School Improvement Hub

Case study

Eden Academy Trust

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 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.
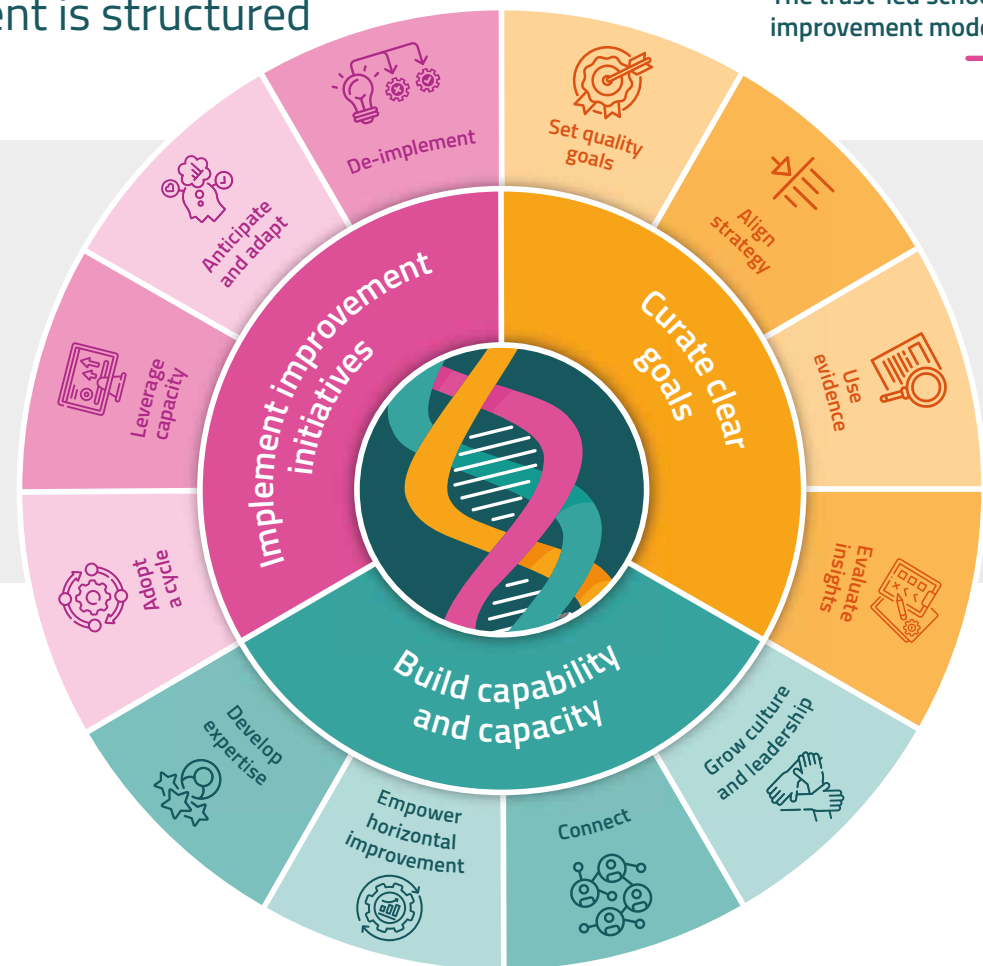
Each of the strands then breaks down into further components. The "Build capability and capacity" strand breaks down into the following components:

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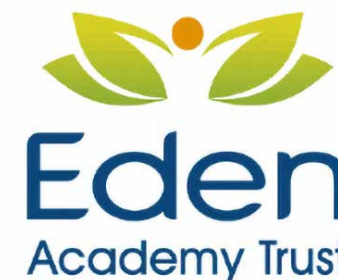- Connect
- Grow culture and leadership

And the "Implement improvement initiatives" strand, therefore, breaks down into these components:

- Adopt a cycle
- Leverage capacity
- Anticipate and adapt
- De-implement

Case study: Eden Academy Trust

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

Grow culture and leadership

Establish a culture where leadership and teaching can flourish

Adopt a cycle

Adopt the behaviours that drive implementation (engage, unite, reflect). Do this while tending to contextual factors and using a structured but flexible implementation process: explore, prepare, deliver, sustain)

TRUST OVERVIEW

Trust: Eden Academy Trust

CEO: Susan Douglas, CBE

Founded: 2012

Schools: Eight special schools – primary, secondary and all-through – spread across 11 settings in West London, Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmorland. All schools cater for pupils with complex learning needs, autism and physical and sensory disabilities

School sizes: The largest school in the trust, James Rennie School, educates 204 pupils. The smallest, Branthwaite Academy, has 67 pupils on roll

Percentage of disadvantaged students: 39.1% of pupils are eligible for pupil premium

Percentage of students receiving free school meals: 43.5%

Percentage of students speaking English as an additional language: 25.6%

Ofsted: Six schools are currently rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, and three schools are due for inspection during the academic year 2024-25. Two were rated inadequate when they joined the trust, and have since been rated outstanding. Three Eden academies have been rated outstanding at least four times. The two newest schools to join the trust have been rated requires improvement for quality of education this academic year, but were judged to have good behaviour, attitudes and personal development.

BACKGROUND

The Eden Academy Trust was created when two special schools in the West London borough of Hillingdon decided to academise and form a multi-academy trust. At the time, the trust was also supporting a third school, which it ran on a management contract on behalf of the Royal National Institute of Blind People.

"It was really quite organic – it began with strong relationships and partnership working," says Carley Holliman, Eden deputy CEO. "It was slow growth in comparison with some of the other trusts – it was a very conscious decision to grow slowly and in a really measured way."

Eden's CEO Susan Douglas began her career in school leadership at the age of 28, when she took over the headship of a West London primary. She currently combines leading Eden with working for the British Council one day a week – and is a big advocate for flexible working.

Schools in the trust now sit in two distinct (and geographically distant) regions: Hillingdon and Harrow, both in West London, and Cumberland, Northumberland and Westmoreland, in the North of England.

The trust is divided into two regions, overseen by a regional director: Northern (covering Cumberland, Northumberland and Westmorland) and Southern (Hillingdon and Harrow in West London). The Southern region is subdivided into geographical clusters of three or four schools, each managed by a cluster lead, who develops a detailed day-to-day knowledge of those schools.

Cross-trust strategy groups, hubs and forums set the direction in a particular area, such as safeguarding or family engagement. They also work on fixed-term projects, for example looking at flexible-working policies.

And, says Mrs Holliman, working together ensures that schools put their own achievements and challenges into context: "Because we are specialist schools, we don't have the same measurable national outcomes data as mainstream schools by which to benchmark. Our schools can think they're doing really well, but then they bring their outcomes to the hub and realise that, compared with other schools with a similar cohort, they could be doing even better and have even greater aspirations.

"So it's really important that we use each other's expertise to challenge our thinking and continue to take steps to get better."

> **"It's really important that we use each other's expertise to challenge our thinking and continue to take steps to get better."**
> **Carley Holliman, Deputy CEO,** *Eden Academy Trust*

WHAT DOES EDUCATION LOOK LIKE AT THE EDEN ACADEMY TRUST?

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Pupils educated by The Eden Academy Trust tend to have complex needs, which mean that they would be unlikely to thrive in a mainstream school. Trust leaders have therefore had to think carefully about how they define and evaluate the quality of their provision – the standards set by the mainstream or the Ofsted inspection framework are not always applicable.

"We've had to think about the key aspects that would make our schools excellent," says Mrs Holliman. "We've moved away from judgements linked to the accountability framework, such as 'good' and 'outstanding', and are instead looking at excellence."

While the trust has shared curriculum principles, there is no aligned curriculum. Each school's curriculum is tailored differently, in order to meet the needs of the cohort it serves.

And there is an equally strong focus on ensuring that Eden pupils are able to access the curriculum in the first place. In many cases, this is about integrating therapeutic practices into their daily education. For example, some pupils require speech and language therapy – and communication is a key focus across the trust. Others use wheelchairs or walking frames, and need regular physical therapy. Some pupils need hoists or manual handling; others need support with toileting and hygiene.

Many pupils have long journeys into school – some travel an hour and a half in either direction – and therefore need an opportunity for physical activity or sensory regulation before they can begin to learn effectively.

While the trust has its own core team of therapists, it also works closely with local authorities, the NHS and local agencies. "We work with nursing and medical teams – everyone focusing on removing the barriers to our young people's education," says Mrs Holliman.

"It would be easy to focus on the care needs of pupils, rather than their education needs. We have to be really focused on what educational outcomes and continuous progress for our pupils looks like."

One of the trust's self-improvement measures, therefore, is how well its schools prepare pupils for their next stage of education or adulthood. There is a trust-wide focus on independence, employability and meaningful occupation.

It also looks more holistically at the service provided to pupils and families. What is each school adding to its locality? How is it using local facilities? And, because many pupils live some distance from their school, the trust not only has to look at how its schools integrate into the local community, but also how their pupils and families integrate into the school community – which may not be local to them.

The trust also focuses on leadership building, and encourages its leaders to constantly ask themselves: "How am I acting as a champion for SEND?" The goal is that leaders should be able to share advice and expertise across the trust – and, potentially, beyond.

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Carley Holliman, Deputy CEO, *Eden Academy Trust*
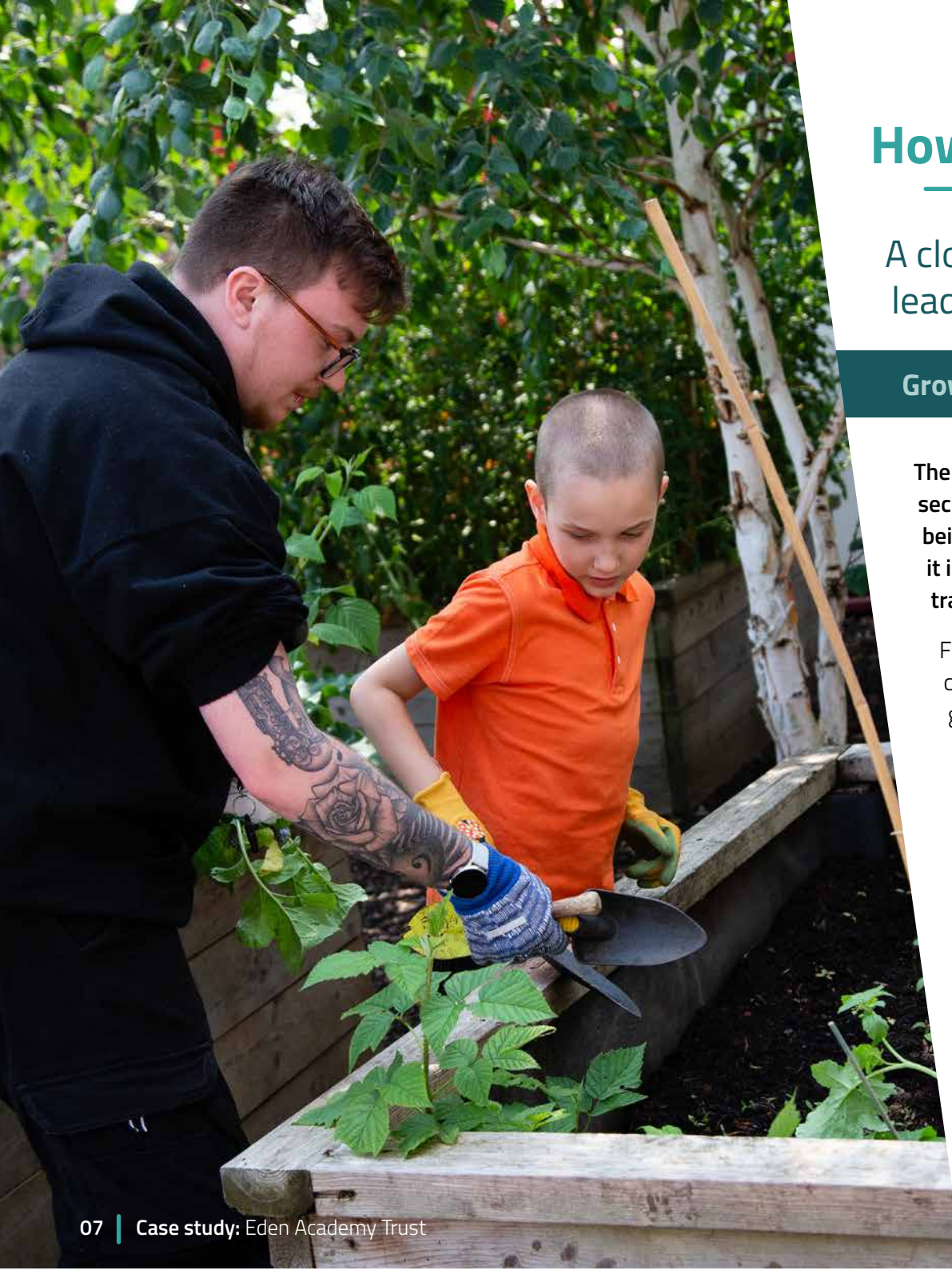
How does this work in practice?

A closer examination of growing culture and leadership and adopting a cycle

Growing culture and leadership: Heads of school

The Eden Academy Trust recognises that becoming a headteacher – securing the knowledge and understanding needed to lead, as well as being able to work well in a leadership team – requires support. And so it introduced a "head of school" position – essentially, a headteacher-in-training role.

Four of the trust's schools currently have heads of school, all of whom are coached, advised and mentored by an executive headteacher until they graduate into full headship.

The executive headteacher spends a significant amount of time onsite with the head of school, offering immediate support and advice. For example, a new head of school in one of the trust's academies is currently supported onsite by an executive head three days a week – though this level of support will not continue long term.

The difference between the roles of executive headteacher, headteacher and head of school are outlined in a three-page document (see Resources section), a sample of which is shown on the next page.

The difference between the roles of executive headteacher, headteacher and head of school *(extract)*

Executive Headteacher is accountable for:	Headteacher is accountable for:	Head of School under the supervision of the Executive head will:
Day to day management		
Ensure operational goals align with strategic objectives. Supporting HOS and SLT to implement strategies.	Ensure operational goals align with strategic objectives, oversee the daily operations and ensure trust and school policies are effectively implemented.	Oversee the daily operations of the school. Ensure school and trust policies are effectively implemented.
Strategic development		
Oversee the long-term, strategic direction Coordinates the strategy of the schools for which they are Executive Head, ensuring high standards	Develops and implements the school's vision and strategy Writes and formulates the school development plan Drafts details action plans Writes delegated school policies Implements trust policies	Contributes to the strategic planning and development of the school Implements initiatives to improve school performance and pupil provision Writes and formulates the school development plan Drafts details action plans Writes delegated school policies Implements trust policies
Governance		
Reporting to LAB and RD progress made on achieving priorities and the impact	Reports to LAB and RD progress made on achieving priorities and the impact	Quality assured by the EHT reports to LAB and RD progress made on achieving priorities and the impact
Budget and resource management		
Oversees the budget setting for school Supports the resource allocation and structure Oversees the implementation of sound financial controls	Produces the budget Manages school spending Implements sound financial controls Reports on the impact of specialist funding e.g. PPG Ensure the school is well-equipped to meet educational needs	Managing the school's budget and resources effectively Ensure the school is well-equipped to meet educational needs Manages school spending Implements sound financial controls Reports on the impact of specialist funding e.g. PPG
Educational leadership		
Oversees the educational outcomes and overall performance of the school Ensuring the HOS is well trained and prepared for responsibilities and tasks Evaluates teaching and learning Ensures high standards of professional performance are established and maintained	Accountable for the educational outcomes and overall performance of the school Decides and implements an appropriate curriculum for the school Ensures high standards of and is responsible for teaching and learning Evaluates teaching and learning Writes the SEND information report	Accountable for the educational outcomes and overall performance of the school Decides and implements an appropriate curriculum for the school Ensures high standards of and is responsible for teaching and learning Evaluates teaching and learning Ensures high standards of professional performance are established and maintained Writes the SEND information report

The theory behind the head of school role is that all school leaders have their own individual strengths, skills and areas of expertise. For example, one leader may have a lot of experience in curriculum, but be relatively inexperienced in personnel management. So when staff contracts are due for renewal, they will need support. "Offering that support means the head of school can really develop their expertise across all key aspects," says Mrs Holliman.

Because all its schools are full, the trust also deals with a large number of tribunals. While some heads of school will already have significant tribunal experience, others come to the role with none at all. Completing the paperwork for a tribunal, and then taking part in the process itself, is not taught on aspiring-leader programmes or NPQ courses. And, because tribunals can differ dramatically, having gone through one does not necessarily give a new leader the knowledge necessary to deal with another singlehandedly.

"Having an executive head to support you in doing this is really beneficial," says Mrs Holliman. "One of our schools had 10 tribunals in one term. So the executive head and head of school might do four together. Then the executive head will say, 'I've modelled it. Now you do the paperwork and we'll look at it together.'

"It's a coaching model, with the head of school doing more each time."

Similarly, it can be daunting for a new headteacher to attend a local authority network group with other heads, discussing developments that often require a detailed knowledge of local history and context. The head of school system aims to tackle this by ensuring that the executive head accompanies the head of school to initial meetings – and then provides context and additional information afterwards. The aim is that the head of school should still be able to take advantage of networking opportunities – but without the pressure of making large decisions on their own.

There is no fixed duration for the head of school role: they graduate into headship at whatever point they feel ready, as agreed with their executive head.. Prior to graduation, the executive head will review the head of school's competence against the headteacher standards, after which the head of school will have a formal interview with the CEO and a trustee. The executive head will then step back into a more hands-off advisory role – though will continue to monitor the school, and will still have fortnightly meetings with the headteacher.

The most recent headteacher graduate was head of school for two years; another is currently in her third year. "They were very capable of graduating, but didn't want to just yet," says Mrs Holliman. "It's not about competence – it's to do with confidence, with quite liking having that executive head there for support."
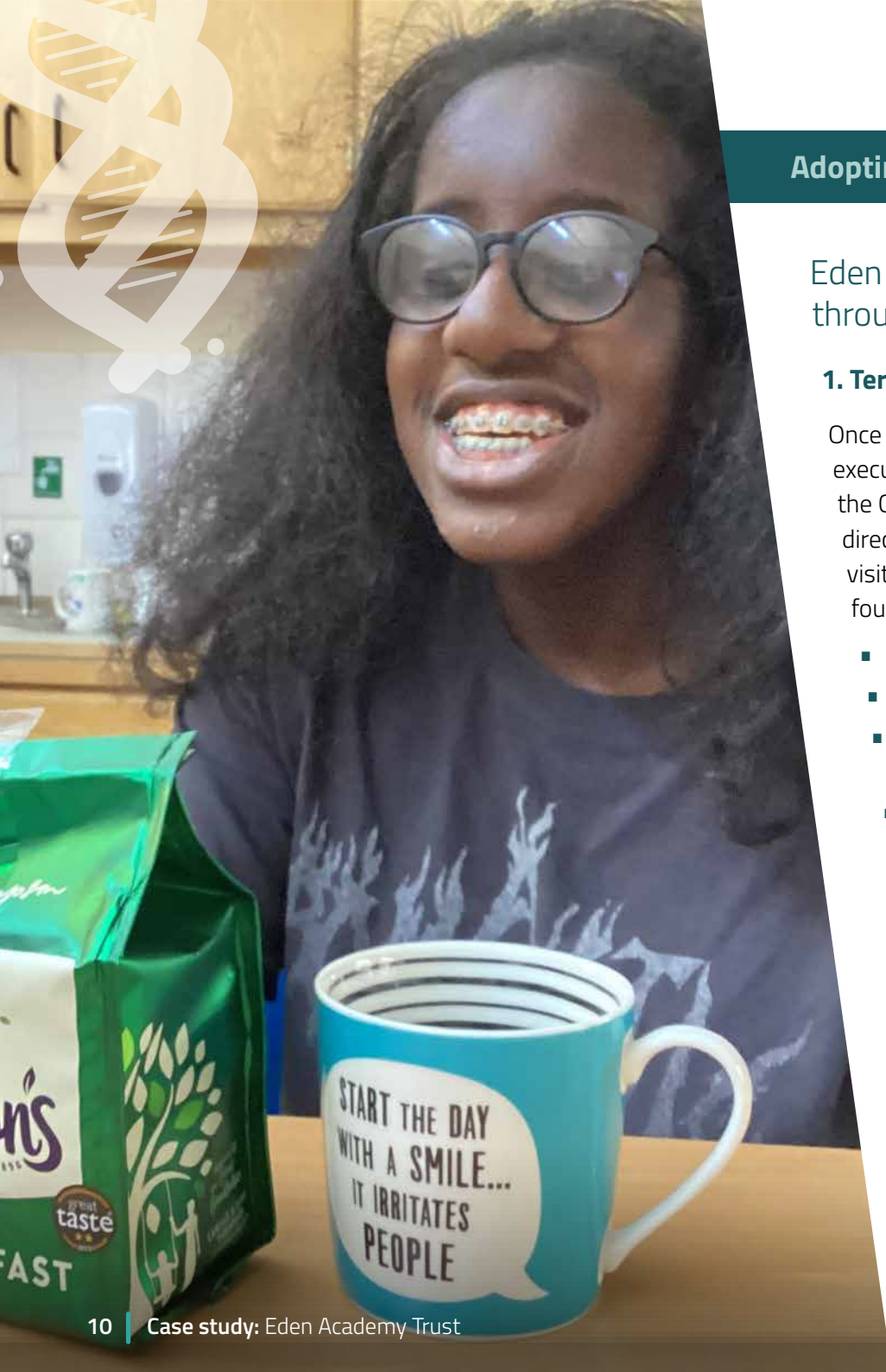
Eden has three quality assurance processes that run concurrently throughout the year.

1. Termly quality assurance reviews

Once a term, two members of the executive education team – comprising the CEO, the deputy CEO, the regional directors and the relevant cluster lead – visit each setting. Each visit addresses four questions:

- What needs to improve?
- What will we do to improve?
- Who is best placed to lead this improvement?
- What has been the impact of school improvement?

In the autumn term, this visit focuses on curriculum and provision. A school that is performing well is able to choose its own narrower area of focus under the "curriculum and provision" heading. In schools where the executive team decides that curriculum provision is not as strong as it should be, however, it will determine the area of focus.

For example, in one school that was due an imminent Ofsted inspection, the executive team recently decided that greater focus was needed on reading.

In the second term, the executive looks at outcomes and community. And in the summer term, they focus on leadership and capacity.

The trust recognises that school improvement is often non-linear: one key member of staff going on maternity leave can have a significantly disruptive effect. Equally, if a school has just introduced a new maths curriculum, it will be working to build and secure that for some time. "It doesn't mean the school isn't good," says Mrs Holliman. "We just allow for that flex, and acknowledge what is needed during implementation."

2. Risk assessment

Once each term, the executive education team meets for a day, and looks in detail at all the schools. The team assesses how each school is performing against the eight points of the Eden excellence framework:

	Leadership	Capacity	Curriculum	Provision	Outcomes	Community	SEND Champions	Resource Management
Building and Preparing	New temporary or inexperienced leadership. Accurate self evaluation using monitoring and evaluation tools. Consistent application of policy and practice. LAB meeting expectations.	Capacity focused inward, building expertise. Developing areas of strength. Workload reviewed. Next steps and actions identified and worked on. Quality of teaching is developing.	Well planned and sequence but not yet consistently implemented. Limited breadth. Personal development not yet embedded. Some opportunities to stretch talents and interests.	Some extended opportunities available. Engagement with some aspects of the local offer. Developing relationships with partners. Feedback cycles established	Assessment used well to inform teaching. Patterns and trends analysed effectively for self evaluation, guiding next steps and intervention. Good progress for most pupils. Inline with national and local benchmarks.	Engage effectively with the community. Engagement opportunities are focused and have purpose. Pupils make a contribution to the life of school/community.	Key partnerships developed. Engages with local school cluster and LA to ensure SEND is a key focus. Some influence over local provision. Advocates of SEND within the community.	Expertise used effectively. Cautious financial planning with risks assessed. Estate management well planned. Some resources used to generate income.
Embedding and securing	Strong and stable senior level. Middle leadership developing. Robust self evaluation. Effective implementation of improvement. Meaningful engagement with stakeholders. LAB meaningful contribution to SI.	Some capacity shared. Shares practice in key areas. Workload is considered in a realistically and constructively. Appreciative enquiry developing. Evidence informed theory of action used to improve the quality of teaching and learning.	Ambitious curriculum which is planned and sequenced to enable pupils to achieve well. Personal development is embedded throughout. It is broad and relevant. Consistent understanding and application of curriculum aspiration.	Range of opportunities available and used. Coherently planned rich experiences. Utilises the local offer. Engages with relevant partners and builds purposeful relationships. Feedback cycles are purposeful and used to measure impact.	Used effectively to prioritise and target pupils, groups and school priorities. Robust analysis and evaluation leading to timely and effective action. At least good for most groups of pupils. Most meeting expectations. At least good progress for most groups. At least inline with local and national comparisons.	Established as a key part of the community with meaningful two-way engagement. Parents are engaged and attend learning events. Effective signposting takes place. Offer advice and guidance to other settings on SEND.	Working with local and business community. Actively participates with LA and care trust in their work.Strong influence over local provision Advocates of SEND in the region.	Medium term planning and financial sustainability secure. Budget decisions made based on robust analysis. Estate and resources well managed and used to generate income.
Sustaining	Strong all levels. Succession identified. Improvement cycle is embedded in all aspects. Critical reflection. Innovative, outward facing and ahead of the curve. LAB's has a positive impact on SI and the wider community	Capacity givers.Shares excellence widely. Capacity is planned for. Well managed workload. Solutions focused. Appreciative enquiry embedded.T&L consistently secure. Leading intrust wide improvements. Open to learning with and from others.	Preparation for life and beyond school embedded. Broad and balanced. Appropriate and relevant. Ambitious pupils make meaningful contributions. Engaging and communicable. Clearly defined principles and ways of working understood and articulated by all. Regularly reviewed from current and future pupil perspective.	Wealth of opportunities to develop independence resilience and confidence. Maximises the local offer. Signposts to relevant partners. Relentless pursuit of excellence. Feedback cycles are an integral part of assessing performance and progress.	Used a critical improvement tool. Purposeful analysis of a broad set of outcomes against benchmarks. At least good for all groups, meeting and exceeding expectations. At least in line with local and national comparisons. Robust systems and structures underpin substantial progress for all. Focused on continual improvement informed by evidence.	Confidence in specialist status. Actively supports the community. Parents engaged and connected with learning. Family learning is embedded. Act as parent advocate. Professional hub and outreach embedded.	Strong presence in local and business community. Challenge and support LA and care trust in their work.Strong influence local provision. National advocates of SEND. Participation in national conversations, publications and conferences.	Long term planning. Financial prudency. Income generation. Operations support ;earning and provision long term. Estate in good order and used well.

The executive team evaluates schools, categorising them under one of three headings: building and preparing; embedding and securing; and sustaining.

Having assessed each school individually, the team then looks at how the schools could work together as a trust. Could one school offer practical support for another? Is there one that has additional capacity that could be used to benefit another school? Do any of the schools require an intervention?

The team will then summarise the current position, taking into account all the information gathered, including school-management and absence data. This will then be fed back to school leaders, and will form the basis of a plan of action for the executive team.

3. Peer review process

The final part of this process involves peer review. At least two Eden senior leaders will visit a third school, pursuing one or two key lines of enquiry. To promote consistency, at least one of the visiting heads should have been involved in the host school's previous peer review.

Because of the wide geographical spread of Eden schools and the travel times involved, these peer-review visits need to be strictly timetabled. In order to ensure maximum impact, peer review does not happen in the first or last half terms of the year.

School leaders choose their own key lines of enquiry – and they are encouraged to select areas they are currently working on, rather than something they simply want to celebrate. Their line of enquiry is phrased as a question, usually beginning: "To what extent…?" So, for example: "To what extent is our approach for developing subject leadership effective in securing continuous improvement to communication?" or "To what extent is our new approach to teaching maths in a semi-formal pathway effective in deepening learning for all pupils?"

Adopting a cycle: Tripartite review process (continued)

Leaders of the host school will present what they think they've achieved. And visiting leaders will ask questions and request further evidence, before coming to a conclusion: "We can see this is secure" or "We can see this isn't as secure as we'd like it to be."

The host school then writes up a report of the review, which all participants must sign off. There are two reasons why the host – rather than the visiting reviewers – is asked to write the report.

"When other people write the report, it's very easy for the school being reviewed to hear what they want to hear," says Mrs Holliman. "But if they write the report, and it has to be agreed, it gives them much more ownership of it. They're saying: 'This is what we observed and this is what we're going to do about it.'

"Also, it's a privilege to visit a school, so sometimes we want to avoid upsetting people when writing up a report. If you're the host, you can be more reflective, concise and focused on next steps."

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>
> *Carley Holliman, Deputy CEO,*
> *Eden Academy Trust*

Key points

- Aspiring headteachers are appointed to a "head of school" role, where they are coached, advised and supported by an executive head

- The aim of the head-of-school role is to provide secure scaffolding for new leaders, by ensuring that an experienced headteacher is available to offer advice and support

- There is no fixed period for the head-of-school role: incumbents graduate into full headship when once they have demonstrated that they have the skills, knowledge and confidence necessary

- A tripartite review structure means that schools and school leaders are evaluated by the executive team and by their peers on a regular basis

- Evaluations by the executive team are used to determine not only areas for improvement but also those areas where schools in the trust might usefully collaborate or support one another

- Reports of peer-review visits are written up by the host school, rather than the visiting teams, because this compels the school being assessed to look at its performance and evaluation with a more critical eye

Resources

- **Comparison of executive head, headteacher and head of school roles**
- **Eden peer review summary model**

- **Eden quality assurance summary**
- **Eden school improvement strategy**

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