

# Growing the Top

Participants  
Handbook



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## Welcome

Welcome to the Challenge Partners Growing the Top programme. Challenge Partners is a national education charity established and led by practitioners. We work with over 500 schools and over 100 school trusts to facilitate mutual improvement through collaboration, challenge and sharing knowledge about effective practice. Our mission is to reduce educational inequality and improve the life chances of all children, ensuring every school community can benefit from the combined wisdom of the education system.

Building on our experience of facilitating over 2,200 school Quality Assurance Reviews and our successful Growing the Top programme, we are able to extend excellence in a learning community of strong good and leading schools. The purpose of the Extending Leading Practice (ELP) programme is to provide a school improvement programme for strong good and outstanding schools to consistently sustain and extend excellence across the school.

This programme is different from the QAR as there are no judgements and similar to Growing the Top in that visiting leaders explore the strengths and knotty issues of host schools. Unique to this programme is the Impact Project, which provides the opportunity to include and develop middle leaders.

We look forward to working with you to have a positive impact on the good and leading schools in our network and the communities they serve.

Yours sincerely

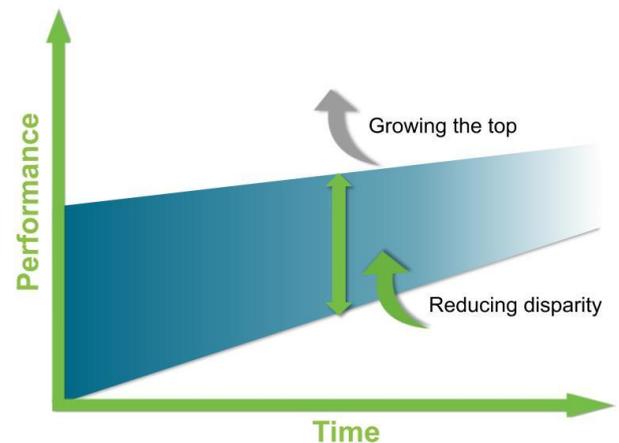
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. E. John".

Dame Sue John  
Executive Director  
Challenge Partners

## What is Growing the Top

The Growing the Top (GtT) programme seeks to provide opportunities for the leading schools in the Network of Excellence (NoE) to work together, not only to lead the education system, but also to push the boundaries and move the system forward.

The Upwards Convergence model (right) proposes that growth for leading schools comes through effective external learning partnerships, engagement with research, structured innovation, and peer reviews. The Growing the Top programme provides this growth both through learning trios of participating schools, which undertake facilitated school visit days, and by providing external stimulus from other sectors during whole cohort events. Through this unique combination of organised events, social capital is built and great educational practice and external knowledge is effectively shared.



As such, GtT is designed to realise a set of ambitious objectives for participating schools:

1. to gain knowledge external to the UK education sector (a distinguishing feature of the programme)
2. to develop social capital between outstanding schools (distinguishing feature)
3. to share leading practice through structured and facilitated school visits
4. to support one another in addressing systemic challenge through the combined wisdom of school leaders.
5. to develop leadership through observation of other leading schools

## The benefits of participation

Professor Peter Matthews’ evaluation report of the pilot programme demonstrated that the programme provided multiple benefits to participants who embrace the opportunity to engage with their peers. These programme benefits include:

### Realising the ambition to drive further improvement

Schools valued the ‘fantastic opportunity’ to spend time in other leading schools and collaborate in considering systemic excellence and ongoing challenges. In all trios, the visits either had led without delay to changes in the participating schools through adopting or adapting to their own specific context the great ideas and practice from schools in their trio or had influenced planning for implementation in September.

### Magpie-ing with pride

The school visits undoubtedly were highlights in which a great deal of knowledge was shared and created. Participating leaders particularly valued:

- *“discovering very useful strategies’ worth adopting in our own schools”*
- *“receiving ‘great ideas’ for tackling their own systemic challenge and finding that their issues were not unique”*
- *“observing and learning about excellent practice”*
- *“gaining fresh perspectives”*
- *“reflecting on their own school improvement priorities”*

### Extending and deepening the professional network

It is evident that the Growing the Top programme generated a high level professional learning community of the senior leaders involved, together with smaller and deeper learning communities within the trios and between the schools represented in the trios. Before the year’s programme was completed, significant inter-school partnerships were flourishing at the operational level, particularly involving subject specialists and other middle leaders who learnt from each other and developed their knowledge in greater depth. The ripples of the programme are spreading outwards and creating new nodes of knowledge.

### Leveraging peer challenge in a new way

The Growing the Top visits had a distinctly different emphasis and flavour from the Challenge Partners’ Quality Assurance Reviews (QARs). As several participants said, the visits were not judgemental. Visiting leaders explored the strengths of host schools and reflected on frank information about their challenges. All participants – host and visiting leaders alike - benefited from the resulting discussion, analysis and brainstorming.

### **Engaging fully, as facilitators provide process leadership**

Experienced senior leaders were trained in facilitation skills specific to the programme so that Trio senior leaders were free to engage in the content of the day without responsibility for process.

### **Being set-up for success**

Factors contributing to the success of the Growing the Top programme included:

- the readiness of these leading partner schools not only to share their strengths but also expose aspects they wanted to improve
- the openness, frankness and insights of fellow leaders in the programme, together with a non-judgemental approach to what they saw
- the quality of several conference speakers who stimulated thinking and reflected different organisational cultures
- the valued contribution of external facilitators for the visit days, particularly facilitators who had substantial experience of school and system leadership.
- the vision, design, organisation and support of the programme by the Challenge Partners team

## The commitment required

In order to reap the benefits of the programme, **it is essential that every school commits to the following:**

1. Embracing and maintaining the programme ethos throughout participation in GtT.
2. Participation:
  - 2.1. The headteacher and one other designated senior leader are to attend all three whole cohort events (including RVSPing to confirm their attendance). If the headteacher or designated senior leader is unable to attend the event, a replacement should be sent.
  - 2.2. The headteacher and the same designated senior leader are to participate in the three trio school visit days, of which they will host one. If the headteacher or designated senior leader is unable to attend the event, a replacement should be sent.
3. Preparation:
  - 3.1. Each school will share their provisional agenda (created with the support of templates and examples below) with the central team and the facilitator for input before finalising. The agenda must be sent to [programmes@challengepartners.org](mailto:programmes@challengepartners.org) at least 2 weeks before the visit day.
  - 3.2. Each host school will share the agenda and provide information relevant to the Trio visit day to the visitors, facilitator and central team at least 7 days before the visit date. (e.g. parking and travel information, the agenda etc.)
4. Evaluation and Feedback: All participants will be expected to complete a pre and post programme survey, as well as a feedback form after each school visit and whole cohort event.
5. Expenses: Each school is to cover the expenses incurred in hosting or participating in the programme days

## The programme ethos

Growing the Top is about collaboration, partnership and challenge. The trust extended within the trios of schools; generosity in sharing; curiosity; and an appreciation of what the other schools were achieving were found to be essential elements of the programme's success. Participants in this year's programme are asked to embody this same ethos, and commit the head of school and a senior leader to attend every trio visit day and whole cohort event.

It is also important to respect the confidentiality of information provided at any activity, particularly about individuals and their work; declare all possible conflicts of interest prior to an activity; maintain appropriate professional relationships with colleagues and/or activity participants and ensure personal conduct does not undermine or exploit a fellow participant.

Lastly, a reminder of the Challenge Partners' values which underpin everything we do:

1. **Excellence** We are always looking for ways to improve because we are determined to achieve the best for every child, teacher and leader
2. **Equity** We treat each other fairly, with trust, care and respect. We seek the best for every child, and know that those who have the least need our combined expertise the most
3. **Courageous Leadership** We speak up and take responsibility for all children, making sure that we do not harm others in doing our best for our own schools
4. **Challenge** We expect the best of ourselves and each other, and value challenge which helps us improve
5. **Collaboration** We listen to, share with and learn from each other, developing our practice together so that every child benefits from our combined wisdom and creativity
6. **Innovation** We use and generate research, we innovate with discipline and evaluate intelligently in pursuit of better outcomes for all children, especially the most disadvantaged

## The Whole Cohort Events

Three full day events for all programme participants (or whole cohort) are run over the year, so please add the dates to your calendars as soon as they are received.

These whole cohort events provide the opportunity for participating schools to:

1. Gain external knowledge from other areas of the public sector, corporates and/or the independent schools sector.
2. Share great practice and/ or learnings from trio visit days.
3. Have opportunities for building social capital (i.e. relationships build on professional trust that facilitate knowledge sharing) and expanding their professional network.

The first whole cohort event will include programme induction and trio introductions, and the last whole cohort event will include trio feedback sessions on programme learnings.

## The Trio Learning Groups or 'Trios'

Schools are matched into trios according to their geography and diversified by their type and hubs to ensure effective engagement and value for all schools. Trio schools visit each other for a day, during which the host school shares an area of systemic excellence and their learning journey to get there, as well as seeking peer support on a strategic challenge. These visits are facilitated by a trained Growing the Top facilitator, who is also an experienced senior leader, to ensure the purpose of the day is achieved.

Over the course of the programme we expect trios and facilitators to build strong social capital and invest time in their relationships with each other. Trios may choose to meet virtually before/between visits to prepare for visits or discuss other issues/reflect on their visit days and follow up on conversations they have started.

### Purpose

The purpose of the visit days is to provide the opportunity to

1. increase social capital which is necessary for the effective sharing of knowledge and collaborative learning
2. share existing knowledge of how an outstanding school manages its continuous improvement
3. share professional expertise through discussion of systemic challenges

### Preparation

Both hosts and visitors are to prepare for the visit day to ensure it is a valuable experience for all participants.

### Host Schools

Hosts prepare an agenda using the guidelines and templates in this handbook. Hosts will share this with the trio facilitator and Challenge Partners central team 2 weeks beforehand to solicit feedback and ensure the purpose of the day is met. At the same time, hosts also communicate the trio visit day start and end times so that visitors can plan their travel. Start times are flexible around your trio's needs, however, typical start times which allow for travel are 9 or 9:30, with the day often ending around 4 p.m. **All communications should include the central team for programme management purposes.**

### Visiting Schools

Visitors may use publicly available information to familiarise themselves with the school being visited prior to arrival, such as:

- What does the school stand for?
- What else is the school presenting to the outside world (e.g. mission statement)?
- What is the context in which the school operates? (i.e. geography, social,

demographic and student make up)

In addition, reading the agenda on receipt and noting any questions which may freshly arise is a useful way to prepare. Many visitors find the journey time useful to ready their minds and demeanour in order to carve out a rich learning space in which they both give and gain.

Whilst you are on your trio visit you may find it useful to use the template provided - ask questions open minded, notes, pre thinking - quick wins

### Participation

The Trio visit day is divided into four parts to facilitate participation, reflection and the achievement of objectives. Content and timing suggestions are suggestions and you can see how some example agendas in the final pages of this handbook.

<p><b>PART 1 - Contracting</b> (20 mins) Led by the GtT facilitator, and includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome</li> <li>• Confirmation of visit objectives</li> <li>• Confirmation of the day's activities</li> </ul> <p><i>N.B. This part of the day may take longer in the first visit to establish ways of working together and be shortened in subsequent visits</i></p>	<p><b>PART 2 - Context and Systemic excellence</b> (2h30) 'you don't remain outstanding by standing still' Led by the facilitator with input from the host school</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• school's context</li> <li>• Sharing, observation and discussion of systemic excellence and how the host school is purposefully improving on its previous best</li> <li>• Mention systemic challenge</li> <li>• Time for individual reflection</li> </ul>
<p><b>PART 3 - Systemic challenge</b> (1h30) Led by facilitator with input from the host school Sharing, observing and discussion of host school's challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time for individual reflection</li> </ul>	<p><b>PART 4 - Wrap up</b> (45-60 mins) Led by facilitator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consolidation of visit findings</li> <li>• Visit day feedback</li> </ul>

### Trio visit day outputs

Participation in the trio visit days produces a number of outputs, including:

1. Trio observations and knowledge share to feed into school improvement planning
2. Individual's notes to be used back in school and in the final whole cohort event for compiling the case study

Programme feedback (to be used by central team for programme evaluation and improvement)

How to engage

## Contact

For all enquiries, please contact our programmes team ([programmes@challengepartners.org](mailto:programmes@challengepartners.org)) and a member of the central team will be able to assist you.

## Trio Visit Day agenda: template with guidelines

Time	Part	Content and Process	Who
20 minutes	<b>1 - Contracting</b>	<b>Contracting</b> (This session can be shorter after visit 1)	Facilitator
40 minutes	<b>1 - Context and Scene Setting</b>	<b>Context/Scene setting/ Learning walk around host school</b> This section should provide an overview of the school. As part of your scene setting, you should mention both the school's systemic challenge and systemic excellence that will be discussed in further detail later. Materials developed for open days can be distributed and viewed ahead of a virtual trio visit day as a learning walk replacement.	Host
1 hour 30 minutes	<b>2 - Systemic Excellence</b>	<b>Presenting your school's systemic excellence</b>  <b>What are you doing to consciously improve on your previous best?</b> Sharing and demonstration of systemic best practice and marginal gains on schools journey to continuous improvement.  <b>Questions to consider:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is your philosophy for continuous improvement?</li> <li>• What little changes/adaptations are part of that drive for continuous improvement?</li> <li>• What decisions have influenced the choices made regarding continuous improvement in this school?</li> </ul> <b>Suggestions include:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talking to students/staff</li> <li>• Presentations on systemic decisions</li> <li>• Observation of a relevant activity (not lessons) for example assembly.</li> </ul> <b>Helpful hints:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• consider splitting visiting team and match with a host senior leader for increased exposure to the system</li> <li>• allow a minimum of 20 min for each observation/activity</li> <li>• Allow 10 mins for professional dialogue afterward for information sharing</li> <li>• Allow an additional period for consolidation or reflection at the end.</li> </ul>	Host
30 mins	<b>Lunch</b>		
1 hour 30 minutes	<b>3 - Systemic challenge</b>	<b>Systemic Challenges at the host school</b> Sharing and demonstration of systemic challenges.  <b>Questions to consider:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you identify systemic challenges/areas to improve?</li> <li>• What strategic decisions have been made in order to focus on these areas of systemic challenge?</li> <li>• How does where you are now compare with where you want to get to in this area?</li> <li>• What have been any success/difficulties in trying to improve this area</li> </ul>	Host

		previously?	
45 mins	<b>4 - Wrap up</b>	<b>Consolidation of reflections and agreement of key points.</b> End of visit day (guided by questions) How does what you have seen today relate to my school/practice? What learning can you take away? What insights can you offer to support the host school to improve further?	Facilitator

## Exemplar agenda 1

Growing the Top: [School name] visit day

Facilitator: *Name*

Attendees: *Names*

**Systemic Excellence: Distributed Leadership and 4th Way professional Learning and coaching**

**Systemic Challenge: Securing excellent outcomes in a growing school whilst embracing well-being for all**

Time	Part	Content and Process	Who
9.00-9.15	<b>Contracting</b>	Contracting	Facilitator
9.15-9.30	<b>Systemic Excellence</b>	Context/Scene setting	SB
9.30-10.00		<b>Distributed Leadership and PIP (presentation)</b> Our philosophy and approach underpinned by strategic planning and fourth way leadership	SB
10.00-10.30		<b>4<sup>th</sup> way Professional Learning and Coaching (presentation)</b> Professional pathways, feedback cycle and QA approaches to drive continuous improvement	BW
10.30-11.00		<b>Meeting with Staff (Q and A)</b> Extended Leaders/TLRS/Teachers	All
11.45-11:45		Consolidation and discussion	All
11:45-12.00	<b>Reflective and Comfort Break</b>		
12.00-13.00		<b>Learning walk around [SCHOOL NAME]</b> Culture and ethos of the school	SB and BW
13.00-13.30	<b>Lunch</b>		
13.30-14.30	<b>Systemic Challenge</b>	<b>Securing excellent outcomes in a growing school whilst embracing well-being for all (presentation)</b> Identifying what makes a difference improving quality assurance, option subjects/HA/PP <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What strategic decisions have been made in order to focus on systemic challenge</li> <li>How does where we are now compare to where we want to get to in this area?</li> </ul>	Key SLT leads, all attendees /other relevant staff

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have been our successes/difficulties in trying to improve this area previously?</li> <li>• What is working effectively in other schools?</li> </ul>	
14.30-15.00		Consolidation and discussion	All
15.00-15.30	<b>Wrap up</b>	Consolidation of reflections and agreement of key points <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does what you have seen today relate to my school/practice?</li> <li>• What learning can you take away?</li> <li>• What insights can you offer to support the host school to improve further?</li> </ul>	Facilitator

## Exemplar agenda 2

**SCHOOL NAME** : Challenge Partners – Growing the Top visit

### Excellence:

- **Sixth Form** – given the focus on Sixth-Form as a potential area of challenge in both other schools, it seemed an appropriate area of excellence to share. There is a strong pastoral set up as well as very clear leadership opportunities for students. We have a large Sixth-Form with a traditional A Level curriculum. 2018 results put us top in the County for value-added at A-Level
- **Curriculum** – We have a broad traditional curriculum offering 25 different GCSE subjects and about 30 courses in the Sixth-Form, mostly A Levels.

### Challenge:

- **Consistency of Tutoring (including Delivery of PSHCE)** – following some questions about inconsistency, we are currently conducting a review of Tutoring and the teaching of PSHCE, so feedback from Challenge Partner colleagues would be very helpful. We have a horizontal tutoring system but with an element of vertical through our well established House system. PSHCE is taught by tutors one hour a fortnight.

Time	Visitor 1 School A	Visitor 1 School B	Visitor 2 School A	Visitor 2 School B
8.30	<b>Arrival</b> – Food and refreshments available in the boardroom			
9.00-9.20	<b>Contracting</b> – led by facilitator			
9.20-10.00	<b>Introduction to [SCHOOL NAME] - Context and scene-setting</b> HT and AHT			
10.00-10.30	<b>EXCELLENCE: Meeting with Sixth Form Pastoral Staff</b> AHT		<b>EXCELLENCE: Learning walk (KS3 and KS4)</b> HT	
10.30-11.00	<b>EXCELLENCE: Curriculum and Options</b> Meeting with students (Y9 and Y11),		<b>EXCELLENCE: Curriculum and Outcomes meeting</b> (AHT),	
11.00-11.15	<b>Break – Coffee/Tea and pastries</b>			
11:15-12.00	Systemic Excellence Discussion and reflection			
12.00-12.30	<b>CHALLENGE: Pastoral Support and House System</b>		<b>CHALLENGE: Pastoral Support and House System</b>	

	Meeting with students (Y7-8),	Meeting with students (Y10-11),
12:30-13.00	<b>CHALLENGE:</b> Pastoral Middle Leaders Meeting with HoY and HoH,	<b>CHALLENGE:</b> PSHCE delivery and role of the tutor Meeting with Form Tutors,
13.00-14.00	<b>Discussion and Lunch</b>	
14.00 -14.45	Systemic Challenge Discussion and reflection	
14:45-15.30	Consolidation of reflections and agreement of key points <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does what you have seen today relate to my school/practice?</li> <li>• What learning can you take away?</li> <li>• What insights can you offer to support the host school to improve further?</li> </ul>	

## Exemplar agenda 3

**Systemic Excellence:** The curriculum and breath of offer - A conceptual, connected and real- life curriculum plan

**Systemic Challenge:** Improving outcomes for key groups of students including HPA/DA and boys. Improving the highest outcome in subjects in terms of %9-7

Facilitator: NAMES

Attendees: NAMES

Time	Part	Content and Process	Who
08:00-08:10	<b>Arrival</b>	Arrival and tea/coffee in staff prep room	HR
08:10-08:25	<b>Systemic Excellence</b>	Meet SLT followed by staff briefing	LH/RTF
8.30-09:00		<b>Scene setting</b>	LH/RTF/SR
09:00-09:45		<b>Tour of the school</b>	RTF
09:45-10:15		<b>Curriculum presentation - LH</b>	All
		Consolidation and discussion	All
10:15-10:30	<b>Reflective and Comfort Break</b>		
10:30-11:45	<b>Learning walk around XXX IG and CD with RTF – SS and MB with LH or SR/SJ – Curriculum</b>		
11:45-12:15	<b>Lunch</b>		
12:15-12:45	<b>Systemic Challenge</b>	<b>Improving outcomes for key groups including HPA/ DA and Boys (presentation - KF)</b>  Identifying what makes a difference improving quality assurance, option subjects/HA/PP <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What strategic decisions have been made in order to focus on systemic challenge</li> <li>• How does where we are now compare to where we want to get to in this area?</li> </ul>	Key SLT leads, all attendees/other relevant staff

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have been our successes/difficulties in trying to improve this area previously? What is working effectively in other schools?</li> </ul>	
12:45-13:30		<b>Learning walk around XXX IG and CD with RTF – SS and MC with LH or SJ/SR - (ONLY Y10 and Y8 available), Outcome and key groups</b>	All
13:30-14:00		Consolidation and discussion to include alternative provision	
14:00-14:30	<b>Wrap up</b>	<b>Consolidation of reflections and agreement of key points</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• • How does what you have seen today relate to my school/practice?</li> <li>• • What learning can you take away?</li> <li>• • What insights can you offer to support the host school to improve further?</li> </ul>	Facilitator

## Visit day takeaway notes template

<b>Host school:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
<b>Preparation: points of interest / questions:</b>	
<b>Systemic excellence:</b>	
<b>Observations:</b>	<b>Questions:</b>
<b>Reflections:</b>	<b>Takeaways:</b>

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**Systemic challenge:**

<b>Observations:</b>	<b>Questions:</b>
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<b>Reflections:</b>	<b>Takeaways:</b>
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<b>Wrap up</b>
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