

The civic trust

Place, devolution and the next chapter
for education

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Confederation
of School Trusts

The voice of school trusts



The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for academy trusts. Our members educate more than four million children through the dedicated work of their 600,000 staff.

We believe school trusts offer the best model for improving education because they uniquely unite schools in organisations with a strong, single purpose: education. This encourages the sharing of expertise, ideas, and resources to give pupils a better start in life.

We advocate for trusts by helping politicians, policy makers, and the wider public better understand their power to help children. We support trusts through practical advice, strategic guidance, and consultancy. We connect them with each other, and with expert thinking and research.

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Principles for policy development and public sector reform

This paper does not offer recommendations but rather a set of principles for reform. We believe that the incoming government could take a more radical approach to educational reform, building on good foundations and the evidence that has been established over many years. This could sit alongside a wider approach to public sector reform aiming to promote resilience and collaboration among civic actors in a place.

Public sector reform could be built around the central organising principles of devolution and place:

- Devolution meaning local systems that are built collaboratively, designed to respond to real lives.
- Place defined at the neighbourhood level, local level, and regional or system level.

People's lives are not organised around departmental boundaries. Reform should therefore be organised around places rather than institutions. Instead of separate systems for health, policing, employment, housing and education, the focus becomes the whole ecology of a locality. Greater Manchester's integrated approaches to homelessness and health provide examples of this philosophy.

We believe this approach would enable a coherent, large-scale reform approach across government departments.

Building the resilience of places is linked integrally to the resilience of local institutions and the relationships between and among them. Structural reform should have as its core focus resilience-building, while strengthening the imperative of collaboration and collective leadership in place.

As we have argued in [The partnership dividend: Civic leadership in place](#), for education, this could mean:¹

- **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. HM Chief Inspector of Schools has long talked about a child's experience of place. Aggregate inspection data of public institutions in place alongside place-based demographic and outcome data could provide valuable insights into the challenges of civic leadership in place, and act as a galvanising force for civic leaders.

A subset of principles could be:

¹ Townsend, J and Cruddas L (2026). [The partnership dividend: Civic leadership in place](#). Confederation of School Trusts.



1. A civic ecosystem

Rather than assuming the state alone delivers public services, reform would recognise a civic ecosystem including councils, NHS organisations, schools and trusts, universities, charities, faith organisations, businesses, and community groups. Government's role becomes enabling collaboration and collective action between and among these institutions.

2. Relationships as infrastructure

Unlike traditional reform programmes, which focus on organisational structures, this approach to reform centres on relationships. A principle of reform would therefore see relationships as infrastructure – one that deliberately builds trust between and among institutions, professionals, communities, and civic leaders. Institutional reform therefore rests on building relational capacity, not merely redesigning organisations.

3. Public value rather than narrow efficiency

CST has long called for the concept of public value to be an organising principle of reform rather than the narrower New Public Management concept of efficiency. Success is measured less through output metrics, and more through public value. Public value can be defined as the value that an organisation contributes to society. The important questions become: "Are communities stronger?" "Are inequalities reducing?" "Are institutions trusted?" Efficiency matters, but it serves broader civic purposes.

4. Trust in professionals

As distinct from excessive central prescription and control of public services from Whitehall, an organising principle for reform could be clearer principles, stronger professional standards, and fewer process requirements. Professional judgement should be viewed as an asset rather than a risk requiring control.

5. Democratic accountability through place

Rather than accountability flowing almost entirely upwards to Whitehall, accountability becomes more horizontal and local. Citizens can see and influence decisions affecting their communities through strengthened local democratic institutions.

6. The economy and public services are connected

Public services are not simply consumers of economic growth; they help create it. Health, education, transport, and housing become components of an inclusive growth strategy. This reflects an emphasis that social justice and economic prosperity reinforce one another.

Taken together, we think these principles amount to a different theory of the state

Traditional model	New model
Central government directs	Central government enables
Departments	Places
Targets	Outcomes
Control	Trust
Competition	Collaboration
Services	Systems
Efficiency	Public value
Citizens as consumers	Citizens as members of communities
Public institutions as delivery vehicles	Public institutions as civic institutions

The shift is not merely administrative but constitutional. It moves from what might be called the *institutional state* - a state defined by its departments, agencies and lines of command - to the *relational state*, in which government's primary task is to cultivate the conditions in which institutions, communities and citizens can work together to create public value.

In that sense, a programme of reform would likely be less concerned with redesigning organisations than with renewing the civic fabric of the nation. Public institutions would be understood not simply as mechanisms for delivering services, but as enduring civic assets that generate belonging, trust and democratic legitimacy.

This represents a move from reform as organisational redesign to reform as civic renewal - a philosophy rooted in stewardship and the belief that the strength of a nation depends on the vitality of its local institutions and the relationships between and among them.

School trusts in England stand ready to help deliver this. It is the cumulation of what we believe and what CST and our members have been working towards over many years.

Introduction

England stands on the threshold of a new settlement between place and the state.

Andy Burnham has said his vision is one that “is rooted not in ideology but in place: a system built collaboratively, designed to respond to real lives rather than the games that dominate national politics.”² He goes on to say: “Devolution can enable a new model of public services based on integration and collaboration rather than fragmentation and competition.”

This paper offers some principles for a programme of reform, driven by what CST and our members believe. School trusts, sometimes known as academy trusts, are already putting this ambition into practice, showing how others can adopt similar principles to deliver real benefits.

CST has long championed the building of school trusts as public and civic institutions. We first published [a framework for the development of civic trusts](#) in 2020.³ We have been developing this concept ever since in all our thought leadership. Our members have embraced this concept and many have become important civic leaders in place.

Strong institutions matter because they create the capacity to sustain improvement beyond individual leaders. School trusts represent perhaps the most significant institutional innovation in English education for a generation, spanning different political parties and governments. They have demonstrated that schools working in deep and purposeful collaboration in a single resilient entity can achieve more than schools working alone. They comprise a real example of the power of devolving leadership, responsibility and accountability to those close to communities.

That is not to say that the job is done. Many trusts are already doing this within the current devolved structure, and, with the new devolution agenda, we can build on what some trusts are already doing to get widescale benefit.

We can and must go further and faster.

As the Reach Foundation says, change is “faster, bolder and more sustainable when it is collective.”

² Burnham, A (2026). ‘[Manchesterism: The devolved blueprint rewriting Britain's economic map](#)’, Politics UK.

³ CST (2020), [School trusts as new civic structures: A framework document](#)



Institutions that contribute to place

For much of the past thirty years, educational reform has been organised around institutions. We have debated structures, accountability, governance, and standards, all in the interests of children and young people receiving the very best education. These debates have mattered. They have helped to build stronger schools and, through the emergence of school trusts, stronger institutions capable of sustaining excellence over time. And this has led to ever-higher standards, greater opportunities for children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the transformation of life chances for countless young people.

Yet another question now presents itself. This is not simply, “How do we build better institutions?” but “How do better institutions further contribute to better places?”

This is the question that sits at the heart of the devolution agenda. It is not principally a constitutional question, nor merely an administrative one. It is instead a moral and civic question. It asks where decisions are best made, how public institutions should relate to one another and, ultimately, how communities become places in which people can flourish.

The rise of strategic authorities and elected mayors represents more than just another layer of government. It represents an invitation to think differently about leadership itself. Leadership is no longer exercised only vertically through lines of accountability to Whitehall. Increasingly, it must also be exercised horizontally through relationships, partnerships and shared civic endeavour.

This presents both an opportunity and a challenge for education. If devolution seeks to strengthen places, then education must be an integral part of that project. Schools and trusts are among the most enduring civic institutions within any community. Their contribution must therefore extend beyond educational performance alone to the wider flourishing of the places they serve.

Perhaps this is nowhere better exemplified than the [civic work of Dixons Academies Trust](#). They have taken a local convening and systems change approach to the places in which they have school groups: Bradford, Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds. They say that too often, public sector and VCS organisations work in silos. In order to genuinely tackle educational and social disadvantage, they aim to build deep collaborative place-based partnerships, where organisations come together to pool resources and expertise to support communities. Key to their civic responsibility strategy is facilitating building power in the communities they serve. Through working with Citizens UK and the Brilliant Club, they have supported students and families to have sustained civic impact.

Of course, educating our children is our core business. We must not wake up in five years’ time and realise that more of our children can’t read, because our attention was elsewhere. Every child deserves access to a great education. This is non-negotiable and must remain core focus. Trusts exist to advance education – to run great schools. This is our lode star.

But schools and trusts also contribute to wider civic outcomes.

The next chapter of educational reform is therefore not only about excellence. It is about excellence in service of place.

Devolution as civic renewal

The emerging philosophy of devolution is founded on a simple proposition: that those closest to communities are often best placed to understand both their strengths and their challenges. We know this in the trust sector. The original animating spirit of the trust movement was one of disruption, innovation, and ambition – a spirit that refused to accept that schools in working-class communities could not be centres of excellence. The point of trusts is that decision-making was devolved closer to communities through the establishment of school trusts. Many trusts have used their freedoms and real decision-making powers to innovate to the advantage of schools and communities.

For example, In St Austell, [Cornwall Education Learning Trust](#) (CELT) has partnered with the Bodmin Town Team to increase the institutional capacity needed to revitalise Bodmin's town centre.⁴ Recognising the need for a unified approach, they are exploring the viability of establishing a Community Interest Company (CIC) to develop people and places simultaneously, repurposing vacant units in the town centre for educational and creative purposes.

This is an argument for a different kind of state: one, enabled by a new devolution agenda, that is confident enough to distribute power, trusting local institutions to exercise judgement within a shared national framework.

Central government continues to define national purpose, guarantee equity and steward public investment, while local and regional government working with civic institutions interpret that purpose in ways that respond to the particular character of place, which they know best.

This shift has profound implications for education.

Educational success can no longer be understood as the product of schools acting alone, something the CST has long argued. The Office of the Children's Commissioner has frequently asserted that children's lives do not divide neatly between education, health, housing, transport, employment, and family support. They experience these as a single reality. Public services must therefore learn to respond as a single system.

This does not diminish the importance of schools. On the contrary, it enlarges their significance. Schools should not be perceived as isolated providers of education but integral participants in the civic life of their communities. Schools in trusts are already embodying this.

⁴ Talbot, M (2026), '[How CELT is increasing community capacity through the Bodmin Revival CIC](#)'. Reach Foundation.



From institutions to systems

Strong institutions matter because they create the capacity to sustain improvement beyond individual leaders. School trusts have demonstrated that schools working in deep and purposeful collaboration in a single resilient entity achieve more for children than schools working alone.

The first phase of reform asked institutions to collaborate for educational improvement. This has been emphatically answered, and with widespread benefit. The next phase asks institutions to collaborate for civic flourishing.

This is a different proposition but one that logically follows the first phase of reform. It is not a departure from what trusts have done and are doing – it is the next stage of the evolution.

School improvement remains essential, but it is no longer sufficient. The question is no longer simply whether trusts improve outcomes within their own family of schools. This has been demonstrated. Instead, the question is how they contribute to the strength and resilience of the wider civic ecosystem.

Institutions must therefore become increasingly conscious of the places in which they are rooted.

The civic vocation of school trusts

The language of vocation is important. A trust is not merely a governance structure or an operating model. Neither is it simply an efficient mechanism for school improvement. It is an enduring public institution established for the common good.

Such institutions possess both capability and responsibility.

School trusts educate 62 percent of children in England; they develop professionals; they employ thousands of people; they steward public assets; they shape neighbourhoods; and they build social capital. They influence not only educational outcomes but the character and confidence of communities themselves.

Seen in this way, trusts are anchor institutions. CST has long advocated the role of the trust as an anchor institution, anchoring their schools even more deeply in place and community. We first published the paper [Community anchoring: School trusts as anchor institutions](#) with the Reach Foundation in 2022.⁵

Anchor institutions are distinguished not by size alone but by permanence, commitment and civic responsibility. They cannot relocate in search of advantage. Their success is inseparable from the success of the places they serve.

This understanding transforms how trusts exercise leadership.

Rather than asking only, “How do we improve our schools and achieve the best educational outcomes for children?”, civic trusts also ask, “How do we improve our schools and contribute to strengthening our communities?” This is because children live with their families in the places and communities where the schools they attend are sited. Educational excellence must absolutely remain the defining purpose of the school trust, but it must be pursued within a wider commitment to [human flourishing](#) that has impact beyond the classroom.⁶

5 Townsend J, Vainker E, Cruddas L (2022). [Community anchoring: School trusts as anchor institutions](#). Confederation of School Trusts.

6 CST, National Society for Education & Catholic Education Service (2024). [Flourishing together](#).

Partnership as public leadership

Leadership within devolved systems depends less upon hierarchy and more upon relationships. No single institution possesses either the authority or the expertise to address the complex challenges facing children and families. Poverty, mental health, attendance, inclusion and social mobility all require collective action.

Consequently, leadership increasingly becomes an act of convening and integrating rather than commanding.

Trusts have an important contribution to make because they possess organisational capacity, educational expertise and long-term stability. Many already work intentionally and for real benefit with local authorities, universities, colleges, employers, health services, charities and community organisations around a shared civic purpose. For example, [Windsor Academy Trust](#) has worked with health trusts across the West Midlands to reduce health inequalities. With CST and the NHS Confederation, they recently published [Co-creating healthy futures: School and health framework](#).

This is not collaboration as compliance. It is collaboration as collective leadership. The partnership itself becomes the mechanism through which public value is created.

Cradle to career

One of the most significant contributions trusts can make within devolved systems is to help shape the identity and future economy of place. Education has always prepared young people for participation in society. Increasingly, however, it must also help communities renew themselves.

This requires stronger relationships between education and employment, between schools and employers, between curriculum and local opportunity. The challenge that the [Milburn review](#) identifies of nearly one million young people not in education, employment and training is one that demands our urgent attention. The challenges that the [Independent Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes](#) identifies require a systemic shift in our mental models of schooling.

Young people should be able to see pathways that connect aspiration with opportunity without feeling that success requires leaving the communities that shaped them. This is why the [Reach Foundation](#)'s work on [Cradle to Career](#) is so important. This is a national network of locally-rooted schools and trusts establishing effective place-based models of 'cradle to career' support in their own communities. The many examples of schools and trusts working in this way is documented in [case studies](#).

As Alan Milburn has demonstrated, this is about what happens in the post-16 landscape but it must reach much further back into our schooling system: all the way to early years, the foundation of education and where the trajectory for every child begins: "The system knows, from the moment a child arrives at school, who is most likely to fail. It has the data, and the unambiguous evidence. A study of over 8,000 young people in Bradford found that children who were not school-ready at ages 4 to 5 were nearly three times as likely to be NEET at ages 16 to 17 years old."⁷

Milburn goes on to diagnose a systemic problem with

⁷ Milburn, A (2026), [Young people and work: interim report](#). Department for Work and Pensions.



state architecture: "Responsibility is dispersed across many organisations. But there is no shared accountability and no clear governing philosophy. Confusion reigns between what happens nationally and what is owned locally. Data is not shared. No amount of reform to individual policy areas or institutions alone will fix this. The architecture itself is the problem."

The measure of success therefore needs to become not simply the strength of one's own institution but the strength of the wider system.

Inclusion as a civic responsibility

Perhaps nowhere is civic leadership more visible than in inclusion. A devolved education system cannot flourish if responsibility for vulnerable children is fragmented across institutions.

Every child belongs to all of us.

This requires trusts to work collectively with local authorities, health partners, and community organisations to ensure that attendance improves, children with additional needs receive timely support and families experience coherent rather than fragmented services.

In collaboration with [Ambition Institute](#), CST and other system partners, came together to strengthen the system by sharing real examples, proven strategies, and the enabling conditions that make inclusion possible through the [Inclusion in Practice](#) research initiative. Its many case studies bring this to life. For example, The [Compass Eko Trust](#) (previously the Compass Partnership of Schools) uses a [SEND Parent-Carer Forum to shape inclusive practice](#) and strengthen school-family collaboration across the group of schools.

Inclusion is therefore not simply an educational strategy. It is an expression of civic solidarity.

Towards a new settlement

The future relationship between strategic authorities and school trusts should not be characterised by control. Both possess distinct forms of legitimacy.

Strategic authorities derive legitimacy through democratic mandate and stewardship of place.

Trusts derive legitimacy through educational expertise, institutional capability and public service.

Neither can accomplish alone what society now requires.

The challenge is therefore to create a new settlement in which democratic leadership and institutional leadership reinforce one another through shared purpose.

We look forward to a discussion with the incoming government about the exercise of local democratic accountability and how we create the conditions in which every institution contributes fully to the flourishing of children, families and communities.

Conclusion

The next chapter of educational reform will not be written solely through legislation or governance. It will be written through relationships, and it will be the better for it.

England has spent a generation building stronger schools and stronger trusts. That work continues and remains indispensable. But excellence must now become more explicitly connected to place.

The question before us is no longer whether institutions matter. They do. The question now is what kind of institutions we choose to evolve into and become.

If school trusts understand themselves as civic institutions as well as educational ones, they can become indispensable partners within a devolved England. They can help shape not only better schools but stronger places, deeper belonging and more resilient communities.

This is the [partnership dividend](#). Not simply that institutions work together, but that, in working together, they create possibilities that none could achieve alone.

For ultimately the purpose of education is not only to improve schools. It is centrally concerned with the cultivation of human powers and the collective strength of communities and society. It is about the society we wish to build. And the measure of our success will be found not only in the excellence of our institutions but in the flourishing of the places to which they belong.







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