

The partnership dividend

Civic leadership in place

Part one

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**Confederation
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The voice of school trusts



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Bringing together trusts from every region and of every size, CST has a strong, strategic presence with access to government and policy makers to drive real change for education on the big issues that matter most.

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Foreword

In December 2022, the Confederation of School Trusts and the Reach Foundation wrote and co-published a think piece called [*Community anchoring: School trusts as anchor institutions*](#). This was part of CST's 'Bridge to the Future' series in which we were attempting to describe the conditions for a different model of leadership and institutional focus: the 'anchor' mindset and 'anchor' institution. This includes:

- Build and nurture strategic partnerships with other schools and other sectors supporting children and families locally.
- Use their position as trusted, visible institutions to improve local systems and increase their impact.
- Run great schools and advocate for (local and national) policy change when needed to achieve long-term goals.
- Deliberately empower others (including people outside the trust) to lead and take action to support children and families.
- Invest in developing their workforce (especially locally) and contributing to strong communities.
- Focus on impact and measure progress against broad outcomes for all children in communities in which trust works.

Three years later, many trusts in England have responded to our call for trusts to be anchor institutions in the places in which their schools are located. Thanks to your collective leadership, we have learned a huge amount about how to weave webs of support for children and families at the school, neighbourhood, local authority and regional levels.

As we wrote in the introduction to *Community anchoring*: "The challenges we face currently are daunting – global economic instability, recession, the rise in absolute child poverty, the continuing impacts of Covid-19 and the climate emergency to name but a few. These are challenges which we cannot address on our own. Great schools are necessary but not sufficient if we are to enable all children to enjoy lives of choice and opportunity."

If anything, the challenges are now more complex and acute. This two-part series builds on the original conceptual framework which we described in detail in *Community anchoring*, but it develops that thinking in a new political and policy context. In part one, we explore this new context and identify some leadership mindsets required for partnership working. In part two, we will explore in more depth some examples about how to realise the partnership dividend at the neighbourhood, local and regional levels.

We have sought to learn from the growing body of evidence about place-based and relational approaches, as well as from the inspiring work of school and trust leaders nationally. Through understanding children's journeys through their childhood and the places children and families live their lives, trust leaders have a major opportunity to increase the collective capacity of their staff, families and communities.

This is the 'partnership dividend'.



Introduction

What is the partnership dividend?

Schools cannot do everything. As we argued in *Community anchoring*, great schools are necessary but not sufficient if all children are to enjoy lives of choice and opportunity.

The solutions to the complex problems that face us are beyond the reach of individual people or single institutions (even the state actor). They require forms of radical, collaborative leadership in place. There is a particular opportunity for schools and trusts to increase the coherence of children's journeys through their education and to contribute to strengthening the neighbourhoods in which they are growing up.

If we accept this premise, then we believe there is a partnership imperative. The only other options are to try to do everything, which is unsustainable, or to pull up the drawbridge and wish our children luck in all aspects of their lives beyond the school gates. This does not seem right morally or pragmatically; beyond school factors have a knack for finding their way into school.

The 'partnership dividend' is realised through an investment in each other, in people, in 'our place'. It is 'paid out' in the increased collective capacity of and for our children, families and colleagues and in stronger, more resilient communities. When we recognise the huge wealth, strengths and talents in every community and build on these together, we create the conditions for children to be safe and well-supported, healthy, to develop strong relationships and to achieve well academically.

The partnership dividend can be realised in many different ways. We have organised these into three 'levels'.

- **Neighbourhood level:** Through intentional and deep relationships with our families and with other schools and organisations serving the same children, we can build shared purpose; increase the coherence of the educational journey children experience; and provide all children with the opportunities to flourish in the place they call home.
- **Local level:** Through working together with other trusts and local authority leaders, we can mobilise school improvement capacity and create the enabling conditions for schools to contribute meaningfully at a neighbourhood level.
- **Regional or system level:** Through working with other education and civic actors we can connect support for children and families across professional silos, even when geographical boundaries of our systems do not align. All in service of enabling children and families to flourish in their place.

In all cases, this work is deeply relational, rather than transactional. As the social activist and author Hilary Cottam says, it is the expression of a radical humanity – how we use our connection with one other to renew education so that our children and communities can flourish together.

It is also, by its nature, long-term work. A single child takes nearly two decades to progress through their school education. We must invest in the relationships and partnerships needed to provide coherent support and opportunities to them throughout their childhood. Trusts are institutions with the longevity, permanence, and durability to anchor this support.

In the next section, we explore the meaning of 'place' and the implications for school and trust leaders seeking to build and sustain local partnerships. We will then look

at the current space for change and describe the leadership mindsets required for partnership working.

The work of partnerships is not 'extra'. Just like trust support for improving pedagogy or the quality of our curriculum, partnerships and a commitment to place are a major lever to achieve a broad range of outcomes for our children and achieve our collective goal of 'advancing education for the public benefit'.

Leadership in place is our best and last frontier.



How can we define 'place'?

Place has no single definition. It is also not new. From the late 1990s, place has been key to successive government strategies across different departments from, for example, neighbourhood regeneration in the 2000s under the last Labour government to the Conservative government's interest in place through 'opportunity areas', or in towns falling into the category of 'left behind'.

Whilst there is no clear agreement across government (or beyond) around a single definition of 'place', it is clear that there is now significant interest in place-based approaches across departments. We believe this should of real interest to school and trust leaders, especially the notable and growing focus on the neighbourhood level.

For instance, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's [Pride in Place](#) programme has a "hyper-local" focus, concentrating on "neighbourhoods of c. 10,000 population", as does the Department of Culture, Media and Sports [Community Wealth Fund](#), which focuses on "neighbourhoods of between 5,000 and 15,000 residents."

Perhaps most significantly, the government's Ten Year Health Plan also refers to 'neighbourhood' policy, going so far as to describe the 'NHS' as becoming a 'Neighbourhood Health Service'. This focus on the neighbourhood is based on a recognition of the fundamental role of relationships (or 'social capital') in enabling people and communities to flourish. As a recent policy brief from Manchester Metropolitan University notes:

*The solutions to many of the complex issues people who use public services face, such as poor mental health, obesity and loneliness can't be delivered just by making our current public services more efficient. They can only be delivered by making them more relational.*¹

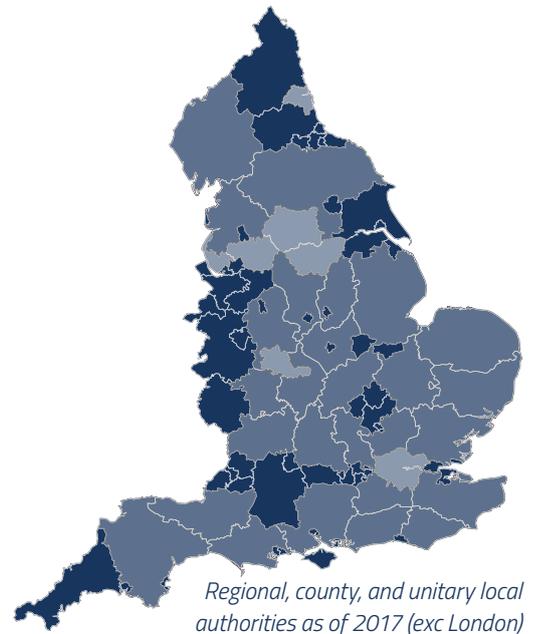
Most people's lives are lived very locally. The majority of primary school children, for instance, go to school less than one mile from home. Ideally, other facilities and services would be equally easy to access. As one mum put it when asked about whether she would attend a new toddler group: "I need to be able to push my pram there in no more than 15 minutes." As the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods recently noted, this local infrastructure matters because when we strengthen social infrastructure, social capital also increases. And this is crucial to strengthening our collective ability to thrive:

*Higher levels of social capital encourage better sustained engagement with public services to improve outcomes in key areas such as health, education and crime.*²

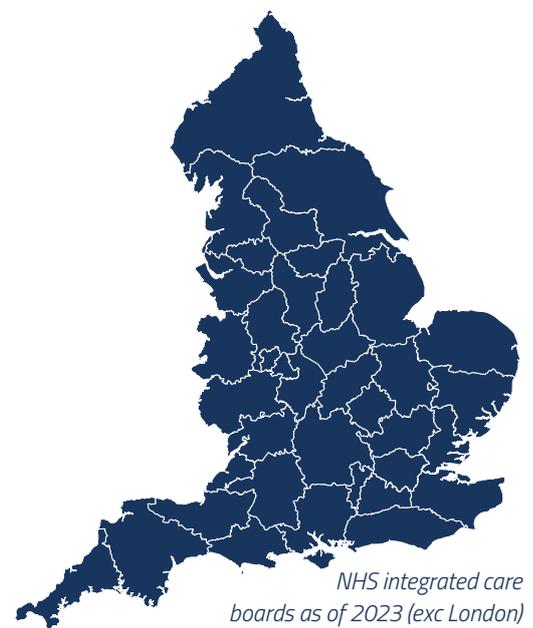
Yet too often, the design of and investment in social infrastructure

¹ Fox, C, Hesselgreaves, H, Cooke S, et al (2025). [Policy priorities to support relational public services](#). Manchester Metropolitan University.

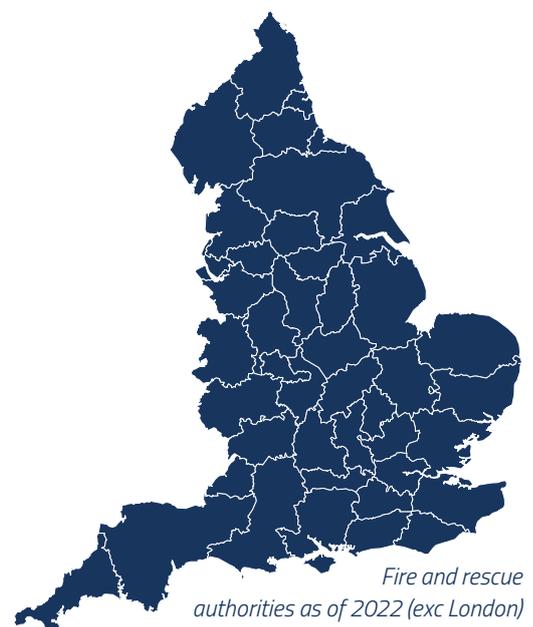
² Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2026). [No short cuts: Towards a national strategy for neighbourhood recovery](#)



Regional, county, and unitary local authorities as of 2017 (exc London)



NHS integrated care boards as of 2023 (exc London)



Fire and rescue authorities as of 2022 (exc London)

has not been based on clear enough understanding of where and how people actually live their lives. For many people, services and facilities are geographically close but there remain major barriers to accessing them, both physically (for example, an unsafe major road or a train line in the way, no easy public transport) or psychologically (located outside of 'my place').

The NHS Confederation now recognises this. They contrast in the how citizens and public services understand 'neighbourhoods':

For citizens, a neighbourhood is not strictly defined by a consistent geography or population size – it can range from a few streets to tens of thousands of people. What matters is how residents perceive their neighbourhood based on local relationships, geography, history and shared experiences.

Public services tend to define neighbourhoods on larger scales, often based on statutory or service boundaries – such as primary care networks or council wards – which may not align with how communities self-identify. Building a consensus around geographic borders in this context is difficult."

*In response, the NHS is seeking to work "at a footprint that responds to and works with communities, fostering familiarity and strong relationships between public services and communities."*³

We believe there is a similar opportunity for trusts to play a similar role and to foster similarly strong relationships and familiarity with their communities.

Education and place-based policy: A neighbourhood opportunity

As universal services with visible and accessible public buildings and facilities and long-term relationships with families, schools and trusts are uniquely well placed to strengthen both civic infrastructure and social capital. Relative to other sectors, however, the focus on the neighbourhood level in education has been and is currently quite limited. A recent blog by Dr Sam Baars provides a useful overview of why this might be. He contrasts 'space-based' with genuinely 'place-based' approaches:

*'space' captures the objective constellation of assets, services and agencies in a given area, while 'place' captures the subjective orientations that people living in that space have towards it; their experience of interacting with it.*⁴

In education, he argues, "the history of (not overly-successful) area-based initiatives in education is almost entirely space-based: little more than area-based targeting on the basis of outcomes."

There is a major opportunity for trusts to focus on the neighbourhood level to embrace genuinely place-based, relational ways of working, both with families and with other professionals serving the same families. A fully-formed place-based approach would nudge us to take seriously children's long-term journeys through their education and to recognise the influence of the neighbourhood on children's ability to thrive.

Many school leaders already have significant social capital. But as James Plunkett writes there is a "special quality" to social capital: "it is the only form of capital that grows when you spend it, and depletes when you don't."⁵ If we are to

³ NHS Confederation (2025). [Delivering a neighbourhood health service: what the 10 Year Health Plan means for local integration.](#)

⁴ Baars, S (2026). 'Area, 'space and 'place'.

⁵ Plunkett, J (2026). 'Power to the People', *Comment is Freed.*



respond to the increasingly complex challenges facing our schools and communities, there is now a particular need and opportunity to grow our social capital at the neighbourhood level where, in many cases, it has depleted over time.

If this neighbourhood focus is also supported by strategic alignment and relationships at the local authority and regional levels, we can create the wider conditions required for neighbourhoods to thrive. The structure of systems across different sectors does not make this straightforward. Geographies, accountabilities and funding streams of different sectors are not aligned. Public sector leaders tend to view place through the lens of their professional interests, policy areas or public service perspective. Trust leaders often work across multiple local authorities or at local levels that do not match LA resourcing structures. At the regional level, to exercise its statutory regulatory role in relation to the school sector, DfE regional directors work in nine regions across children’s social care, SEND, schools and area-based programmes. But the regional structure in Regions Group is not coterminous (to give one key example) with NHS integrated care boards in health.

Given this, it is unlikely that public policy will be able to reach an agreed definition of ‘place.’ And perhaps this is not desirable because functions should be performed at different levels of population size and possibly look different in different contexts.

With all this in mind, creating the conditions (at the local and regional levels) that encourage and enable schools make a full contribution at the neighbourhood level, feels even more important – that is where children and families live their lives.

The table below lays out an overview of potential partnerships and their roles at different geographical levels.

Unit of place	Tentative definition	Possible partnerships	Potential for collaborative action
Neighbourhood (for example Plaistow in East London or Didsbury in Manchester)	The place where my child goes to school and our GP and post office are based.	Other schools and education institutions GP neighbourhood health Leisure facilities and sports clubs Youth clubs Community policing Post office Local shops	Developing more localised models and approaches that enable educational coherence; long-lasting family relationships and the co-creation of support for children based on deep understanding of hyper local/ neighbourhood needs and children’s journey through childhood.
Local area (town, city or council area, for example Newham or Manchester)	The place where I get more of my services for example, my hospital, rubbish collection)	Other trusts active in the locality Area based education partnerships NHS trust Clinics, such as child development centres or mental health services Family hubs Local university Council services	Developing operational relationships and solutions, for example school improvement capacity, workforce development, education/ health partnerships to reduce health inequalities.
Region (for example, London, South West, Greater Manchester)	The larger place of which my local area is a part – could be a city or conurbation	Other trusts NHS integrated care board DfE regions (including RISE teams) Combined authorities	Developing strategic relationships to galvanise a more diverse set of partners around solutions to bigger, possibly more systemic regional issues for example leadership development, productivity, wider health issues, youth employment.

Making change happen – Leadership mindsets for effective partnership working

Fostering collaborative action

In *The Dawn of System Leadership* Senge and his colleagues write about the importance of cultivating collective or collaborative leadership, even while our larger cultural contexts remain firmly anchored to the myth of the heroic individual leader.⁶ They write that “undoubtedly we are at the beginning of the beginning in learning how to catalyse and guide systemic change at a scale commensurate with the scale of problems we face, and all of us see but dimly.”

So how do we go about this work?

Here, we set out (tentatively) some core leadership mindsets for realising the partnership dividend. In part two, we will set-out an emerging theory of action for the neighbourhood, local and regional levels.

Leadership mindsets

Realising the partnership dividend requires a leadership mindset that sees creating partnerships as an opportunity to strengthen outcomes and strengthen trust, connection and collective capacity. There are four core elements to the leadership mindset:

Shared purpose and a razor sharp focus on data

As Jennifer Blatz from Strive Together shared with us at last year’s CST Annual Conference, a danger with place-based collective impact approaches is that might be “a lot of collective and not much impact”. A clear shared purpose, aligned to a set of success milestones act as a crucial decision making tool for leaders working together. We need to be able to answer the question: Is this work enabling children in our neighbourhoods to be safe, to be healthy, to develop strong relationships and to achieve well academically? Answering this questions, requires a culture of data use (including human stories and credible quantitative evidence) that drives action towards clear shared outcomes for children.

Mobilising around a problem with personal and professional curiosity, not blame.

It is easy when we don’t understand the day-to-day experiences of our families or the pressures, practices and accountabilities of another professional fall into a culture that blames them for why things are not working. Maintaining a mindset of professional curiosity is much more powerful (and enjoyable!)



⁶ Senge, P, Hamilton, H and Kania, J (2015). [‘The dawn of system leadership’](#), Stanford Social Innovation Review.

Remembering our agency and being creative.

Schools and trusts cannot 'do everything' but as leaders you have significant influencing and convening power. By bringing people together, building trust and orienting to the long-term, we can enable significant change. Collaborative work at all levels is complex and involves many constraints: professional boundaries, geographies, funding and accountability regimes to name just a few. Professor Viviane Robinson reminds us that the process of forming and integrating constraints is a highly creative process.⁷ In the context of this work with families, other school leaders and civic partners, creativity refers to "the production of viable or workable new, or original solutions to complex, novel ill-defined problems."⁸

Learning (together) as we go

We are fortunate in the UK to have a '[What Works Network](#)' which aims to improve the way public sector organisations create, share and use high-quality evidence in decision-making. It supports more effective and efficient services across the public sector at national and local levels. We should engage as deeply as we can with this evidence. Sometimes, however, the evidence is only emergent or not yet established and the solutions need to be co-created, iterated and tested for impact locally. So we need to combine evidence-informed practice, creative iteration, and rapid response and a willingness to adapt when needed.

Getting going

The four elements of the leadership mindset above are, we think, relevant and useful whether you are building partnerships at the neighbourhood, local or regional and system levels.

In part two of this series, we will lay out some core steps and questions to consider when building partnerships. As the place where children and families experience their education, we see the neighbourhood level as the most important place to start.

7 Robinson, V (2023). *Virtuous educational leadership: Doing the right work in the right way*. Corwin.

8 Mumford et al (2014). p. 758.





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