



Transfor**MAtive**

Inclusive by Design: Using Digital Learning to Improve Outcomes for All

A TransforMAtive Roundtable Networking Dinner
Event partner – Seesaw, The Ivy, Bath, 30.09.26

Executive Summary

The discussion reinforced a central proposition: **inclusive digital learning is not fundamentally a technology challenge. It is a design challenge.**

Technology can increase accessibility, reduce barriers, provide new ways for pupils to demonstrate learning, support adaptive teaching and create capacity for staff. However, these benefits depend on the surrounding educational model. Digital tools introduced without a clear understanding of pupils, pedagogy, curriculum, workforce and organisational purpose risk becoming additional layers of complexity rather than mechanisms for inclusion.

A consistent theme throughout the evening was the importance of moving beyond labels and averages towards a more complete understanding of the individual child. SEND status, disadvantage indicators, attendance data and attainment measures all provide important information, but none adequately describes the child in front of the teacher. Inclusive practice requires leaders and teachers to understand pupils' starting points, barriers, strengths, experiences and relationships, and then design learning accordingly.

Participants also challenged the assumption that consistency across a trust must mean uniformity. There was strong support for common expectations, equitable access to opportunity and shared organisational infrastructure. At the same time, leaders recognised that teachers need sufficient professional agency to respond to the pupils and communities they serve.

The roundtable therefore pointed towards a model in which trusts create **consistent conditions rather than identical experiences.**

Those conditions include strong curriculum thinking, equitable access to digital tools, trusted data, clear expectations, professional development, inclusive pathways, appropriate specialist provision and organisational systems that reduce unnecessary workload. Within those conditions, teachers retain the ability to exercise judgement, creativity and professional expertise.

Technology has an important role within this model, particularly where it can reduce friction around planning, assessment and feedback, improve accessibility, identify patterns that may otherwise remain hidden, and give pupils different ways to engage with and communicate their learning.

The opportunity is therefore not to digitise the existing system indiscriminately. It is to use digital capability deliberately to create more time for the activity that matters most: **high-quality human interaction between adults and children.**



Key Learning



1. Inclusion begins with understanding the child

A recurring theme was the danger of designing provision around categories rather than individuals.

Trusts hold significant amounts of information about pupils, including attendance, attainment, SEND, safeguarding and disadvantage. Yet these datasets are often considered separately, potentially obscuring the wider picture of a child's experience.

Leaders discussed the value of bringing different sources of information together to identify vulnerabilities, patterns and barriers that may not be visible through an individual dataset.

This requires more than sophisticated dashboards. It requires a culture in which data supports professional curiosity.

The question becomes not simply:

“What does the data tell us?”

but:

“What does this help us understand about this child, and what might we do differently as a result?”

Several leaders described the importance of understanding what might be called the relationship between **pathway, pupil and pedagogy**:

- ✓ What does the pupil need to learn?
- ✓ What barriers or experiences are influencing their learning?
- ✓ What pedagogical approach will enable them to succeed?

Technology can support this understanding, but it cannot replace it.



2. Simplification matters, but simplification must not become reductionism

Participants repeatedly reflected on the growing complexity facing schools.

New guidance, frameworks, accountability expectations, curriculum initiatives and interventions can accumulate over time. Well-intentioned attempts to address individual challenges may collectively create an increasingly complicated environment for teachers and leaders.

There was a strong argument for trusts acting as a filter rather than simply transmitting this complexity into schools.

Good digital and organisational design should therefore reduce cognitive and administrative load, not increase it.

Key Learning

This applies equally to classroom practice. Participants discussed examples where teaching had become unnecessarily complicated, with additional resources, images, activities or processes potentially distracting pupils from the core learning.

However, simplification should not mean assuming that pupils or communities are simple.

The challenge is to **create simple systems around complex human needs**.

That distinction is important.



3. Consistency should create equity, not conformity

One of the central questions of the evening was how trusts can create consistency across multiple schools while preserving the professional autonomy required to respond to different pupils and communities.

The emerging view was that consistency should focus on entitlement and conditions.

Every child should have access to high expectations, appropriate digital tools, a rich curriculum, skilled adults and meaningful opportunities regardless of the school they attend.

However, equality of entitlement does not necessarily require identical provision.

Different schools will serve different communities. Individual pupils will face different barriers. Some will require greater adaptation, additional resources or more intensive support.

Trusts therefore need to distinguish carefully between:

- ✓ those things which should be standardised;
- ✓ those things which should be aligned;
- ✓ and those things which should remain locally responsive.

The objective is not identical schools.

It is an equitable experience of education.



4. The workforce is central to any inclusion strategy

Although the event was positioned around digital learning, much of the conversation returned to people.

This was significant.

Participants repeatedly identified workforce confidence, professional knowledge, retention, belonging and capacity as essential components of inclusive practice.

Key Learning

Technology cannot compensate for a workforce that does not feel confident responding to increasingly complex needs.

Nor will digital transformation succeed if technology simply creates another requirement for already stretched staff.

Trusts need to consider whether professional development adequately prepares staff for the reality of contemporary classrooms, including:

- ✓ increasing SEND complexity;
- ✓ adaptive teaching;
- ✓ behaviour and relational practice;
- ✓ digital pedagogy;
- ✓ responsible use of AI;
- ✓ interpretation of data;
- ✓ and collaboration across professional boundaries.

Leaders also reflected on the changing expectations of the workforce.

Belonging, agency, professional growth and flexibility are increasingly important considerations for recruitment and retention. Schools cannot always offer the same patterns of flexible or remote working available in other sectors, making culture, professional purpose and the quality of the working environment particularly important.

Inclusive schools require inclusive workplaces.



5. Relationships remain the infrastructure of learning

Perhaps the strongest thread running through the discussion was the importance of relationships.

Participants shared examples of pupils who had succeeded not because an adult had discovered a particular intervention or technology, but because someone had listened to them, understood them, persisted with them and communicated that they mattered.

This has significant implications for digital strategy.

The purpose of technology should not be to remove human interaction from education.

It should enable more valuable human interaction.

If technology can reduce the time spent processing information, marking routine work, creating resources or identifying gaps in understanding, the capacity created should be deliberately reinvested into activities such as:

Key Learning

- ✓ feedback;
- ✓ mentoring;
- ✓ conversation;
- ✓ adaptive teaching;
- ✓ professional collaboration;
- ✓ and relationships with families.

The question for digital leadership therefore becomes:

What should technology do so that people have more capacity to do what only people can do?



6. Technology can expand how children participate in learning

Inclusive digital learning creates opportunities for children to engage with education in different ways.

Discussion touched on the potential of tools including voice input, adaptive platforms, digital portfolios, reading support, automated feedback and embedded AI.

For some pupils, traditional modes of demonstrating learning can themselves become a barrier.

A pupil may understand a concept but struggle to record it through handwriting. Another may need to hear content repeatedly before developing confidence. Others may benefit from visual, verbal or interactive approaches.

Used appropriately, technology can provide multiple means through which pupils can access, practise and demonstrate learning.

This does not mean lowering expectations.

It means separating the intended learning from unnecessary barriers to demonstrating it.

Digital accessibility should therefore be understood as part of good educational design rather than an additional SEND intervention.



7. Digital equity involves access, opportunity and purpose

Providing a device is not the same as achieving digital equity.

Nevertheless, equitable access to appropriate technology remains important.

Participants reflected on the value of one-to-one access and the opportunities digital tools can provide to pupils who may otherwise have limited access to technology, enrichment or learning resources outside school.

Key Learning

But access must be accompanied by purpose.

Effective digital equity requires consideration of:

- ✓ connectivity;
- ✓ devices;
- ✓ accessibility;
- ✓ digital literacy;
- ✓ staff capability;
- ✓ curriculum integration;
- ✓ safeguarding;
- ✓ family engagement;
- ✓ and the quality of the learning experience.

The ambition should be greater than ensuring that every pupil can access the same platform.

It should be to ensure that every pupil can benefit from the opportunities digital learning makes possible.



8. Inclusive curriculum design requires both knowledge and experience

There was productive tension during the discussion around curriculum design.

Participants recognised the importance of a strong knowledge base, literacy and numeracy, while also questioning whether overly formulaic approaches risk reducing engagement and professional creativity.

The discussion suggested that these are not necessarily competing ambitions.

Children require secure knowledge, but they also need opportunities to apply that knowledge in meaningful contexts.

Examples shared included project-based learning, enterprise experiences, cultural opportunities, travel, performance and collaboration.

Such experiences can provide purpose to learning and help pupils develop communication, teamwork, confidence, creativity and problem-solving alongside academic knowledge.

For inclusion to be meaningful, access to these opportunities cannot depend on postcode, family income or which school within a trust a child happens to attend.

Sector Insights



Attainment, achievement and inclusion need to be considered together

One of the most significant tensions explored during the evening concerned the relationship between attainment and achievement.

Leaders were clear that high expectations matter. There was little appetite for lowering standards in the name of inclusion.

At the same time, participants questioned whether existing measures always recognise the educational progress made by pupils with the most significant barriers.

A child entering school with complex needs may make transformational progress without reaching an age-related threshold within the expected timeframe.

For the pupil, family and professionals involved, that progress is highly significant.

The sector therefore faces an important challenge:

How can accountability maintain high expectations while recognising meaningful achievement and different starting points?

This debate becomes increasingly important as schools serve pupils with more complex and varied needs.



Inclusion is becoming a trust-wide organisational capability

Historically, inclusion might have been understood primarily through the work of SEND leaders, pastoral teams or specialist provision.

The discussion suggested that this is no longer sufficient.

Inclusion increasingly depends on the interaction between:

- ✓ curriculum;
- ✓ workforce;
- ✓ technology;
- ✓ data;
- ✓ estates;
- ✓ finance;
- ✓ professional development;
- ✓ governance;
- ✓ family engagement;
- ✓ and external services.

Sector Insights

It is therefore a strategic leadership issue.

For multi-academy trusts, the opportunity is to build capability once and make it available across the organisation rather than asking individual schools to solve the same problems independently.

Shared expertise, specialist provision, data infrastructure, procurement, professional development and digital platforms can all contribute to this.

The scale of a trust should enable greater inclusion, not greater distance from the individual child.



Transition remains a potential point of vulnerability

The conversation highlighted transition, particularly between primary and secondary education, as a significant issue.

A pupil may move from a small number of adults who understand their needs deeply to a significantly more complex environment involving multiple teachers, subjects, routines and locations.

For pupils with SEND or other vulnerabilities, this transition can be particularly demanding.

Digital systems could play a much greater role in maintaining continuity of understanding, but this requires more than transferring records.

Trusts need to consider how relationships, strategies, successful adjustments and professional knowledge travel with the child.

Inclusion should be designed as a continuum rather than a series of separate institutional responses.



Data integration may reveal hidden vulnerability

Many trusts possess substantial volumes of information but lack a coherent view across systems.

A pupil's attainment might look secure when viewed independently.

Their attendance might appear only marginally concerning.

Their safeguarding record may show no single major issue.

Their SEND profile may not cross a particular threshold.

Yet when these indicators are considered together, a very different picture can emerge.

Trusts therefore have an opportunity to develop more integrated approaches to data that support earlier intervention and better professional decision-making.

Sector Insights

This should be approached carefully.

The purpose is not to algorithmically define children or automate professional judgement.

It is to ensure that the right information reaches the right professional at the right time.



AI should create capacity rather than accelerate activity

AI featured throughout the discussion, both explicitly and implicitly.

There was enthusiasm about the potential of AI to reduce workload, support assessment, generate insights, improve accessibility and personalise elements of learning.

There was also recognition of a wider leadership question.

If every efficiency created by AI is immediately filled with more tasks, analysis and activity, then technology will not solve workload. It may simply increase organisational intensity.

Trusts should therefore be deliberate about where the benefits of automation are reinvested.

One of the most valuable uses of AI may be to create additional human capacity.

That might mean more time for professional dialogue, mentoring pupils, curriculum thinking, collaboration or direct engagement with families.

The success measure for AI in education should not simply be how much faster a process becomes.

It should include what educators are able to do with the time and capacity created.



Future Research Questions



The roundtable identified a number of questions worthy of further exploration across the sector:

1. What should be consistent across every school within a multi-academy trust, and where should professional and local autonomy remain?
2. How can trusts combine attainment, attendance, SEND, safeguarding and contextual information to identify vulnerability earlier without reducing children to data profiles?
3. What constitutes meaningful digital equity beyond the provision of devices and connectivity?
4. How should professional development evolve to prepare teachers and support staff for increasingly complex inclusive classrooms?
5. How can digital tools and AI reduce workload while deliberately creating more time for relationships, mentoring and professional dialogue?
6. How can trust-wide digital platforms support continuity for pupils moving between schools, phases or specialist provision?
7. What measures could better capture achievement and progress alongside attainment while retaining high expectations for every pupil?
8. How can trusts evaluate whether a digital tool is genuinely improving inclusion rather than simply increasing engagement or adding another system?
9. How should leaders balance evidence-informed consistency with the creativity and professional agency associated with exceptional teaching?
10. What role should pupils and families play in designing inclusive digital learning models?
11. How can technology provide different ways for pupils to access and demonstrate learning without unintentionally lowering expectations?
12. What organisational conditions enable a trust to move from isolated examples of inclusive practice to sustainable system-wide capability?

Concluding Statement



The strongest conclusion from the roundtable was that inclusion cannot be delivered through a single intervention, platform or policy.

It is created through the interaction of people, culture, curriculum, systems and technology.

Digital capability has the potential to make education more accessible, more responsive and more equitable. It can help staff understand pupils more deeply, reduce unnecessary workload, remove barriers to participation and provide children with different ways to learn and demonstrate what they know.

But technology must remain in service of education rather than becoming its organising principle.

The future of inclusive digital learning therefore depends on leadership choices.

Trusts must determine what should be common, what should remain flexible and how their collective scale can create opportunities that individual schools could not easily provide alone.

They must also protect the professional relationships through which education ultimately happens.

The challenge is not to choose between consistency and autonomy, knowledge and creativity, technology and relationships, or attainment and inclusion.

It is to design systems capable of holding those ambitions together.

That requires professional confidence, organisational courage and clarity of purpose.

The opportunity for multi-academy trusts is significant: to use digital capability not simply to make existing processes more efficient, but to create a more inclusive educational model in which every child has access to high expectations, meaningful opportunity and adults with the time, information and professional freedom to help them succeed.

Inclusive by Design is therefore not primarily a technology strategy. It is a commitment to designing the whole educational experience around the belief that every child can belong, participate and achieve.