

## **Driving trust improvement and facilitating deeper trust-to-trust collaboration through Challenge Partners Trust Peer Review**

### **Summary**

In 2021, Challenge Partners was invited by four trusts in the South West (Cabot, Cathedral, Futura and Olympus) to pilot a different approach to our established Trust Peer Review. Evaluation on conclusion of the pilot in summer 2023 revealed the main benefits to be in:

- Offering a unique opportunity for trust leaders to evaluate their own school improvement models as they reviewed and more deeply understood other trusts' models
- Sharpening own approach to school improvement through being forced to articulate it, receiving actionable feedback, and learning from others' approaches
- Understanding how own trust was perceived by others and addressing misconceptions - replacing myths with healthy views
- Identifying opportunities for collaboration and connection
- Deepening relationships between the trusts at multiple levels and building a shared sense of responsibility for education, children and young people across an area

In the words of one trust Education Director:

*“The four trusts involved in the South West pilot have all used the feedback and their learning from reviewing the other trusts to deeply reflect on their own school improvement model. All have reflected on how useful the review process has been in deepening understanding of how trusts work, and for stimulating improvement in their trust.”*

Challenge Partners would be delighted to partner with other groups of trusts to deliver a similar model.

### **Challenge Partners Trust Peer Review - the basics**

First piloted and independently reviewed by the NfER<sup>1</sup> in 2018/19, Challenge Partners Trust Peer Review (TPR) is built on more than a decade's experience in facilitating more than 3,000 school-to-school peer Quality Assurance Reviews.

The TPR evaluates each trust on its own terms, seeking to understand its unique history, context, and approach to school improvement, and to assess the effectiveness of this. There is no checklist, but clear areas of focus and guiding questions that enable the review to get under the skin of the trust. Guiding questions are aligned to CST's Building Strong Trusts: Assurance Framework, to which Challenge Partners contributed. There is also time built into the three-day review for the host trust to present an area of challenge and gather insight, ideas, and feedback from the visiting team.

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<sup>1</sup> Available on Challenge Partners' website [HERE](#).

TPRs are expertly led by recently-retired CEOs of successful trusts, trained and quality assured by Challenge Partners. They lead a team of peer reviewers – Challenge Partners-trained executive leaders drawn from different trusts across the country – who work alongside the host trust to evaluate the trust’s approach to school improvement. The role of the Lead Reviewer is critical in:

- Working with the host trust to determine what they want to get out of the review
- Agreeing a schedule of meetings and activities to achieve the desired outcome
- Holding the process and facilitating discussions, so hosts and visitors are free to focus on the content of the review
- Capturing key points from the review in a written report

The power is in the process, reflections and notes taken by the host trust in timetabled discussions where hosts and visiting reviewers evaluate, discuss and reflect on what they have seen and heard. The report prepared by the Lead Reviewer summarises the key points and belongs to the host trust alone - it is up to them who they share it with.

### **The group model, as piloted in the South West**

The key difference in the group model is that the leaders involved in each TPR in the group are the same. Among the South West group, this enabled relationships to deepen over time and discussions across the reviews to build on each other. The Lead Reviewer is also the same for each review, which further enhanced these benefits.

On a practical level, EAs in the four South West trusts took responsibility for managing the logistics of the reviews, which is something Challenge Partners usually handles. The pilot began with contracting and reviewer training in spring 2022, with a review at each trust taking place in each of the four big terms between summer 2022 and summer 2023.

To further build on the benefits of the four TPRs, there are plans for the trusts to reconvene for a day in autumn 2023 and summer 2024 to hear what each trust has done in the 12-15 months since their review (focusing on two trusts at each session). There is interest in running a further cycle of TPRs the following year.

### **What we learned from the pilot**

The key benefits of the pilot are recorded in the summary above. Reflecting on the experience of the pilot, one Director of Education noted how:

*“The review is an intellectual pursuit into how you lead and improve schools and the decisions and strategies that can be chosen to add value as a Trust held within a Review that offers multiple practical and real examples of how those decisions play out in context.*”

*“This supports greater understanding of school improvement models and offers the space for a deep evaluation of your own Trust and how effective it is and in comparison to other Trusts.*

*“It creates a collaborative and collegiate structure for educationalists to share, connect and collaborate in a shared endeavour to build strong Trusts that have great schools that meet the needs of the children and communities that the Trusts serve.*

*“Going under the bonnet of another Trust is a brilliant way of evaluating the quality of your own Trust.”*

One of the hypotheses we wanted to test through the pilot was whether reviewing trusts in a local area and where relationships already existed diminished the level of rigour and challenge in the reviews. Feedback in the evaluation suggested that reviewers hadn't held back.

The evaluation revealed unexpected benefits in how relationships developed between the trusts, with existing relationships deepening among executive leaders and new relationships being forged at other levels, e.g. between operations teams and between the EAs. This delivered a range of tangible benefits including sharing of policies and other information, and agreed transfer of staff between trusts, as well as an increased sense of and means for exercising collective responsibility across the local area.

An important reflection is that the main purpose and benefit from a school improvement point of view was not to provide quality assurance of each trust's school improvement model, but to offer a developmental peer evaluation of what seemed to be working well and areas to address. Common with all voluntary peer review processes, the accuracy of the evaluation depends crucially on the openness and transparency of the host trust. The success of the pilot reflects feedback given by participants that each trust had been prepared to make themselves vulnerable and be honest about things that weren't working so well.

### **Offer to new groups of trusts**

Challenge Partners would be delighted to work with new groups of trusts to explore how a similar model could work for them, drawing on lessons from the pilot and adapting to the groups' particular needs.

### **Prices**

The price for TPRs in the national programme in 2023/24 is:

- £7,500 for trusts of 6 or more schools
- £6,600 for smaller trusts



For a group subscription, we would apply a discount of 5% for spend of £20,000 or more. This would mean a price per trust of:

- £7,125 for trusts of 6 or more
- £6,270 for smaller trusts

**Dr Kate Chhatwal OBE, CEO, October 2023**