When and why MATs need an HR system
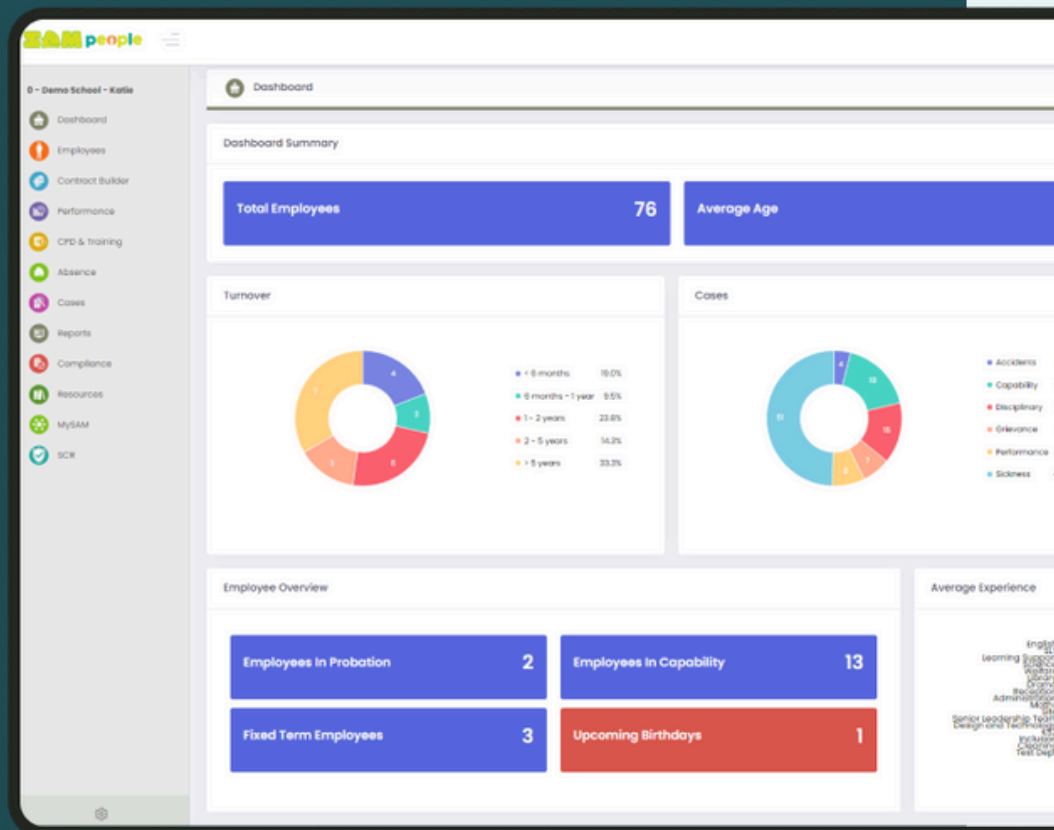
Trust leaders share how they've used HR software to reduce workload, improve turnover and scale HR best-practice - and how you can do the same.

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"Spinning too many plates"
"Wearing too many hats"

Kathryn Birch
Founder and
CEO at SAMpeople
and FusionHR

These two phrases often describe what it's like working in HR in education today. With teams stretched thin across more and more schools, it's a real challenge to keep up with day-to-day people management - let alone big-picture strategic decisions that help your school or trust to grow.

When I began my career in education in 2004, I worked as a consultant supporting schools in financial difficulty, or with school improvement challenges. I saw the same challenges time and again: staff were overwhelmed by paperwork and spent so much time on admin tasks, they had little time left for the strategic interventions that could make a difference.

Traditional HR systems, which were designed for business settings, just didn't fit the specific needs of schools or trusts and the nuances of education.

I realised that, without the right tools, even the most dedicated HR teams would struggle to provide the support schools and staff need.

That's why we created our HR Consultancy FusionHR, and later our full HR suite of education people management software: SAMpeople, SAMpeople Recruit and Payroll bureau.

Over the years, it's become clear that Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) face their own unique HR challenges. Centralising systems and processes creates complexity in managing staff across multiple sites with different needs, processes and cultures.

The right HR system for MATs isn't just about moving paperwork online - it's about building a people management approach that matches your trust's values and priorities, and truly supports the people who make education happen.

In this guide, we hear from trust leaders on how they've used software to drive HR excellence across their trust - and set out the steps you could take to do the same. We hope you find something in this guide to inspire you!

Kathryn Birch

6 ways HR software drives
HR excellence in trusts

Specialist HR software, designed for education, is valuable for schools of any size - but it becomes essential for trusts facing growth, centralising services, and supporting a growing workforce. Without effective systems in place, it's difficult to gain the visibility and oversight needed to truly understand staffing challenges, let alone manage them proactively.

But HR software should do more than just generate reports, or store staff data. The right solution helps people managers follow best practice and statutory processes, provides context for every staff interaction, and frees up time to focus on higher impact, strategic work.

Here are six ways trust leaders tell us HR software supports HR excellence across their trust.

"We needed an employee portal to engage staff and enable us to work holistically across the trust. We are seeing the rewards already. It's helping build an inclusive culture. It is bringing together and streamlining processes."

Sally Boaden, Chief Finance and Operating Officer at Raleigh Education Trust

Gain a complete trust-wide view of staffing

A centralised dashboard provides instant, clear oversight of staff turnover, absences, HR casework and recruitment activity across all your schools - without needing to chase individual HR leads or school leaders. This makes it easy to spot where issues are emerging, and identify schools that need extra support or intervention such as those experiencing high absence costs or increased turnover.

Promote consistent HR best-practice and centralised processes

When everyone works from the same system, you can easily share trust-wide policies and establish consistent ways of working, supported by built-in triggers, workflows and approval processes. Absence management, for example, can be standardised with custom approval workflows and automated trigger guidelines - either applied trust-wide or tailored to schools as needed.

Free up HR teams for strategic initiatives

Self-service features allow staff to keep their personal data up-to-date, request time-off, track CPD and access documents independently. Automated workflows for line managers - such as leave approvals and return to work reminders - significantly reduce time spent on manual administrative tasks. Central HR teams benefit from comprehensive reporting tools, BI dashboards and streamlined policy management, giving them increased capacity to focus on strategic people projects that drive the trust forward.

Reduce absence and support employees

Automated absence tracking and trigger dashboards ensure a clear and consistent absence policy is applied for all schools. Ability to set monitoring periods and track attendance improvement ensures you stay in control of the absence case. Trend analysis across schools, departments and terms enables timely support for staff and helps inform a robust wellbeing strategy.

Enable data-driven recruitment and retention strategies

With the full visibility of your workforce and detailed reports on turnover and absences, central HR teams can clearly identify gaps and develop targeted interventions for wellbeing, flexible working and staff engagement. Using your own data to inform decisions and drive improvements leads to smarter recruitment and retention across the trust.

Have peace of mind that HR compliance is being met

A trust-wide HR system allows HR compliance to be maintained consistently across all schools. It stores contractual and payroll records accurately, updates the Single Central Record in real time, and replaces static spreadsheets with dynamic cloud-based tools. Workforce Census requirements are met automatically in line with DfE requirements, and policies and contractual documents can be distributed and tracked for staff acknowledgement, supporting standardisation and compliance trust-wide.

How The Arbib Education Trust reduced turnover by 8%

Sarah Casemore, HR Director at The Arbib Education Trust, acknowledges that workload is one of the top reasons why staff leave schools in the UK[1]. We spoke to Sarah about how SAMpeople has helped them to relieve that.

What prompted your trust to look for an HR system or a new HR system?

We're passionate about staff experience and believe that if we're creating the best environment for our staff, then they're going to give our children the best experience. We're always looking at different ways we can make life a bit easier, more straightforward.

It's common knowledge that the number one reason why staff leave schools is workload. So, as part of our function in HR, we do our best to reduce this.

Did you use an HR system previously or did you move from paper? If you moved from paper, how did this move benefit your trust?

We were using paper before. Our absence requests and approvals were done on paper, so there was duplication, increased workload, and things went missing. There was a lot of inefficiency. At school level, it was difficult to report and it took each school at least a day to pull together. It was really clunky, very cumbersome and the risk of human error was high.

We also wanted to improve our recruitment approach. Paper-based working made it difficult to track what was happening. It felt old fashioned and didn't reflect what we were all about as a modern organisation. Recruitment is an area where schools are really struggling at the moment. It was critical to see what we could do to streamline the process.

What made you choose SAMpeople or what made it stand out from other HR systems that you looked at?

One of the things that made SAMpeople really stand out was that it's been designed by people who understand education. Other HR systems don't deal very well with complicated education HR working arrangements, such as term-time working and pay grades.

The absence module was another real seller for us. I've never seen a system deal quite so well with such unusual working patterns, calculating everything for you.

SAMpeople is really focused on supporting school life.

SAMpeople was the best value for money, with some really impressive functionality; the fact that it could integrate the recruitment and HR system was a real strength.

What impact is SAMpeople having?

SAMpeople has supported us with our strategic objectives. It enables me at a trust level to be able to provide support 'in the moment' to schools. It makes us much more resilient.

The biggest impact is being able to report on turnover. SAMpeople made it really easy for us to look at the reasons why people are leaving. The education sector is facing recruitment and retention challenges at the moment. Retaining good quality staff is more critical than it's ever been.

Last year we managed to use that [turnover] information to drive change, and we've reduced our turnover by 8% across the trust! That's probably the single biggest transformation that we've seen.

The absence module has transformed how we're working to organise cover and handle absence. We're seeing where people are hitting triggers much earlier and this tells us where we might need to offer more support or do something differently.

Have you seen a notable reduction in absence since using SAMpeople?

After the initial set up of SAMpeople, we could track it going down. What's been really helpful and valuable is being able to compare absences year on year, which is driving us to make changes.

For example, for the next academic year we're going to trial a two-week half term in October rather than one week, as autumn term is when we currently see the highest staff sickness absence. We think that will help to make a difference to staff wellbeing and absence and consequently to the quality of education we can provide to our young people. It's driving quite important operational decisions. We're using all of that data in a way that we couldn't previously.

How do you think SAMpeople will help your trust in the long term?

SAMpeople is helping us to constantly improve our practice, making the experience of our staff and students better. SAMpeople is critical to that because it's giving us so much quantitative information about what is going on in our trust.

There are lots of indicators in data that tell you about the health of the organisation, how we're doing and where we might need to focus next. For example, by analysing our demographic data, we can track our progress towards our ongoing commitment to create and sustain an equitable and inclusive working environment for all staff across our trust. That's how I see SAMpeople supporting us.

What advice would you give to a trust who is hesitant to implement an HR system?

Talk to other schools about their experiences. It doesn't have to be a big bang with everything new, you can do it gradually like us. Schools are busy places, we're all really stretched and there's never enough capacity. SAMpeople are brilliant at understanding the pressure of people in schools.

SAMpeople made life a lot easier; but most importantly, it has given us some really valuable organisational insights that are shaping our decision making.

[1] *Working lives of teachers and leaders: wave 3, Department for Education 2024*

How Priestley Academy Trust streamlines processes and informs people decisions

Mathew Atkinson, Chief Executive Officer, oversees the strategic direction of Priestley Academy Trust and makes sure organisational goals are met. We spoke to Mathew about how SAMpeople has supported HR excellence in his trust.

What challenges did you face before choosing SAMpeople?

We faced challenges managing HR processes across multiple sites. When you're responsible for 350 people across six sites and different line management systems within those, we wanted an efficient system to reduce challenges, such as tracking staff absence and compliance of the Single Central Record and payroll. Our goal was around streamlining those processes and having oversight from the central trust function.

There was a lack of access to real time data across the sites and difficulties in reporting HR metrics. We needed a solution that could help us centralise data so that we can make decisions based on what the data is telling us.

What made you choose SAMpeople over another HRIS?

We chose SAMpeople for the user-friendly interface and the comprehensive functions that sit behind that.

SAMpeople is built for education by people who are involved in education, which is really important.

We have a long standing relationship with FusionHR, so we knew the customer support was good.

We're interested in absence and turnover metrics and compliance tracking, particularly in relation to the Single Central Record, because it's one of the trust's responsibilities to have oversight of the Single Central Record (SCR) for all of the schools. SAMpeople allowed us to do that in a readily accessible format. The SAMpeople SCR is live so I can see any changes that have been made daily. That means you're getting real time data from across the organisation so that you can make decisions and have discussions with leaders in school.

Is SAMpeople making a difference to the way your staff work?

Yes, SAMpeople has reduced our administration workload across the trust, allowing HR teams to focus on strategic initiatives and enhancing staff wellbeing rather than being bogged down in the nitty gritty.

SAMpeople has been a big success across the organisation giving oversight from the central trust function, and bringing consistency.

Certainly for me, I don't know 350 staff inside and out, so I'm able to log on to the system and see data for that individual in one place. I have found that really helpful to get an oversight and understanding of individuals.

I think it's also helpful that our HR provider is from the same company. We're talking the same language, they understand our policies and procedures and that's inputted into the system and taken in account.

What excites you working with SAMpeople?

[With the SAMpeople and Arbor integration] it should be a one stop shop for staff, pupils and processes.

We won't be inputting things into different systems, allowing the data to be more reliable and managed more effectively across the trust. With SAMpeople Recruit in the mix, we can manage the employee journey through the organisation.

What would you say to a trust who hasn't considered getting an HRIS yet?

I'd advise them to consider the long term benefits of investing in a system such as SAMpeople because it can significantly reduce the HR burdens that you might feel as an organisation.

Ultimately, having an HRIS in place, leads to better information. We all know that information is power because that supports your decision-making processes.

Having a system like SAMpeople gives you the capacity and capability to take that HR information and do something meaningful with it.

Why SAMpeople is the UK's fastest-growing education HR system

SAMpeople has been designed and refined by our team of education HR specialists, with over two decades of hands-on experience supporting HR in schools and trusts. Since launching in 2021, SAMpeople now helps over 2,200 schools and trusts across the UK to support their staff, reduce manual workload, increase operational efficiency and oversight, and drive HR best-practice.

Trust level overview with MAT dashboard

Central teams and senior leadership can access reports, statistics and HR data at a glance with a dynamic dashboard of key HR metrics. Pull reports from across schools, filtering to specific details where required to understand the complete picture of your staff.
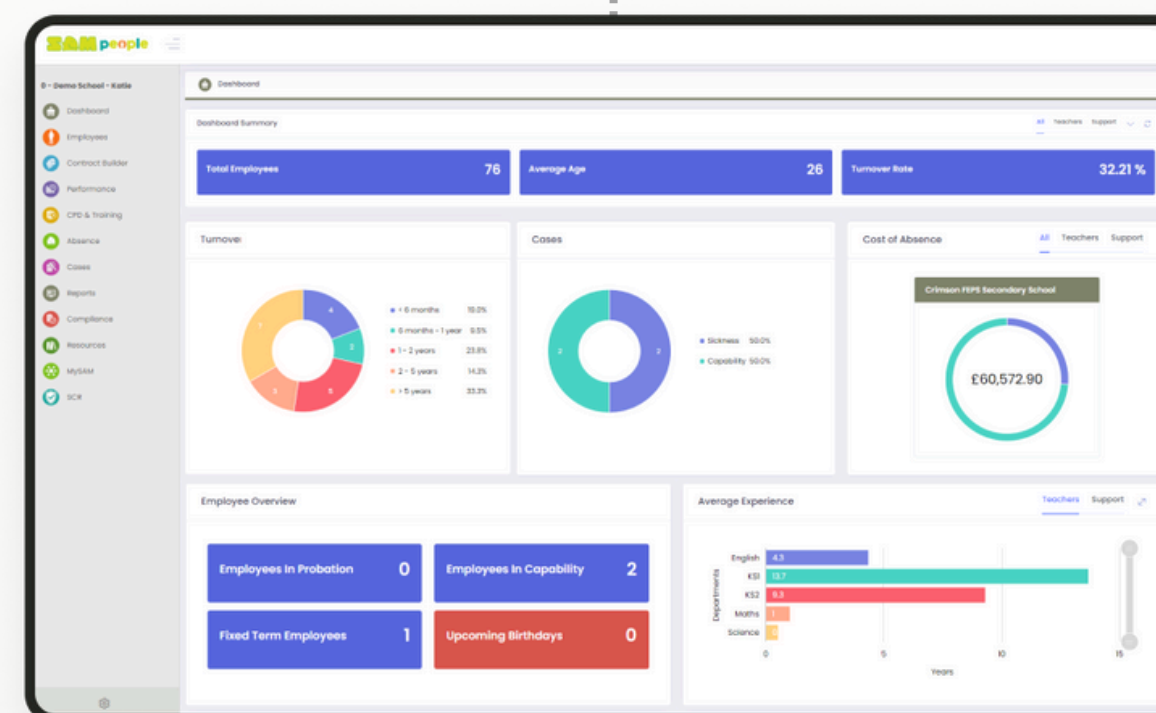
Secure GDPR compliant storage

Making SAMpeople your source of truth for all employee information ensures compliance with data protection regulations but also ensures payroll changes are accurately tracked and managed and reported on the payroll export report. With a clear audit trail, HR and payroll teams can eliminate discrepancies and reduce the risk of payroll errors, supporting compliance and transparency. With a cloud based HR system, you can move away from paper based files and searching individual computers and improve data accuracy. HR teams can access information from anywhere anytime, allowing for flexible working across school sites and other locations.

Create consistent processes and policies

With built-in workflows and automated reminders, you can quickly and easily implement consistent processes across the trust. Absence management and return to work meetings are handled consistently from school to school, making sure employees are treated fairly. Share policies trust wide and communicate changes to employees at the touch of a button.

Compliance and Single Central Record management

Our Single Central Record and compliance management features give you peace of mind that documents and records are up-to-date. You can focus your attention on what's needed with built-in flags, alerts and expiries. Give each school their own Single Central Record and access these at trust level for reviews and audits.

Help staff self-service with the MySAM employee portal

Our employee self-service portal gives employees a simple way to request leave, manage their personal details, view their CPD and performance objectives and submit additional hours and expenses. With mobile friendly access, encouraging engagement has never been easier.

Comprehensive case work and performance tracker

Simplify case and performance management so HR teams can securely log, monitor and update every case stage in one centralised system. Relevant documents, communications and evidence are stored in a single, easily accessible location. When preparing for meetings, hearings or performance reviews, quickly compile historical information and supporting evidence and prepare a summary report or produce a hearing bundle in minutes - streamlining the process, and enabling HR teams and line managers to be confident and prepared.

Avoid duplication with MIS sync

Reduce duplication of admin tasks by integrating your HR software and MIS. Data flows between the system to make sure you are always up-to-date.

Making the move, how does it work?

Our teams have extensive experience onboarding trusts of all sizes with a tried and tested process to make sure nothing is missed, and you are supported throughout. Here's a quick overview of how it works:

Phase 1 →

Trust programme management

You will be assigned a dedicated member of our Programme Management team to guide you throughout your implementation journey. Together, you'll build a thorough project plan and they will help make sure you get the most out of your onboarding programme.

Things to think about:

Implementing an HR system is a great opportunity to review and tidy your HR data.

Phase 2 →

Onboarding - data migration and system build

Our Customer Onboarding Partners will transfer your HR data in the system, with regular meetings to keep you up-to-date and request any further information we need to build your system bespoke to your trust.

Then, we'll roll out the core modules including employee profiles, the absence module and MySAM employee portal, so you can get started on core processes right away.

"Our onboarding was well supported and smooth. There was always somebody at the end of the phone and that's continued right through. We feel really supported by the team and the guidance helped us avoid the pitfalls that I'm sure could happen with rolling a system out like SAMpeople.

There were regular reviews as to how we were getting on and pointing us in the right direction. Even last summer I was having a review a couple of years into the contract as to what we're making the most of and where we might add value."

Mathew Atkinson, Chief Executive Officer, Priestley Academy Trust

"We took a phased approach to implementation. Moving from paper to a system really highlights what's good in your data, and where you've got some cleaning up to do, but it helped us to improve the quality of our data. We also used the opportunity to look at our processes and standardise our templates across each academy.

We were keen to get MySAM, the self-service employee portal, up and running. This was going to be a change in working and we thought it might be the hardest part, but we had really positive feedback; Staff loved being able to see their information and were quite shocked when they saw some of their own absence information. It's quite powerful to have that absence information at your fingertips; it really highlights areas you might not have noticed before and helps spark meaningful conversations and actions.

It was nice to get your core system built and then add additional modules around other school priorities at your own pace."

Sarah Casemore, HR Director, The Arbib Education Trust

Phase 3 →

Customer education and training

Customer Education Specialists will begin training on how to use SAMpeople. We know it can be difficult to get everybody together for a training session so our teams offer virtual, recorded and in-person training based on your needs.

Our training teams can do the hard work for you - making sure everyone is using the system correctly and answering any questions they might have.

Phase 4 →

Customer success

After the initial launch of your core modules, you will be supported by our Customer Success team to begin to roll out additional modules within SAMpeople like your Single Central Record, Performance Management, Training and CPD.

This phased onboarding means you can roll these out on a timeline to suit your capacity.

Ongoing support - Account Management

Trusts using SAMpeople will be assigned a dedicated Account Manager to support them throughout their journey. Your Account Manager will meet with you termly to make sure you are receiving all the support you need to achieve your HR goals. Use your Account Manager to ask about additional features, support and plan those longer-term goals.

Joining a community of trusts

Once you're onboarded with SAMpeople and have mastered your initial training and roll-out, our team will support you to get the most out of SAMpeople and reach your long-term HR goals.

SAMpeople Hub →

The SAMpeople Hub is an online helpdesk and resource area, accessible anywhere anytime, for all things SAMpeople! The Hub is filled with helpsheet articles and videos to support you to get the best out of SAMpeople.

We regularly update the SAMpeople Hub with guidance notes for new releases and features, so you are always up-to-date.

The Hub also hosts MyJourney, a training pathway for roles within schools and trusts with links to sessions. MyJourney groups webinars and helpsheets easily by role. Use the SAMpeople Hub to improve your technical knowledge and find the answers to your questions.

Training webinars →

Our regular training webinars are hosted by our Customer Education Team covering all areas of the software. Book onto these webinars easily via the SAMpeople Hub. Our training webinars are hosted live, and we also have pre-recorded sessions for ease. Use our training sessions to see the system in action, best if you learn visually or want to teach colleagues.

Total Employees	802
Total Cases	76
Turnover Rate	15%

Cost of Absence — All Teachers Support

£898,662

Export payroll

Telephone, ticket and email support →

Our Customer Success team are available all year round 8:30am-4:30pm, throughout half term and the summer (bar Christmas closure) for you to submit queries, call our helpdesk and book meetings with a Customer Success Partner. Use our helpdesk for quick system related queries where our team can provide technical support.

Share features that matter to you →

Our SAMpeople team are always looking for ways to make the system work even harder for you. We always welcome feedback so tell us what's most important to you to support our product roadmaps! Our product roadmaps are consistently reviewed to make sure we are providing the best software to work for school and trust life.

Monthly newsletters →

Receive monthly newsletters full of HR insights, product updates, blogs and more. Be the first to hear about new features, HR training and webinars with our monthly digest! Share the newsletter with colleagues, and stay up-to-date with all things SAMpeople!

Don't forget to follow us on LinkedIn to keep up-to-date with all things education HR and SAMpeople!
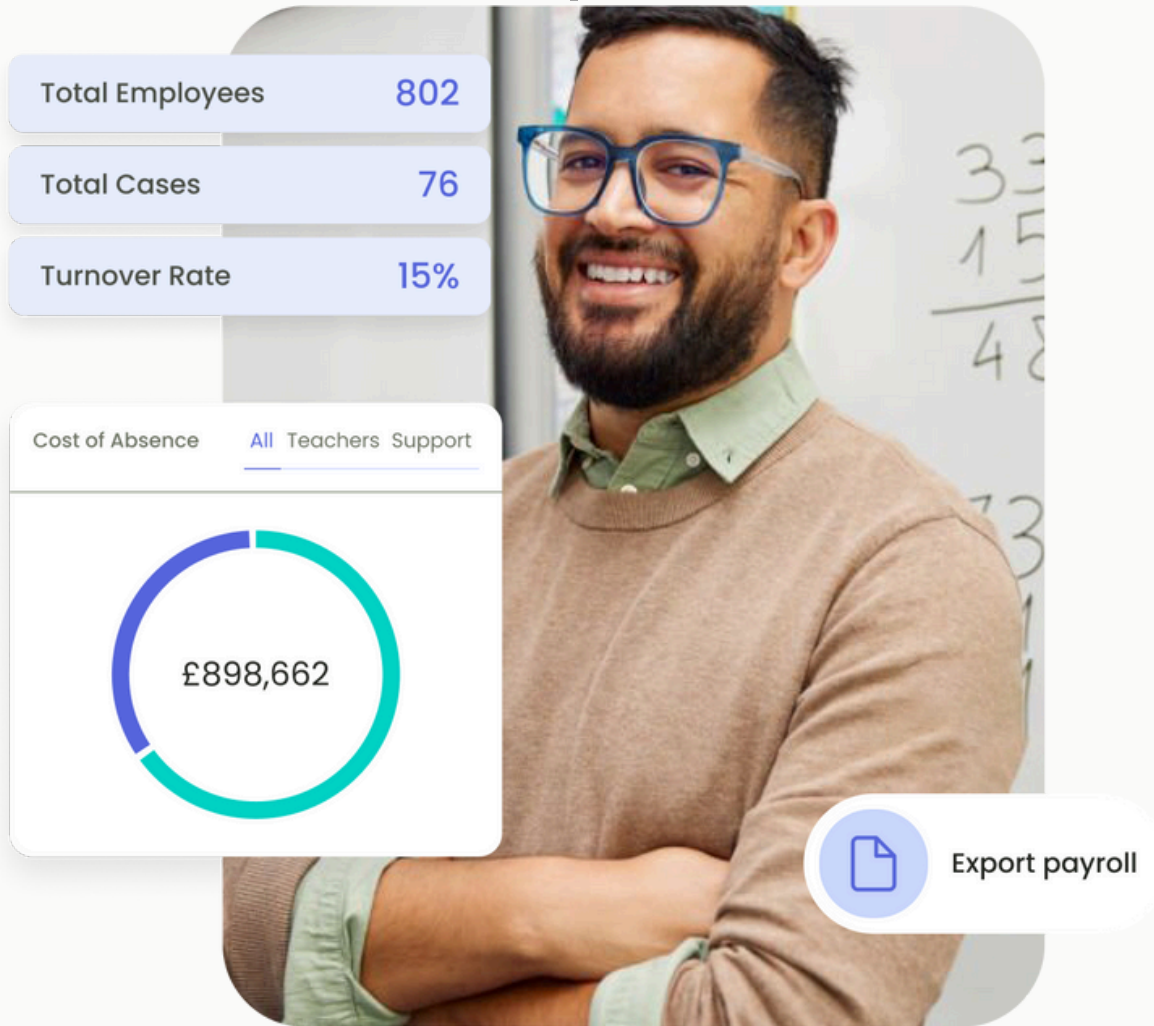
Frequently asked questions

What other pieces of software does SAMpeople integrate with? How do you avoid duplicate entry when implementing a HR system?

SAMpeople can integrate with your MIS using our direct API with Arbor, Bromcom & SIMS. SAMpeople also integrates with our Safer Recruitment software, SAMpeople Recruit, meaning one single point of data entry.

The payroll export report, which can be used to inform finance, pulls through changes that happen on a monthly basis, for example, new starters, leavers, contractual changes and absences. You might wish to use our Payroll Bureau service to link up your HR and payroll even more.

Is there a staff app?

We don't have a staff app at the moment, however our employee portal, MySAM, is optimised for mobile accessibility! MySAM allows staff to request annual leave, appointments and more. Staff can sign documents and policies and make claims for mileage, expenses and overtime. Staff also have the ability to view career journey plans and objectives meaning you can be aligned at all times.

How can an HR system help with case management, saving us from pulling information from many places?

SAMpeople allows you to create cases for employees to easily track and manage casework from start to finish. Upload documents, track correspondence and add notes in each case file and then build case bundles in minutes with our customisable export.

What sort of reports can I run in SAMpeople?

You can report on absence by department, line manager, absence type, annual absence comparison report and much more with absence related reporting.

Report on employee data, turnover rate, Return to Work summaries, TOIL/Flexi Report and Performance objectives summary and more.

Use our Power BI connector for pulling together even more insights.

All reports are filterable and exportable along with real time dashboards at both MAT and school level. Benefit from running your Single Central Record and workforce census in SAMpeople too.

Can you add authorisation levels or workflows for absence requests?

Yes, workflows for absence requests are customisable and can have a multi-level authorisation. Add staff who need to be notified of the absence but may not be part of the approval process, to provide even more clarity across teams.

Can I set up tasks for line managers, such as reminders to do return to work meetings?

Yes! Return to Work meeting reminders can be set up for line managers.

Does SAMpeople have a trust view dashboard, and can I filter by date range?

For sure! The trust level dashboard shows key HR metrics from across your trust and can be filtered by date and teachers or support staff.

What payroll information can I pull from SAMpeople?

Our payroll export report tracks all new starters, leavers and contract changes, absences, personal detail changes, overtime, mileage and expenses.

How do I add casual staff information if they don't have an employee record?

You can add casual staff into SAMpeople as an employee record. You can also add casual staff straight onto the Single Central Record such as contractors and agency staff.

Can staff register overtime and log expenses? If so, where is this done?

Yes, you can give access though the MySAM employee portal for employees to request overtime, mileage and expenses. Requests can go through a multi-level approval process and once approved the employee will be notified. This information will pull into the payroll export report or can be used for auditing purposes.

What's next? Get in touch or see us in action

You are ready to take the next step and begin your journey towards implementing an HR system; So, what next?

Get in touch ➜

Get in touch for a discovery call and demonstration. Our team will discuss your initial requirements, challenges and get you booked in for a demo.

Download our brochure ➜

Download our brochure to learn more about our HR, recruitment and payroll services and explore our key features.

The People Strategy Series

for schools and MATs

Join our People Strategy webinar series and tackle your biggest people challenges, together with trust leaders and our team of HR specialists.

Every term, The People Strategy Series explores topics like wellbeing, EDI, flexible working, compliance and more to empower you in your role and help you design a leading people strategy. Hear from trust leaders and HR specialists and take back actionable strategies for your school or trust right away.

You can also see SAMpeople in action through our introductory demo webinars.

Sign up here

Simplify and connect the whole employee journey

From hiring to payroll to case management - our suite of integrated products and services help you streamline, support and join up every aspect of people management in education.

"The impact has been amazing, we are seeing change and we are seeing each school engaging with the systems. It's helping build an inclusive culture."

Sally Boaden, Chief Finance & Operating Officer, Raleigh Education Trust

✓ People Management

✓ Recruitment

✓ Pay and Pensions

✓ HR Advice and Support

✓ MIS Integrations

We help over 2,200 schools and trusts to:

Finally understand the complete picture of their staff

Our products join up all your staff data, so you can track every interaction. Turn scattered touchpoints into clear insights about absences, recruitment, retention and wellbeing, and know exactly where to focus your attention.

Scale HR without increasing headcount

With a strong HR infrastructure, it's easy to roll out consistent processes and policies and treat everyone the same way. And with our people services team at FusionHR, HR advice, consultancy and strategy is only a phone call away.

Dramatically reduce HR admin for everyone

With self-service tools for employees, and helpful reports, automations, alerts and templates for managers, HR quickly becomes less of a mountain.

We're education people, people

We created SAMpeople because we've been there.

Founded by former school staff and our education HR specialists at FusionHR, we're bringing together decades of HR expertise with the latest in people management technology.

Read our story at **sampeople.co.uk/about**

Book a demo or find out more at

→ **sampeople.co.uk**

→ **01924 907319**