

Stakeholder Briefing – Schools and Trusts

Schools North East

Schools North East is a charity set up in 2007 by schools and for schools. We are a movement for change, giving a voice to all 1,150 North East schools in the national debate. Visit schoolsnortheast.org for more information.

These briefings are designed to give a snapshot of the views of schools and school leaders within our network. This information is collected through a variety of means, whether through surveys, roundtables, or the regular feedback we receive from partner schools.

The views reported are those of schools in the North East, and don't necessarily represent our definitive policy position. For more information about our policy work, please visit the [policy page](#) of our website. The focus of our policy work is summarised in our [Manifesto for North East Education](#). If you are interested in further engagement with our policy work, please email policy@schoolsnortheast.com. Information in this document is private and confidential and is not to be shared with any third party. This document is the intellectual property of Schools North East.

Schools North East Advisory Board Summer 2026: Ofsted and Mission North East SUMMARY

Our summer Advisory Board brought school and trust leaders together with Lee Owston, Ofsted's National Director for Education, and Joe O'Connell from the Department for Education's Mission North East team. Both sessions were working discussions rather than presentations. Mission North East remains in its design phase, so what leaders said in the room can still shape it. The through-line across both discussions was that national policy must distinguish the quality of a school's work from the conditions it operates in. Leaders were explicit that this is not an argument for reduced accountability or lower expectations.

KEY POINTS

Ofsted inspection - Leaders welcomed a more professional and constructive inspection tone, but raised continuing concerns about consistency between inspection teams, communication of the new framework and independence in the complaints process.

Context and inclusion - Schools want inspection judgements to properly reflect context, including disadvantage, SEND, pupil mobility and medical absence. Inclusion and high achievement should not be treated as competing priorities, and inspection teams need sufficient specialist expertise.

Mission North East - Leaders welcomed the opportunity to shape the programme but cautioned against creating another layer of school improvement where significant capacity already exists across trusts, local authorities and partnerships.

Tackling the structural divide - Mission North East should focus on areas schools cannot address alone, including access to health and specialist services, family support and enrichment, with shared accountability across education, health and local government.

Long-term delivery - Schools want Mission North East to build on existing regional relationships, recognise effective practice beyond Ofsted and attainment data, properly resource participation and establish measures and capacity capable of delivering sustained change.

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In Depth Analysis

Ofsted

What leaders said

Leaders recognised that the tone of inspection has become more professional and constructive. Reflection meetings, greater transparency during inspections and the nominee role were all welcomed.

Several concerns were raised. Communication has not matched the scale of the change: report cards and evaluation grades are not comparable with the previous system, but schools, parents and the public continue to read them through the old judgements. Consistency between inspection teams was the single most significant concern raised, including variation in how the toolkit is interpreted and pressure to produce further evidence at very short notice late on day two. And leaders repeated the case for genuine independence in the complaints system.

A recurring concern was whether inspectors give sufficient weight to context and distinguish achievement from raw attainment. Leaders stressed that schools serving disadvantaged communities, highly mobile cohorts or large numbers of pupils with additional needs may deliver strong progress without headline outcomes reaching national averages. Conversely, high attainment does not necessarily demonstrate strong curriculum and teaching where outcomes are influenced by pupils' starting points or external support. Leaders were clear that this distinction is important if the quality of schools' work is to be judged fairly.

Ofsted set out its weekly quality-assurance and consistency work - regional reviews, national panels, scrutiny of evidence bases, inspector training, and the possibility of provisional grades changing. Leaders welcomed hearing it and argued that none of it builds confidence while it remains invisible from outside. Ofsted acknowledged that initial webinars and guidance will not deliver the cultural change required, pointed to named HMI relationships with local schools, and indicated it intends to trial more independent oversight of complaints during the coming academic year.

What we are pressing for

A sustained communications programme aimed at staff, governors and parents rather than one-off guidance. Public transparency about the consistency and quality-assurance processes Ofsted described to us. Independence in the complaints system that schools can actually have confidence in. And context that influences judgements rather than appearing as background: leaders welcomed similar-school data entering the Inspection Data Summary Report but were clear that its presence is not the same as its use.

On SEND and attendance specifically, leaders asked that achievement be assessed through starting points, curriculum access, progress and preparation for adulthood, and that inspection teams hold the specialist expertise to do that. On the combined attendance and behaviour judgement, leaders argued that attendance is heavily shaped by poverty, health, housing, transport and delays in public services, and that strong practice should not be obscured by factors schools cannot control.

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Mission North East

What leaders said

DfE outlined four emerging elements: school improvement, engagement and enrichment beyond the school gate, place-based leadership, and innovation on a test-learn-and-grow model, with initial delivery in a small number of areas before regional expansion.

Leaders welcomed the chance to shape it and questioned whether its purpose is yet clear enough. Four strands appear to have been settled before a full discovery process established the problem the mission is addressing.

The strongest note of caution concerned traditional school improvement sitting at the centre. Trusts, local authorities, collaboratives, partnerships and RISE already do this. Leaders' view was that a further layer risks duplicating existing work, adding to the load on the same experienced leaders repeatedly asked to support national initiatives, and implying that regional inequalities originate inside schools.

Leaders also asked how geographical clusters and local governance will work, noting that effective partnerships do not always follow local-authority boundaries, particularly across the Tees Valley, and that schools should have a meaningful role in choosing the partners they work with. They also stressed that Ofsted judgements and attainment data alone are not sufficient measures for identifying the strongest provision. Mission North East should recognise effective practice in its wider context, including schools and trusts delivering strong inclusive practice in challenging circumstances.

DfE confirmed funding is available for its place missions but the North East allocation has not been finalised.

What we are pressing for

- That the programme concentrates on what the government can do and schools and trusts cannot: access to health and specialist services, family support, enrichment, and the structural divides of disadvantage.
- That it establishes shared accountability across education, health, local government and other agencies, with the data sharing and common local objectives to make that real.
- That it builds on existing relationships rather than imposing new structures, and that arrangements for identifying effective practice recognise the wider context in which schools and trusts are working rather than relying on Ofsted judgements and attainment data alone.
- That participation is properly resourced.
- That success is measured beyond short-term attainment — access to specialist support, enrichment participation, parental engagement, attendance, transitions and longer-term outcomes.
- That Mission North East is given sufficient time to build sustainable regional capacity and embed change. Leaders highlighted the risk of regional initiatives ending before their impact can be secured, and the need for the programme to be designed for the long term rather than around short programme or political cycles.

What happens next

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We will continue to press Ofsted on consistency, transparency and complaints independence, alongside the need for context and specialist expertise to be applied consistently in inspection, and we will follow the independent oversight trial closely. Mission North East is still in design, and we are feeding member views directly into the team.