



Connecting



**CST Annual
Conference 26**

15 & 16 October, ICC, Birmingham

#CSTConf26

Governance at scale



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Governance at scale



Source: [Governance at scale](#) (2026)

Core messages today

Scale by itself is not the answer. The test is whether resulting organisations are:

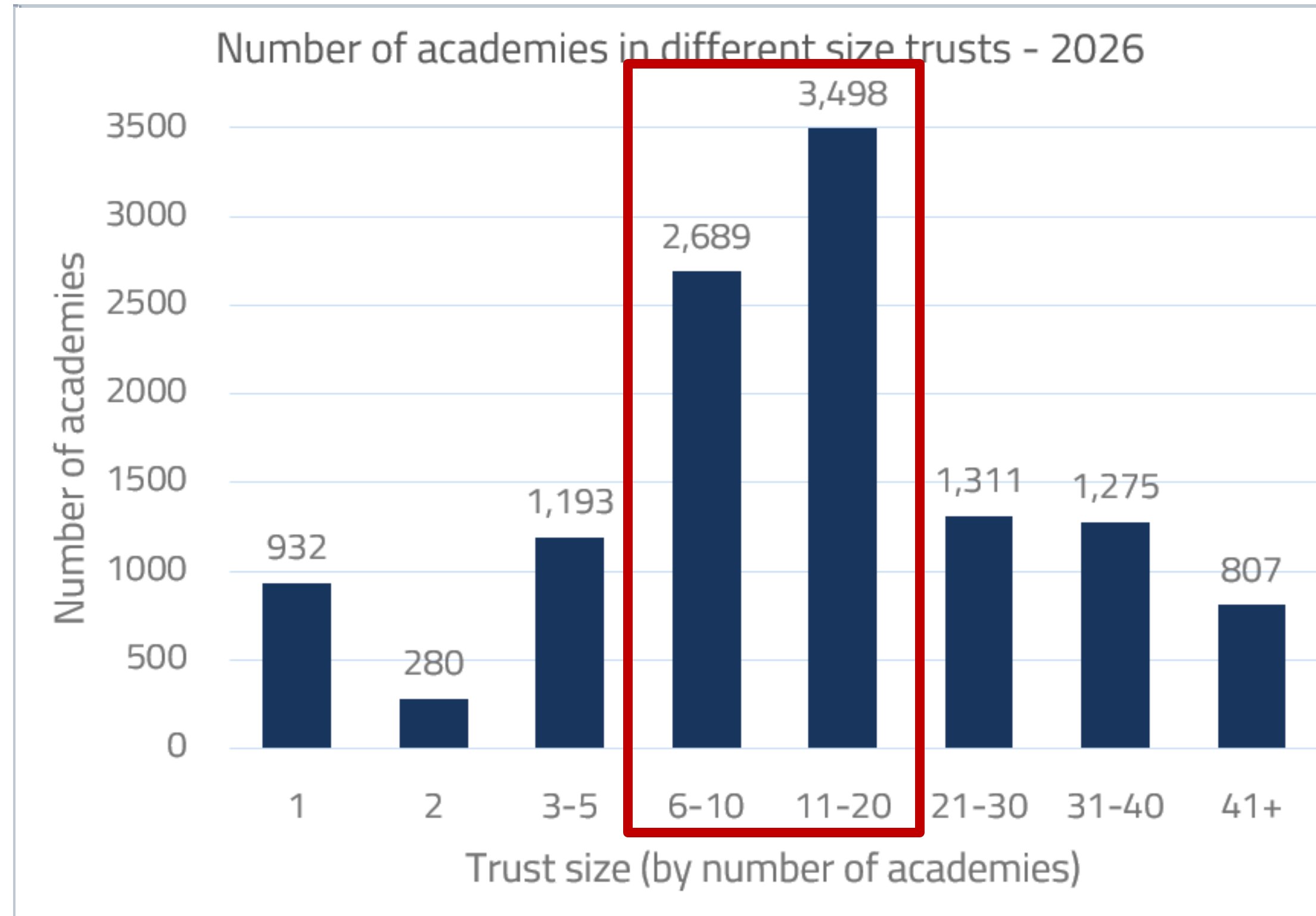
Coherent | Capable | Trusted | Adaptable





How scale changes organisations

Changing trust landscape



But... what do we mean by scale?

Not just headline metrics:

- **Size** – Number of schools? Pupils? Financial turnover?
- **Complexity** – Multiple phases, contexts, LAs, proliferating expert roles, layers
- **Distance** – Geographical, organisational, relational
- **Speed and impact** – Scale expands impact; pace balanced with control



What do we mean by scale?



3,836 pupils

£34,732,000

3 schools



3,973 pupils

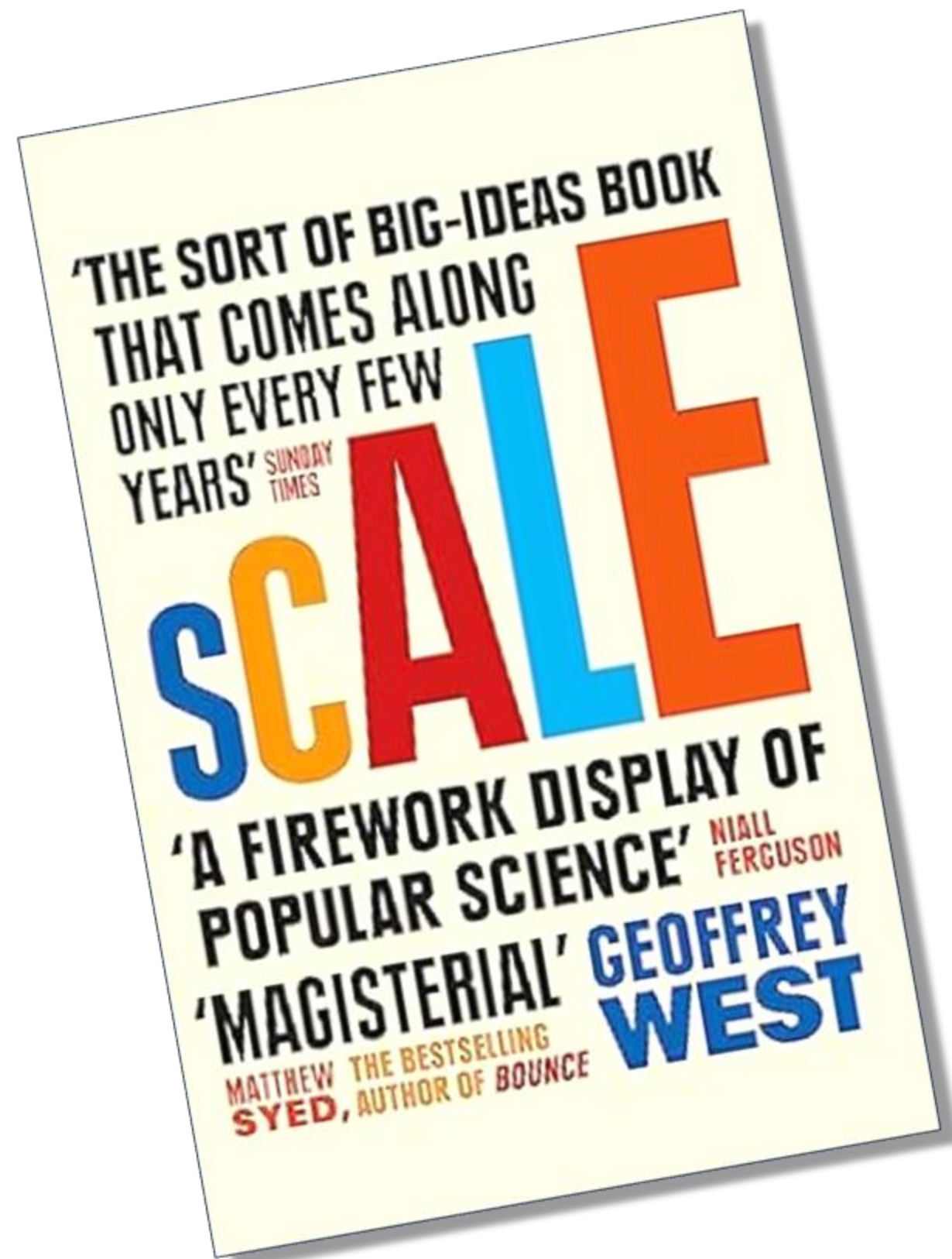
£30,672,000

26 schools

Scale



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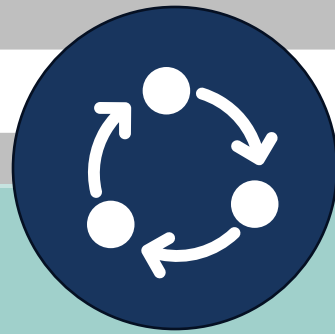
- Bigger is not simply 'more'.
- Growth changes how systems behave.
- Systems gain efficiency as they scale...
- BUT growth also amplifies problems.
- Large systems become more rigid and less adaptable.
- Network design determines efficiency.
- Sustainability depends on **innovation and adaptation.**



The benefits and risks at scale

The 'scale dividend'

Protective structure Strategic enabler



Reducing friction for schools

Taking on
administrative and
operational burdens
and freeing up
school leaders' time



Amplifying expertise

Giving schools rapid
access to high-
quality, specialist
functions; enabling
deep and purposeful
collaboration



Building resilience by using resources nimbly and responsively

Directing knowledge,
funding, and capacity
where it will have the
greatest impact towards
accomplishing the
trust's overall mission

Civic institution anchored in communities

How do you know you are getting the scale dividend?

Educational resilience

Is expertise reaching the schools that need it most?

Financial resilience

Are collective resources delivering greater value and supporting unviable but necessary schools?

Staffing resilience

Are we delivering career pathways, succession, and high quality development?

Operational resilience

Are shared services improving quality and risk management?

Geographical resilience

Does the footprint support collaboration, sustainable provision, and civic anchoring?

The risks at scale

- **Blurred lines:** Delivery becomes confused
- **Lack of coordination:** People duplicate and work at cross-purposes
- **Lack of capacity:** Resource allocation has not evolved to match scale
- **Bottlenecks:** Delay due to layers of decision making and desire for control
- **Ossification:** Change, adaptation, and reinvention become difficult
- **Lack of alignment:** Shared purpose, values, and identity are lost



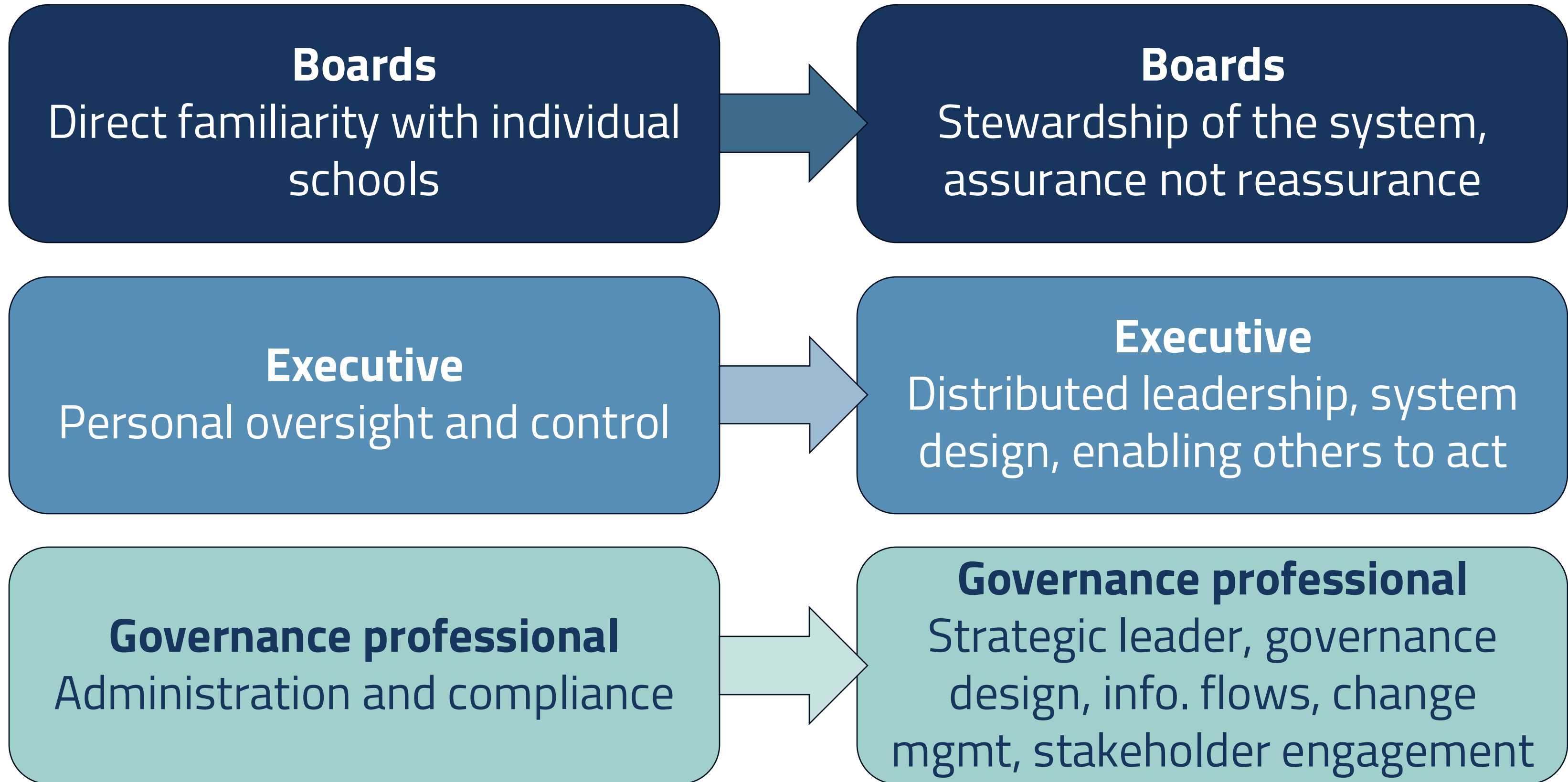
Discuss in pairs

Where is scale currently creating
the **greatest benefit** in your
trust, and where is it creating the
greatest friction?



Evolving roles

How roles must evolve



Governance professionals as strategic leaders

They need:

- **Capacity & capability:** appropriate resourcing of governance function
- **Technical skills & up-to-date knowledge:** ongoing professional development and sector briefings
- **Insight & early involvement:** governance closely involved in due diligence and pre- and post-merger planning
- **Positioning & perception:** shift away from administrative towards being seen as a strategic leader



Co-op's experience





Designing governance at scale

Good governance design

Stewardship of **shared purpose** is explicit and structurally reinforced

Clear **decision-making** rights are co-located with expertise and legitimacy

Focus is **strategic** not operational

Accountability is visible and owned

Information flows prioritise signal over volume and avoid delay

'Red handles' exist

Coordination eliminates duplication

Stakeholder voice is structurally embedded

The system is capable of **learning and redesign**

Good governance design *at scale*

Stewardship balanced with adaptation

- Overcommunicating identity and purpose
- Decisions remain anchored in a common understanding of purpose
- Governance as a cultural system:
 - How power is exercised
 - How challenge is handled
 - How trust is built
- Structurally creating space for learning, adaptation, and innovation

Letting go with intent

- Subsidiarity with purpose – intelligent delegation based on expertise, legitimacy, coherence, and capacity
- Preventing accountability sinks:
 - Clear ownership
 - Understood escalation routes
 - Assurance that nothing can disappear into a gap between structure and practice

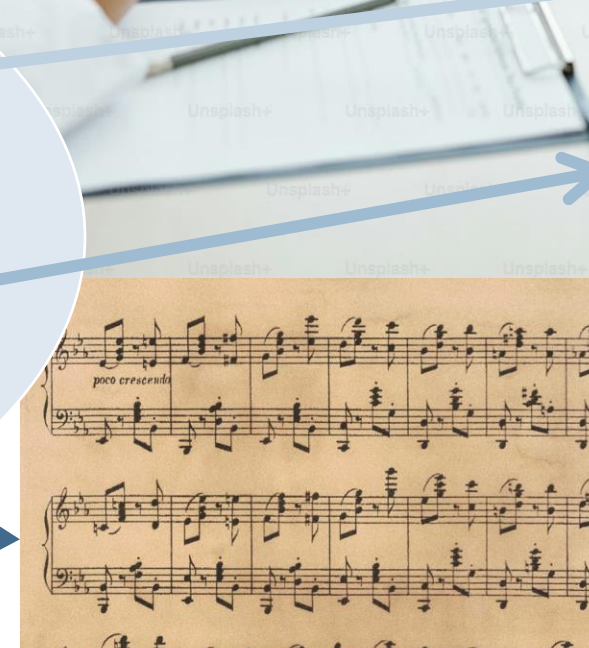
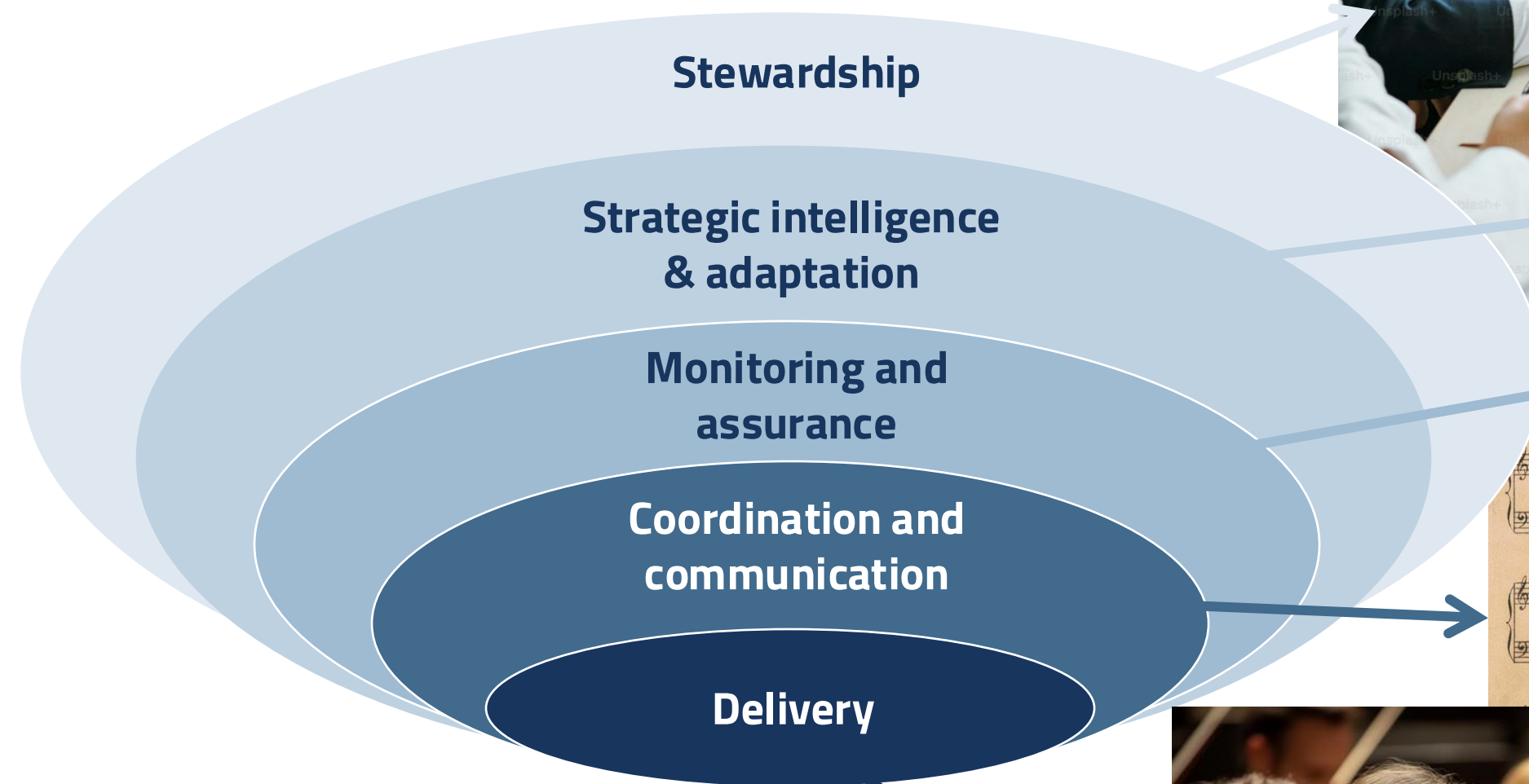
Coordination & communication

- Capturing and amplifying stakeholder voice, structurally
- Rapid feedback loops over lengthy reporting
- Consistency while allowing for context:
 - Clear expectations and standardisation to counter variability and lack of interoperability
 - All while allowing flexibility for context

Viable system model



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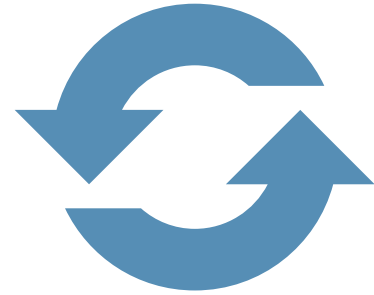
Archetypes of system failure



Labyrinth

System 1 failure

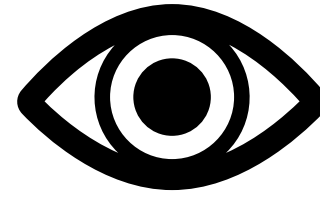
When the flow of work crosses multiple organisational boundaries, creating delays and friction



Reinventing the wheel

System 2 failure

Repeatedly addressing the same problem and duplicating effort ('fluffload') through lack of coordination



Control dilemma

System 3 failure

Increased demands for performance reporting by managers due to fear of loss of control, leading to more 'fluffload' for staff



Here be dragons

System 4 failure

Systemic failure to learn about emerging risks in the environment and integrate intelligence into strategic decision making



Follow the leader

System 5 failure

Leaders allowed to introduce continuous stream of initiatives & rapid, unrelated changes sapping resources without achieving lasting improvements

Discuss in pairs: The risks of rapid consolidation

Coherent

1. Fragmented policies, systems, data, & operating models
2. Schools retain separate organisational identities
3. Commonality imposed too bluntly, or variation is left unmanaged
4. Resources become a source of bargaining or perceived unfairness

Capable

1. Complexity outpaces central functions
2. Governance remains under-resourced
3. Leadership succession and system leadership capability are weak
4. Integration work is added to business-as-usual workloads

Trusted

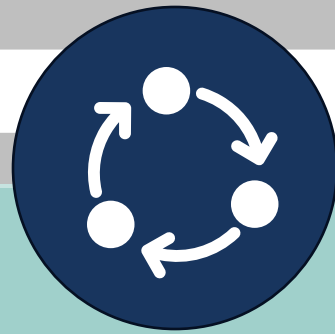
1. Local voice becomes mediated or diluted
2. Boards depend on portable but context-poor metrics
3. Schools experience the trust as distant
4. Mission is asserted centrally but not expressed through everyday decisions
5. Accountability dispersed = accountability sinks

Adaptable

1. Legacy decision rights and schemes of delegation create confusion and duplication
2. Hubs or regions add another layer without a clear purpose
3. Standardisation drowns out innovation and context

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	This	Not this
Stewardship & adaptation	Balancing stability with renewal, sustaining organisational health while creating space for learning, adaptation, and innovation over time.	Ossification and static governance arrangements with little capacity to adapt; a focus on the short term rather than the longer term.
Governance expertise & capacity	Governance professional has a strategic role in designing structures, information flows, and assurance mechanisms fit for scale.	Governance professional lacks capacity to oversee multiple layers, resulting in reactive firefighting and administrative support.
Accountability	Clear, intentional accountability routes, supported by subsidiarity, defined escalation, and visible ownership of decisions.	Loss of proximity and over-mediated oversight leading to 'accountability sinks' and disillusioned stakeholders
Alignment & coordination	Shared identity, principles, and strategic intent, reinforced through coordination, communication and consistent frameworks rather than uniform structures.	Fragmentation of purpose and priorities as legacy practices and local variation pull in different directions.
Decision making	Confident delegation with clear guardrails; decisions sit close to expertise while retaining board assurance.	Over-centralisation, indecision, delays, and bottlenecks driven by fear of loss of control
Information flows & types	Exception reporting and rapid feedback surface issues early and enable timely, proportionate response. Quantitative <i>and</i> qualitative intelligence.	Slow, bulky data and reporting that lacks insight, creates fluffload, obscures emerging risks and weaker signals, and over-relies on blunt metrics.
Stakeholder voice	Designed mechanisms that capture, amplify, and route stakeholder voice to where decisions are made.	Local voice diluted or tokenistic, with concerns absorbed into process or lost between layers.

Thank you



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