

# The partnership dividend

Civic leadership in place

James Townsend and Leora Cruddas CBE



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### About the authors

James Townsend is Executive Director of the Reach Foundation.

Leora Cruddas CBE is Chief Executive of the Confederation of School Trusts.



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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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## 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'.



## Part one: 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> Cottam, H (2018). *Radical Help: How we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state*. London: Penguin Random House.

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."

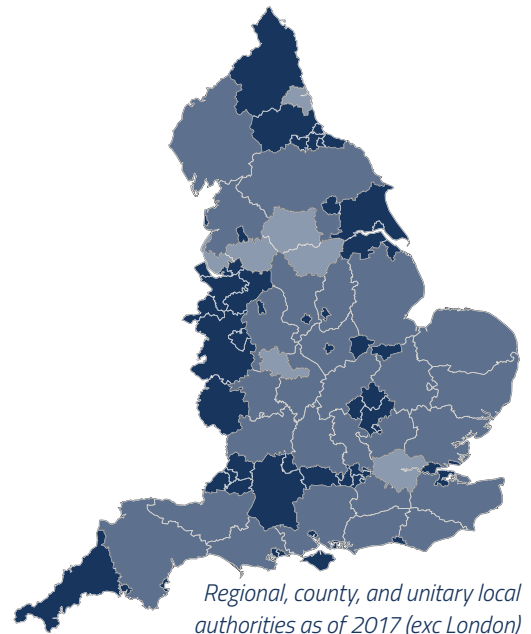
Perhaps most significantly, the government's Ten Year Health Plan also refers to 'neighbourhood' policy, going so far as to describe the 'NHS' as becoming a 'Neighbourhood Health Service'. This focus on the neighbourhood is based on a recognition of the fundamental role of relationships (or 'social capital') 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.*<sup>2</sup>

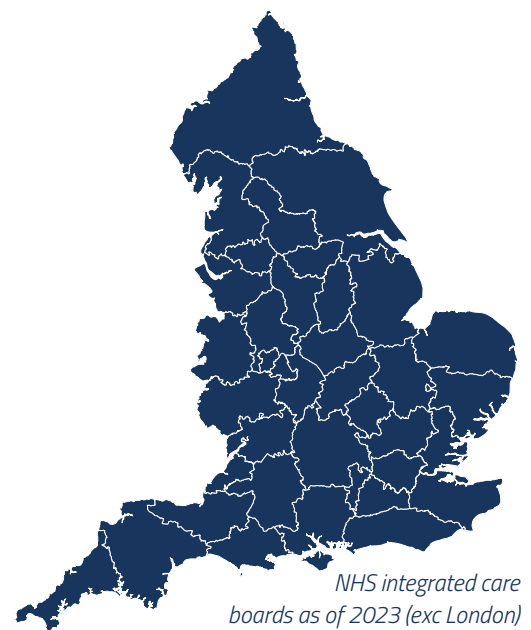
Most people's lives are lived very locally. The majority of primary school children, for instance, go to school less than one mile from home. Ideally, other facilities and services would be equally easy to access. As one mum put it when asked about whether she would attend a new toddler group: "I need 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.*<sup>3</sup>

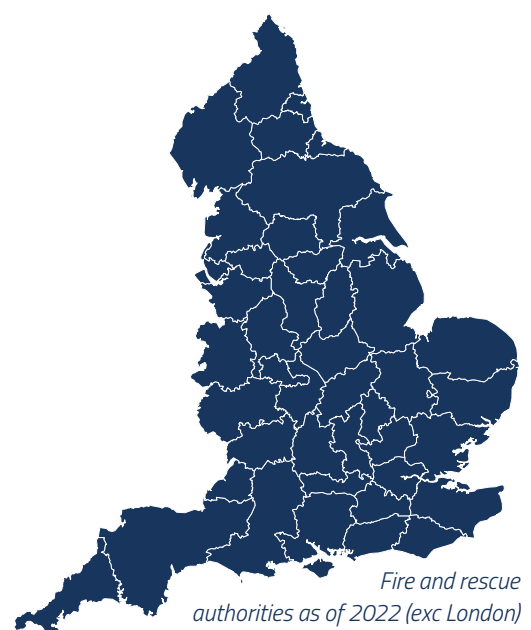
Yet too often, the design of and investment in social infrastructure



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)

<sup>2</sup> Fox, C, Hesselgreaves, H, Cooke S, et al (2025). [Policy priorities to support relational public services](#). Manchester Metropolitan University.

<sup>3</sup> Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2026). [No short cuts: Towards a national strategy for neighbourhood recovery](#)

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."*<sup>4</sup>

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.*<sup>5</sup>

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."

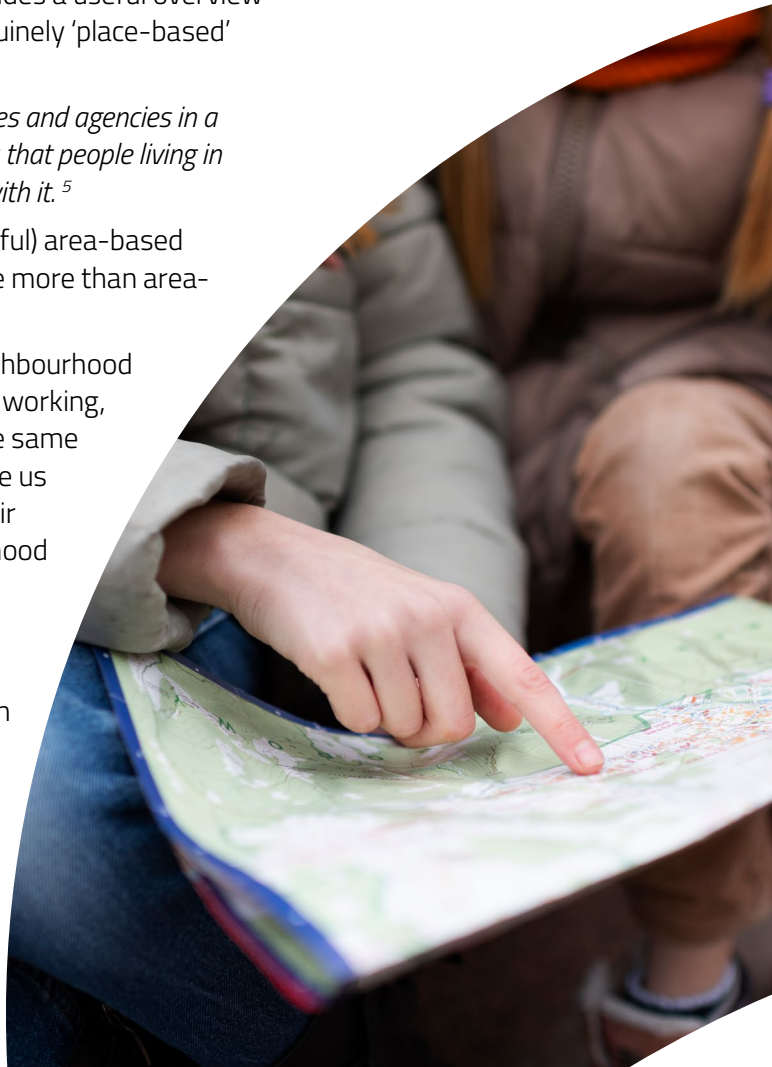
There is a major opportunity for trusts to focus on the neighbourhood level to embrace genuinely place-based, relational ways of working, both with families and with other professionals serving the same families. A fully-formed place-based approach would nudge us to take seriously children's long-term 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."<sup>6</sup> If we are to

<sup>4</sup> NHS Confederation (2025). [Delivering a neighbourhood health service: what the 10 Year Health Plan means for local integration](#).

<sup>5</sup> Baars, S (2026). 'Area, 'space and 'place'.

<sup>6</sup> 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                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Neighbourhood</b><br>(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<br>GP neighbourhood health<br>Leisure facilities and sports clubs<br>Youth clubs<br>Community policing<br>Post office<br>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. |
| <b>Local area</b><br>(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<br>Area based education partnerships<br>NHS trust<br>Clinics, such as child development centres or mental health services<br>Family hubs<br>Local university<br>Council services | Developing operational relationships and solutions, for example school improvement capacity, workforce development, education/ health partnerships to reduce health inequalities.                                                                                          |
| <b>Region</b><br>(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<br>NHS integrated care board<br>DfE regions (including RISE teams)<br>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.<sup>7</sup> 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!)



<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup>

## 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.

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

9 Mumford, MD, Gibson, C, Giorgini, V and Mecca, J (2014). 'Leading for creativity: People, products and systems' in Day, DV (ed). *The Oxford Handbook of Leadership and Organisations*. Oxford University Press..

## Part 2: Gaining the dividend

In part one we argued that we can realise a 'partnership dividend' through an investment in each other, in people, in our place. The dividend is 'paid out' in the increased collective capacity of and for our children, families, and colleagues and in stronger, more resilient communities.

We suggested that when we recognise the huge wealth, strengths and talents in every community and cultivate strong relationships and a range of partnerships, we can create the conditions for all children to be safe and well-supported, to be healthy, to develop strong relationships, and to achieve well academically.

We also tentatively laid out four core leadership mindsets required to realise the partnership dividend:

- **Shared purpose and a razor sharp focus on data:** a recognition that we need to understand all the factors influencing children's ability to thrive and to create shared accountability for making this a reality.
- **Mobilising around a problem with personal and professional curiosity, not blame:** recognising the pressures on families and colleagues and being curious about how we could partner to strengthen the system for all.
- **Remembering our agency and being creative:** Schools and trusts cannot 'do everything' but as leaders we have significant influencing and convening power. By bringing people together, building trust and orienting to the long-term, we can enable significant change.
- **Learning (together) as we go:** Combining evidence-informed practice, creative iteration, and a willingness to play a role in developing new evidence about 'what works' when needed.

And we noted that the partnership dividend can be realised at multiple geographic levels: the neighbourhood (the hyper-local level in which most people actually live their lives); the local (the city or local authority level at which many services and opportunities are organised); the regional (the level through which various branches of national government - for example the Department for Education or the NHS - interact with frontline public servants).

In this second part, we're going to explore in more detail how the partnership dividend can be gained at the neighbourhood, local, and regional levels. We will share examples of powerful work already underway at each level and pose some reflection questions to help consider the implications for trust leaders seeking to increase the collective capacity supporting their children, staff, and communities.



## The neighbourhood level

Schools have a major opportunity to increase collective capacity at the neighbourhood level. They are trusted, visible, universal institutions with long-term relationships with children and families.

Working collectively with other civic actors and, crucially, with other schools serving the same children and families, there are three major opportunities to realise the partnership dividend at the neighbourhood level:

- To increase the coherence of children's progress through education
- To invest in long-lasting relationships with families
- To use school leaders' convening power to re-shape the local system

## Increasing educational coherence

Too often (for understandable reasons) we focus narrowly on one 'phase' of a child's journey, without considering closely enough the experience children had before joining us and where they are going onto next. The investment in curriculum design and pedagogy over the last decade has largely neglected careful reflection around the coherence between phases, contributing to transitions where many young people struggle.

Through working collaboratively with other local nurseries, schools, and colleges, we can make this journey as coherent as possible. If curriculum plans and pedagogical approaches are thoughtfully aligned, with strong relationships between nursery, primary, and secondary teachers, and school and trust leaders, knowledge and skills can gradually build across phases as well as within them and the compounding effect of education can be felt. The benefits of this are particularly significant for children without the resources to 'fill in the gaps' of a fragmented system.

By mapping typical journeys through each local system; establishing ways to understand the progress of all of 'our kids'; and by building relationships between teachers and leaders across phases and institutions, we can identify smoother routes for all of our children.

The Cradle to Career milestones journey tool shared on page 14 is an example of how we might track children's journeys through each local system and galvanise around strengthening the long-term experience. Tracking these milestones for whole cohorts of children in a specific neighbourhood (four or five council wards) rather than just by individual schools allows us to create shared accountability for the success of all children as they move through their local system. It also allows us to identify opportunities to increase coherence and support when needed.

### South Solihull Cluster: Building cross-phase educational coherence

*In South Solihull, a cluster of eleven infant, junior, secondary, and special schools has spent three years rewiring their local system to eliminate the fragmentation that occurs during phase transitions. Through cross-phase subject communities, primary and secondary teachers meet regularly to align curriculum language, knowledge, and skills across phases. In geography, for instance, this curriculum mapping ensures that learning builds progressively from infant classes through to the end of secondary, preventing "academic dip" at transition points. This is reinforced by a half-termly professional development network for teaching assistants, ensuring consistent pedagogical support.*

*To sustain this, the cluster completely redesigned transition pathways, introducing targeted music and sports sessions and a joint summer school for 140 vulnerable*

children. Eight of the schools are now formalizing their relationship and forming the Echelon Education Trust in January 2027. The new trust will build this cross-phase alignment directly into its institutional DNA from inception.

### Cornwall Education Learning Trust: A town-wide strategy for early years transition

*In St Austell, Cornwall Education Learning Trust (CELT) has used its place-based “Cradle to Career” model to pioneer a comprehensive, town-wide strategy for early years transition. Recognizing that educational coherence must begin long before a child enters a reception classroom, the trust has broken down traditional institutional boundaries to construct a unified, frictionless entry into formal education.*

*The cornerstone of this strategy is collaboration between twelve private pre-school settings and seven local primary schools. To drive this work, CELT strategically deployed its Early Years Foundation Stage lead to work cross-phase across the town. This dedicated leadership facilitated the co-production of a single, universally agreed-upon transition and school-readiness plan used by every single pre-school provider in St Austell.*

*Crucially, this town-wide alignment is backed by shared data infrastructure. All primary schools across the town have committed to using the same assessment package to evaluate children’s speech and language on entry. By sharing this data, the partnership has established a robust, community-wide baseline to target early speech and language provision. This systemic approach ensures that every child, regardless of their nursery background, experiences a highly coherent, well-supported transition into formal schooling.*

## Investing in long-term relationships with families

If we thought about family relationships as rigorously as we think about pedagogy and curriculum, our schools (and families’ experience of our schools) could feel very different. In the understandable search for efficiency, our interactions with families are often transactional. Just as we can consciously design for coherence in pedagogy and the curriculum children experience, we can intentionally create opportunities to build and sustain strong relationships with children and families over time and across phases. Schools in the same neighbourhood often work alongside families for twenty years or more: this offers a huge opportunity to develop a meaningful partnership.

Strong, trusting relationships between teachers and parents and carers are especially important for children experiencing disadvantage, but they matter for all children. They are especially important at moments of transition, or when challenges arise. They cannot be built only in times of crisis and schools cannot rely on just one or two leaders who are “good at relationships.” We need to design opportunities to build relationships and all staff need training and support to develop their relational practice. As David Robinson, of the [Relationships Project](#), says: “Relationships should be the first mile, not the extra mile.”

By auditing our current approach to building and sustaining relationships with families across all schools in our neighbourhood; listening deeply to what brings them joy and puts pressure on them; and designing for relationships, we can develop our collective capacity to support our children (and in doing so, reduce

complaints, improve parental engagement, improve attendance and enable children to engage fully with their education).

### Brigshaw Learning Partnership: Relationship-centred practice in place

*Serving a tightly defined geography of ex-mining villages east of Leeds, the Brigshaw Learning Partnership (BLP) utilises its unique geographical footprint – six trust primaries feeding one central high school – to build deep, generational connections with families. BLP has explicitly designed its entire cradle-to-career operating model around relationship-centred practice.*

*This systemic focus is codified through the trust's bespoke RELATE model. Moving beyond reactive, crisis-driven communications, BLP trains all frontline staff, including teaching assistants, admin, and pastoral teams, in deliberate relational communication. Connection begins before a child even starts formal schooling; the Brigshaw Beginnings transition event brings hundreds of new families together, while the early years team conducts intentional home visits for every single child to establish trust from day one.*

*The profound impact of this social infrastructure is best demonstrated by the trust's "Festival of Transition." Running from year 4 through year 7, this proactive framework has completely re-engineered the move to secondary school. By replacing standard data handovers with a comprehensive relational blueprint, BLP has achieved a striking 96% reduction in year 7 autumn suspensions alongside a 2.5 percentage point lift in student attendance.*

### Maritime Academy Trust: Humanising the home-school relationship

*Maritime Academy Trust has chosen to invest in ongoing relationship-centred practice. The trust walks alongside families for up to eight years, with strong relationships acting as a catalyst for long-term school improvement.*

*This longitudinal partnership with families begins before formal schooling even commences. Through the Maritime Strong Foundations programme, the trust hosts parent-infant play groups and specialized baby massage courses at hubs like Bligh Primary. These early years interventions are co-produced with parents, establishing the school as a nurturing, supportive place and seeding vital peer networks when children are still toddlers.*

*As children grow, these bonds are deepened and sustained through the trust's scale-defying annual home visit initiative. Every single autumn, teachers conduct roughly 3,500 proactive home visits across every year group, meeting families on their own terms before the school gates open.*

*This continuous cycle of listening and connection is championed by a dedicated network of community ambassadors across Maritime schools. By matching families with local services and organizing cross-generational partnerships, such as Hook Lane's year-long collaboration with a local care home, these ambassadors bridge the gap between home, school, and the wider neighbourhood, ensuring a profound sense of mutual belonging that lasts throughout a child's entire educational journey.*

## Re-shaping the local system

If we want all children to enjoy lives of choice and opportunity, great schools are necessary but not sufficient. By mapping the assets in our neighbourhood;

gathering a wider set of data about all children in our neighbourhood; and listening deeply to children, families, residents and other professionals and civic actors, we can collectively identify opportunities to begin to re-shape our local systems.

This is slow work that relies on strong relationships, shared purpose and a willingness to share power. But if we can, as Sascha Haselmayer suggests in *The Slow Lane*, “hold the urgency” and take time to co-create new ways of working and being together, we can increase social capital and collective capacity to support children.<sup>1</sup>

Gathering wider data about children’s lives in our neighbourhoods (including public health, housing or employment data) can open up new perspectives and ideas for collaboration. For instance, cross referencing attendance data with information about the percentage of five year olds with obvious signs of tooth decay could open up the need and opportunity for partnership with dental professionals.

Mapping the existing assets in our neighbourhoods open up discussions about how to provide stronger support for all children. Building relationships with youth clubs, employers, health providers, charities, faith groups and specialist professionals can open up new opportunities for children and families. An openness to build relationships, explore opportunities, and be creative around use of space and expertise often leads to a ‘snowball effect’ and an increasing web of support for children and families. Building on the example above, strong relationships with local dentists and health charities, for example, when combined with an understanding of the detrimental effect of poor dental health on attendance, could lead to new approaches to dental health in a particular neighbourhood.

Finally, listening deeply to children, families and other people living and working in our neighbourhoods creates opportunities for collective action and shared agency. When we take time to understand the joys and pressures in people’s lives, we can build a relationship around changing our neighbourhoods together - re-shaping them based on shared goals and shared ownership. In the dental health example, an effort to create sustainably better dental health and attendance will have much greater success if co-created by families, school leaders, and dental professionals and designed to work in their specific neighbourhood.

### Honicknowle Cluster: Transforming a neighbourhood through the Burrington Hub

*In the north-west of Plymouth, the Ted Wragg Trust and Learning Academies Trust and local authority schools have dismantled traditional institutional boundaries to re-shape the local system alongside the Honicknowle community. Spanning five schools within a tight one-mile radius, this cross-trust partnership acts as a unified community anchor. Guided by a shared understanding of cradle-to-career leadership, the cluster’s headteachers sit on each other’s governing boards to bake shared accountability directly into their operating rhythms.*

*The heart of this neighbourhood transformation is the Burrington Community Hub based at All Saints Academy Plymouth. The hub has grown into a vibrant, multi-agency resource centre where the concept of “what’s on” is intentionally shaped around holistic family life.*

*Rather than walking into a clinical public service building, families enter a warm, non-judgemental space where they can access a range of daily support. On any given week, the hub provides a secure anchor for parents navigating complex SEND pathways, offering them a safe sanctuary to share frustrations and celebrate*

<sup>1</sup> Haselmayer S (2023). *The slow lane: Why quick fixes fail and how to achieve real change*

wins. Parents with babies and toddlers gather for bookable antenatal courses and interactive Time to Play sessions designed to build strong early years connections and foster vital peer networks.

Beyond emotional wellbeing and parent support groups, the hub actively addresses local pressures like food security and economic opportunity. Through hands-on youth cooking programs using redistributed food from FareShare, young people learn practical culinary skills while sharing community meals. This is layered with direct access to crucial advice services, hosting dedicated Citizens Advice drop-in clinics and partnership sessions with local housing and health networks. The hub has 'humanised' local support—ensuring that children and families are fully heard, supported, and empowered to thrive.

## United Learning, Bognor Regis: The single-campus community anchor

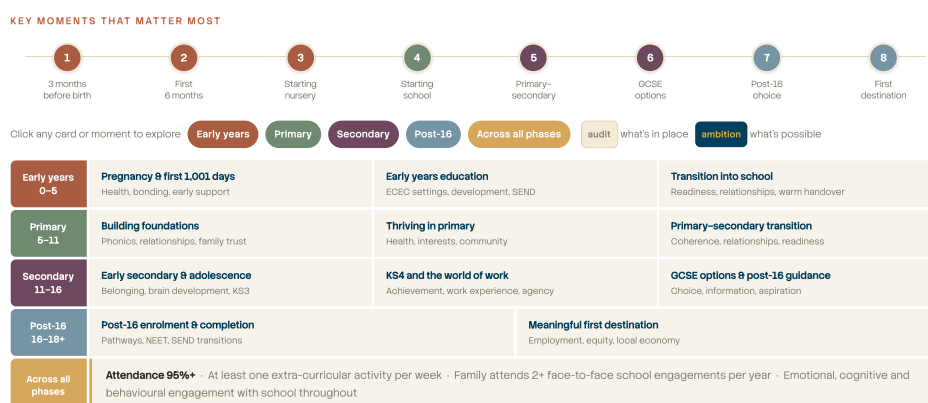
In the coastal town of Bognor Regis, United Learning is making the most of its expansive shared campus, which serves 2,280 children from infancy to 18, to strengthen the entire neighbourhood. At the very heart of the model sits The Phoenix Centre, a community hub designed to serve as a neutral, inclusive space for the wider community. The centre operates alongside a weekly community café that sees an average footfall of over 800 users, and coordinates 17 distinct partner organizations under one roof, providing single point of access for Jobcentre Plus, Citizens Advice, local health teams, and early help services.

To combat cost-of-living pressures and ensure food security, the hub runs a monthly food asset program that supports dozens of families. Crucially, the trust recognizes that a community cannot thrive if its youngest citizens are left behind after 15:30; therefore, the centre provides enriching, safe, and structured activities for young people outside of school hours. United Learning ensures the hub is deeply rooted in local voices, mobilizing neighbourhood assets, parental support groups, and multi-agency networks to create a protective web of care to support all residents to flourish together.

## Cradle to career milestones journey tool

To support school and trust leaders to understand and strengthen the journey babies, children and young people take as they move through their childhood and education in their place, the Reach Foundation has created the [Cradle to Career Journey Tool](#).

The tool provides prompt questions and a set of suggested milestones for leaders working together to enable all children in their neighbourhood to thrive.



## The local level

As important as the neighbourhood level is, the wider systems in which our schools and communities sit do, of course, have a significant impact on children's ability to thrive. In this section, we look at three ways in which trusts can support their schools to lead at the local authority or city level.

### Lead effectively and contribute meaningfully

Firstly, trusts can build partnerships by encouraging their schools to lead effectively and contribute meaningfully in their neighbourhoods. This can, of course, take many forms. But we must recognise that it is not automatic that school leaders have the opportunity for regular connection with schools or other organisations outside their own trust, even when those schools are serving the same families as them.

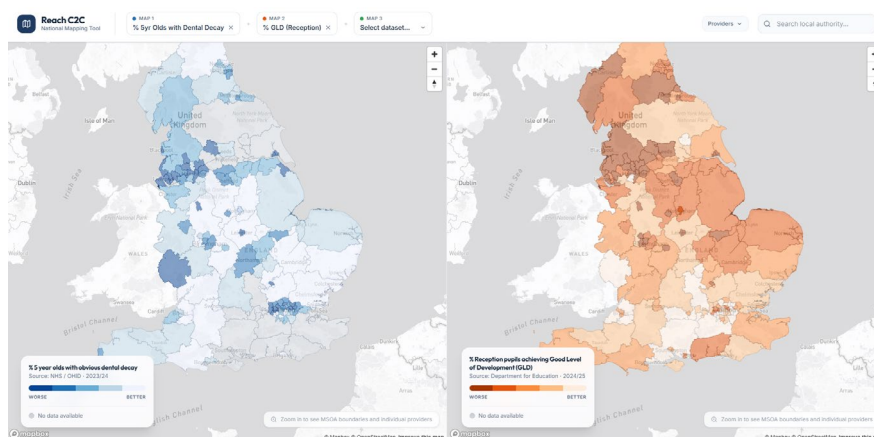
One of the major strengths of trusts is the powerful collaboration that takes place between schools within trusts. This can be complemented by encouraging school leaders to also work closely with local schools (whether they are in the same trust or not) as well as with other local institutions. This could, for instance, be supporting headteachers and other leaders to sit on local education partnership boards or LA committees and to join local head teacher forums.

### Develop a deeper understanding of the local context

Secondly, schools can be supported to develop a deeper understanding of their local context. This could be through trusts providing schools with a range of data about the specific neighbourhoods their schools serve, or providing expertise and capacity to map the assets in local communities. Just as trusts play a crucial role in understanding trends in pupil attendance, engagement and learning, by providing schools with a range of information about the local context and wider factors impacting children's ability to learn, they can similarly open up opportunities and ideas for how schools may deepen their impact.

#### Data mapping tool

To support trusts to understand the context in which their schools are operating, The Reach Foundation commissioned ImpactEd to create a [data and mapping tool](#). The tool pulls together education, social, health and economic data at the local authority level and is designed to help trust leaders more deeply understand their schools' contexts and identify opportunities for partnership.



### Strengthening systems in multiple neighbourhoods

The third aspect is trusts playing a leading role (often in collaboration with other trusts or local authority colleagues) in strengthening systems that affect children and schools in multiple neighbourhoods in the locality.

This could be, for instance, ensuring that there is a strong local pipeline for the development of the teaching and wider children's workforce; in creating or supporting efforts to increase attendance across the local area by providing the detailed information required by schools and convening them to learn from each other; by ensuring there is a clear approach to transition across a local authority; or

by building local partnerships that can benefit multiple schools and neighbourhoods – such as charities or social enterprises operating across the city/ local authority.

### Plymouth's place-based approach

*In Plymouth, the vision of trusts as civic anchors has helped shape a place-based approach to education that moves beyond fragmented school improvement, recognising that many factors affecting children's lives sit beyond the school gate and that education must be understood as part of a wider local system.*

*Plymouth's place-based journey began in 2017 with a clear belief: improving outcomes for children would require the whole city to work together. The journey was not always straightforward. There were false starts and lessons learned along the way, but each step helped build the trust, relationships and shared ambition that define the partnership today.*

*Supported by significant leadership investment from the Ted Wragg Trust, alongside the commitment and leadership of Plymouth's schools, trusts, the local authority, and wider partners, the city has developed a genuinely collaborative approach to school improvement. At its heart is a simple ambition: Plymouth leaders working together, to tackle Plymouth challenges, to improve the lives of Plymouth children.*

*That ambition became the foundation for the city's Place-Based Plan. More than 50 representatives from every phase of education, specialist settings, trusts, the local authority, health, and wider services came together to co-design a shared approach that respected the autonomy of schools, while recognising that many of the barriers facing children can only be addressed collectively. Together they developed six connected priorities focused on identifying vulnerability earlier; strengthening belonging; improving transition; creating communication-friendly environments; expanding alternative support; and reducing the impact of vaping.*

*The impact has been felt across the city. Schools are working together more closely than ever before, sharing expertise, developing common approaches and acting earlier to support children before challenges become entrenched. Plymouth is now increasingly recognised as a leading example of place-based working, with its learning already informing work in Torbay, Dorset, Exmouth and other parts of the country.*

### Palladian Academy Trust: City-wide shared responsibility

*In Bath, Palladian Academy Trust has stepped forward to address the stark pockets of persistent disadvantage that exist in close proximity to significant wealth. Rather than restricting its focus to its own classrooms, the trust has used its civic presence to orchestrate BA2gether – a powerful locality partnership that brings together schools in the BA2 postcode area (bridging Bath and North East Somerset and Wiltshire local authorities.)*

*Palladian's locality leadership is grounded in a candid, evidence-informed diagnosis: standard school improvement is necessary but insufficient when disadvantage is deeply embedded. Recognizing that the primary-to-secondary transition point is where the achievement gap frequently becomes entrenched, Palladian used its convening power to establish a cross-postcode multi-agency transition task group. This network aligns data systems, intervention thresholds, and professional language across multi-academy trusts, maintained schools, the Bath Parent Carer Forum, and public health teams.*

*Crucially, this collaborative mindset extends into systemic local policy through the trust's work with the Wiltshire Learning Alliance. Leading 'from behind' Palladian co-wrote and launched the Wiltshire Disadvantage Charter, actively adapting language and co-designing an ambitious framework to support vulnerable learners across the county.*

*Through a dedicated BA2gether Lead role, the trust is now moving local coordination away from temporary goodwill into a permanent operational backbone. By shifting from a school-centric to a family and community-centric model, Palladian is seeking to ensure that children experience local education not as a series of disconnected institutional hand-offs, but as a single, joined-up pathway.*

## The Centre for the Children's Workforce

*The [Centre for the Children's Workforce](#), incubated by the Reach Foundation, is a new national initiative dedicated to building the workforce children deserve.*

*Every child should be able to rely on coherent systems of care and support. Yet too often, children in England are let down by services that are well-intentioned but ultimately fragmented. The Centre exists to change that, moving from disconnected disciplines and services to an interconnected, interdisciplinary workforce that is more than the sum of its parts.*

*Through one strand of work, the Centre is working with delivery partners – including the Titan Partnership, Ted Wragg Trust, Priory Learning Trust, Castle School Education Trust, Reach Schools, Lighthouse Schools Partnership, Gosforth Group, Orion Education, Eden Academy Trust, The Mead Educational Trust, Tykes Teaching Alliance, and the Brigshaw Learning Partnership – to collaboratively build the skilled, sustainable workforce needed for all children in their wider communities to thrive.*

*Together with the Centre, these delivery partners are establishing a shared structure to find and develop great people across their schools and wider communities. This local system-level approach is anchored by a two-year foundation degree, open to anyone working with babies, children and young people – in schools, youth work, social services, family support, youth justice and beyond. The degree can be studied for without leaving their work or community.*

*By investing heavily in the professional growth of local people wherever they work, these partners exemplify how trusts can act for the benefit of an entire locality rather than focusing narrowly on their own institutions. Instead of leaving individual organisations and institutions to solve acute recruitment and retention shortages in isolation, these trusts are developing pathways that help people progress and connect, building shared capability and coherence across the system.*

*What is more, in providing a space for a range of staff and practitioners to learn side-by-side, these pioneering trusts are helping to establish a shared body of knowledge across roles and specialisms, building cohorts of staff that think and work in interconnected and interdisciplinary ways with the child at the centre.*

## The regional level

As with the neighbourhood and local levels, efforts to strengthen systems of support for children and families at the regional level are best commenced with relationships, understanding of assets and needs, and a clear shared purpose. As we discussed earlier, public services are organised according to different geographies and (understandably) different professionals see their work through those lenses. But to support all children to thrive, we need to work beyond silos to understand how different regional bodies and sectors can integrate to achieve common goals.

This starts by convening education leaders in a region to deepen commitment and understanding of regional challenges and opportunities. In the South West, as well as a regular SW Trust Leaders Network (originally convened by Olympus Academy Trust and supported by the DfE regional team) there are also a range of networks to share learning and maintain focus on shared challenges. Dan Nicholls, CEO of the White Horse Federation, convenes the SW Disadvantage Network; Tamara Dexter, Director of Inclusion at Futura Learning Partnership, convenes the SW Inclusion and SEND Network; and Kate Richardson, Director of Education at Cabot Learning Federation, convenes the SW Attendance Network.

It is built on by bringing together leaders from different sectors to understand the pressures they each face and overlapping challenges, and building relationships needed to create shared purpose and to develop new ways of working.

### Windsor Academy Trust: Systemic cross-sector integration at the regional level

*The partnership between Windsor Academy Trust (WAT) and the NHS demonstrates how strategic, system-level collaboration can bridge public sector boundaries to advance health and educational equity across an entire region. Initiated by WAT's Chief Executive Officer Dawn Haywood and local NHS trust chief executives, this regional partnership aligns health and education systems around three clearly defined core strategic pillars: preventing health issues, establishing community health provisions on school sites, and developing the future NHS workforce.*

*Rather than relying on transactional, isolated initiatives, the trust has built structural relationships with multiple regional bodies, including Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust, Midlands Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, and the Stoke and North Staffordshire Integrated Care Board. The practical impact of this system-level wiring operates at scale across several municipal hubs:*

- *Whole-school mental health and careers frameworks: In Stoke and North Staffordshire, WAT combines forces with the NHS Mental Health Support Team to embed preventative clinical workers into everyday school life, while co-producing an early-inspiration careers pilot explicitly informed by pupil voice.*
- *Hyper-local community health provision: In Blakenall, one of the region's most disadvantaged communities, trust primary schools have transitioned into visible neighbourhood health hubs, hosting pop-up immunisation clinics, parenting support networks, and community-wide healthy eating programmes.*
- *The future workforce pipeline: At Windsor Olympus Academy, a multi-agency partnership with local hospitals has led to hands-on ward tours, specialist genetics initiatives, and high-visibility career fairs aimed at diversifying the local healthcare talent pool.*

Finally, partnership could develop through mapping challenges that impact

the future of a region and playing a key role in developing solutions. Numerous South West trust leaders, for instance, were involved in the SW social mobility commission's Tech Frontier work, exploring how supporting more young people into crucial tech roles could both strengthen a vital industry and increase social mobility across the region.

In all of the examples above at both the local and the regional levels, the 'rubber hits the road' at the neighbourhood level – where children have the opportunity (or not) for a great education, to pursue healthy lifestyles, or access treatment easily when needed, or to access careers opportunities or work experience.

Yet, making the neighbourhood opportunity a reality also requires relationships, shared understanding of assets and needs, and shared purpose at the local and regional levels.

Trust leaders are well placed to contribute to building this shared purpose.



## An invitation and a call to action

In [\*Community anchoring: School trusts as anchor institutions\*](#) we said that this work is both an invitation and a call to action.<sup>2</sup> As school trusts emerge as civic structures, we see an opportunity for them to be anchor institutions in their communities by making a strategic contribution to the greater social good and prioritise support for those experiencing disadvantage. For us, this is a social justice issue.

In *Community anchoring*, we addressed, directly, the issue of an external focus as potentially detracting from the core business of advancing education. We believe this is worth re-stating. We are explicitly not making the case that schools should be all things or that high educational standards can be compromised by a wider focus. The focus on the core business of schools as advancing education is essential and the first task of leaders is to ensure the quality of education.

But if we are truly going to address the multiple impacts of disadvantage and narrow or eliminate the disadvantage gap, then we believe trust leaders must work with others to advance education as a wider common good. Civic trusts acting as anchor institutions in their communities create the conditions for purposeful collaboration with other schools and with civic organisations, with a particular focus on supporting children and families experiencing disadvantage.

The need for this kind of leadership has never been greater. The 'disadvantage gap' between children experiencing disadvantage and their wealthier peers is the largest it has been in a decade at both KS2 and KS4. So, we believe that a new kind of leadership and a new kind of institutional focus is needed – school trusts must consciously adopt an anchor mindset if we are to address the multiple challenges we face in our communities, in our nation as a whole and globally.

We want to return to our opening hypothesis: 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. This is a new opportunity to lead – to make change in the places where people live. Leadership in place is our best bet and last frontier.

## Further reading

- The Kings Fund, [\*Place-based partnerships: challenges and opportunities\*](#)
- The Kings Fund, [‘The government wants a ‘neighbourhood health service’. The first step is to agree what that means.’](#)
- Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, [Mapping the Landscape of Place-Based Initiatives in England, 2019-2025](#)

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<sup>2</sup> Townsend J, Vainker E, Cruddas L (2022). [\*Community anchoring: School trusts as anchor institutions\*](#). CST.





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