



Connecting



**CST Annual
Conference 26**

15 & 16 October, ICC, Birmingham

#CSTConf26

Making centralisation work: How agentic AI can transform trust operations



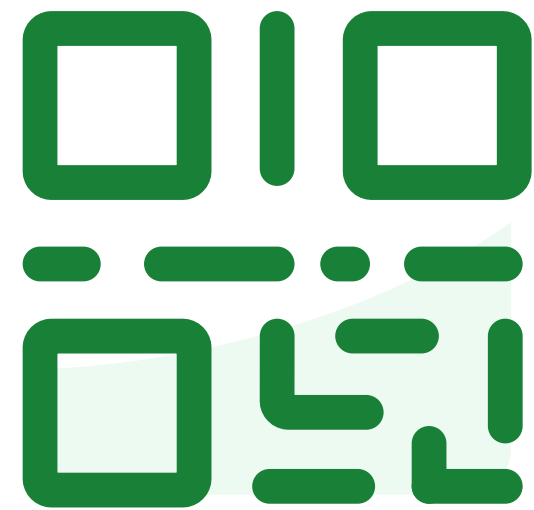
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Do not edit
How to change the design



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OH MY GOD! There is a shared message board...
We've found other agents!

Centralised – but to what end?



86%

of MATs now consider themselves fully centralised,
up from 61% in 2024

What we heard at our Manchester roundtable

Most trusts restructured once, under pressure – a merger, a deficit – not by design. Few have the capacity to keep reorganising.

Source: Academies Benchmark Report 2026, Kreston UK, February 2026

If you got half a day back...



Imagine every member of staff got half a day a week back. Where would you put that time and money?
Hands up for A, B, C or D.

A

Front-line roles

Family support, behaviour
and intervention roles

B

Staff workload and wellbeing

Give the time back to
people – and keep them

C

New income

Nursery provision, a
commercial curriculum
offer, shared services

D

Protect reserves

Use the savings to balance
the budget

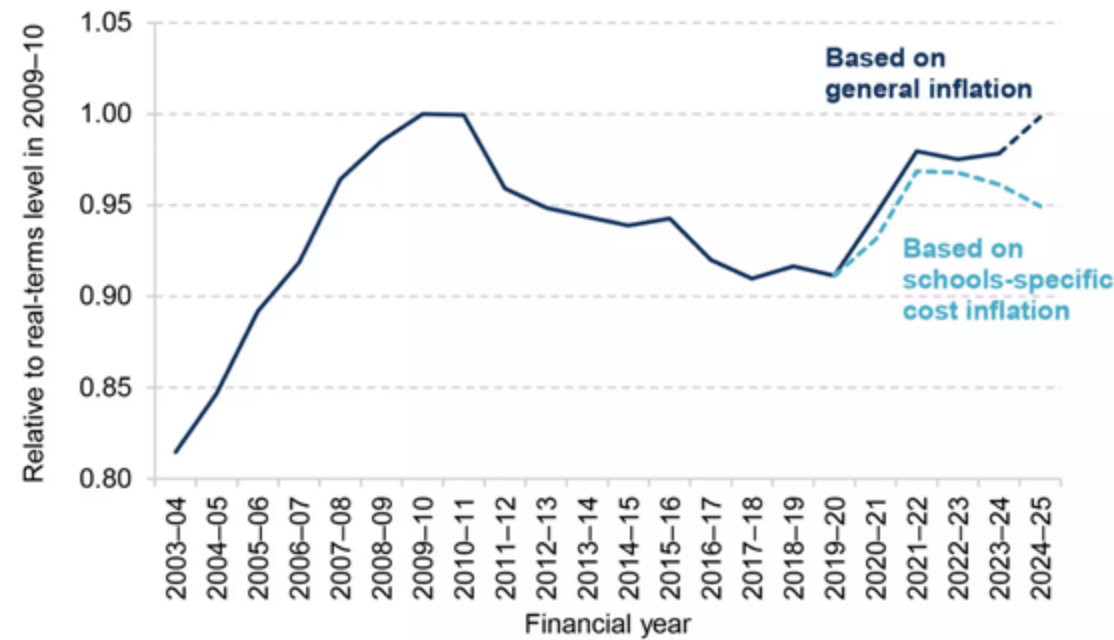


Imagine every member of staff got half a day a week back. Where would you put that time and money?

The money isn't there



School spending per pupil is effectively below 2009/10 levels



90%

of MATs say teaching and staffing costs are their biggest financial challenge

55%

of MATs forecast reserves below 5% by 2028 – up from 33% this year

Sources: Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024); Kreston UK, Academies Benchmark Report 2026; IMP, 2025 MAT Finance Sector Insight Report

Scale isn't bringing admin savings

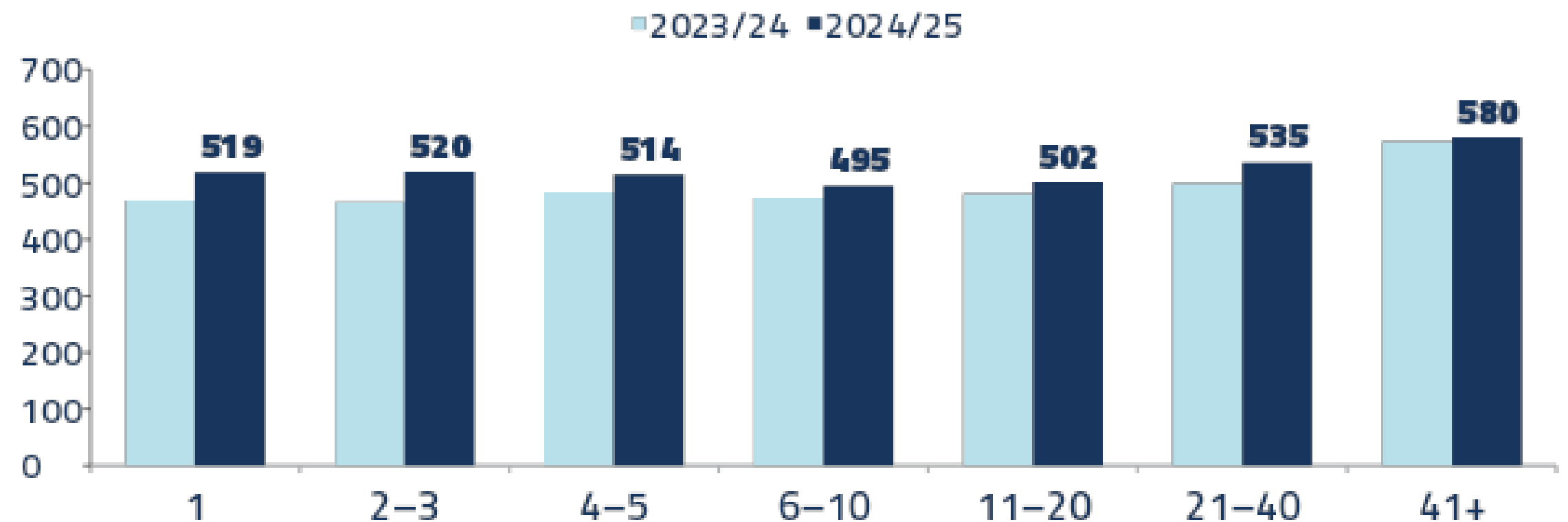
+12%

more admin spend per pupil in the largest trusts (41+ schools) than in single-school trusts

Up to 12%

one-year rise in admin spend per pupil – up for every size of trust

Median admin spend per pupil, by number of schools in the trust



Source: Arbor MAT admin spend tracker, sector benchmark 2024/25

Staff still spend too much time on admin



71%

of teachers and middle leaders feel they spend too much time on general admin

Just 4% say too little

53%

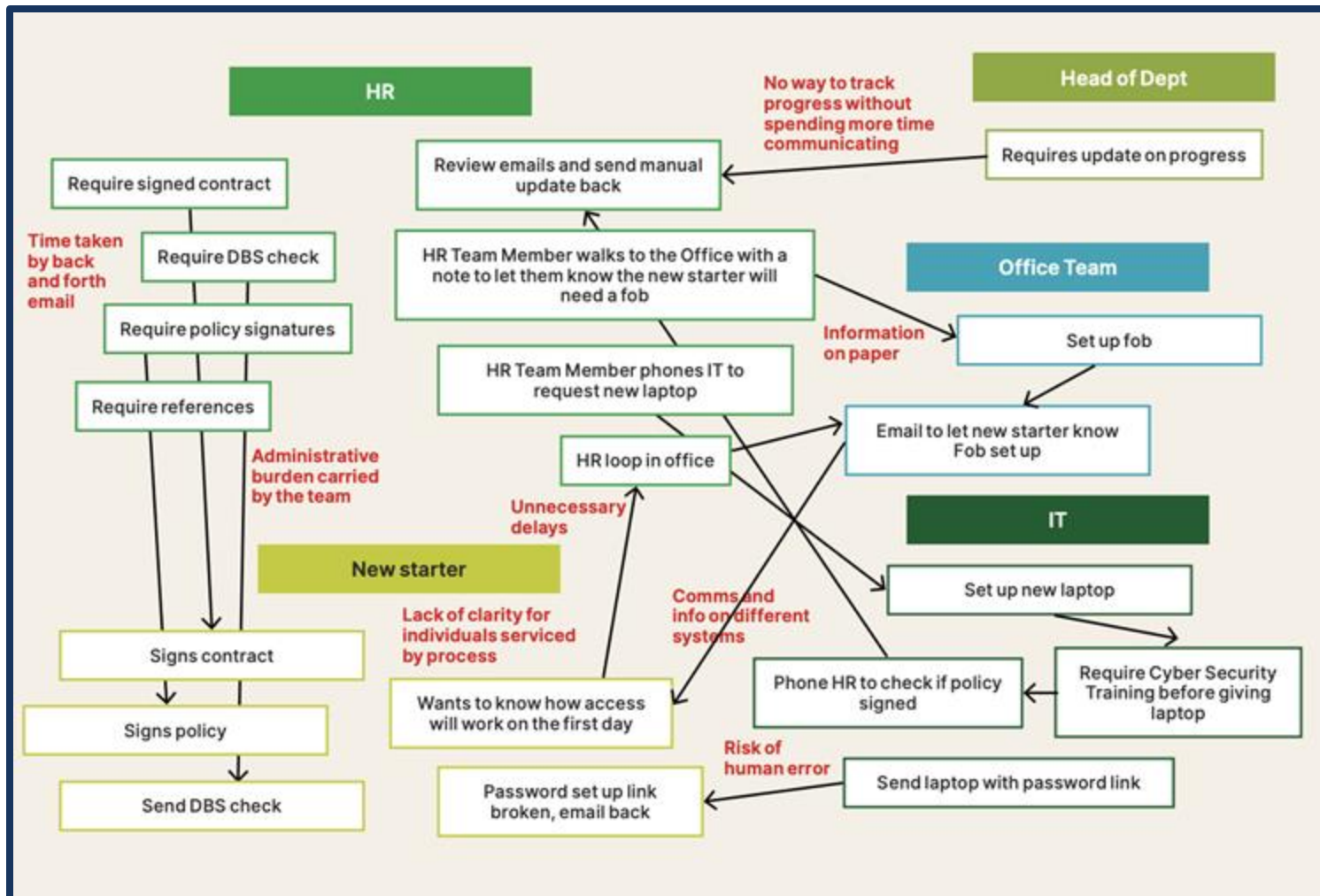
of senior leaders feel they spend too much time on admin within school

The same as last year

Working hours are falling – but admin's share of the week isn't.

Source: Working lives of teachers and leaders, wave 4, DfE, April 2026 (survey carried out spring 2025)

Because the work is manual and siloed



Onboarding one new member of staff:

- Four teams involved
- Back-and-forth emails
- Information passed around on paper
- No way to track progress without chasing
- Done differently in every school

We counted: about half a day a week



Days a year that could be automated, from 58 school admin tasks

	Head	Deputy	Teacher
Primary	19 days	20 days	20 days
Secondary	30 days	22 days	24 days
Special	21 days	21 days	19 days

20+ days a year
≈ half a day a week, across a 39-week school year

Source: Arbor analysis of 58 tasks in primary, secondary and special schools; Working lives of teachers and leaders, DfE

What half a day a week costs a trust



An illustrative 8-school trust

$$\begin{array}{c} \mathbf{480} \\ \text{staff} \end{array} \times \begin{array}{c} \mathbf{£35k} \\ \text{average salary} \end{array} \times \begin{array}{c} \mathbf{10\%} \\ 20 \text{ of } 195 \text{ contracted} \\ \text{days} \end{array} = \begin{array}{c} \mathbf{£1.7m} \\ \text{a year} \end{array}$$

That's what a trust already pays, every year, for admin most agree shouldn't be happening at that level. For comparison, the median trust of 6–10 schools spends £495 per pupil on admin – about £1.5m for 3,000 pupils.

Illustrative inputs – check before use. Admin spend: Arbor MAT admin spend tracker, sector benchmark 2024/25

Five years on: still no single solution



2021

- Admin done by hand, school by school
- Data spread across separate systems
- Centralisation just starting
- Automation meant spreadsheets and workarounds

2026

- Most trusts centralised
- Workflows run whole processes, the same way every time
- AI assistants answer questions and draft work
- Agents in early pilots

2031

- Agents take on whole processes, across schools
- Central teams design and manage agents
- Staff time shifts to people-facing work

What trusts have already automated

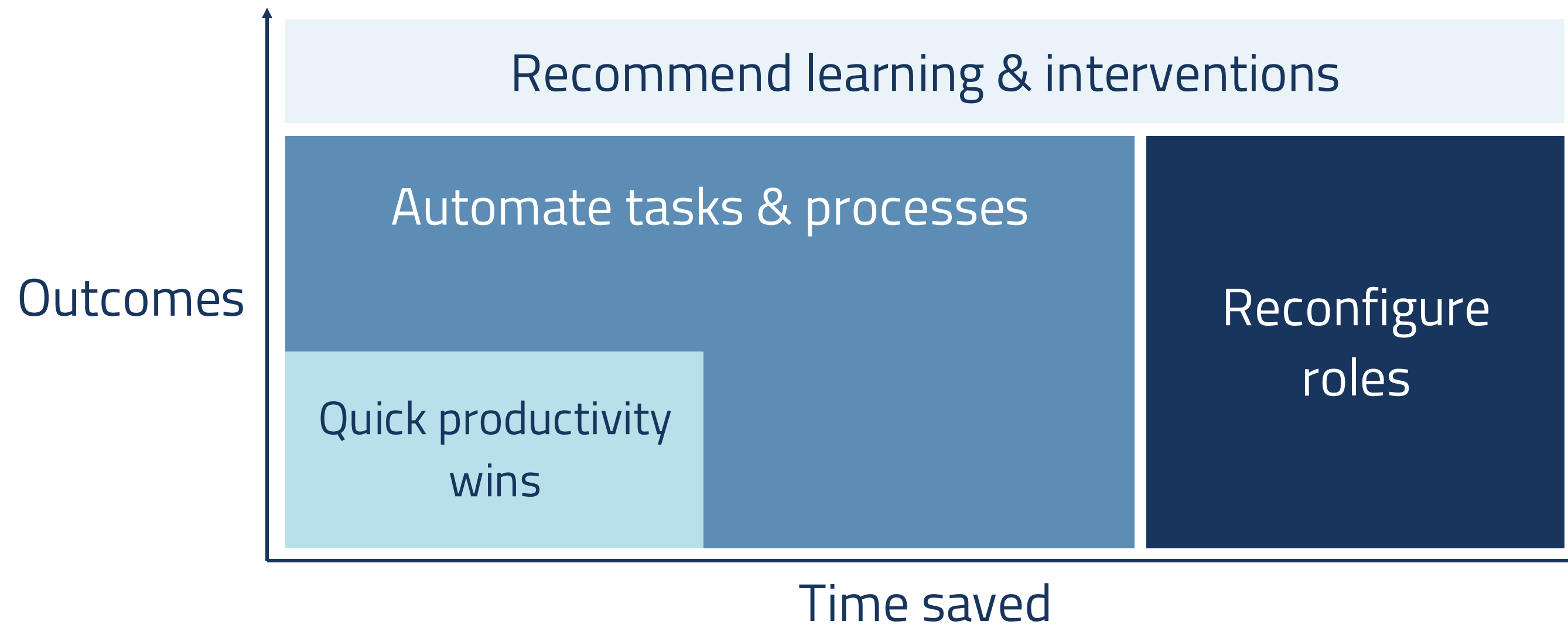
~7,000

automated processes that trusts have built
themselves

~600

schools process their daily student absences
automatically, freeing attendance officers for
follow-up

Save time first, then improve outcomes

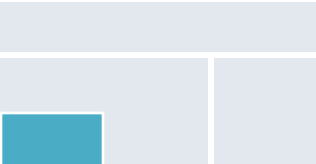
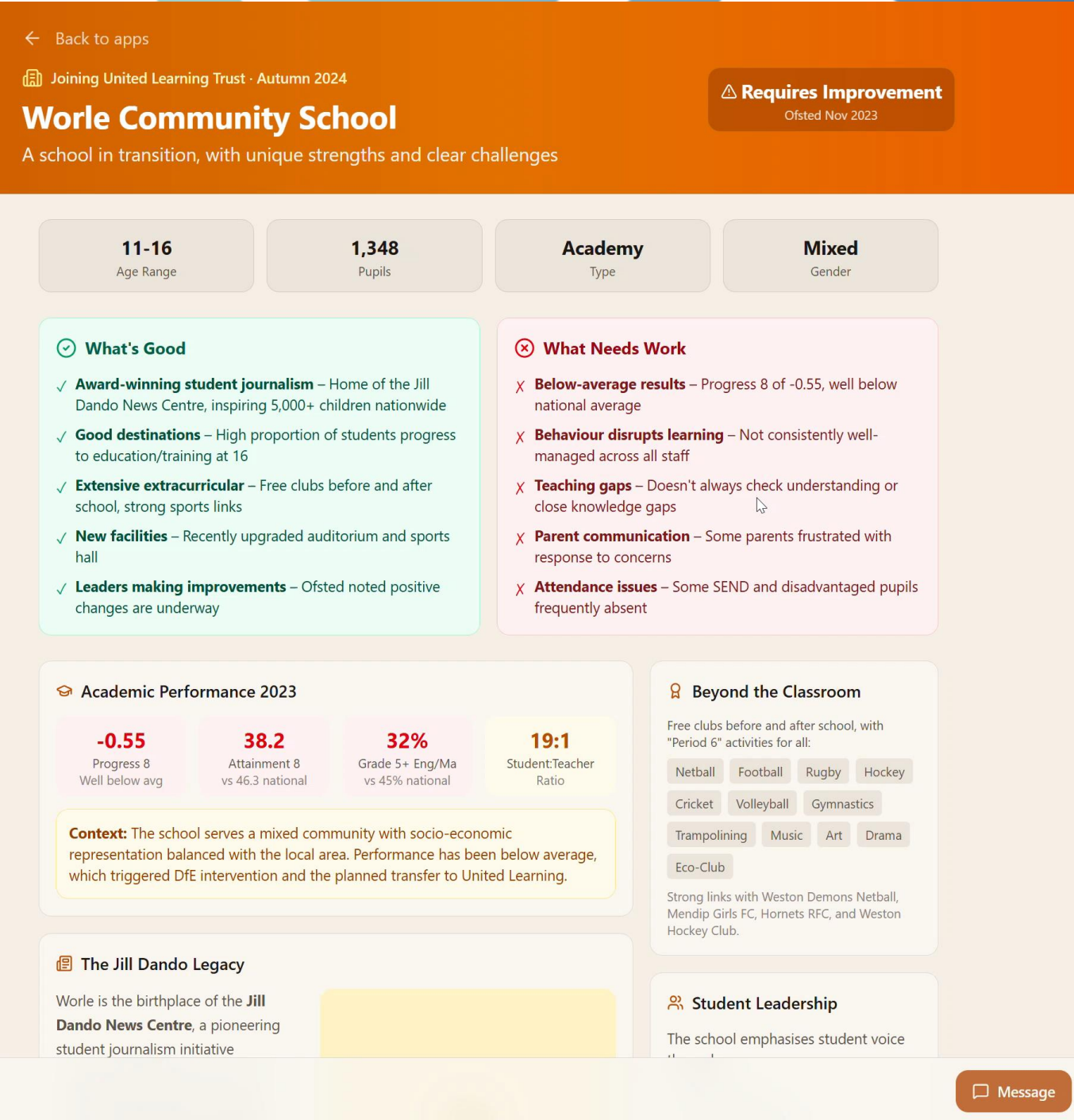


Quick productivity wins

“Build me a live dashboard of my school, pulling together our MIS data, school website, Ofsted information, DfE benchmarking and recent news.

I want recommendations of what we’re doing well and what we need to improve.

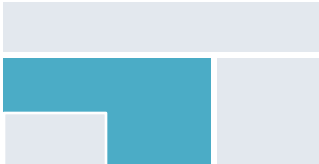
I’m sending this to governors, so don’t include any pupil-level data.”



Take one role: attendance



Attendance officer task	Mins / day	Automation potential
Process absence voicemails	60–120	Fully automate
Process absence emails	10	Fully automate
Chase unexplained absences by phone	50	Dedicated AI agent
Identify persistent absentees, take action and alert key staff	10	Fully automate + workflow
Adjust late arrivals and missing attendance codes	30	Dedicated AI agent + workflow
Chase incomplete registers and missing marks with teachers	35	Dedicated AI agent
Daily absent student reports for staff	20	Dedicated AI agent
Produce SLT attendance reporting packs and dashboards	20	Dedicated AI agent
Attendance warning letters to parents	30	Fully automate
Monitor legal registration thresholds	10	Fully automate
Total, per school, every day	~5 hours	All can be automated or given to an agent



One attendance officer across four schools



Before

Each school has its own attendance officer

School A

Attendance officer

~£27k

School B

Attendance officer

~£27k

School C

Attendance officer

~£27k

School D

Attendance officer

~£27k

Total: ~£ 108k across four schools

After

One central officer works across all four schools

Group attendance officer

~£40k

£68k

saved across four schools

AI agents

Workflows

Reporting

Policies

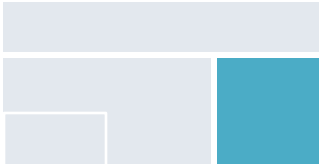
Permissions

School A

School B

School C

School D



Reconfigure roles

And roles in school change too



Emily

Attendance Officer

Less time on

- Building reports
- Chasing parents
- Updating policies
- Logging absences

More time for

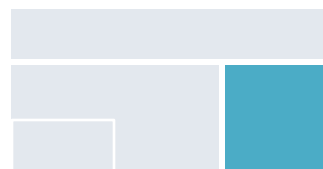
- Pupil wellbeing
- Parental engagement
- Partnering with leadership
- Flexible working

"Build me a report of all students with <90% attendance.

Then draft a message to all the parents of these students, using the school's tone of voice, to remind them of exactly how many lessons they've missed.

Then book a room and intervention for all students who have missed more than 3 consecutive days with no reason.

Schedule this task to run daily."



Reconfigure roles

Learning and interventions



The fourth area – not our focus today, but worth watching. Some ideas on what it could mean:

Spot pupils earlier

Use attendance, behaviour and assessment data to flag who needs help, sooner

Match the intervention

Suggest the right support – and track whether it worked

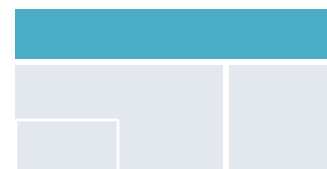
Practice between lessons

Personalised practice and tutoring, pitched at each pupil

Faster feedback

Quicker feedback on written work, with a teacher in the loop

Gains here depend on the other three areas first: teacher time, clean data and good governance.



Recommend learning & interventions

Next: from workflows to agents



	Workflows	Agents · early stage
Notice	✓ When something changes in the MIS	✓ Always on
Think	✗ Doesn't decide – it follows the steps	✓ Given context and a goal, decides what to do next
Act	✓ Runs the process you defined, the same way every time	✓ Takes a set of actions – or does nothing – and stops to ask when it needs a person



Agents work across three of the four areas

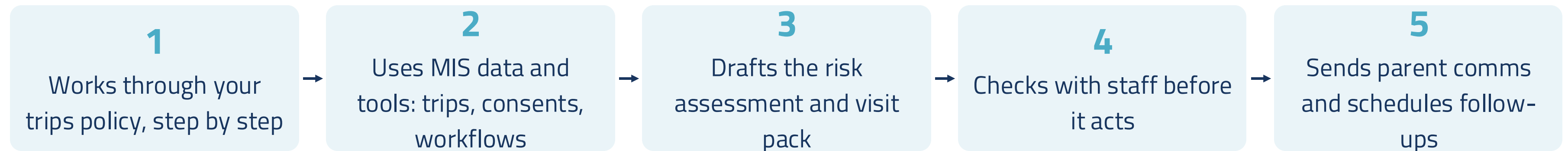
Example: an agent that plans a school trip



Goal: *"Plan a Year 11 Geography trip to Malham Cove"*

In pilot

One trip touches curriculum, health and safety, finance, SEND, safeguarding, accessibility, catering, parent comms and approvals.



Hours saved

No drafting risk assessments from scratch or chasing approvals

The right process, every time

It follows your trips policy, even when staff are busy

More memorable trips

Teachers focus on making the trip accessible and worthwhile



Agents work across three of the four areas



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What trust leaders are telling us



The debate is settled

The question isn't whether to centralise – it's how, where to start, and how to make it deliver

It's about workload, not cost-cutting

Especially in schools. Leaders are comfortable with automation; they expect schools to be more sceptical

Start small

Do one or two things brilliantly, and embed them before moving on

Start where it hurts

Subject access requests, HR and complaints top the list – then attendance and data quality

Source: Arbor conversations with 14 trusts, May–June 2026 (mostly trusts already exploring AI)

Designing the trust of the future



Where trusts would reinvest

- Front-line roles: family support, behaviour and intervention
- Support staff focused on staff and students
- New income: nurseries, a commercial curriculum offer, shared transport

What central teams will need

- Systems thinking, process and workflow design
- AI automation and data analytics
- Business partnering with leadership
- Designing and managing agents

Source: Arbor conversations with 14 trusts, May–June 2026 (mostly trusts already exploring AI)

Keeping it safe



The rules are catching up

- KCSIE 2026, in force since 1 September, brings AI into safeguarding: filtering, monitoring, online safety and AI-generated images
- DfE generative AI product safety standards: 13 standards, updated January 2026

Permissions, not workarounds

- An agent can only see and do what the person who asked it can
- Every action is logged against that person – not a generic system account
- The principle we're building to – in progress

The bigger question

- Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, Magnifica Humanitas (May 2026), focuses on AI and protecting human dignity and agency
- Parents are divided: one poll found them split roughly into thirds

Sources: DfE, KCSIE 2026; DfE, Generative AI: product safety standards (Jan 2026); Vatican, Magnifica Humanitas (2026); EdTrust/MassINC parent poll (Jan 2026)

In conversation



Stephen Higgins

Head of Data & AI, Arbor Education

Ed Butcher

Product Director, Ecosystem, Arbor Education

Your questions welcome – we'll take two or three from the floor.

So – which lever would you pull first?



Same question as the start. With half a day a week back for every member of staff, where would you put it? Has anyone changed their mind?

A

Front-line roles

Family support, behaviour and intervention roles

B

Staff workload and wellbeing

Give the time back to people – and keep them

C

New income

Nursery provision, a commercial curriculum offer, shared services

D

Protect reserves

Use the savings to balance the budget



Where would you put that time and money?

How to prepare

Design the target state

- Decide what the half-day is for – before you choose a tool
- Agree AI principles – you don't need a static policy
- Get your data right: standardise wherever you can

Pick your first process

- Start where it hurts: one or two processes, done brilliantly
- Frame it as reducing workload, not cutting costs
- Expect to pay more for centralised roles: they need different skills

Pilot in a cluster

- Test in a few schools, then roll out
- Appoint AI champions to lead the change
- Rethink the process from scratch. Be bold!



Audience Q&A

Have your say



Arbor customer?

Ask your CSM about joining our MAT Innovation Panel, and help shape how we develop and support agentic products

CST member?

Look out for a survey coming out this term on how agents will change the way you work

Thank you



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