

How smart centralisation can boost local autonomy: trust case study

Looking to balance central efficiency with local agency? Find out how a 54-school trust is effectively transitioning from a highly centralised model to 'regional adaptation', with staff adapting central resources and systems to suit their school's context.

About the trust

- [Oasis Community Learning](#) is a 54-school trust, serving approximately 31,700 pupils and employing 5,300 staff
- Its schools are located in 5 regions across England: the north, Midlands, south west, south coast and London and the south east
- Oasis is driven by its strong community vision and a mission of equity in education
- Oasis sees itself as more than just a school trust – it's a “community organisation that runs schools”
- 53% of its pupils come from disadvantaged backgrounds, 21% of pupils have SEND and 38% of pupils have English as an additional language
- 88% of its schools are rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted – the majority from challenging starting points



What's the approach?

Oasis Community Learning's mission of "exceptional education at the heart of the community" and its values of inclusion, equality, healthy relationships, hope and perseverance are central to everything it does.

Previously, the trust prioritised building a strong 'core', to provide a solid foundation for all its schools. This encompassed both the operations, and teaching and learning functions:

- All services were run by the trust central team, with a trust-wide curriculum taught in all schools
- This made services like IT, property and HR more efficient and specialised – but it was a '1-size-fits-all' approach that didn't work as well for curriculum and pedagogy in individual schools

Now, Oasis is shifting towards a more flexible model it calls a 'regional or place-based small organisational model'. With its strong core established, there's a need to adapt and contextualise its approaches even further, to continue to raise standards for pupils:

- Resources and systems are still created and managed by a central team, so the trust is aligned
- Staff form regional groups that act as 'small organisations,' where they use the strong foundation provided by the centre and adapt them to the needs of their local context (a priority for the trust moving forward is training and development for leaders, so they're able to do this in ways that drive towards learning in the classroom)
- Services like IT, property and HR remain centralised but locally supported – freeing up schools to concentrate on teaching and learning

This case study outlines how Oasis is achieving the shift from a fully centralised model to regional adaptation, as told to us by **Helen Arya**, chief education officer

and deputy CEO, and **Sara-Jayne Martin**, the trust's national lead of research and best practice.



This could work for you if ...

- **Your trust has grown significantly, but still has more work to do to meet the diverse needs of different schools and regions.** Oasis grew quickly, with schools spread across the country
- **You want to improve pupil outcomes and inclusion.** Oasis noticed a downward trend in its results data. This was the “wake-up call” that “what we were doing in the centre was not having the impact needed in the classroom”
- **You have a strong, centralised curriculum that meets national needs, but requires more adaptation to meet local needs and contexts.** Oasis found that the same curriculum couldn’t meet the varied needs of pupils in communities as different as north London and Grimsby
- **You want to empower schools and staff to contextualise and personalise teaching and learning,** to better meet the needs of individual pupils

Why try this?

“We're placing the children and teachers at the heart of everything that we do”

Oasis is still in the early stages of this transition, but indicators show that this approach is more effective than the highly centralised model.

These early indicators include:



- Evidence from pilot programmes, that shows improved pupil work and teacher practice
- Positive feedback from leaders and teachers: staff say they see the training's impact in pupil work
- Praise from staff for the trust's "thoughtful and rigorous" professional development that gives them a chance to reflect on their practice, and encourages them to "focus on one small change at a time, and that this feels manageable," says Sara-Jayne
- Teachers find the training's focus on 1 small change at a time manageable
- Positive trends in attendance data and mock exam results
- This year's performance data will be the proof, but there's a strong feeling from leaders that "the trend line that was going in the wrong direction will be rescued this year"

1. Establish a strong central infrastructure

You'll probably have this in place already, but make sure you start with some of your core services fully centralised – not every service needs to be regionally adapted.

Oasis has kept the following services centralised, with some regionalisation in each function:

- IT
- Finance
- HR
- Property management
- Compliance
- Procurement
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Communications

Do this first, before moving to regional adaptation. It should free up staff to focus on adapting the curriculum, and teaching and learning – the things that need to be



personalised to each individual school and region, and where staff professional judgement is most valuable.

"These central services provide efficiency and consistency," says Helen, "with the schools as their customers, freeing them to focus on education."

If you're still in the process of centralising, or don't know where to start, check out our step-by-step articles on [how to centralise a service](#).

2. Create systems and resources, that are made to be adapted

"It's a starting point based on the best available evidence"

Create a set of core, trust-wide systems and resources that are maintained centrally but designed to be adapted and contextualised at regional and school levels. These need to be "the starting point, not the end-point," says Sara-Jayne.

This tends to work best for teaching and learning, e.g. curriculum resources. But it can also work for things like safeguarding or school improvement, where pupil and family contexts differ locally.

Take a research-based approach when developing these

- Look at all the relevant research and evidence, and consider what your 'philosophy of education' is, as a trust. Oasis' philosophy of education is mentioned on the trust website, in the [welcome from the CEO](#)
- Work with experts, especially on curriculum materials



- Base your educational approaches on sound pedagogical principles and evidence-based practices, regularly reviewing and updating them as new insights emerge
- Use a tried and tested approach to change management – Oasis follows the [PESTLE model](#) of analysing external factors that impact an organisation, and [Kotter's 8-step model](#) of leading successful change

But don't be too prescriptive

You want these resources and systems to be high-quality, but avoid a 'top-down' approach:

- Leave space and flexibility for the systems to be tweaked and resources adapted, to suit the needs of individual regions, school and pupils
- Metacognitive work (thinking about thinking) should remain with teachers in the classroom

Adapting resources and systems takes time. In the short-term, it might feel like a more prescriptive approach delivers quicker wins, but "we're choosing the long-term development of expertise over the short-term wins," says Sara-Jayne.

For example, adapt a centralised curriculum to local need and context

Oasis is developing training and expertise to be able to adapt its centralised curriculum, to meet local and contextual needs.

This curriculum:

- Spans both primary and secondary, allowing for strong sequencing and progression
- Was written by primary and secondary subject experts, who reviewed the latest research and evidence
- Is "steeped in the trust's curriculum intent and mission," and has been praised by Ofsted
- Isn't overly prescriptive:



- Subject overviews, intent statements and long-term plans are provided
- Short-term plans are also provided, but the trust is working on building staff expertise and confidence to adapt them to meet local needs
- There's space for schools to adapt the curriculum to be more 'place-based,' e.g. incorporating local geography or history
- Different schools could deliver the same curriculum in totally different ways to suit their different contexts

Learn more about the [Oasis curriculum](#) and access the trust's [subject intents and long-term plans](#).

3. Train and support teachers and leaders to adapt the central systems

If teachers and leaders are used to 'top-down' systems and 'straight out of the box' resources, they'll need training and support to adapt to a new way of working.

"The metacognitive thinking and habits of the teacher can't be held by somebody centrally ... that has to be held by the person in the classroom"

Invest in professional development and coaching

Provide teachers and leaders with ongoing training and support on how to adapt resources successfully, to meet the needs of pupils in their school or classroom. Staff may



be used to simply 'delivering' rather than thinking, adapting and planning. Aim to equip teachers with the skills to effectively adapt strategies and address diverse pupil needs.

At Oasis, it was particularly important for this training to focus on inclusion, research-based practices and 'habits of thinking'.

The trust:

- **Has a dedicated national team.** It includes national leads for various areas, such as leadership, teacher development, research and best practice. The team takes responsibility for staff CPD, so it isn't just 'one more thing' for school leaders to worry about
- **Uses an instructional coaching model provided by [Steplab](#).** This helps teachers embed evidence-informed practices and really focus on the pupils in front of them
- **Has created 'communities of practice' around subjects and aspects of learning.** This is where leaders can share successes, reflect on practices and discuss how to drive towards highly contextualised teaching and learning
- **Is moving towards regionalised training.** This will give regions greater autonomy and agency to decide what training and support their schools need, allocating resources to support networks based on those needs

4. Plan for regional adaptation

The transition from centralisation to regional adaptation won't happen overnight. It needs to be a long-term vision and strategy.

At Oasis, regional adaptation is part of its 2030 plan, which it's moving towards. Over the next 5 years the trust plans to:

- Strengthen the central resources and systems
- Empower the different regions it serves to become more self-sufficient, by giving regional directors and schools the autonomy, agency and resources to adapt strategies to their local contexts



- Continue to develop its shared curriculum, building in more co-construction and flexibility
- Regionalise their school improvement models and allocate resources to meet specific regional needs

Oasis thinks of the evolution of the trust as different versions:

- Version 1.0: when it started, with 3 schools
- Version 2.0: taking on lots of schools
- Version 3.0: centralisation
- Version 4.0: de-centralisation (the version it's in now)

Use a good change management model

Like with any big organisational change, how you manage the change itself is important. Remember:

- **Balance innovation with maintaining strong core operations and 'business as usual'.** Carefully manage the transition to regional adaptation, introducing changes gradually and thoughtfully, while making sure essential services continue to function smoothly
- **It can be difficult to unpick established systems when you've stayed in a centralised model for a long time.** Be prepared to address potential resistance to change and to carefully disentangle long-standing central practices as you transition. This takes time!
- **Manage expectations.** Recognise that the lack of early, obvious wins in a long-term project can challenge buy-in and momentum. Celebrate small victories along the way to keep morale high
- **Carefully narrate progress and accept a messy process.** Communicate progress clearly and consistently, acknowledging challenges and setbacks as learning opportunities rather than failures



Clarify roles and responsibilities

Be clear on roles and responsibilities during the transition from centralisation to regional adaptation. Be clear about what's changing and what's not, to maintain accountability and avoid confusion.

Make sure everyone understands their part in the overall plan, and how they contribute to the trust's goals.

Pilot the approach in a few schools

If you're a large trust like Oasis, test the regional adaptation model in a few schools or regions before implementing it trust-wide. A pilot will allow you to identify and address potential issues before a broader rollout. Oasis piloted the model in a few of its secondary schools first.

6. Implement regional adaptation across your trust

Once you've created the adaptable resources, trained staff, made a plan, communicated the changes to everyone and carried out a pilot – you'll be ready to roll out regional adaptation across your trust.

Understand that regional adaptation is a long-term process that requires time to establish and see impact. Helen and Sara-Jayne agree this "is not a quick fix," and will probably take a trust 5 to 10 years.

7. Monitor impact and adapt

- Continuously gather data and feedback on the impact of regional adaptation across your trust, and make adjustments as needed. Look at:
 - Staff, pupil and parent survey results
 - Performance and progress data
 - Attendance data
 - Anecdotal conversations with staff
- At Oasis, it holds principals' conferences and regular 'CEO listening exercises' (where the CEO takes direct feedback and questions from staff across the trust) to get a feel for how the new approach is landing on the ground
- Maintain open channels of communication between all levels, to make sure everyone feels heard and informed

Stay flexible and be ready to adapt the process based on what's working and what isn't.

How to make this a success

Here are Helen and Sara-Jayne's top tips for effectively implementing regional adaptation:

- **Listen to your staff.** Ask for teacher and school leader feedback throughout and incorporate it into decision-making processes. Trust that they know what works best in their schools and classrooms. "It's really about listening to people and making sure that they're with you every step of the way," says Helen
- **Have a strong core mission and vision,** so that everyone understands what the organisation stands for and where it's heading. Oasis' core mission is to build strong and inclusive communities. "It's definitely not a mission that's laminated on a wall," explains Helen. "It's lived out every single day, in everything that we do"
- **Show leaders the direct positive impact on pupils' work, to create buy-in at school level.** "Deliberately show your leaders pupils' work before, and pupils' work after then look at the difference. That feels really tangible," advises Sara-Jayne



- **Keep experimenting.** It's all about finding the right balance between central support, and regional autonomy/agency. "There are elements of centralised approaches that still exist, but we want them to be leveraged in a way that really impacts the children in in the classroom," says Sara-Jayne
- **Provide ongoing support.** Offer CPD and coaching to support teachers and leaders in adapting to the new approach. Think about taking a highly contextualised approach to CPD, as well as to teaching and learning

Sources

Helen Arya is the chief education officer and deputy CEO at Oasis Community Learning, and **Sara-Jayne Martin** is the trust's national lead of research and best practice.

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