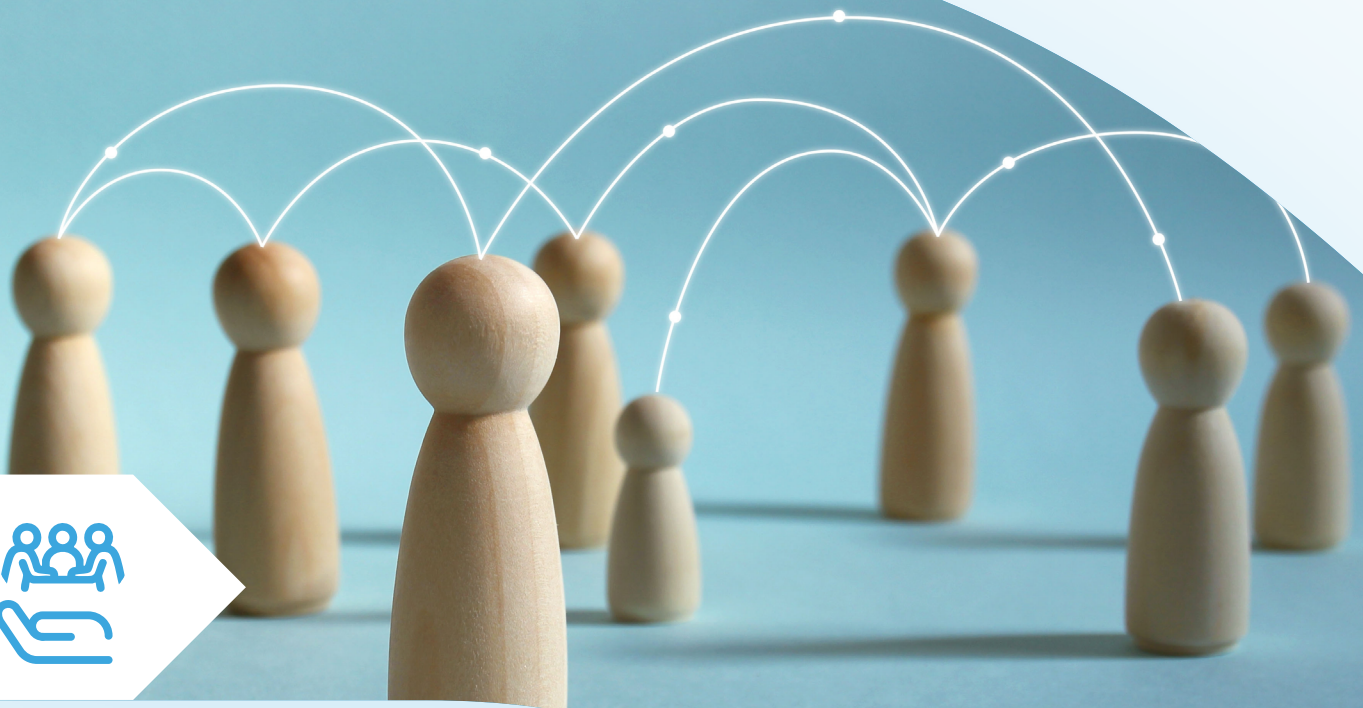


Public sector impact studies

Education: Centralising communications to drive school growth and efficiency





The problem

Schools today face tough competition to attract both students and talented teachers. However, even when schools belong to a larger group such as a trust they are often left to manage their advertising, recruitment, and stakeholder communications alone.

This decentralised approach creates duplication and missed economies of scale. Office teams spend hours designing flyers, drafting parent communications, or managing reputational issues, which are tasks that take them away from core school operations. Because every school is doing this separately, work is repeated unnecessarily, and the quality of the materials varies wildly. By failing to work together, the Trust wastes money, increases its exposure to reputational risk during crises, and misses the chance to build the strong, shared reputation needed to attract pupils and high-quality staff.

This public sector impact study is based on a talk at Productivity Pitches, a series of events hosted by the Institute for Government and The Productivity Institute, which aims to share and support ways to improve public sector performance levels. The talk is available to watch on the [Institute for Government's website](#).



The innovation

The Thinking Schools Academy Trust, which has 26 schools across the south of England, addressed this structural inefficiency by creating a centralised expert marketing and communications team called Thinking Creative as part of its central services hub. This unit functions as an in-house agency, providing specialist support to its 26 schools, replacing a fragmented model with a coordinated, strategic service. The key components include:

- *Standardisation of core marketing assets:* The central team developed a suite of high-quality, professionally designed templates for essential marketing materials, including prospectuses, banners, and digital assets. These resources are centrally produced and quality-controlled but can be customised for each school, ensuring brand consistency while retaining local identity.
- *A ready-to-go resource bank:* For recurring, high-stakes campaigns like admissions, the team created a comprehensive library of pre-written copy, social media content, and digital advertisements. This allows schools to launch professional campaigns quickly, eliminating the need for staff to create materials from scratch.
- *Targeted, proactive intervention:* The central team uses data to identify schools that are struggling to meet their pupil admission numbers or fill key staff vacancies. It then deploys expert support to these schools, designing and executing bespoke campaigns to address their specific challenges.
- *Centralised crisis and strategic communications:* The team coordinates trust-level communications, ranging from sensitive crisis responses to celebratory storytelling. By acting as a central hub, it ensures messaging is timely and consistent, providing a protective layer that reduces reputational risk across the network.





The impact

This centralised model has delivered significant gains in both operational efficiency and organisational effectiveness:

- *Freed-up school-level capacity:* By taking on the burden of day-to-day marketing and complex crisis communications, the central team has freed up hundreds of hours of time for school leaders and administrative staff, allowing them to refocus on their core responsibilities of education and operational management.
- *Improved pupil recruitment and school growth:* The professionalised admissions campaigns have led to tangible increases in pupil numbers. For instance, a successful rebranding and marketing campaign for the newly formed Penbridge School in Portsmouth saw them exceed their admission targets. At The Victory Academy in Kent, a strong campaign directly supported the case for capital investment to expand its Sixth Form.
- *Enhanced staff recruitment:* The centralised, digital-first recruitment campaigns have significantly improved the Trust's ability to attract talent and it saw an increase in engagement with its digital channels, with one in every 26 candidates now applying directly through its website or social media.
- *Achieved economies of scale:* By centralising design, procurement, and campaign management, the Trust achieves better value for money and delivers a higher quality of output than individual schools could afford on their own.



Takeaways

This case study demonstrates how a public sector organisation can unlock significant productivity gains by strategically applying the business principle of shared services. The innovation lies in identifying a set of non-core, specialist functions, such as marketing, communications, and recruitment, that were being performed inefficiently at a local level and consolidating them into a high-performing central unit. This move created immediate economies of scale, but its most profound impact was in transforming a disparate collection of schools into a coordinated system capable of executing a coherent, trust-wide strategy.

The success of this model is underpinned by its ability to resolve the classic tension between central standardisation and local autonomy. By providing centrally-produced, high-quality templates that can be locally customised, the Trust ensures brand consistency without erasing individual school identity. This approach avoids rigid standardisation that can alienate local stakeholders, instead creating a partnership where the centre provides the expert tools and capacity, and the schools provide the essential local knowledge.

Ultimately, the Thinking Creative unit illustrates how a strategic investment in central capacity can create a virtuous cycle of productivity. By freeing up frontline leaders to focus on educational delivery, the model directly improves the core service. At the same time, by driving successful pupil and staff recruitment, it secures the financial and human resources necessary for the entire organisation to improve and grow.

This proves that for a multi-site public service organisation, the most effective way to improve frontline productivity is often to build a strong, expert centre that takes non-core, burdensome tasks off their plate.

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