



TransforMATIVE

# Designing for All: Technology's Role in Inclusive Education



A TransforMATIVE Roundtable Networking Dinner  
Event partner – Eclipse (AI Readaction Tool), 05.05.26,  
The Ivy, Birmingham

# Executive Summary

This roundtable brought together MAT leaders, digital strategists, SEND specialists, operational leaders and education partners to explore how technology can support more inclusive, equitable and sustainable education systems.

Across the discussion, participants consistently reinforced one central principle: technology should enable educational values, not drive them. Digital transformation was viewed not as an isolated IT initiative, but as an organisational and cultural strategy that must align with inclusion, workforce development, operational sustainability and student outcomes.

Many trusts represented at the discussion described themselves as being “further in the journey” than they had assumed. However, a recurring insight was that no organisation feels fully “finished” in its digital transformation. Instead, trusts are operating within what one participant described as an “infinite purpose” a continual process of adaptation, reflection and improvement.

Several major themes emerged:

- **Inclusion must be embedded into digital strategy from the outset, rather than treated as a compliance exercise or add-on.**
- **Trust-wide coherence is increasingly important as MATs scale, merge or absorb schools with fragmented systems and inconsistent digital maturity.**
- **AI is rapidly reshaping education and workforce expectations, but its role must remain augmentative rather than replacement-based.**
- **Staff confidence, leadership behaviours and organisational culture are now greater barriers than access to technology itself.**
- **Equity does not necessarily mean sameness; trusts are wrestling with how to balance standardisation, autonomy and contextual need.**
- **Sustainable digital transformation depends upon collaboration between education, operations, finance, IT and governance functions.**

Participants also highlighted the growing urgency around AI literacy for students. A key reflection from the discussion was that today’s learners may become the first generation never to experience life without AI-enabled systems. This raises profound questions for pedagogy, leadership and curriculum design.

The roundtable concluded with a shared recognition that the sector benefits enormously from professional generosity, collaborative problem-solving and honest reflection about challenges still unresolved.



# Key Learning



## 1. Digital Strategy Must Be Values-Led

Participants strongly rejected the notion of “technology for technology’s sake.” Instead, successful transformation was described as beginning with educational purpose:

- ✔ What outcomes are being improved?
- ✔ Which barriers are being reduced?
- ✔ How does technology support belonging, accessibility and opportunity?

Several leaders reflected that earlier digital initiatives had failed because they were driven primarily by infrastructure or procurement decisions rather than educational strategy.

Trusts that were revisiting or rebuilding strategies described greater success when:

- ✔ educational leaders were involved from the outset;
- ✔ inclusion objectives were explicitly embedded;
- ✔ operational efficiencies were linked back to student experience.

There was repeated emphasis that digital strategy should not sit solely within IT teams. Leadership, curriculum, SEND, safeguarding, finance and governance functions all require ownership.



## 2. Inclusion and Equity Require Different Thinking

One of the most significant discussions centred around the distinction between equality and equity.

Participants acknowledged that:

- ✔ providing every school with identical tools does not necessarily produce equitable outcomes;
- ✔ different contexts require different interventions;
- ✔ disadvantaged communities may require disproportionately greater investment.

Examples included:

- ✔ schools with significantly higher pupil premium populations;
- ✔ inconsistent device quality across trusts;
- ✔ varying access to specialist SEND tools;
- ✔ unequal digital literacy among staff and students.

Trust leaders reflected on the tension between:

- ✔ standardisation for efficiency and supportability;
- ✔ flexibility for local contextual needs.

# Key Learning

Several participants noted that trusts must establish clearer rationales for why variation exists, rather than allowing inconsistency to emerge accidentally.



## 3. Workforce Capability Is Now the Critical Challenge

Technology access itself was rarely identified as the primary issue. Instead, trusts highlighted:

- ❑ inconsistent staff confidence;
- ❑ limited CPD time;
- ❑ competing compliance training demands;
- ❑ fear or uncertainty around AI;
- ❑ uneven leadership understanding.

A common observation was that many accessibility and productivity tools already exist within existing platforms, but staff remain unaware of them.

Participants repeatedly stressed:

- ❑ people do not know what they do not know;
- ❑ sustainable adoption depends upon culture and modelling;
- ❑ leadership behaviours directly influence staff confidence.

Several leaders argued that workforce development can no longer rely on traditional annual CPD structures. Instead, organisations may need:

- ❑ microlearning;
- ❑ digital champions;
- ❑ peer-to-peer coaching;
- ❑ collaborative communities of practice;
- ❑ embedded experimentation.

The concept of “psychological safety” emerged as particularly important. Staff need permission to explore, test and occasionally fail without fear of judgement.



## 4. Leadership Style Shapes Digital Culture

A strong theme throughout the evening was leadership behaviour. Participants described successful approaches as:

- ❑ relational;
- ❑ servant-led;
- ❑ distributed;
- ❑ enabling rather than controlling.

# Key Learning

Leaders noted that digital transformation fails when:

- ✓ decision-making is overly centralised;
- ✓ technology is imposed without educational rationale;
- ✓ stakeholders are consulted tokenistically;
- ✓ innovation is blocked by fear or operational rigidity.

Conversely, trusts reported stronger progress when:

- ✓ leaders modelled technology use themselves;
- ✓ strategic intent was clearly communicated;
- ✓ innovation pathways existed;
- ✓ schools felt heard and involved.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of language clarity. Terms such as:

- ✓ autonomy,
  - ✓ strategy,
  - ✓ inclusion,
  - ✓ equity,
- can mean very different things to different stakeholders.

Shared language was viewed as essential to coherent transformation.



## 5. AI Is Accelerating Existing Challenges

AI emerged as both an opportunity and a tension point. Participants generally agreed that:

- ✓ AI should augment professional judgement, not replace it;
- ✓ students require AI literacy as a life skill;
- ✓ staff confidence currently lags behind technological advancement.

Some trusts described cautious approaches where:

- ✓ staff may experiment with AI,
- ✓ but students are restricted from access due to safeguarding concerns.

However, this raised concerns that schools may unintentionally widen digital disadvantage by preventing safe exploration while students independently access AI tools outside school.

The discussion referenced broader educational questions:

- ✓ What is the role of teachers in an AI-enabled world?

# Key Learning

- ✓ How should assessment evolve?
- ✓ How do schools prepare students for unknown future contexts?

A recurring reflection was that education increasingly requires leaders to act as facilitators and enablers of learning rather than gatekeepers of knowledge.



## 6. Financial Sustainability Depends on Visibility and Coherence

Trusts acknowledged significant financial pressures around:

- ✓ device replacement cycles;
- ✓ infrastructure modernisation;
- ✓ licensing;
- ✓ staffing;
- ✓ SEND provision;
- ✓ cyber security;
- ✓ AI tools.

Participants highlighted several emerging strategies:

- ✓ trust-wide standardisation;
- ✓ clearer procurement governance;
- ✓ lifecycle planning;
- ✓ central contract visibility;
- ✓ alignment of costs to staffing or operational drivers.

A major concern was duplication:

- ✓ multiple platforms performing similar functions;
- ✓ inconsistent procurement across schools;
- ✓ fragmented systems inherited through mergers or growth.

Several leaders stressed that sustainable transformation requires:

- ✓ accurate asset and contract visibility;
- ✓ realistic forecasting;
- ✓ leadership understanding of whole-life costs.

# Applied Examples



## Trust-Wide Digital Champions

One trust described establishing voluntary digital champions in every school. These staff:

- ✓ received platform certification training;
- ✓ supported colleagues informally;
- ✓ modelled effective practice;
- ✓ reduced pressure on central IT teams.

The initiative created local expertise while strengthening staff confidence.



## Collaborative Digital Working Groups

A trust described transforming previously fragmented leadership forums into collaborative digital strategy working groups.

Rather than functioning as complaint forums, these groups now:

- ✓ shape strategic priorities;
- ✓ test innovation proposals;
- ✓ provide challenge and support;
- ✓ improve trust-wide coherence.



## Student Digital Leadership

Participants reflected on successful models where students acted as digital leaders or champions.

Examples included:

- ✓ students supporting staff;
- ✓ peer-led digital problem-solving;
- ✓ creative application processes;
- ✓ student-led demonstrations of accessibility tools.

This was viewed as both empowering and highly scalable.



## AI-Enabled Operational Efficiency

The sponsoring organisation described AI-supported redaction and data processing tools designed to reduce workload around:

- ✓ subject access requests;
- ✓ GDPR compliance;
- ✓ document review.

# Applied Examples

This was framed as an example of AI solving practical operational challenges rather than replacing educational roles.



## Standardisation with Contextual Flexibility

Several trusts described efforts to standardise:

- ✓ platforms,
  - ✓ infrastructure,
  - ✓ procurement,
- while still allowing flexibility for specialist educational contexts

This included:

- ✓ balancing Chromebook and Apple device ecosystems;
- ✓ considering SEND-specific accessibility requirements;
- ✓ aligning technology choices with curriculum needs.

# Future Research Questions

The discussion surfaced several unresolved strategic questions that merit further exploration across the sector.



## Inclusion and Equity

- ✓ How should trusts define the difference between equality and equity in digital provision?
- ✓ What constitutes a “minimum digital entitlement” for every learner?
- ✓ How can trusts measure inclusive impact beyond device distribution?



## AI and Pedagogy

- ✓ What should AI literacy look like at primary, secondary and specialist levels?
- ✓ How should assessment evolve in response to generative AI?
- ✓ How can schools safely enable AI experimentation while mitigating safeguarding risks?

# Future Research Questions



## Workforce Development

- ✔ What models of CPD are most effective for sustained digital confidence?
- ✔ How can trusts create time and space for professional experimentation?
- ✔ What leadership competencies will MAT leaders require over the next decade?



## Trust Governance and Sustainability

- ✔ What governance structures best support digitally enabled inclusion?
- ✔ How can trusts balance local autonomy with operational standardisation?
- ✔ What funding and procurement models most effectively reduce duplication and inequality?



## Student Experience

- ✔ How do students perceive digital inclusion compared to staff assumptions?
- ✔ What role should student voice play in digital strategy development?
- ✔ How can trusts better prepare students for AI-enabled workplaces and society?



# Closing Reflection



A defining feature of the roundtable was the openness and honesty of participants.

Rather than presenting finished solutions, leaders shared real tensions:

- ✔ fragmented systems,
- ✔ uneven maturity,
- ✔ financial pressures,
- ✔ workforce anxiety,
- ✔ strategic uncertainty.

Yet the discussion also demonstrated strong collective commitment to inclusive education and collaborative improvement.

The strongest conclusion from the evening may be that digitally inclusive transformation is not a destination. It is an ongoing leadership practice requiring:

- ✔ reflection,
- ✔ adaptability,
- ✔ professional generosity,  
and sustained alignment between values, people and systems.

As one participant reflected:

**“We’re all on the journey together and none of us are ever fully there.”**