School Improvement Hub

Case study

E-ACT

Confederation of School Trusts

ImpactEd Group

CST and ImpactEd Group are working together to collate examples of school improvement practices used by trusts, freely shared to help schools across the country. If your trust has work that aligns with our conceptual framework for trust-led improvement, please visit the website: **schoolimprovementhub.org** for details of how to work with us to develop and share a case study, and help all our schools to keep getting better.

Trust-led school improvement model

The CST conceptual model for trust improvement is structured as a triple helix, consisting of three strands:

Curate clear goals

Defining clear purposes, strategies and goals, so that the trust knows what it's aiming for and how to get there

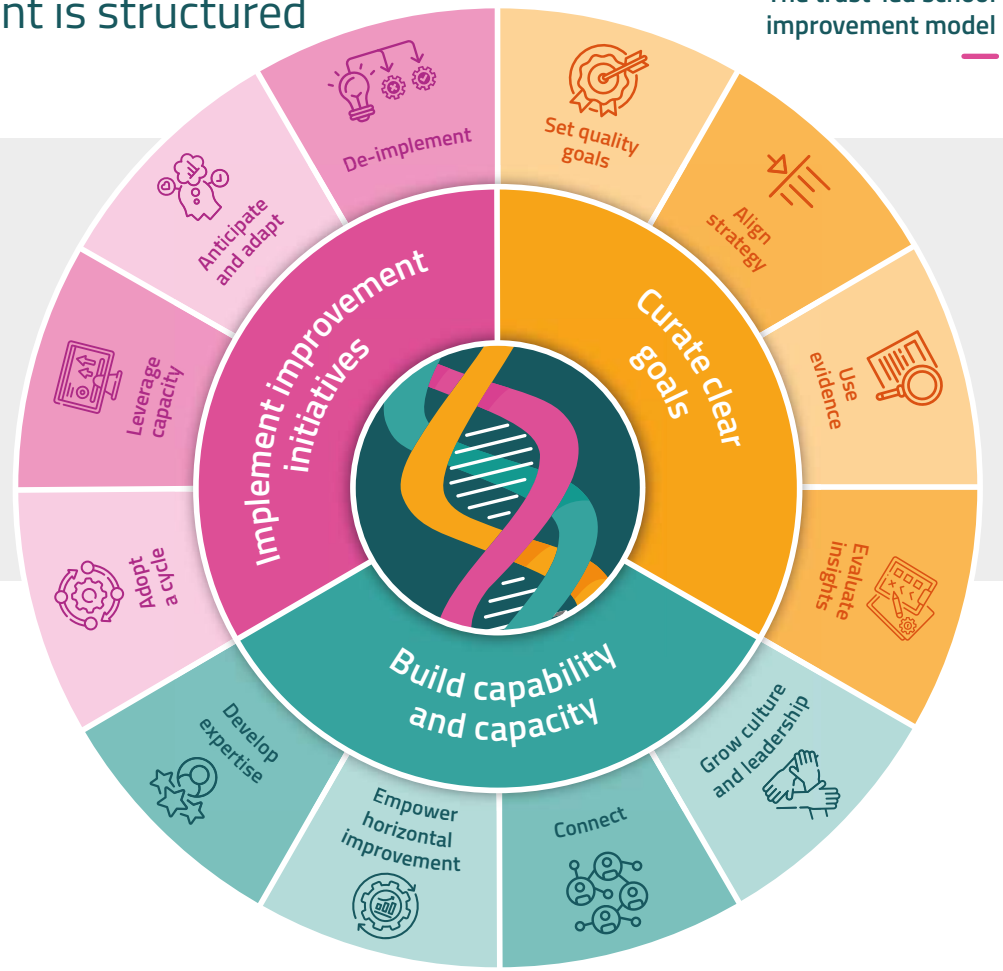
Build capability and capacity

Shaping the people, culture and capacity within the organisation, in order to create the conditions for sustainable improvement

Implement improvement initiatives

The ongoing process of implementing improvement, iterating and refining as plans are enacted

The trust-led school improvement model



The model outlines the key aspects of how a school-improvement process, strategy or model might be enacted within a trust. Rather than dictating areas for improvement, the conceptual model allows each trust to apply its own understanding of quality and its own improvement goals to each of the three strands. The model is intended to help trusts trace a pathway from the areas their improvement strategy intends to address towards a broader consideration of how they achieve their improvement goals.

Each of the strands then breaks down into further components. The **"Curate clear goals"** strand, therefore, breaks down into these components:

- Set quality goals
- Align strategy
- Use evidence
- Evaluate insights

And the **"Build capability and capacity"** strand breaks down into these components:

- Develop expertise
- Empower horizontal improvement
- Connect
- Grow culture and leadership

Case study: E-ACT

This case study highlights the following components in the conceptual model:

Empower horizontal improvement

Improve practice across a group of schools simultaneously, rather than just one school at a time

Use evidence

Use evidence to identify the actions most likely to build momentum in the desired direction

TRUST OVERVIEW

Trust: E-ACT

CEO: Tom Campbell

Founded: 2008

Schools: 38 academies across England – 21 primaries, 14 secondaries, two all-through schools and one special school

School sizes: The largest school in the trust, E-ACT Ousedale School, has 2,049 students. The smallest, E-ACT The Kingfisher, has 136 pupils on roll

Percentage of disadvantaged students: 46.9% of pupils are eligible for pupil premium

Percentage of students receiving free school meals: 44.8%

Percentage of students speaking English as an additional language: 33.2%

Key stage 2: 65% of pupils achieved the expected standard in all three of reading, writing and maths

Key stage 4:

Three-year Progress 8 average: All E-ACT academies -0.13

Three-year Attainment 8 average: All E-ACT academies 42.3

BACKGROUND

Set up in 2008 as Edutrust Academies Charitable Trust, the trust quickly became known by its catchier acronym.

Its aim was to take on schools that were failing – struggling with leadership, standards, budget and recruitment – and turn them around. Its schools therefore serve pupils with higher-than-average levels of disadvantage and SEND. Attainment on entry is well below average.

Its early years were characterised by poor academic performance: in 2013, only 17 per cent of E-ACT's academies were rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. David Moran, appointed CEO that same year, led a turnaround; by his departure in 2019, 70 per cent of academies were rated good or outstanding.

Today, 93 per cent of academies inspected as part of the trust received a good or outstanding judgement.

Borrowing from business-leadership author Simon Sinek's book *The Infinite Game,* the E-ACT executive team thinks of education as comprising the finite and the infinite game. The finite game is made up of the building blocks of education, such as safeguarding and attendance. It also includes measurable outcomes: statutory assessments and Ofsted reports.

The infinite game, meanwhile, relates to the vision and mission of the trust – what E-ACT's CEO, Tom Campbell, calls "a real tangible activism element: a real commitment to levelling up and advocating for children with SEND from the most disadvantaged backgrounds".

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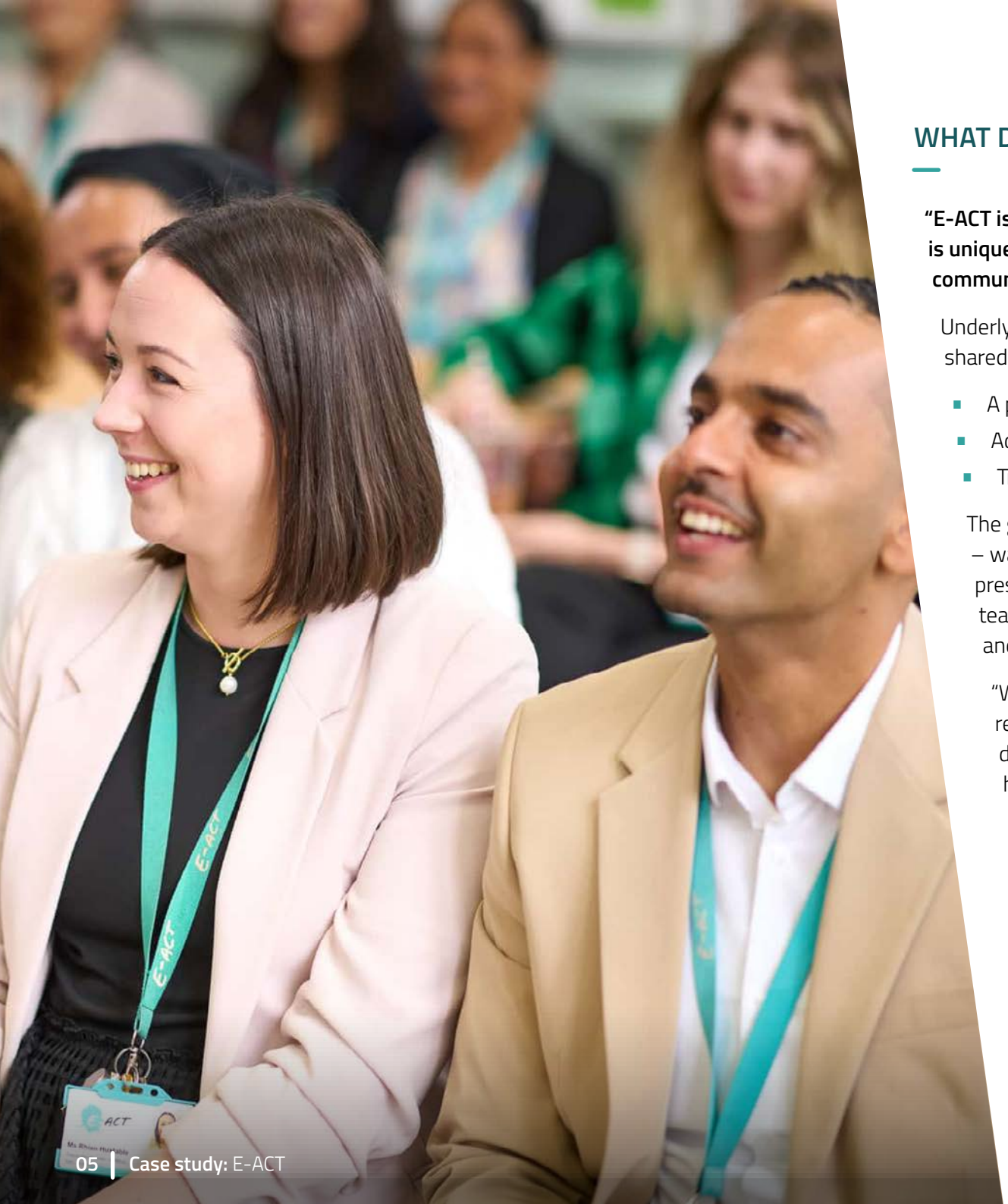
> *Tom Campbell, CEO, E-ACT*



WHAT DOES EDUCATION LOOK LIKE AT E-ACT?

"E-ACT is not a franchise model," says Mr Campbell. "Every school is unique within our trust, responding to the demands of their community and the talent of their staff and pupils."

Underlying this, however, is a commitment to collaboration, as well as shared priorities. Across the trust, these priorities are:

- A people-first culture
- Advocacy and inclusion
- Transforming outcomes.

The geographic spread of the trust – from Bristol to Sheffield – was initially seen as a potential obstacle to collaboration, presenting logistical and operational challenges. But the central team made a concerted effort to reframe this gap: to see distance and diversity as strengths, rather than challenges.

"We work in seven of the nine Department for Education regions, and we wanted to try and capture the learning from different areas of the country, so that our strategy never felt homogeneous and it never felt narrow," says Mr Campbell.

"We spent a lot of time thinking deeply about leadership at scale. And we talked a lot about what it felt to be part of E-ACT and how it felt to be part of a multi-academy trust."

The trust aims to educate the whole child, but is also keenly aware that the building blocks of safeguarding, attendance, behaviour and attainment need to be in place in order to create a sustainable environment for improvement.

Mr Campbell cites business author Sam L Savage's book *The Flaw of Averages*, which highlights the risk in designing a system around a set of assumptions about the average – including the average school. The trust therefore decided to take a behavioural economics approach to management at scale.

"The key part of the behavioural economics is to accept that we need to give voice to the experts in schools," says Mr Campbell. "We need to create conditions for experts to thrive and collaborate and learn from each other. Then we're really unlocking scale as a strength."

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How does this work in practice?

A closer examination of empowering horizontal improvement and using evidence

Empower horizontal improvement: The wisdom of crowds

Decisions at E-ACT are made using what the trust refers to as the wisdom of crowds.

The crowd here is a community of practice – other trusts often call them networks; E-ACT refers to them as boards – with the resources to lead the trust in a particular area.

Boards are convened to deal with significant trust strategies – for example, every secondary leader with responsibility for outcomes comes together to lead the whole-trust approach to improving outcomes. But there are also smaller boards, collaborating on more local community issues. Each board is overseen by one of the trust's education directors, who will often bring challenges to the meeting for the group to discuss.

Not all board members are headteachers. For example, the fluency board is facilitated by a deputy head and staffed by assistant heads. "They feel really empowered," says Pete Kirkbride, E-ACT's national director of secondary. "A lot of our leaders are quite junior levels, very excited about leading national initiatives."

A board meets in person roughly once every half term, sometimes supplemented by virtual meetings. The agenda will be determined by

Empower horizontal improvement: The wisdom of crowds (continued)

the chair, and often depends on the time of year and available data. There is also a board action plan, co-created by members, which outlines their strategic goals. In addition, members of the board will bring their own issues and questions for discussion.

If the executive-team member of the board wants to suggest an issue for discussion, it will be presented as: "I think we need to be looking at this. Do you agree? I could invite the head of three outstanding schools outside the trust to come and present to us, and then we can discuss what we think provision should look like – does that seem a good idea?"

At every point during the subsequent discussion, board members are told that nothing the executive leader suggests is compulsory – but if they think they know a better way of doing something, then they need to deliver a presentation about it to the group. Each member then brings the best solution they have – and the board decides collectively which one it likes best.

"Fundamentally, we think great heads run great schools," says Mr Kirkbride. "So we really push the mission right down to the leaders.

"We give them the intent, the mission. And then we trust those leaders to go and drive it. And it's been remarkable what happens when you just unleash the talent of maybe 200 years of education in each board. Coming from the top, bottom, left and right of the country, every demographic, every Ofsted grade – and then suddenly, boom, off you go."

Not all discussions will end in consensus. For example, a conversation about primary-school reading programmes ended by narrowing down a shortlist of 25 programmes to two. So, while there was not full agreement on a single, trust-wide reading programme, there was strong evaluation of the products used, and an agreement on what the best programmes should provide.

Empower horizontal improvement: The wisdom of crowds (continued)

Needs vary across the country; they also vary by educational phase. In those cases, the consensus would be found in an agreed definition of the problem and shared ideas about the solutions that could be used locally to tackle it. For example, when a board was convened to audit behaviour policies across the trust, it found that the full spectrum of behavioural ideology was represented – schools were making policy decisions based on the culture of their particular community. These variations were so great that the board concluded that it should not draw up a trust-wide E-ACT behaviour policy. Instead, the board looked at the principles and standards that should underlie a good behaviour policy – wherever on the spectrum that policy may lie.

Similarly, while the trust would not necessarily dictate what a great lesson looks like in each of its schools, the board will agree on a set of principles that determines what a great lesson should look like.

In certain areas, however, consensus is necessary. For example, the trust had decided that it would have a single safeguarding system, which it would procure and manage centrally. A newly opened conversation about reporting to parents will similarly seek consensus.

There were more than 100 board meetings in the 2024-25 academic year – which translates into a lot of senior-leader hours offsite. To compensate for this, E-ACT schools have to plan for 120 per cent leadership capacity, so that board time is already factored in.

"When we first introduced it, you could imagine some headteachers were saying, 'Oh, my goodness me. There's a different leader out every week,'" says Mr Campbell. "But as they started to receive the benefits and the gains and the reciprocity that provides, they were quickly on board and doubling down on the engagement.

"We see those that are the most engaged performing the best by any measure. And where we've got schools that are stubbornly stuck, it's often because they haven't engaged as much. So it's about getting over the fear of losing staff time, to see the gain element in terms of the months or years of school improvement that can be achieved in a very short amount of time."

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Use evidence: Proxy assessment measures

1. Pupils

To measure how effective its education provision is, E-ACT began looking beyond conventional assessment. Assessment is obviously important – but the trust also wanted to measure the impact of education on the lived experiences of children.

So it began using a series of proxies to measure educational impact. Using the wisdom of crowds, a board of 20 senior leaders traced educational outcomes back to their causal factors. For example, happiness at school leads to engagement at school, which in turn leads to better outcomes. So the trust began to look for proxy measures of happiness at school – such as enrichment trips – and of potentially unhappiness at school, such as teacher absence.

"We're deeply cynical of bureaucracy," says Mr Campbell. "We kick each other under the table if we start to refer to the Ofsted inspection outcomes or exam results. So we really challenged ourselves to measure what we value rather than value what we measure."

One of the trust's current priorities is to raise attainment in English across primary and secondary. They begin with an overarching goal: to increase attainment in English by 20 per cent. To achieve this goal – and to monitor progress towards it – the trust has put in place a series of daily, weekly and monthly measurable proxies.

For example, it was clear that there was a disadvantage gap in English. But how do you quantify this gap into something tangible – and therefore begin to narrow it?

The quantifiable measure that the trust came up with here was a million words. When they start school, disadvantaged children hear, speak and read a million fewer words than their more advantaged peers.

A million words, the trust determined, equates to approximately 10 novels a year. Again, this was a tangible number that leaders could work with. So they began to ask schools to target disadvantaged children and find ways to ensure that they read 10 more books a year than they might otherwise do.

"If we close the word gap, we can expect

their reading and writing to start to get to national average," says Mr Campbell. "And we can expect children in secondary to start moving through towards grade four, grade five at GCSE. With the only different focus being on reading library books."

The board then looked at what the challenges might be when it came to implementing this initiative. For example, the trust would have to ensure that every school had a well-stocked library. Then it questioned whether additional reading necessarily needed to involve a physical book – would reading on a device be equally effective?

"But all those things come with estate asks, digital asks, curriculum resource asks," says Mr Campbell. If, for example, the trust was to propose spending £400,000 on school libraries, then it needed to show potential impact – bringing in ideas about how reading could affect pupil wellbeing, and thus attendance as well as achievement.

Elsewhere, in order to improve pupil attendance and reduce exclusions, the trust is using registration for pupil premium as a proxy measure. Using deprivation data, leaders have identified 3,000 pupils in the trust who are eligible for pupil-premium funding, but are not currently registered for it – equivalent to £3,000,000 of additional funding

Leaders have therefore been working with families – either making them aware of the funding or discussing with them why they have chosen not to sign up. In the latter case, this was often a result of language difficulties or fears about immigration status. Sometimes they simply need someone to help them navigate the registration process – which schools can provide. The central team then keeps a daily tally of how many families have signed up.

The aim is that when pupils have access to free breakfast and lunch every day, their attendance will improve. Increased attendance will in turn improve attainment. Free meals will also lead to better behaviour and fewer exclusions.

The trust believes that proxy measures allow for greater agility than traditional data. Rather than relying on an end-of-phase test, E-ACT is able to measure its proxies on a day-to-day or week-by-week basis. "Can you imagine if every kid in our school presses one of five buttons about how they're feeling that day?" says Mr Kirkbride. "And then we could react to that proxy in terms of: is it that we've got a lot of English teachers out this day? And how are we going to react to that next week to fill that gap?

"We can use staff attendance as a leading indicator for pupil achievement. We don't wait until the English teacher has been off two weeks and we've started to get complaints. We know this is a live issue, and we put in the support immediately."

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Use evidence: Proxy assessment measures (continued)

2. Staff

Staff are sent regular surveys, many of which include the question: "How often have you thought about resigning?"

The responses to these surveys are then sent to the relevant board – but the trust quickly discovered that there was little correlation between the number of staff who said they were thinking about resigning and the number who actually resigned.

So the trust began using proxy questions to find out the real answer to this question: staff are asked about their relationship with their line manager, about their perceptions of workload and about their access to professional development. These responses are then used alongside other data – attendance, online management, performance management – to determine the number of staff members genuinely likely to leave.

A similar approach of finding and addressing quantifiable proxy measures has been used to increase diversity among school leaders.

For example, a lack of diversity among leaders was quantified: fewer than 1 per cent of E-ACT headteachers were black. So the trust developed a programme to identify all the talent in its schools – typically members of staff already in a leadership position or with leadership responsibilities. And then it offered them tailored professional development. As a result, 20 per cent of headteachers now come from a black or minority ethnic background.

Similarly, looking at representation of women among senior leaders, the trust realised that there were proportionately fewer women on the first rung of the leadership ladder: entry-level teaching and learning responsibilities were more likely to be taken by a man than a woman.

The trust therefore launched a big campaign to support women into their first leadership roles. This has resulted in a significant increase in women successfully applying for roles such as heads of department.

Key points

- E-ACT does not follow a franchise model: while there is a shared recognition of what is important, often the specific approach taken is left up to the individual school
- The trust relies on "the wisdom of crowds", using topic-specific boards to research best practice and determine the right approach to use across the trust (or, alternatively, whether a shared approach is in fact necessary)
- E-ACT factors in time working with boards when planning leadership duties, to ensure that senior leaders and middle managers are able to spare the time for at least one board meeting every half term.
- Where improvement is needed, the trust will often use proxy measures to quantify a problem or work incrementally towards a solution – focusing on the number of books a child reads each year, for example, as a proxy measure for English attainment
- Proxies can also be used as a measure for staff-related outcomes – proxy measures of staff satisfaction are a more effective way of predicting retention levels than simply asking outright whether staff have considered resigning

Resources

The following resources were developed by the E-ACT boards:

- EYFS home-visit handbook
- Smooth transitions: strategies to move from Reception to Year 1 effectively
- Your phonics guide
- Professional learning map
- E-ACT eight people objectives

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