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Forging Local Coherence: LocalEd project evaluation report

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

The LocalED project was funded by the Association of Education Committees Trust (AECT) and ran from April 2022 to November 2024.[1] It was designed to test new locality models for the English school system led by local authorities, combined authorities and school led partnerships. Each of the nine localities involved focussed on one of three 'pilot' areas:

i. **Improving outcomes for vulnerable children** – Coventry Local Authority, Rochdale Local Authority, Wakefield Local Authority, Wiltshire County Council

ii. **Working as a Combined Authority** – North of Tyne Combined Authority

iii. **Strengthening professional accountability** – Ealing Learning Partnership, Learn Sheffield, Milton Keynes Education Partnership, Schools Alliance for Excellence (Surrey).

The overarching question for the evaluation was: **What are we learning about leading successful locality working?** We focus on the synthesis of findings relating to this overarching question here, with detailed findings on each pilot area available in the main report.

Our starting point is that locality leadership must always be adapted to the context in which it operates. **There was no 'one best way' to lead across a locality** – not least because of differences in the positions leaders held and the work they did: some fulfilled statutory functions and could assume a degree of positional authority, others relied on volunteers and lateral, network leadership.

Local leaders worked to **forge coherence** in terms of how different partners worked together to improve place-based outcomes. Throughout the project we observed leaders

> *The overarching question for the evaluation was: What are we learning about leading successful locality working?*

working to forge local coherence in the face of fragmentation and complexity:

- in Pilot 1 this was centred on efforts by the four Local Authorities (LAs) to develop integrated working in support of vulnerable children

- in Pilot 2 it was about the new Combined Authority bringing leaders from three LAs as well as wider partners together to strengthen collaboration in support of school improvement

- in Pilot 3 the four school-led partnerships were seen as the local 'glue' which held diverse schools and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) together.

Coherence was never 'done', so required continuous attention and effort. It was not about tight standardisation or straightjackets. Rather, it was about developing:

- **collective moral purpose**
- **a common cause**
- **integrated ways of working**.

Forging coherence in these areas was complex adaptive work which required sophisticated and overlapping skills, qualities and approaches, as shown in Figure 1, overleaf.

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[1] See the project website https://localed2025.org.uk/ for details.
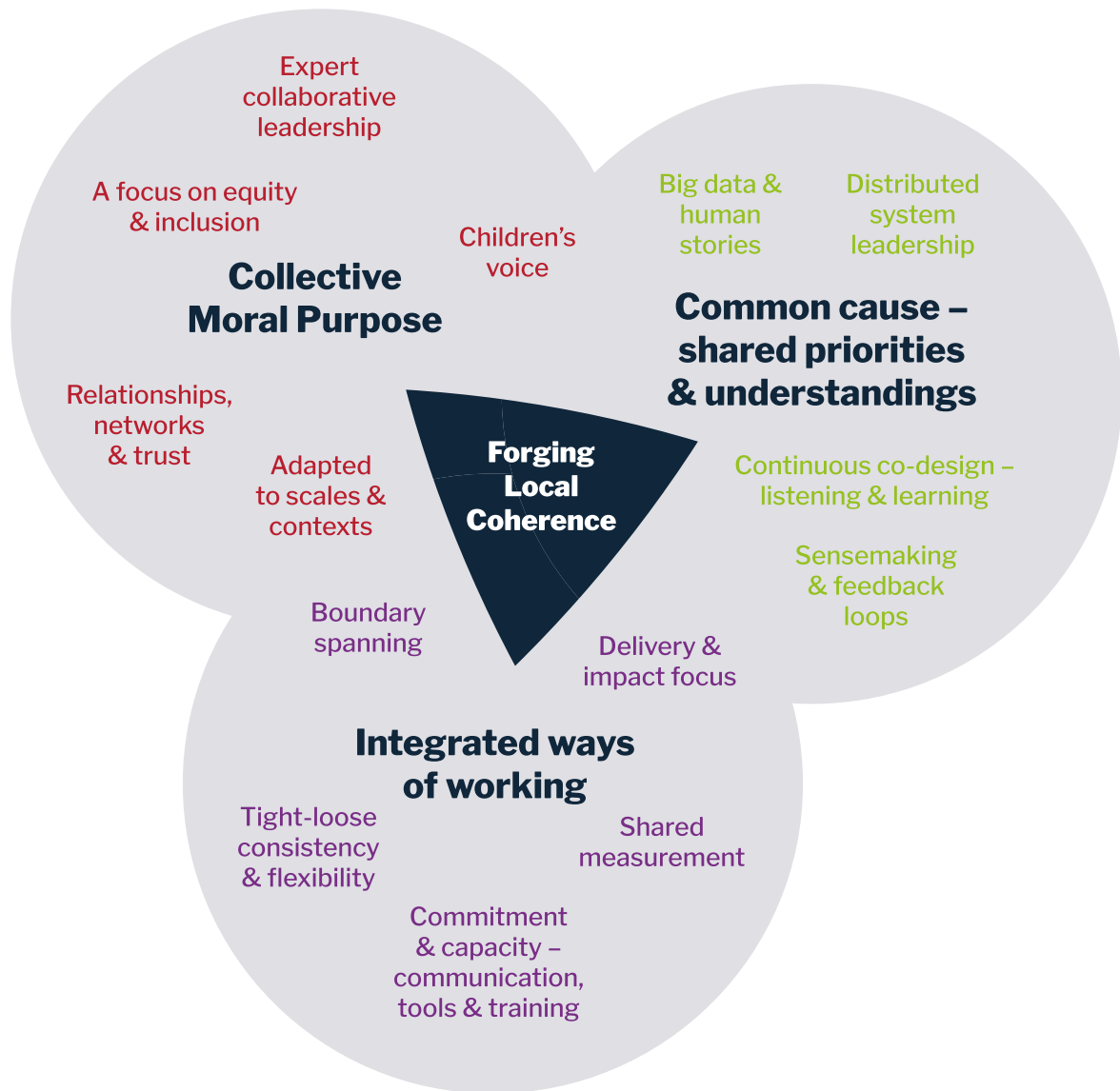
Figure 1: Forging Local Coherence

The diagram shows three overlapping circles converging on a central dark triangle labelled "Forging Local Coherence".

Collective Moral Purpose
- Expert collaborative leadership
- A focus on equity & inclusion
- Children's voice
- Relationships, networks & trust
- Adapted to scales & contexts

Common cause – shared priorities & understandings
- Big data & human stories
- Distributed system leadership
- Continuous co-design – listening & learning
- Sensemaking & feedback loops

Integrated ways of working
- Boundary spanning
- Delivery & impact focus
- Tight-loose consistency & flexibility
- Shared measurement
- Commitment & capacity – communication, tools & training

Forging Local Coherence

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Local leaders worked to forge coherence in terms of how different partners worked together to improve place-based outcomes.

Collective moral purpose:

Over the past three decades, the education system in England has been subject to various market incentives which encourage competition and local status hierarchies, for example with more and less 'popular' schools. Since 2010 the rollback of LAs and expansion of MATs has driven further system fragmentation, meaning that geographically 'local' identities and arrangements have begun to dissolve. Reducing pupil numbers, tight budgets, recruitment challenges and the sheer pressure of leading schools post-Covid all serves to make local collaboration challenging.

Fostering **collective moral purpose** across a locality in these contexts required:

- **Expert collaborative leadership**: The individuals and teams leading the locality work were seen as credible, expert and trusted role models. Their leadership was key in shaping the other elements outlined here.

- **A focus on equity and inclusion**: Ensuring that vulnerable learners were prioritised and supported was central to Pilot 1 but was a focus in all nine localities, helping to strengthen shared moral purpose.

- **Adapted to scales and contexts**: The locality leads were expert at scale-jumping – i.e. zooming in and out to consider how local, regional and national contexts interact to impact on children, families and the services that support them. They had a deep knowledge of their locality and strong relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, which allowed them to understand different perspectives and to facilitate shared dialogue.

- **Children's voice**: Most projects were designed to strengthen children's and/ or parent/carers' voices, which helped to generate collective moral purpose.

- **Relationships, networks and trust**: The locality leads not only had strong relationships themselves, they were also skilled at fostering these across their localities through their work to convene and facilitate collaborative events, projects and networks. This was important for building trust and overcoming professional isolation.

This locality (still) matters and 'we' have a collective responsibility to ensure that all children here succeed.

Figure 2: Collective Moral Purpose

A shared priority (or priorities) that reflects a well-developed understanding of local challenges and the issues that underpin them, which galvanises collective action.

Big data & human stories

Distributed system leadership

Common cause – shared priorities & understandings

Continuous co-design – listening & learning

Sensemaking & feedback loops

Forging Local Coherence
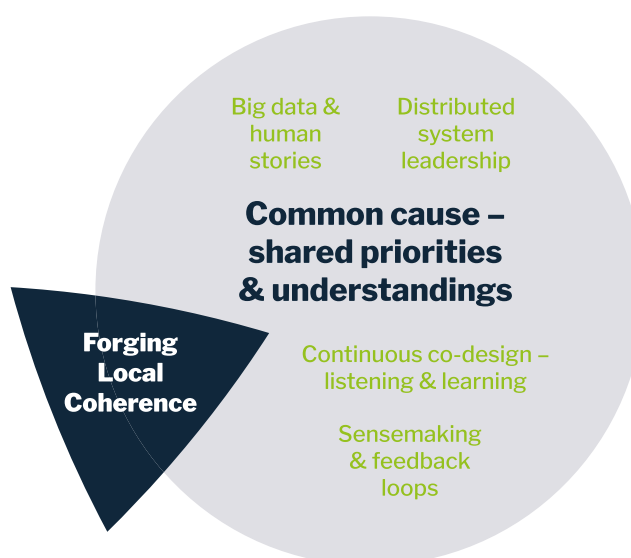
Figure 3: Common cause – shared priorities and understandings

## Common cause – shared priorities and understandings:

School attendance was one example of a shared priority which galvanised collective action in the Pilot 1 localities. The national focus on attendance coupled with the research showing how absence impacts negatively on learning meant that schools were always likely to prioritise this issue. What made it a 'common cause' was how local leaders engaged colleagues from different sectors (e.g. health, social work) to see why and how they should contribute to improving school attendance.

Shaping a **common cause** in this way required:

- **Big data and human stories**: All four LAs in Pilot 1 started their work to identify vulnerable children by analysing 'big data', to see which groups were falling between cracks. Over time, all four came to complement this approach with a 'granular' case study focus on individual children, using these 'human stories' to hold up a mirror to where services were not meeting need and thereby incentivise collective action.

- **Continuous co-design – listening and learning**: The locality leaders were adept

at bringing diverse stakeholders together to shape and agree new ways of working. Critically, these co-design sessions did not only occur at the start of a new project or initiative – they were continued to support ongoing sensemaking and iterative improvement.

- **Sensemaking and feedback loops**: Making progress required individual and collective learning, with key leaders coming together to reflect on feedback, data and experience. The projects used various governance boards and working groups to structure this sensemaking.

- **Distributed system leadership**: Locality working became most powerful where multiple leaders took ownership of the 'common cause' – recognising they had a role to play in influencing their peers and taking collective action. This ethos was particularly apparent in the four 'school-led' partnerships (Pilot 3), where membership was seen as *"buying into a partnership not purchasing a service."* In Pilot 2 the small Combined Authority team relied on leaders in the three LAs and middle leaders in schools to unlock 'blockages' and implement change.

Professionals from different organisations, areas or disciplines collaborate – adopting shared language, systems, processes and/or tools – supporting efficiency and effectiveness.
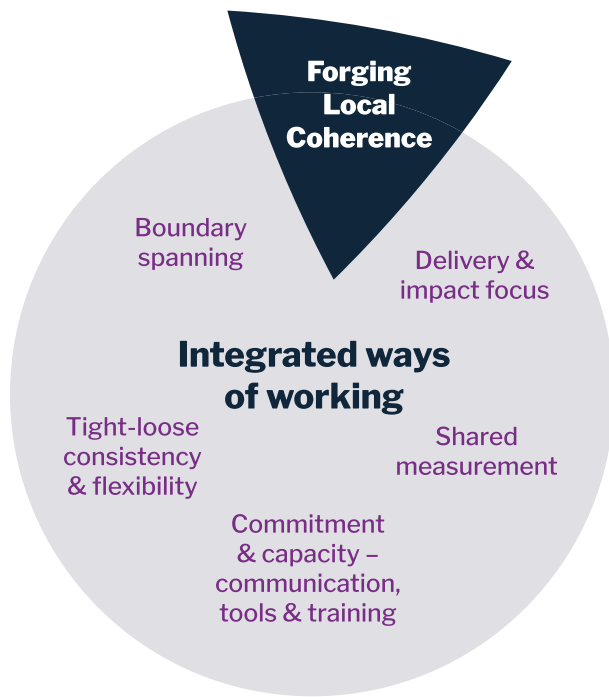
Figure 4: Integrated ways of working

Integrated ways of working:

Integrated working was key to ensuring that professionals from different organisations and disciplines worked together to meet the needs of all children across a locality. Coherence was strengthened where this work involved developing shared language, systems, processes and/or tools, all of which provided a platform for richer and deeper collaboration across organisational and professional boundaries. In the process, this work served to build trust and strengthen collective moral purpose. Purposeful collaboration around a 'common cause' enhanced efficiency and effectiveness, for example: by supporting vulnerable children and thereby avoiding costly remedial work (Pilot 1); by enabling economies of scale (Pilot 2), and by strengthening school self-evaluation and peer review and support (Pilot 3).

Developing **integrated ways of working** involved:

- **Tight-loose – consistency and flexibility**: Getting the balance right between consistency and flexibility was a subtle but hugely important feature of successful integrated working. Balancing tight and loose was a particular feature of the projects – such as school reports in Pilot 3 – which required significant innovation and where wider political change required agility.

- **Shared measurement**: By defining shared ways of measuring the issues that diverse teams were working to address, there was increased scope for collective learning on progress and barriers to success.

- **Boundary spanning**: Time and again we heard how 'the locality' was not one thing, but involved multiple different communities, geographies, contexts, organisations, structures, silos and scales. These boundaries – sometimes real, sometimes attitudinal – were commonly at the heart of local tensions and challenges. Boundary spanners – well-connected individuals who bridged organisational silos – brought together diverse perspectives on complex issues and helped to move knowledge and expertise around.

- **Commitment and capacity – communication, tools and training**: Scaling up approaches required careful attention to professional learning and support across the localities. This generally involved codifying and translating the learning into systems, processes and tools – and sharing this via formal training and informal learning networks. While the evaluation included positive examples, longer-term impact will depend on whether this can be achieved successfully.
- **Delivery and impact focus**: Local leaders were able to keep stakeholders on board by articulating how progress was being made and how impact would be achieved, while still allowing for agency and ownership. In addition, delivery and impact required strong project and programme management to ensure change on the ground

Conclusion:

All nine localities have made significant progress in relation to their chosen 'common cause', even if that change has not always developed in the ways that were originally anticipated. We assess the sustainability and impact of the different initiatives in some detail in sections 2.2–2.4. The fact that all nine localities have remained engaged in the project despite receiving no funding to participate is testament to the commitment of the local leaders and the strength of the LocalEd model, in particular the skills and expertise of the Advisory Team (Isos Partnership with Dame Christine Gilbert) who provided advice and support and facilitated the Communities of Practice.

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The fact that all nine localities have remained engaged in the project … is testament to the commitment of the local leaders and the strength of the LocalEd model.

We argue that local leaders across England – and, potentially, more widely – can learn from the work outlined here and that it offers some clear implications for national and local policy. These implications include the overarching message that local coherence is critical for successful and inclusive educational systems, and that that coherence can be strengthened through relatively low-cost forms of support and encouragement, as demonstrated by the LocalEd model. Equally, there are many more specific implications embedded in this report, such as:

- Where local leaders take time to focus on granular 'human stories' of individual children, and to understand what these examples tell them about fault-lines in their wider systems and support structures for vulnerable children, this can support transformative change.
- Where a Combined Authority works in collaboration with LAs, trusts, schools and wider partners to identify and address gaps in provision and to connect up professionals across boundaries, this can generate economies of scale and stimulate new ways of working.
- Where local school partnerships take collective ownership of professional accountability, taking time to think through where and how pupil and parental voice can be strengthened or how 'quality' education can best be developed, this can help to overcome some of the perverse outcomes that arise from hierarchical accountability systems.

1. Background to the project and evaluation

1.1 Report outline

This report draws together findings from an evaluation of the LocalEd/Educating for the future project. The independent evaluation was commissioned by the Association of Education Committees Trust (AECT) and was undertaken by Professor Toby Greany and Dr Susan Cousin from the University of Nottingham. It focused on drawing out evidence and learning from across the nine project localities – clustered into three pilot areas – in relation to the leadership of successful locality working. An interim evaluation report, published in autumn 2023, captured findings from the first year of the project.[2]

This section briefly outlines the LocalED project and the evaluation approach, including four areas (shared commitment to the locality; leadership and governance; clarity of focus and approach; and sustainability and impact) identified from the literature as key for successful locality working. These areas provide the structure for the evaluation findings in subsequent sections. Following this, Section 2 provides an overview of each locality and its LocalEd projects together with key findings in the four areas. It starts by commenting briefly on the overall project design and approach before focussing on the three pilots. Section 3 draws out a synthesis of what the project has learned about leading across localities, while the Conclusion highlights some key implications.

1.2 About the LocalEd/Educating for the Future project

The LocalED/Educating for the Future project was designed to test new locality models for the English school system led by local authorities, combined authorities and school led partnerships. The project ran from April 2022 to November 2024.[3]

The AEC Trust funded the project, with oversight by the Project Director – Jonathan Crossley-Holland. His role has included setting up the project, engaging in the various workshops and events, managing relationships with stakeholders, and publicising the work of the pilots. A project Steering Group, including representatives from a range of key stakeholder organisations, guided the work. Isos Partnership together with Dame Christine Gilbert (referred to in this report as the Advisory Team) was commissioned by AECT to provide hands on advice and support to the nine localities involved in the pilot. We describe their approach in Section 2.1. When we refer to the 'AECT team' in this report we mean the Project Director and the Advisory Team together.

At the outset of the project, the infographic below (Figure 5) was developed by the AECT team to capture the key reasons for focussing on locality working.

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2   Greany, T., and Cousin, S., (2023) *Educating for the future: developing new locality models for English schools – Year 1 (2022–2023) evaluation report.* London: AECT. Available at: https://localed2025.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/LocalED-Educating-for-the-future-year-1-evaluation-report-FINAL.pdf

3   See the project website https://localed2025.org.uk/ for details.

Figure 5: The key reasons for focussing on locality working

Early in 2022, an open call for applications led to nine localities applying and being selected to undertake focussed work in one of the following pilot areas:

- **Pilot 1 – Vulnerable Children.** This pilot tested approaches to fostering a sense of collective responsibility, on the part of schools, trusts and other agencies, for the progress and outcomes of vulnerable young people.

  Localities: Coventry Local Authority, Rochdale Local Authority, Wakefield Local Authority, Wiltshire County Council

- **Pilot 2 – Combined Authority.** This pilot tested the potential benefits of a school improvement arrangement that works across a combined authority.

  Locality: North of Tyne Combined Authority, which was closed and replaced with the larger North-East Combined Authority in May 2024

- **Pilot 3 – Professional Accountability.** Local areas piloted approaches to accountability that are rigorous but less 'high stakes' than the current model, including through strengthened accountability to parents and students.

  Localities: Ealing Learning Partnership, Learn Sheffield, Milton Keynes Education Partnership, Schools Alliance for Excellence (Surrey)

1.3 About the evaluation

The core question this evaluation sought to address was: 'What are we learning about leading successful locality working?'

The evaluation was designed using an 'improvement science' approach.[4] Improvement science recognises that organisations and localities are complex and so assumes that teachers, schools and other stakeholders must be individually and collectively engaged in a continual process of learning how to improve, in the process developing 'practice-based evidence'. This learning is structured in cycles of improvement, designed to develop, test, review and refine interventions aimed at addressing specific problems. Improvement science emphasises the importance of peer networks and is focused on strengthening the professionalism of teachers and leaders. It involves practitioners engaging with researchers to enhance the practical work of education, using common measures, inquiry methods, and communication mechanisms to anchor collective problem solving. This description clearly aligns with the LocalEd project, in which the nine localities collaborated in networks to undertake cycles of improvement, supported by the Advisory Team. As evaluators we sought to complement

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In total we undertook: 106 interviews, 24 observations, seven locality workshops, and a survey.

this approach by providing independent and objective feedback on progress and learning, including by offering formative as well as summative insights to the project.

During the initial phase of the evaluation we completed a literature review of international and national evidence on locality working and place-based change.[5] This informed the development of an evaluation framework (Box 1 – overleaf) which we used to structure the collection and analysis of data. Our overall evaluation approach, incorporating this framework, is shown in Box 2.

At the end of the first year we synthesised the evidence collected to produce nine 'locality baselines' – or preliminary case studies. Building on these, in summer 2024 we synthesised the evidence from year 2 to produce nine detailed locality case studies. The baselines and case studies were sent to the local project leads to check for accuracy. This report reflects a cross-case analysis of the nine case studies. It focusses mainly on the data collected in year 2 of the project (2023–24), given that the year 1 findings were outlined in the interim report, but we draw out overarching findings and conclusions from across the entire project. Table 1, on page 13, describes the evidence collected throughout the project drawn on for this report. It shows that we undertook: 106 interviews, 24 observations, seven locality workshops (with ~ 50 participants), and a survey (n=202).

4 Peurach, D. J., Russell, J. L., Cohen-Vogel, L., & Penuel, W. R. (Eds.) (2022). *Handbook on improvement-focused educational research*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

5 Cousin, S. and Greany, T. (2022) *Developing a new Locality Model for English Schools: Literature Review Update*. Nottingham

Box 1: Locality working evaluation criteria

1. A shared commitment to the locality

- *To what extent do key stakeholders have a shared understanding of what is meant by 'the locality'? Does this definition align with the pilot area (e.g. LA or partnership boundaries)?*

- *To what extent do key stakeholders feel that they identify with/belong to this locality?*

- *To what extent do key stakeholders feel responsible for the success of all children and young people in this locality, in particular the most disadvantaged?*

- *To what extent do key stakeholders perceive a culture of trust and reciprocity across the locality?*

2. Leadership and governance of the partnership

- *To what extent do all key stakeholders across the locality, including children, young people and their families, have a voice in shaping the partnership's priorities and work?*

- *Does the partnership and the work being undertaken have a political mandate?*

- *Is there a governance mechanism(s) (e.g. forum, board) to enable collective decision-making and shared accountability? Is this specific to the project, or broader? Is it seen by local stakeholders to involve appropriate partners with sufficient authority to leverage the changes required?*

- *Who is involved in leading the partnership and in what ways? Is this leadership seen by key stakeholders as credible and appropriately skilled?*

- *Are there clear processes for involving relevant stakeholders in planning and delivering the work?*

3. Clarity of partnership focus and approach

- *Is there a clear focus/need which the locality pilot is seeking to address? How significant is this issue – does it require incremental or more disruptive change? Is this a need that local stakeholders (really) care about? Is it supported by data and evidence? Does it include a clear focus on equity?*

- *To what extent have local partners been engaged in getting 'under the skin' of the issues – for example to consider local context and history, organisational silos/linkages, enablers/ barriers to success, underlying assumptions and/or issues beyond the school gates?*

- *Is there a shared understanding of how this issue connects to other priorities and areas of work?*

- *Is there an agreed plan for addressing the issue, with clarity on roles and responsibilities and a shared understanding of what success will look like (including interim success measures)?*

4. Sustainability and impact

- *Are the resources (including time etc) required to undertake the agreed work sufficient?*

- *Has there been sufficient focus on developing staff skills and capacity to address the issue?*

- *How far have shared definitions/thresholds/tools and/or ways of working been developed and embedded across local organisations, to enable shared learning and collaboration?*

- *How (well) are stakeholders kept informed and communications managed to ensure that the work is well understood and that issues are raised in a timely way?*

- *How is progress evaluated and how are findings shared to support learning and improvement? How do feedback loops operate to identify and overcome barriers?*

- *How (successfully) are the partners held accountable for progress – individually and collectively?*

- *Is there evidence of impact from the project across the locality, in relation to proxy indicators (e.g. enhanced skills/behaviours of staff/organisations etc) and/or impact (e.g. improved outcomes)?*

Box 2: The evaluation approach

	[Locality Name]	
- *How does this locality assess its own progress/impact?* - *Any changes during project period?* - *How: Use locality-developed (and assessed) KPIs* - *Sources: Locality action plans and reports to Advisory Team*		- *How does this locality compare with criteria for locality working drawn from the evidence base?* - *Any changes during project period?* - *How: Compare with criteria from literature – i) shared commitment ii) leadership & governance, iii) clarity of focus & approach, iv) sustainability & impact* - *Sources: Surveys, evaluation workshops, interviews, observations, documentary analysis*
Overall: ***What are we learning about leading successful locality working?*** *Sources: Nine locality case studies + cross case analysis*		

Table 1: Sources of data for the evaluation

	Year 1 (2022–23)	Year 2 (2023–24)	Total
Interviews with locality pilot leads	Summer 2022 x 9 Summer 2023 x 9	Summer 2024 x 9	27 interviews
Interviews with Advisory Team pilot leads	Summer 2023 x 3	Summer/autumn 2024 x 4	7 interviews
Interviews with key stakeholders in each locality		Spring 2024: Pilot 1 = 28; Pilot 2 = 9; Pilot 3 = 35	72 interviews
Evaluation workshops with stakeholders in each locality	Autumn 2022 x 7		7 workshops (~50 participants)
Survey	Winter 2022/23		202 responses
Observations of Advisory Team-run workshops	8 workshops	8 workshops	16 workshops observed
Observations of events and activities	4 observations	4 observations	8 observations
Analysis of documentary evidence	Locality plans and reports, Ofsted reports, presentations and websites etc.		

The localities and teams involved in the pilots were all operating in a context of continual change. These changes were partly in response to national and local policy and funding changes, including reforms which, since 2010, have restructured LAs' relationships with schools, reduced their funding and revised their duties and responsibilities. Responses to these changes have varied, often reflecting local contextual features and historical relationships.

> **"**
> *The localities and teams involved in the pilots were all operating in a context of continual change.*

The Covid-19 pandemic further impacted on these issues, leading to increases in the need for services to support vulnerable children. Furthermore, as we outline below, the nine localities differ in significant ways: for example, four were led by Local Authorities (LAs), four by 'school-led' partnerships and one by a Combined Authority. These differences have affected the starting points and progress of the different initiatives across the nine localities. In this report we draw out common themes and findings but acknowledge that this risks obscuring important nuances within as well as between the localities.

Evaluating an ambitious, large scale and complex project such as LocalEd is challenging, and we acknowledge strengths as well as limitations in our approach. Given our commitment to an improvement science approach, we have worked

with the AECT team and project steering group throughout to shape an approach that could add value, by focussing on the overarching question (i.e. what are we learning about leading successful locality working?) We are confident that by combining the observations, workshops, survey and interviews – including repeated interviews with the locality leads and Advisory Team over the project period – we have developed a rich and rounded picture of each locality and the progress that has been made. The locality working evaluation criteria (Box 1) have given us a clear conceptual framework and basis for comparing the different projects. That said, we do not claim to have standardised ways of measuring change over time, for example in terms of 'shared commitment to the locality'. Similarly, we do not claim to have robust evidence of impact from every individual project. At the start of the initiative we planned to use national performance data to track change and impact within and across the nine localities; however, it quickly became apparent that this would not be appropriate given the diversity of the projects and localities involved. Instead, the Advisory Team worked with the nine local project leads to clarify specific key performance indicators (KPIs) for their projects, together with monitoring approaches suited to their local governance arrangements. We draw on the evidence provided by those local evaluations to inform our assessment.

> *We are confident that by combining the observations, workshops, survey and interviews … we have developed a rich and rounded picture of each locality and the progress that has been made.*

Finally, one challenge in undertaking a study of this nature is how to ensure anonymity for participants, in line the project's ethical approval,[6] whilst still providing sufficient contextual detail on each locality to inform the findings. We have sought to achieve this balance right by anonymising all quotations but naming the localities.

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[6] The evaluation received ethical approval from the University of Nottingham School of Education Ethics and Integrity Committee.

2. Key findings

2.1 Project design and approach

The evaluation was mainly focussed on developments and leadership in the nine local areas, with less focus on how the LocalEd project itself was structured and led. Nevertheless, we did ask interviewees for their views – particularly the locality leads in the nine areas, who were the most closely involved – and we draw on this evidence here.

The locality leads saw huge benefit in being part of a national project. It helped raise the status of their work locally, brought significant opportunities to learn from their peers in other areas, and connected them to national experts and developments:

> *It was brilliant.... I'm not thinking in the same way as I did a few years ago.... being part of something bigger than yourself and having the experts who sort of gently nudge you in different directions and change your mindset, it's absolutely invaluable.* (Locality lead)

These benefits kept all nine localities actively engaged in the project, often despite significant challenges which could have distracted them – such as staff absence, organisational restructures, and workload pressures. The fact that all nine localities have remained actively engaged despite not receiving any funding from AECT to participate in the project is testament to its perceived importance and intangible value as well as the commitment of the locality leaders.

The decision to structure the project in three 'pilot' areas (vulnerable children, combined authority and professional accountability) helped to give a focus to the locality work. This was most evident in Pilot 1, where the focus on vulnerable children aligned with the remit of the four LAs and offered a clear locality and moral purpose dimension. Similarly, in Pilot 3, the four

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>
> *Working together on a common theme, with opportunities to share progress and discuss common challenges via termly online workshops... was seen to support shared sensemaking and a sense of collective learning, commitment and accountability.*

partnerships were focussed on strengthening professional accountability, although this has been a challenging concept to define and operationalise. The focus on how a Combined Authority can support compulsory education (Pilot 2) has been important given the wider thrust of devolution policy and practice.

The locality leads all described LocalEd as a powerful learning experience. Working together on a common theme (Pilots 1 and 3), with opportunities to share progress and discuss common challenges via termly online workshops (Communities of Practice) facilitated by the Advisory Team, was seen to support shared sensemaking and a sense of collective learning, commitment and accountability. We observed the development of these communities of practice ourselves, through attendance at the termly workshops, which continued to mature over the course of the project as participants developed mutual trust and shared understandings. The communities of practice were seen to bring an *"external element of scrutiny and a balance of challenge and support"*, helping to set a rhythm and keep progress on track. Annual conferences held in London for all nine projects were also

appreciated, as *"fast-paced, we leave full of ideas to take away"*, and an opportunity to share with others, which *"gives you assurance that you're on the right track"*. We heard multiple examples of how locality leaders were collaborating with each other on bi-lateral topics and reflecting on how their own work compared with progress and developments in the other pilot localities. Having a single Combined Authority (CA) prevented the development of an equivalent community of practice in Pilot 2, although they valued the annual conferences which provided this to a more limited extent.

i.   The credibility and expertise of the Advisory Team, which was well matched to each pilot.

ii. A shared methodology for structuring the thinking and work, including identifying a set of hypotheses for each pilot to test upfront and a regular cycle of reporting against clearly articulated questions and common templates.

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We heard multiple examples of how locality leaders were collaborating with each other on bi-lateral topics and reflecting on how their own work compared with progress and developments in the other pilot localities.

iii. Expert work advising, challenging and supporting individual pilot leads in relation to their projects. This was structured through a cycle of monthly meetings but generally involved additional visits, observations and taking on ad hoc roles when asked (e.g. chairing a local project steering group, speaking at a launch event, facilitating a local workshop or developing a helpful tool or resource). The challenge aspect of this role was particularly notable in Pilots 1 and 3, where the Advisory Team were prepared to critique work and steer projects away from one course of action and towards another where they felt this was appropriate. Examples of this challenge role include the 'granular' focus on case studies of individual children in Pilot 1 and the work on report cards in Pilot 3.

iv. Skilled facilitation of the termly action learning workshops in Pilots 1 and 3, which, as noted above, helped to develop strong communities of practice characterised by shared commitment and learning.

2.2 Pilot 1: Vulnerable Children

Overview of the four localities and projects

Pilot 1 is led in each of the four areas by the Local Authority (LA) Education Service, working with a range of other services (social care, health, youth justice, the police) as well as schools. Table 2, below, provides an overview of the four LAs in Pilot 1 – Coventry, Rochdale, Wakefield and Wiltshire.

The table provides background data for each LA ('About the LA'). This highlights some clear differences between them, for example in terms of size (104 schools in Rochdale vs 274 in Wiltshire) and overall socio-economic status. The localities all include pockets of affluence alongside areas of severe and long-standing deprivation. Patterns and levels of academisation also differ widely: Wakefield saw widespread academisation before the pilot, whereas Rochdale's was slow and often the result of forced sponsorship initially, although numbers are now rising.

The focus of the pilot was on whole-LA support for vulnerable pupils, who, nationally, are not well-served by the system. All four LAs have worked to strengthen local coherence and integrated working by: introducing a version of the 'Team around the Child/School' (TAS);

placing an emphasis on building relationships with families and providing early support to prevent escalation of need; and working to embed a cultural change from a 'services-led' to a 'child-centred' approach to vulnerability. These changes were, at the start of the pilot, more mature in some localities than others. The pilots quickly identified school attendance as a 'flag' of potential vulnerability, using this as a 'common cause' that different service providers could work on together. The pilot leads generally started with analyses of LA-held 'big data', seeking to develop consistent ways of defining and identifying vulnerable groups. During the course of year one they shifted to focus on a granular, child-centred approach, taking time to understand the experience of small numbers of 'case study' children, asking how well their local systems were meeting their needs, and then using these insights to inform wider improvement efforts. Table 2 provides information about the cohorts of vulnerable children who were the focus of each pilot. As we explore in the following sections, the strategic push for integrated working in each LA together with the individual 'insights' work proved complementary in reaching a better understanding of the causes of vulnerability and finding solutions.

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The pilots quickly identified school attendance as a 'flag' of potential vulnerability, using this as a 'common cause' that different service providers could work on together.

Table 2: Overview of the four Pilot 1 localities and their LocalEd projects

Coventry	
About the LA	• Coventry is a relatively compact, fast-growing city with 85 primary, 22 secondary and 9 special schools, 115 in total. Schools are over-subscribed. • Coventry is relatively disadvantaged, ranking 68/317[7] local authorities in levels of deprivation, with pockets of affluence. • Levels of academisation are around national – 51%, with 100% of secondary schools. • The pilot focussed on one highly deprived area of the City (Bell Green and Wood End, Henley Green, and Manor Farm, abbreviated to WEHM).
Partnership working	• All schools and the LA have signed up to the 'One Coventry' commitment to work in partnership to meet the needs of all Coventry children. • Pre-existing examples of strong partnership work in community-based hubs were commended in ILACs inspection (2021). The LocalEd pilot arose from attempts to build on these via joint working of the LA Transformation and Education teams.
LocalED project summary	• Early Help Link Worker (EHLW): One post funded for one year (2023/24) by Coventry Building Society, working with one school with a focus on 11 students at risk of permanent exclusion. • Transition support: Funded for one year by LA, with a focus on Years 6–7 transition. Cohort 1 (2023) 9 children. Cohort 2 (2024) 17 children with a social worker (CWSW).

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7 See English Indices of Multiple Deprivation: 2019 for all four LA rankings in Table 2: https://www.ons. gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/datasets/ mappingincomedeprivationatalocalauthoritylevel

Rochdale	
About the LA	• Rochdale has 104 state-funded schools. It is part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and one of the DfE's Priority Educational Investment Areas (PEIA). • Rochdale is one of the most disadvantaged areas in England ranking 15/317 LAs on the Deprivation Index. • Levels of academisation have been slower than nationally but are rising (10/14 secondary schools are academies (of which 8 are sponsored) and 13/73 primaries).
Partnership working	• Raising Rochdale' strategy shared by LA and schools – reflects an aspiration to improve services to all children by delivering multi-agency responses to families in need).
LocalED project summary	• A stratification analysis of LA data identified potentially vulnerable children for closer examination, with focussed support in 2023/24 in two cohorts: Cohort 1 – 10 children who were severely absent (SA) and whose families had been referred to Early Help three or more times. Cohort 2 – 10 children in a single primary school. • Training for cross-LA teams in use of PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope)[8] model to concentrate on future options.

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Despite differences in size, geography and demographics, the four areas share the challenge of responding to increased demand on LA services in a national context of reduced resources, increased fragmentation (through academisation) and local contexts of high levels of disadvantage.

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8   Developed by Bristol Educational Psychology Service

Wakefield	
About the LA	• Wakefield LA includes the City and 5 adjoining districts each with a strong local identity. 134 state-funded schools. • Wakefield is relatively disadvantaged compared to LAs nationally (79/317), with pockets of affluence. • Schools in Wakefield academised early: 70/116 primary schools and 17/18 secondaries are academies. 14 MATs of which only 5 are based solely in the locality).
Partnership working	• 'Wakefield Families Together' (WFT) strategy co-constructed with partners to improve services to children by delivering multi-agency responses to families in need. • Pre-existing examples of strong partnership service delivery include the development of locality hubs to deliver WFT service, commended in ILACs inspection (2021). • Enhanced training of Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) and Education Psychology Service (EPS) • Joint working between EWOs and youth services (newly trained mentors).
LocalED project summary	• 'Tested' the Team around the School (TAS) model and integrated services system from the perspective of individual cases: • Cohort 1 (2023–2024): 9 primary pupils from different schools, flagged by attendance data as Serious Absence (SA) but 'not known' to WFT services • Cohort 2 (2024–2025): 10 secondary pupils identified as SA attending Key Stage 3 alternative provision, supported by 3 'mentors' • Cohort 3 (2024): Year 6–7 transition in 2 secondary schools. Pupils with existing poor attendance and/or older siblings with poor attendance (and other vulnerabilities).

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Tensions were expressed about who should take responsibility for social issues external to the school: these disagreements often centred on whether or not a child met the 'threshold' for additional support from the LA.

Wiltshire	
About the LA	• Wiltshire is a large county with 284 state-funded schools: 229 primary schools, including some very small rural schools, and 55 secondaries. • Socio-economically, the county is relatively advantaged overall, with low levels of deprivation, but with pockets of rural disadvantage (241/317). • Levels of academisation below the national at 45%, particularly in primary. 51/55 secondaries are in a MAT, mostly small and local to Wiltshire.
Partnership working	• 'All Together' co-constructed between LA, Wiltshire Learning Alliance (all schools in Wiltshire) and other partners to enhance multi-agency responses to families in need. • LA funded 11 temporary School and Family Support practitioners to work as a 'bridge' between schools and wider early help services.
LocalED project summary	• Transition support summer term 2024 for transition to a new school or key stage (KS) in September 2024. 12 pupils known to the Virtual School, mix of year 6–7 (primary – secondary transition) and year 9–10 (KS3 – 4 transition). • Transition support co-ordinated by Disadvantaged Learners and Leadership Lead and Head of Targeted Education, working through meetings such as TAS or Child in Need. • LA-led Transition Group of cross-phase heads drew on pilot learning to develop a strategy, resources and guidance to share across the LA.

A shared commitment to the locality

Despite differences highlighted above in size, geography and demographics, the four areas share the challenge of responding to increased demand on LA services in a national context of reduced resources, increased fragmentation (through academisation) and local contexts of high levels of disadvantage. The complexity of the challenge was reported as a driver of increased collaboration:

Schools in isolation have [no] chance of making the difference or being inclusive if they do it by themselves. LAs have [no] chance of making the progress they need to with children and families by not having schools front and centre in terms of relationships. (LA Lead, Rochdale)

The four LAs had different starting points, in terms of relationships, maturity of partnerships and degree of challenge in engaging vulnerable pupils and their families, which influenced the degree of shared commitment reported by respondents in year 1. Tensions were expressed about who should take responsibility for social issues external to the school: these disagreements often centred on whether or not a child met the 'threshold' for additional support from the LA, with school leaders feeling unsupported while wider services felt overwhelmed. Year 2 interviews testify to increased levels of commitment and trust, increased understanding of different perspectives and greater empathy between LAs and schools and academies. MAT CEOs were often passionate in interviews about the need for collective solutions to disadvantage:

For any organisation that operates within a local authority, the LA is an important partner, even if we are not accountable to them in terms of our performance, because of the services that we utilise, the way we work together, whether that's through alternative provision, through special educational needs, disabilities, admissions, mental health. (MAT CEO)

The collective commitments to work to improve the life chances of vulnerable pupils encapsulated in the whole LA strategies ('One Coventry', 'Raising Rochdale', 'Wakefield Families Together', Wiltshire's 'All Together') remained high in the collective consciousness. Strengthened collective working and local networks were seen as an antidote to the loneliness experienced by many leaders:

As a head teacher, it's a really lonely job, you never switch off. It might be a sleepless night about one child or about one aspect, outcomes, attendance, [asking] how can I make it better? If we work as a locality, you know that somebody else is thinking the same things. And... there's often joint solutions there. (Headteacher, Wakefield)

Collaboration was driven by a strong collective moral purpose to improve equity and inclusion across the localities. Integrated models such as the TAS bring together the school and relevant agencies that provide early support to prevent exclusion, including social care, health professionals, voluntary and community services and the police, in a 'tell us once' approach. The LocalEd pilot work in all four localities was focussed on strengthening these approaches and bringing local coherence, by working to overcome organisational silos and professional boundaries. Encouragingly, our interviews in summer 2024 across all four localities revealed a consistent view that these efforts were helping to strengthen coherent partnership working, avoid duplication of effort and resources, and provide more rapid and 'holistic' support. Key to this was engaging the child and family quickly through a 'trusted'

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Collaboration was driven by a strong collective moral purpose to improve equity and inclusion across the localities.

relationship with an individual professional, who could then access a range of services.

At the start of the pilot, Wakefield's model of integrated working was the most mature; a failed inspection in 2018 had necessitated an overhaul of services, which were then rated as Good in the 2021 ILACs inspection. Wakefield leaders wanted the LocalEd pilot to test their integrated services, – 'holding up a mirror' to how the system was working for vulnerable families. Rochdale and Wiltshire's approach was at a more exploratory stage initially, so the pilots evolved more organically. Coventry's pilot arose from a locality-based community prototype project: with the same aim of integrating local services and early support for families, it had an emphasis on links with community and voluntary services.

Despite this progress, integrated working remains challenging in all four localities. Interviewees working closer to the ground sometimes reported inconsistencies, perhaps not surprisingly for professionals in a context of transition and in local systems of varying degrees of maturity. These operational tensions were partly attributed to different priorities and professional cultures across schools/trusts, LA-run services and, sometimes, commissioned providers from the voluntary sector. In all four localities, the focus on 'case studies' of individual children and their families, encouraged by the Advisory Team, was reported as hugely helpful in: a) making the case for integrated working, by highlighting where and why children were falling between cracks and the consequences for their progress and outcomes; b) providing a test-bed for new ways of working which could then be scaled up and integrated into wider systems and processes.

Leadership and governance of the partnership

Year 1 focused on building relationships and establishing partnership agreements, particularly in the localities where integrated working was less mature. In year 2 there has been a clearer articulation of the governance and quality assurance of the work, together with increased confidence in the underpinning theory of action (discussed in the next section). All the pilot 1 projects had a political mandate, reporting into their respective LA Cabinet and elected members and reflecting their statutory duty to address the needs of vulnerable children. The work also had a national mandate, for example through statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of LA, schools and MATs in relation to attendance (2019; 2024). Two-way feedback on the projects operated through partnership groups and boards consisting of the LA and all or representative headteachers, who communicated with wider headteacher groups within established reporting structures.

Each of the projects was seen to have been led by one, two or three key individuals in the LAs. A repeated refrain was how LA leadership had improved over the last 2–3 years. Levels of mutual understanding and respect between leaders in different contexts, such as schools/MATs and the LA, appeared to have increased as they worked together to tackle post-pandemic challenges. The LA leaders were seen as credible, with expert knowledge of the locality, clarity about strategy and expectations, positive relationships, an ability to work at different scales (for example, LA-wide, schools, and parents and young people) and a commitment to equity-focussed partnership working:

The LA has been key in getting everybody together... And I think something like this doesn't work unless you've got somebody taking the helm. (Headteacher, Coventry)

They're visible, they're approachable, and they are listening to the voice of head teachers.

Equally the children's voice is really important to them. (Headteacher, Wakefield)

The LA have been open and honest about the difficulties and about the desire to use resources in a more cohesive manner and the intent is very openly clear to be better for children, and I think that in itself has made a difference. (Headteacher, Rochdale)

Similarly, LA leads recognised and respected the strength of school leadership in their areas, acknowledging that these leaders were increasingly aware of how their work within schools formed part of a wider local system, suggesting that system leadership was becoming more distributed:

You have not just changes in (school) leadership, but you have leaders who grow, their influence grows and so their ability to articulate how things can change and then lead to actually action plan what that change could be, I think are real positives in this city and I think the schools overall are also massively improving in terms of their offer. (Coventry LA)

Distributed system leadership was strengthened through three practices in particular:

- first, co-design (or co-production), with ongoing stakeholder engagement and two-way communication and learning helping to ensure shared ownership: *"there's been quite a lot of co-production and asking various head teachers for their opinion"* (Headteacher, Wakefield).

- second, boundary-spanning, with key individuals working to bridge organisational and professional silos and to add diverse perspectives: *"We've seconded a few people from and into different services and some from schools and the mix has meant they've been bouncing so many brilliant ideas off each other and learning from each other"* (LA Senior Officer, Wiltshire).

- third, engaging pupil, parent and community 'voice', for example through surveys, one-to-

one relationships and (in Wakefield) a 'young people's takeover' of some of the Children and Young People's boards: *"Teens come and run the agenda. They hold us to account and they challenge us…. which makes you very humble"* (Headteacher, Wakefield).

Clarity of partnership focus and approach

All four pilots have a focus on equity with the aim of making a difference to vulnerable students. Stakeholders were clear on success indicators: coherent integrated working, leading to re-engaged pupils, better attendance, fewer suspensions, no permanent exclusions, and better outcomes.

In year 1, the theory of action expressed by the Advisory Team was to make vulnerable pupils more 'visible' – initially through analyses of LA-wide 'big' data – so that they did not 'slip through gaps' in provision; to gain insights into the causes of vulnerability so that, through the agreed collective responsibility, these could be addressed; to test possible solutions; and to narrow performance gaps between vulnerable students and their peers. As the pilots evolved, so too did the theory of action. The 'granular' approach of focussing on specific 'case study' children offered both an in-depth intervention in an individual case and a real time 'practice audit' of how each local system was working. The locality leads reported powerful impact from this approach, describing it as both enlightening and shaming: *"I think that's been really powerful, talking about real life journeys, and that's helped to shift (the) culture"* (Rochdale lead). In the Year 1 report we highlighted

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All four pilots have a focus on equity with the aim of making a difference to vulnerable students.

challenges with engaging all partners in the workshops, for example if schools perceived the issues to be the responsibility of social work rather than education. In year 2, the deep dives into individual cases and the 'human stories' they revealed generated emotional commitment and a sense of shared moral purpose. The cases also highlighted gaps in practice, enabling 'meaningful dialogue' between different agencies around the points at which a different intervention or type of support might have changed the pathway for that pupil, thus informing future decisions. In this sense, there was evidence both of transformational change in the lives of the small numbers of young people that were the focus of the deep dives and wider systemic changes in how services were organised and delivered, with a key focus on the quality of interactions a child experiences.

The analysis of attendance data was a starting point in all four pilots, as an early indicator of vulnerability and a 'common cause' to provide a shared focus. This data was discussed with schools to agree small cohorts for close, targeted, preventative or rehabilitative support. All four pilots introduced a key person to act as a bridge between the child and family, the school, and a range of services which could provide the mix of support needed in each case. The person providing this 'bridge' differed in each locality: for example, in Coventry an Early Help Link Worker (EHLW), funded by the local building society, worked with 11 children in one school identified as high need, whereas in Wakefield and Rochdale the universal offer includes a named EWO who co-ordinates support. In Rochdale staff are trained in the PATH model, a person-centred, aspirational planning tool for use with individual children; this is used alongside relationship-building with parents. The Education Welfare Service, the Fair Access Team and the SEND Team, have all been trained in its use, as have some school staff. In Wakefield the EWO or the school can call on the TAS, a 'team' of named link workers from early

> *Critically, by working to identify and support vulnerable groups early on, the aim was to get 'upstream' by helping children early.*

help, children's social care, mental health, health visitors, and SEND. Wiltshire's team of 11 School and Family Support practitioners worked with schools to build their capacity to identify and address student needs, and the Head of the Virtual School co-ordinated responses through a strategy summarised as 'personalise, predict and prevent'.

While the different localities structured this 'bridge' role in different ways, what was common to all was the focus on personalised relationships and understanding of need, backed by flexible support from a range of different professionals and services. Critically, by working to identify and support vulnerable groups early on, the aim was to get 'upstream' by helping children early which also avoids the need for more intensive – and expensive – threshold assessments and specialist support.

Three of the pilots – Wiltshire, Coventry and Wakefield – also focused on 'transitions'. Wiltshire's approach reflected a realisation that transitions exacerbate vulnerabilities. They established a Transitions Group of primary and secondary headteachers, led by the pilot lead, to develop resources and, eventually, a county-wide Transition Strategy. In Coventry, school leaders flagged absence as a concern in workshops leading to meetings with the virtual school, crime, violence reduction, and public health teams. The resulting enhanced transition pilot offered bespoke transition packages to 10 Year 6 pupils moving into year 7, with support from youth organisations and for parents. This was extended the following academic year to 17 children with a social worker.

Sustainability and impact

The year 1 report identified a set of challenges for localities in scaling up their work to achieve local coherence and impact. By the end of year 2, while stressing that cultural change needs time, interviewees expressed confidence that the changes had helped to develop shared understanding and more coherent ways of working. The fact that most changes were to core activities, through enhanced integrated working rather than new or additional provision, was seen to make sustainability more likely.

One issue identified in year 1 was how to share information and address a lack of consistency in provision across different areas. This issue has reduced but does still persist. One hope was that directories could work as a single source of information, but this has proved difficult, for three reasons: people prefer a named person to contact; directories are difficult to keep up-to-date where services are time-limited and staff churn is high; and voluntary, charity and social enterprise (VCSE) services (a large part of the non-specialist service landscape) often work on an informal or ad hoc basis. More encouragingly, the locality basis of the pilots and co-location of services, together with boundary spanner roles, is helping to build relationships which bring their own form of coherence:

> *Being at the locality meetings means I get to know what provision exists and who the contacts are; as a result of the pilot, I get a list of everybody who's at that meeting and their emails and what their roles are.* (Coventry Headteacher)

Data systems have emerged both as a challenge and a potential solution to coherence. On the one hand, services have different systems and information protocols that are not aligned. On the other, digital systems are in development, such as a 'digital front door' in Coventry, as part of strategies to improve information-sharing and speed up access to support. A new issue raised in year 2 was that the paradigm within which

conversations about vulnerability are taking place is outmoded; failing to recognise the extent that young people now live on-line, with all the risks this presents.

Concerns around fragmented roles and responsibilities appeared to reduce in year 2, with schools and the LAs reporting a clearer sense of where responsibility lay. In Wakefield, for example, the combination of a fully negotiated attendance strategy setting out clear roles and responsibilities, together with better access to support via the TAS, has helped. Guidance includes model policies and a commitment from the LA to support decision-making in schools if the policy is followed.

Two key mechanisms helped support these changes: first, the 'granular' approach and case studies outlined above, which have helped to generate a sense of shared moral purpose and ownership; second, the co-design of 'tools' and guides, coupled with training to support their use. Examples include Wakefield's district-wide attendance strategy, which is backed by guidance documents, a shared data-base and practical tools, including a set of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) resources. Rochdale has also developed an Emotionally Based Non-Attendance (EBNA) framework with tools, training and oversight by a multi-agency panel, as well as a practice model (PATH) with training of LA teams and school staff in its use. Wiltshire has the 'Vulnerabilities Tracking Tool', the Trauma Resilience tool, a set of case studies of pupils with particular vulnerabilities, and sets of questions for primary and secondary schools to work through to improve transitions.

Unsurprisingly, scaling up – to take the learning from small-scale pilots to influence whole-school or locality-wide change – was recognised as a challenge, with all four localities seeing this as a work in progress. However, various examples were given of how the LocalEd theory of action is being used to inform other priorities and how the tools and resources are being used to scale-up impact and secure local coherence.

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A potential challenge for sustainability was funding. No additional funds were provided for the pilots and pilot leads have largely worked with existing teams and resources.

For example, Wakefield, has used the pilot methodology in a proposal for a SEND early help pathway and will be extended to consider Elective Home Education; Wiltshire has taken it to pupil premium networks and children with a social worker and their Transition Group model of 'action learning sets' is easily transferable to other groups of schools. In the Coventry pilot school, strategies from the transition project are now used for all pupils across the school.

Finally, a potential challenge for sustainability was funding. No additional funds were provided for the pilots and pilot leads have largely worked with existing teams and resources. Where possible they drew on funding available in the system to support vulnerable pupils, either in LAs and/or in schools via pupil premium funding, arguing that with the right mindset and commitment to work in different ways, significant capacity and improvement could be unlocked. That said, some of the initiatives outlined above did require additional funding, for example for the EHLW role in Coventry which was funded for one year by local businesses, with concerns that these approaches might not be sustainable once funding ended. Encouragingly, in summer 2024, the headteacher in Coventry confirmed that the impact of the EHLW had been such that the school would fund the post going forward. Nevertheless, there was a more general concern among headteachers that new roles could become 'one more burden' placed on already over-stretched budgets.

Turning to evidence of impact, the individual case studies capture sometimes large gains in attendance together with enhanced support for wider family challenges, providing examples of how trajectories can be turned around. In addition, the pilots reported changes in policies and processes as well as some improvements in attendance and wider outcomes for vulnerable students, with an expectation that these improvements would continue and grow over time. Interviewees stressed, however, that cultural change takes time, as does re-building relationships with families and children who have until now found school a less than welcoming environment, or who are dealing with traumatic social and family issues. Starting with policy change, Coventry and Wakefield have moved to a universal strategy where levels of absence are consistently linked with the early help offer. In Rochdale, every 'severely absent' child now has a support plan and Ofsted has praised the LA's approach.[9] In terms of wider outcomes, two pilots shared with us attendance and persistent absence data. Coventry, saw a slight improvement across the two years though rates are not yet back to pre-Covid levels. In Rochdale, severe absence rates in primary are back to pre-pandemic levels, with the lowest rates across Greater Manchester.

In the secondary phase they are showing a *"steady decline"* (-1.1%) since 2022/23. In Coventry, of the 11 pupils on the EHLW pilot and the 9 on the transitions pilot, targeted as at high risk of exclusion, none were permanently excluded by the end of the 2024 academic year. In addition, all four localities shared powerful stories of how individual children had benefitted, such as this one:

> *The child was referred to TAS by the school when in year 10 as a young carer for mum with poor school attendance due to anxiety about leaving mum at home. A 'young carer' plan was put in place including a referral to a young carer group. Agreement was reached with the school that the child would not get a detention if late and lesson seating plans were changed. The child also received a range of 1-1 support. They attended all their GCSE exams and achieved 3s in English and Maths and 2x 4s... Their relationship with Mum has improved as the young person is more independent* (Wakefield Lead)

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All four localities shared powerful stories of how individual children had benefitted.

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9   Ofsted, Rochdale Joint Targeted Area Inspection report, April 2024.

2.3 Pilot 2 – Combined Authority

Overview of the locality

The North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) was a partnership of three local authorities – Newcastle, North Tyneside, and Northumberland – with a directly elected Metro Mayor. The Combined Authority (CA) operated for five years (2019–2024), based on a Devolution Deal agreed in 2018. In 2023 the Government Gateway Review of the CA assessed how far it had delivered on the ambition and targets set out in the Devolution Deal. The findings were positive and a further £100m of investment was committed over the next five years. The Mayoral election in May 2024 brought a change from an independent Mayor to a Labour Mayor. It also saw the closure of NTCA and the establishment of the new North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA), covering four additional authorities: Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland. The Devolution Deal hands powers and funding from central government to the region for seven 'portfolios': transport; economy; housing and land; education, skills and inclusion; finance and investment; rural, coastal and environment; culture, creative, tourism and sport. Unlike England's other CAs, both NTCA and NEMCA have chosen to include investments in compulsory-phase education improvement and child poverty prevention in their work.

NTCA was the only CA to participate in Pilot 2 of the LocalEd project, reflecting its unique focus on school improvement and support. The focus here is on the work with NTCA, although interviewees held in 2024 also captured views on the move to the new larger CA.

A shared commitment to the locality

Commitment to the North East and to the CA, reported as high in year 1, appeared even stronger at the end of the second year. Stakeholders were keen to share their experiences, to describe the perceived successes of the work to date and to reinforce their commitment to the vision of the CA: to address disadvantage in the North East through collaborative working, sharing of resource and expertise and innovative collective solutions to the challenges of poverty and disadvantage.

The CA was reported to have built on existing collaborative practice and extended it in terms of both reach and geography. Previously sceptical stakeholders (who expressed doubts in early evaluation workshops) spoke positively about the ways in which fears (of duplication, loss of autonomy and being judged) had been allayed. Positive word of mouth messages appear to have won over schools that were slower to engage. Partners believe the CA has *"done a really good job at promoting understanding of North Tyne as a region and getting people to see themselves outside of their local authority and being part of something bigger"*.

Partnerships with local groups and national agencies (LAs, schools, academy trusts, teaching school hubs, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), the Association of Education Advisers (AoEA), the Difference, Voice21, Carnegie Leadership Centre) have been harnessed and resources shared, bringing 'much-needed coherence' to the region while expanding access to information and support for schools. Stakeholders repeatedly mentioned the emphasis that NTCA staff place on listening to local voices to identify need and then brokering and often funding support from a range of national and regional agencies. Interviewees were clear that these programmes had led to increased collaboration across the three LAs and increased levels of trust across the region.

One area for development was the inclusion of the voices of children, parents and communities in setting and delivering priorities. The NTCA Lead acknowledged this but highlighted that it had been a stronger theme in the Child Poverty programme, so this could inform future development work.

Leadership and governance of the partnership

The high levels of trust described by stakeholders interviewed towards the end of 2023/24 can be attributed to the clear governance structure of the CA's decision-making, the process of two-way communication with stakeholders at different levels of the system and the demonstrable success of its programmes. The Advisory Team lead noted the importance of the governance structure, including the monthly meetings between LA and CA leads:

> The regular meetings they have with the (LA) education directors work really well. They've used that... (to) update, take feedback, have the strategic conversation.... it's enabled them to spot when they've got an issue and solve it quickly. What I'd say is that it's based on the strength of the relationships. And I think it's based on the quality of [the CA staff].

The Education Directors described the value of these monthly meetings, with some moving from initial misgivings to enthusiasm. They emphasised the importance of how the CA was established, with a memo of operation and an emphasis on the meetings as a confidential space to share concerns. The monthly meetings were seen to bring a *"formalised structure to share school improvement and to challenge us to up our game"* and enabled the three LA directors to collaborate more: *"We definitely feel more connected"*:

> One of the strengths is that [we] aren't alone at the top of the pyramid as it were, shouldering everything ourselves. It's almost like the first additionality was the formation of a quasi-senior management team... It keeps us sane. (LA Director)

The CA team also engage directly with headteachers and other partners by attending headteacher group meetings and sessions run by the Teaching School Hub and other partners. Headteachers and leads in other agencies mentioned the importance of establishing relationships and the time and effort the CA team have devoted to this: *"the CA is a very people-centred organisation"*. This ability of the small NTCA team to work at different levels of the system, building relationships at both strategic and operational levels, was reported as a major strength:

> The beauty of this system is: what the CA has added is more resource, financial and human. But also they've used our ability to draw on local insights and some of the lower level relationships to gain traction where we feel it's most needed but maybe where there was some resistance or some apathy to yet another initiative. (LA Director)

Interviewees mentioned the care taken by the CA team to listen and respond to local needs: *"they're known, they're visible, they really listen to what's going on, they take time to come to sessions. They're seen as part of the system and system change"* (Partner). Above all, the collaborative way in which NTCA have worked at all levels is reported to have been a main contributor to the high degree of 'buy-in' they've achieved: *"it doesn't feel it's done to you, it feels that it's done with you"*.

The interim report mentioned the advantage of a strong political mandate and this was reiterated in 2023/24, with comments on the 'tightness' of the CA's procurement procedure, decisions being cleared at Cabinet level and the engagement of the Mayor in opening conferences and making visits. The NTCA team have also worked to build relationships and better alignment with DfE Regional Directors, which holds potential for strengthening the cohesion of the regional education system.

Clarity of partnership focus and approach

The Devolution Deal (2018) gave a clear focus to the purpose and aims of the NTCA education programme, informed by an earlier consultation. Nevertheless, a challenge in 2022/23 was

ensuring that the CA brought 'additionality' and 'added value' to a crowded school improvement landscape. The CA was careful not to duplicate national programmes, or programmes commissioned by LAs, but to work in identified 'gaps' in provision to meet need.

In Year 1 the NTCA focused on five strands: 1. post-Covid recovery; 2. the development of teachers and leaders; 3. improving transitions between schools; 4. supporting schools in challenging contexts and 5. careers and progression pathways. Strand 2 included funding AEoA accreditation, to create a network of system leaders able to support school improvement in the region, and commissioning a bespoke programme 'Linking Leaders' through the National Research School and EEF to develop leaders to provide peer challenge and support and identify and share good practice. Strand 4 included a focus on literacy training. Strand 5 was mainly led by the Local Economic Partnership (LEP), with plans to work more closely with the Education Team in the NEMCA model.

Year 2 has built on these programmes, refocusing on fewer priorities and including a 'Local Priorities' strand to respond to needs identified by schools. This included further cohorts of the AoEA accreditation and an ambition to 'map' and utilise the additional school improvement capacity across the region. Strand 2, Professional Development, continues the Linking Leaders programme, extending it to additional cohorts and middle leaders. Responding to headteachers' priorities, Voice21 were commissioned to offer Oracy training to 100 schools, reported as *"the largest Oracy programme in the UK"*[10] and rebranded for the NTCA as 'VoiceNorthofTyne'. As part of Strand 3, Local Priorities, the NTCA commissioned Leeds Beckett University's Carnegie Leadership Centre to roll out their existing School Mental Health Award to NTCA schools.

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Take-up of programmes supported by NTCA has increased in year 2, with 266 schools engaging by June 2024.

The funding and resource for the School Improvement strategy is a stable commitment through the 30-year Devolution Deal, although flexibility will be required to align with Cabinet priorities and national policy developments. Funding comes from the CA's investment fund; however, the CA Lead argued: *"It's not the stuff we fund, it's more the connections we make in the collaboration and convening where the real value comes"*.

Take-up of programmes supported by NTCA has increased in year 2, with 266 schools engaging by June 2024. 60 school improvement leads are engaged in the AEoA accreditation and 110 school leaders from 48 schools have been supported through the Linking Leaders programme as well as officers from the three LAs. This provision was seen to complement existing national programmes, for example by providing opportunities for *"head teachers who do not want to go into executive leadership… (but) are just looking to develop themselves further"* (Partner).

Sustainability and impact

At this stage, impact evidence is collected at programme level: *"what we don't have is a big global statistic that this education improvement programme has improved outcomes"* (CA Lead). Some programmes have been externally evaluated and providers supply impact data, but measures are not consistent so the CA team is considering how to develop an overall approach.

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10 https://www.hexham-courant.co.uk/news/23913402.north-tyne-voice-21-launch-uks-largest-oracy-programme/

That said, the team describe 'green shoots' (*"reading age is going up, exclusions in the project schools are down"*).

Unsurprisingly, some issues and challenges remain. While school engagement is increasing, reaching the schools and professionals most in need is a challenge given the 'opt-in' approach. The CA has used an element of 'targeting' and has sought to address the needs of small, rural schools through flexible delivery. Engaging MATs has sometimes been challenging, but the CA has had some success by using MATs to deliver programmes and talking regularly to MAT leads about the offer. 'Churn' in the system remains challenging, but the Linking Leaders programme is partly designed to strengthen support and distribute knowledge and expertise. Finally, having trained and supported many schools and leaders (e.g. 30 leaders with AEoA accreditation) the CA is ready to move to a level of maturity where need and support can be deployed more strategically to secure impact across the area.

The new Devolution Deal (2024) means that the work will be 'scaled up' from three to seven LAs. Stakeholders, while expressing various degrees of caution, were optimistic: *"Moving from 3 – 7 will work because we have a good track record of being able to show the benefits for children and for families of joined up working across local authorities"*. (LA Director)

Overall evidence suggests the NTCA has added value to the system in the following ways:

- Legitimacy – through the elected Mayor and Cabinet, backed by the national Devolution Deal.

- Common purpose – the CA has helped by convening, brokering, raising awareness of different possibilities and providing 'space to collaborate'.

- Coordination and alignment – bringing cohesion to a disjointed system, for example with national and regional agencies now working better together.

- Value for money – the small CA team (3.5 FTE) is seen to have used its resources to facilitate events and initiatives and to achieve economies of scale unavailable to individual LAs and MATs.

- Externality – the ability to spot good practice from across a mix of local authorities and the status of a 'neutral player' to break down barriers to collaboration and willingness to share; and to 'shine a light' on issues LAs and schools might not yet have considered.

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While school engagement is increasing, reaching the schools and professionals most in need is a challenge given the 'opt-in' approach.

2.4 Pilot 3 – Professional Accountability

This section outlines how the four school-led partnerships involved in Pilot 3 – Ealing Learning Partnership (ELP), Learn Sheffield, the Milton Keynes Education Partnership (MKEP) and Schools Alliance for Excellence (SAfE – in Surrey) – have worked to strengthen professional accountability.

Overview of the four localities and projects

Table 3, below, provides an overview of the four partnerships. It includes background data ('About the locality') which highlights important differences between them, for example: while Ealing is small (94 schools) and relatively deprived, Surrey is large (400 schools) and relatively affluent. Levels of academisation also differ widely – from below the national rate (51%) in Ealing (17%) and Milton Keynes (42%), to above in Surrey (59%) and Sheffield (63%).

Table 3 includes the proportion of schools judged 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted in each locality, reflecting the focus on school improvement in all four partnerships. We recognise that this might be seen as problematic, especially given the focus of this pilot on professional accountability, but argue it is valuable as a broad indicator of school capacity and levels of school improvement challenge. We do not suggest that these proportions reflect the impact of the LocalEd projects, not least given that only a subset of schools in each locality will have been inspected during the two-year project period.

The table also includes an 'About the partnership' section. This shows that the partnerships are constituted differently: ELP is part of its LA, Learn Sheffield and SAfE are both non-profit companies, while MKEP is not formally constituted. These arrangements partly explain different ways of working and capacity: so, whereas the first three all hold budgets, employ staff and provide services to schools, MKEP relies on a volunteer co-ordinator and school contributions in-kind.

Finally, the table includes a short summary of the LocalEd projects undertaken in each locality, aimed at strengthening professional accountability. ELP's focus was on strengthening its existing model of peer review between schools, moving it away from a 'mocksted' approach (i.e. geared towards preparing for Ofsted) and towards a more formative model in which pupil voice is central. ELP has also strengthened support for its cluster leaders and introduced a parallel focus on SENDCo leadership and inclusion. Learn Sheffield and MKEP both developed local 'school reports', as a way of capturing a broader picture of school quality for parents and (through an internal version in the former) strengthening school to school learning and collaboration. MKEP has also worked to strengthen collaboration between secondary schools, through a focus on literacy. Finally, SAfE started with a focus on introducing peer reviews between schools, but shifted towards enabling schools to self-evaluate themselves in relation to inclusion and equity.

Table 3: Overview of the four Pilot 3 localities and their LocalEd projects

Ealing Learning Partnership (ELP)	
About the locality	• Ealing is a relatively small London borough with 94 state-funded schools. • Socio-economically the borough is around average for London,[11] but relatively disadvantaged compared to other LAs nationally(94/317).[12] • 98% of schools graded 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2024. • Levels of academisation are well below the national rate (17% vs 51%), particularly in primary. Most secondary schools are either academies or foundation schools, with relatively few MATs.
About the partnership	• ELP was established in 2017. It is integrated with the LA. Its strapline is 'No learner left behind – No school left behind.'[13] • In autumn 2024 85 schools (90%) were members of ELP, including a majority of Ealing's secondary schools. In 2023–24 ELP's income was almost £1.2m.
LocalED project summary	• ELP's focus has been on generating a 'high challenge, low threat' culture which supports formative accountability. ELP had established peer reviews between primary schools before the pandemic. The LocalEd project evolved this into a Peer Enquiry and Review (PER) model, adding Spirals of Enquiry to strengthen pupil voice. Additional work with Cluster leads and SENDCos in primary. • Secondary schools built on a history of collaboration (e.g. data sharing, curriculum and senior leader networks) to identify shared priorities and collaborative events focussed on literacy and transition.

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11 See https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/boroughs/ealing-poverty-and-inequality-indicators/?comparator=england

12 As in Table 2, we use the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation: 2019 to assess the four localities: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/datasets/mappingincomedeprivationatalocalauthoritylevel

13 See https://www.egfl.org.uk/elp-services

Learn Sheffield

About the locality	• Sheffield is one England's larger core cities, with 180 state-funded schools. • Socio-economically, the city is relatively disadvantaged (67/317). Around 80% of students eligible for the pupil premium attend just 35 schools in the city. • 86% of schools were graded 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2024. • Academisation level (63%) is ahead of national rate (51%), with around 30 different MATs, including some national/regional chains.
About the partnership	• The partnership was established in 2015 as a not-for-profit company owned by schools and colleges in the city and Sheffield City Council. Its strapline is 'By Sheffield, For Sheffield, In Collaboration'.[14]. • Income in 2023–24 was £2.8m. LA funding has reduced over time, from 95% in 2015 to 6.6% in 2023–24. In 2023–24, 87.5% of schools were members.
LocalED project summary	• The project has focussed on developing school 'reports', including an external version for parents and internal version as a data tool for schools to compare themselves with other schools. Work with Cynefin has explored innovative approaches to capturing student and parent voice. • A planned project to develop MAT peer reviews was not developed.

Milton Keynes Education Partnership (MKEP)

About the locality	• Milton Keynes is a mid-sized but fast-growing city, with 115 schools. • Socio-economically, the city is around average (148/317). • 87% of schools were graded 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2024. • Level of academisation (42%) is below the national rate (51%), with 18 trusts, mostly local but a small number of regional and national chains.
About the partnership	• MKEP was established in 2019 to provide a platform for collaboration across the city. MKEP is not formally constituted and is reliant on volunteers for project management and school engagement.
LocalED project summary	• MKEP's LocalEd project has focussed on two areas: • Developing a 'school report' ('school profile') for parents. Digital versions of the report cards have been developed. • Reading for Life: all secondaries, special and AP providers focussing on literacy in Key Stage 3 via conferences, surveys and sharing resources.

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14 See https://www.learnsheffield.co.uk/

Schools Alliance for Excellence (SAfE) (Surrey)	
About the locality	• Surrey is a large shire county, with 400 state-funded schools. • Socio-economically, the county is relatively advantaged overall, though with some differences between areas.[15] • 84% of schools graded 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2024. • Levels of academisation (59%) are ahead of the national rate (51%), with more than 50 trusts, including some national and regional chains.
About the partnership	• SAfE was established in 2019 as a not-for-profit company working in partnership with Surrey County Council and other stakeholders. It works to support improvement, with a particular focus on inclusion and equity.[16] • SAfE is commissioned by the LA to carry out statutory school improvement work and to provide governance support in Surrey's maintained schools. • 80% of schools in Surrey subscribe to SAfE.
LocalED project summary	• In 2022/23 SAfE engaged volunteer schools in developing an approach to peer review. It later changed tack and focussed on strengthening school self-evaluation in relation to inclusion using an existing framework. In 2023–24 153 schools used this tool. SAfE developed good practice resources and vignettes.

A shared commitment to the locality

The four 'school-led' partnerships involved in Pilot 3 were formed in the decade after 2010 in response to increased academisation and the roll-back of local authorities, driven by an aim to re-vitalise or sustain collective moral purpose and collaborative improvement across their localities.

Interviewees across all four localities highlighted a set of challenges which could make coherence, collaboration and 'shared commitment' difficult, including:

• rising SEND needs among children, further accentuated where LA capacity and provision in this area was weak. This could lead to issues where a minority of 'inclusive' schools were felt to bear more than their 'fair share' while other schools were not really inclusive;

• declining pupil numbers, particularly in primary, leading to increased competition;

• MATs becoming more insular, while schools not in MATs could become isolated;

• staffing challenges (recruitment and retention) and a general lack of capacity in schools to engage in new initiatives.

The partnerships had different starting points and levels of 'shared commitment' at the start of the evaluation. ELP is part of Ealing LA: the partnership's formation in 2017 reflected a strategic decision by the authority to engage

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15 Surrey's 11 district council areas range from 234/317 (most deprived – Spellthorne) to 307/317 (least deprived – Mole Valley) compared to all LAs nationally on the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation: 2019.

16 See https://schoolsallianceforexcellence.co.uk/join-us/mission-vision-values/

schools more actively in shaping the borough's school improvement work and approach at a time of reducing budgets. Whereas some LAs chose to encourage all schools to academise at that time,[17] Ealing did the opposite, at least in the primary phase, with the vast majority of schools still maintained. By 2022, ELP had established peer reviews between these primaries as a valued way of structuring collaboration and preparing them for Ofsted inspections at a time when support from LA advisers was reducing, so the move to the more formative PER approach offered a natural progression. The evaluation found that primary school leaders in Ealing – including special school heads – were strongly committed to working together through ELP, although the small number of local primaries in MATs were not engaged. Primary heads recognised that they needed to take responsibility for making this work – a change in mindset from when the LA played a more proactive role, indicating a growth in professional accountability:

> *I think the shift in heads' attitudes over that period from September 18 to now is... that we have got to find our own solutions and be part of a self-supporting system rather than a paternal local authority having experts who can advise, guide and support... But there are still some who think, 'what's it going to do for me?'* (Primary head / Cluster Lead)

Secondary school leaders in Ealing were also positive about ELP and those that had experience of working in other areas generally described it as a more collaborative place. Curriculum and senior leader networks are well established and secondaries are active in ELP's governance groups. While secondary heads in Ealing were less willing to engage in peer to peer review models initially, there was progress in year 2 through the reading and transition projects and conferences.

School leaders in Sheffield and Surrey described difficult relationships with their LAs in the past. In both places, the move to a 'school-led' partnership was seen to have helped to rebuild trust:

> *Going back historically the relationship between some schools and the local authority was not great... (Whereas) that more collaborative approach where it is school owned, has actually probably brought about more effective collaboration because there's a degree of agency in there and actually there's less fear... (and) more trust.* (MAT CEO, Sheffield)

> *I think they've (i.e. SAfE) done some remarkable work rebuilding trust in the collaborative work and the system. Because before them it was broken.* (Primary head, Surrey)

The Sheffield and Surrey partnerships also differed from Ealing in other respects, most obviously in having to work across much larger and more fragmented landscapes, with higher numbers of academies and MATs. Despite these challenges, school leaders in both places – like Ealing – described their local partnerships as the 'glue' which was holding the locality together and helping to forge coherence. Leaders who had worked in these localities over an extended period and who had helped shape the partnership approach were particularly likely to describe themselves as 'invested' in these models, sometimes expressing concern that more recently appointed leaders might not have the same commitment. This strong engagement was apparent in high membership subscription levels in all three localities: 80% of schools in Surrey, 87.5% in Sheffield, and 90% in Ealing.

The drive to create MKEP was similar to the other three localities – i.e. to sustain collaboration at a time of reducing LA capacity.

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17 For examples see: Greany, T. (2020) Place-based Governance and Leadership in Decentralised School Systems: Evidence from England. *Journal of Education Policy,* 37(2), 247–268. DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2020.1792554

However, because MKEP was not a formal organisation and did not have core staff or a significant school improvement offer, its relationship with schools and its capacity to undertake its LocalEd projects was different, relying on voluntary contributions. The city's small size coupled with generally good relationships between heads was seen to allow for strong, informal collaboration of this nature – *"I don't think it needs the sort of infrastructure that other places have"* (Secondary head, Milton Keynes). One example of this informal approach was the city's subject networks for secondary teachers, which are co-ordinated by a former Teaching School.

These different starting points and levels of 'shared commitment' clearly shaped the focus and progress of the LocalEd projects in each locality. While ELP built on its existing collaborative structures and peer review model, the other three localities introduced new initiatives. Learn Sheffield and MKEP focussed on developing local school reports cards – a completely new approach which required 'blue skies' thinking and sometimes challenging conversations about what gets measured and communicated to parents. SAfE started 'bottom up', with a proposal for schools to undertake peer reviews, but this proved challenging, so in year two the focus was on embedding and extending an approach to school self-evaluation in relation to inclusion.

Leadership and governance of the partnership

The three formally constituted partnerships have established governance groups which enable shared decision-making and oversight of their work. These arrangements are similar but slightly different in each locality.[18] In Surrey, an additional steering group was convened to oversee the LocalEd work, but the project lead reflected that it might have been better to work through the

> *The three formally constituted partnerships have established governance groups which enable shared decision-making and oversight of their work.*

main partnership governance board. Meanwhile, in Milton Keynes, a Project Development Group comprising 15 leaders from all sectors (primary/secondary/FE, special and AP, LA/academy) drove the report card work, while the literacy project was steered by the city's secondary heads group.

The political mandate for the partnerships and their LocalEd projects was bound up with their relationships with their respective LAs. In Ealing, the Council sees the partnership as integral to its wider educational work and mission. In Surrey, the history of challenging relationships between the LA and many schools was seen to be improving, while the LA commissions SAfE to undertake its statutory school improvement and school governance functions. In Sheffield, the LA helped establish the partnership in 2015 and owns 20% of the company. The LA commissioned the partnership to undertake statutory school improvement functions for several years, but pulled back from that commitment in 2022, causing significant financial challenges for the partnership. In early 2023 Learn Sheffield published a 'position statement', which helped to raise awareness of these issues, including at a political level in the Council. Following this a new DCS was appointed and the LA reengaged with the partnership: *"The relationship with the LA... is probably the most positive it's ever been"* (Project Lead). In Milton Keynes the LA has previously provided in-kind support to MKEP, including by sharing

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18 See the Year 1 evaluation report for details of governance arrangements and membership.

progress with elected councillors, but has had limited capacity in recent years. More recently, the LA has reengaged to a limited extent, for example providing agenda space for consultation on the draft report card at one of its termly quadrant meetings with headteachers.

We turn now to the leadership of the partnerships and their LocalEd projects. In all four localities a core individual or small group led the work, with wider leadership distributed across a larger network. In Ealing, the work was led by four colleagues: an LA Director, ELP's Quality and Partnership Lead (3–11), the LA Secondary Lead, and a SEND and Inclusion Partnership Lead. In addition, school leaders were commissioned to take on area-wide roles: five primary Cluster Leads – serving heads who receive funding to lead their clusters – and, in secondary, the teaching school, Teach West London. This core group was seen to drive the partnership:

> *I would say ultimately it all comes down to the leadership of, you know, a few people that really live and breathe it and believe in it, and if you haven't got those people in post, then it could very easily quickly fall apart.* (Secondary Head, Ealing)

In the second year ELP invested in bringing the cluster leads together to develop their skills as system leaders and boundary spanners, which was seen as helpful. Primary and special heads valued the work of their cluster leads and described an inclusive 'collegiate decision making' approach, although one cluster lead explained that leading beyond authority could have its frustrations:

> *I struggle with our accountability because I can't tell them to do anything. They do it because they want to do it and that does mean some things don't work as well.* (Primary Head, Ealing)

In Sheffield the report card project was led by the partnership's CEO, who employed a data consultant to support the technical development and drew on wider members of his team where required. Interviewees were universally positive about the CEO, a former primary headteacher, who was seen as highly expert and credible, with strong relationships and a deep knowledge of the city and its schools. It was clear that his relationships and credibility were key to keeping schools engaged in the report card project even when they were pulled away by more pressing priorities:

> *It does all rely… on the quality of leadership and the person, you know, driving the whole decision-making process.* (Secondary head, Sheffield)

However, interviewees did also express a concern that if the CEO were to leave, there was no clear succession plan for the partnership. Partly in response, the CEO led an evaluation of the partnership in early 2024.[19] He used this to identify clear workstreams and future priorities, allowing him to distribute leadership more clearly across his team.

In Surrey, SAfE's CEO led the project together with her team and two former headteachers employed on fractional contracts to facilitate the working groups. The CEO's leadership was seen as critical – 'she is personally so hugely respected' (Special School Head) – in particular her focus on inclusion and equity in a context where the proportion of disadvantaged children is relatively small, meaning that their needs could be overlooked. The CEO was not a former headteacher (like the LA Director in Ealing), but was seen to have appointed a highly credible team.

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In all four localities a core individual or small group led the work, with wider leadership distributed across a larger network.

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19 See https://www.learnsheffield.co.uk/LS-Insights-Hub/Learn-Sheffield-Evaluation

Finally, in Milton Keynes, the project was co-led by the Chair of the city's Secondary Heads group and the Chair of MKEP's Education Improvement Board (a primary head), working with a volunteer co-ordinator who had previously worked for the LA. In terms of wider leadership there were differing views. One was that the project had unlocked diverse perspectives and agency, representing a positive example of shared leadership. The other was that beyond the core development group, school leaders across the city had failed to really commit and seemed to be trapped in a cycle of 'learned helplessness'. Given that the project did develop a set of report cards and that the secondary literacy project was widely seen as successful in bringing schools together, this latter view seems overly harsh, but it does highlight how lateral system leadership – by serving leaders, working with their peers – can create uneasy dynamics.

Clarity of partnership focus and approach

The four partnerships worked in different ways to define and implement their projects. Co-design – most often involving headteachers, but also sometimes wider stakeholders – was a feature of all four projects, but particularly the completely 'new' initiatives (e.g. report cards and SAfE's initial work on peer review). To differing extents, and particularly on these 'new' initiatives, project leaders needed to balance a tight-and-loose approach to development: on the one hand, they needed a clear focus and evidence of progress in order to keep diverse stakeholders engaged and on track; on the other, they needed to remain open to fluid possibilities in a context of local and national change.

SAfE worked 'bottom up' initially, inviting volunteer leaders from 26 schools and trusts to work together in two clusters (one geographical and one dispersed) to shape an approach. Both groups chose to focus on peer reviews but over the course of the year it became clear that this was unrealistic – partly for practical reasons, but also from a view that many Surrey schools

would not really engage given the competitive landscape and fact that most MATs now insist on their own internal quality assurance processes. Instead, in year two, SAfE focussed on promoting its existing Surrey Inclusion Framework and integrating this more clearly with other strands of its work. One headteacher in Surrey argued that while they understood the case for initial consultation and a 'bottom up' approach, *"heads like clarity – we like to know what we're doing"*. In their view, there was a lot of talk in the early phase of the project, but a lack of consensus, with different stakeholders having different agendas, so it would have been helpful to be given a more limited set of choices. That said, there was praise for SAfE's CEO in how she took the decision to change direction and focus on the Inclusion Framework. Views on the Inclusion Framework were mixed: on the one hand there was a recognition that this was an important but under-recognised area for schools in Surrey to focus on; on the other, there was a sense that the voluntary tool would not really impact in schools that did not already see this as an important issue.

Sheffield and Milton Keynes chose – independently – to develop local school reports, hoping to broaden out how schools and parents judge school quality and, in the process, take greater local ownership of professional accountability. Both partnerships worked with core co-design groups comprised of volunteer leaders from schools and trusts (with 29 members in Sheffield and 15 in Milton Keynes) and then consulted with wider leaders across their respective localities on draft iterations of the report cards. In Sheffield, this was seen to have garnered a good level of engagement. In Milton Keynes, while all schools were given the chance to comment on drafts via the quadrant meetings, there was a sense that engagement remained weak: *"I was hoping people would be like 'Yeah, this is great. I want to be involved in this... but it wasn't really. It was all like, 'oh, yeah, it's interesting what you're doing... let us know how it goes'"* (Primary head, Milton Keynes).

Both partnerships made good progress with school reports over the two years, with various iterations developed, informed by small scale consultations with parents. Sheffield has also developed an 'internal' version – essentially a database which allows schools to compare themselves with other local schools on a range of measures, which it plans to offer as a commercial product. It has also worked with a company called Cynefin to explore how pupil and parent voice could be captured more dynamically, which has led to a wider project funded by the City Council.

All this work took place at a time of uncertainty in terms of whether and how report cards might become part of national policy if Labour won the 2024 general election. As a groundbreaking initiative (both locally and nationally) developing local school reports required significant time and input from leaders who needed to engage in 'blue skies' thinking about their purpose and format. These discussions raised important questions about how school quality might best be assessed and communicated to parents in rounded, but trustworthy, ways – including, potentially, 'negative' data. When the draft profiles were shared with parents a common response was that they did want to see 'quality assured' data, for example from Ofsted reports and test outcomes, but they also wanted 'a feel for the school', so schools were encouraged to include photos, videos and curriculum information. One challenge was that while leaders in both localities said they did not want the school reports to be a marketing tool, geared towards informing parental choice of secondary school, this did seem to be how everyone perceived them, with the risk of accentuating competition:

> *If we're going to use it for parents and recruitment when there's a world of failing schools out there, people aren't going to be wanting to be as open and honest. So I think there is a tension there.* (Secondary head, Milton Keynes)

Related to the point above about 'negative' data, the process of developing school reports revealed some 'sensitive areas', most significantly whether and how to include a measure of school inclusion.[20] While some schools were fearful of being 'named and shamed' for a lack of inclusion, others were concerned about raising their inclusive profile any further. Ultimately, these robust debates can be seen to have strengthened professional accountability, by giving leaders a voice and requiring them to negotiate what would be included. Participants in the core groups found the work intellectually stimulating and exciting, giving them a chance to take ownership of accountability.

In Ealing, the decision to move away from 'mocksted' style peer reviews and towards the formative PER model was widely understood and welcomed by primary and special school leaders, with evidence that this was happening in practice in the review we observed. New developments, such as the Spirals of Enquiry approach, were well structured and supported, backed by extensive materials and training programmes. That said, there was also a welcome level of flexibility in these models, with a recognition that some headteachers might still want a 'mocksted' approach:

> *People who've had OFSTED... They've actually been more able to almost embrace the enquiry bit, because they're at a different spot in their journey. But because we are not, we are still using it as a mini-Ofsted because that's where the school is at.* (Primary head, Ealing)

Sustainability and impact

Assessing whether and how the LocalEd projects have impacted on levels of professional accountability is challenging, not least because we have found no clear way of defining or measuring this concept. While our evaluation collected

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[20] For a discussion of these issues see https://schoolsweek.co.uk/what-does-inclusion-look-like-in-practice-today/

significant evidence related to locality working, it was not designed to track impact: rather, each locality set and tracked its own KPIs related to the specific priorities and projects undertaken.

Our findings show that all four partnerships, but particularly the three that work at scale with schools and trusts to support improvement, have high levels of school engagement and are regarded positively by stakeholders. Interviewees in Ealing, Sheffield and Surrey gave numerous, specific examples of how the partnerships had helped them and their staff to improve: *"SAfE (is) brilliant – they have a high level of expertise. They were a very, very big support to me to get the school back up to Good"* (Primary head, Surrey). As we showed above, many interviewees recognised the less tangible ways in which the partnerships were adding value – acting as the 'glue', building trust and reciprocity and identifying and tackling local challenges which might otherwise go unnoticed.

ELP and Learn Sheffield have worked most comprehensively to assess and publish their progress and impact.[21] Both partnerships evaluate their work in relation to local priorities, such as school attendance, SEND and disadvantaged pupil groups, as well as academic outcomes and school quality overall. They do this by combining evidence from surveys and monitoring data with analyses of national pupil assessment and Ofsted data, recognising that their impact in these areas cannot be seen as causal given all the other factors at play. In both cases there are clear improvement trajectories: for example, Ealing has sustained high levels of school performance, including in 2023–24, with 98% of schools graded 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted, Key Stage 2 and 4 assessment outcomes well above national (maintaining 1st or 2nd place nationally

for Progress 8 over the last 3 years)[22] while Sheffield has seen impressive improvements in Ofsted outcomes (moving from 8th of 8 Core Cities in 2015, to 2nd in 2024) although its pupils' outcomes remain below national.

Turning to the impact of the LocalEd projects, we cannot say unequivocally that professional accountability has improved, but our assessment is that levels of honest robust dialogue and mutual respect have been high between the schools and trusts that participated in all four localities and that the projects have opened schools up to pupil and, sometimes, parent voice in ways which have the potential to strengthen stakeholder accountability. In Ealing, almost all primary headteachers engage in the PER process – with most spending at least three full days each year visiting and being visited in triads – while Spirals of Enquiry offers a more systematic focus on pupil voice. In Surrey, school leaders who had used the Inclusion self-evaluation tool could describe how this had allowed them to identify groups – such as *"our underserved and disadvantaged parents"* (Primary head) – that they would otherwise have missed. In both Sheffield and Milton Keynes, while the school reports are at pilot stages so have not had direct impact, the process of developing them has enabled the development of new collective perspectives on school and locality-wide accountability, with scope for this this to unlock new relationships between schools and parents in the future.

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21 ELP publishes an annual evaluation report – see https://www.egfl.org.uk/elp-services/elp-committees/elp-evaluation Learn Sheffield undertook a one-off evaluation in early 2024 (building on a 2018 peer review led by Dame Christine Gilbert) https://www.learnsheffield.co.uk/Projects/Learn-Sheffield-Evaluation

22 See https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/gcse-attainment-borough/#:~:text=71.2%25%20of%20students%20in%20London,the%20average%20rate%20in%20England

3. Leading across localities: forging local coherence

In this section we draw together the findings, focussing on the overall question which underpinned the evaluation: what are we learning about leading successful locality working?

In the year 1 report, we developed a preliminary response to this question, which was summarised in one page in the executive summary. During Year 2 we showed this summary to many of our interviewees, asking them to reflect on whether this overview captured the key features of successful locality leadership in their view, and anything that was missing. All interviewees judged it to be a good synthesis, though some made additional suggestions. We draw on those insights here, together with our own assessment of the evaluation evidence.

First, locality leadership must always be adapted to the context in which it operates. We do not suggest there is 'one best way' to lead across a locality – not least because there are differences in the positions leaders hold and the work they do: some fulfil statutory functions and could assume a degree of positional authority, others had to rely on volunteers and lateral, network leadership.

In the year 1 report, we argued that local leaders must work to forge coherence in terms of how different partners work together to improve place-based outcomes. We suggested that coherence emerges through complex combinations of collective moral purpose, shared priorities ('a common cause') and integrated ways of working. Throughout the project we observed leaders working to forge local coherence in the face of fragmentation and complexity. In pilot 1 this was most obvious in the work to develop integrated working, in Pilot 2 it was about bringing leaders from the three LAs together to identify 'niches' and strengthen collaboration, while in Pilot 3 it was about being the local 'glue' that held diverse schools and trusts together. The nine locality leaders were clear that forging coherence was a key driver for their work and engagement in the project, although – as the second quote below highlights – it is never really 'done', so requires continuous attention and effort:

> *My view about this project is that it's a wide-angle lens on the system, which gives the system a little bit of coherence and it helps us navigate what is a very fragmented system nationally and helps us to distill what that means for children and families in Rochdale.*
> (Locality lead, Rochdale)

> *The amount of time, effort and energy it takes to forge coherence is just extraordinary.*
> (Locality lead, Ealing)

Coherence was never about tight standardisation or straightjackets – *"you can't do a 'one size fits all'"* (Locality Lead, NTCA). Rather, it was about developing:

- collective moral purpose – local stakeholders have a shared view that 'this locality (still) matters and 'we' have a collective responsibility to ensure that all children here succeed'

- a 'common cause' – a shared priority (or set of priorities) that reflects a well-developed understanding of local challenges (e.g. school attendance) and the issues that underpin them, which galvanises collective action

- integrated ways of working – professionals from different organisations, areas or disciplines collaborate, adopting shared language, systems, processes and/or tools, leading to increased efficiency and effectiveness.

Forging coherence across these three areas required sophisticated skills, qualities and approaches. We show these in Figure 6, in overview, and describe them in more detail below. The use of a Venn diagram indicates how the three areas and the skills, qualities and approaches interact and overlap in complex ways. Although we place each skill, quality or approach in one area, the reality is that most – perhaps all – are cross-cutting. Inevitably, this is a synthesis – we are not saying that all these elements were apparent in all nine localities, rather they played out to different extents and with distinctive emphases in each case.

Figure 6: What are we learning about leading successful locality working?

Collective moral purpose:

Over the past three decades, the education system in England has been subject to various market incentives which encourage competition and local status hierarchies, for example with more and less 'popular' schools.[23] Since 2010 the rollback of LAs and expansion of MATs has driven further system fragmentation, meaning that geographically 'local' identities and arrangements have begun to dissolve.[24] Reducing pupil numbers, tight budgets, recruitment challenges and the sheer pressure of leading schools post-Covid all serves to make local collaboration challenging. Fostering collective moral purpose across a locality in these contexts is complex adaptive work, requiring:

- **Expert collaborative leadership:** As we illustrate throughout this report, the locality leads were seen as credible, expert and trusted role models. Their leadership – together with their delivery teams – was key in shaping the other elements outlined here. They were not ego driven and did not rely on hierarchical power – indeed, as we outline below, their success reflected their ability to facilitate distributed system leadership and curate networks. Equally, they were often described in ways which characterise transformational leadership – being good at horizon scanning and strategic thinking, and being courageous, tenacious and values-driven. We were struck by how often they placed individual and collective values centre-stage, as in this quote: *'relationships, empathy and kindness are core values needed for this work, whilst not losing sight of the end goal'* (Rochdale Lead).

- **A focus on equity and inclusion:** Ensuring that vulnerable learners were prioritised and supported was clearly central to Pilot 1 but was a focus in all nine localities, helping to strengthen shared moral purpose. Examples include the work on child poverty in NTCA, the focus on inclusion in Surrey, and work on the race equality strategy in Ealing.

- **Adapted to scales and contexts:** The pilot leads were expert at scale-jumping – i.e. zooming in and out to consider how hyper-local, local, regional and national contexts interact to impact on children, families and the services that support them. They could operate in and influence 'political' environments, such as a local council or combined authority, but could also work authentically 'on the ground'. They had a deep knowledge of their locality and strong relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, which allowed them to understand different perspectives and to facilitate shared dialogue. A downside of this is that they would be hard to replace – and could not easily translate their approach to a different locality.

- **Children's voice:** Many of the projects were explicitly designed to strengthen children's and/or family/carers' voices, which helped to generate collective moral purpose. Examples included the 'children's take over' of governance boards in Wakefield; student questionnaires in Wiltshire; the use of Spirals

> **"**
> *Many of the projects were explicitly designed to strengthen children's and/or family/carers' voices, which helped to generate collective moral purpose.*

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[23] Greany, T. and Higham, R. (2018), *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks: Analysing the 'Self-Improving School-led System' Agenda in England and the Implications for Schools*, London: UCL IOE Press.

[24] Greany, T., Noyes, A., Gripton, C., Cowhitt, T. and Hudson, G., (2023) *Local learning landscapes: exploring coherence, equity and quality in teacher professional development in England*. University of Nottingham

of Enquiry in Ealing, or the work to test draft school reports with parents and to ensure that pupil and parent views were included in them.

- **Relationships, networks and trust:** David Hargreaves argued that collective moral purpose emerges where professionals work together over time to address shared problems of practice, through which they come to care as much about the children attending the school down the road as they do about the children in their own school.[25] The locality leads not only had high-trust relationships and networks themselves, they were also skilled at fostering these across their localities, through their work to convene and facilitate collaborative events and projects.

Common cause – shared priorities and understandings:

We used school attendance, above, as an example of a shared priority which galvanised collective action in the Pilot 1 localities. The national focus on attendance coupled with the research showing how absence impacts negatively on learning meant that schools were always likely to prioritise this issue. What made it a 'common cause' was how local leaders helped different sectors to see why and how they should contribute to improving school attendance. For example, one LA leader described how they worked with school, social care and public health leaders on this issue together: through which, headteachers came to appreciate how non-attendance impacts on wider outcomes (e.g. obesity), while social care and health leaders saw how regular school attendance could help with issues such as mental health. Shaping a 'common cause' in this way required:

- **Big data and human stories:** All four LAs in Pilot 1 started their work to identify vulnerable children by working to link and analyse 'big data' sets. This helped them to see which groups were falling between cracks, facing

multiple vulnerabilities and/or bouncing between multiple different services – and to agree common definitions and flags for vulnerability, which different providers could adopt and address. Over time, all four came to complement this approach with the 'granular' case study focus on individual children, using these 'human stories' to hold up a mirror to where services were not meeting need and thereby incentivise collective action around a 'common cause'.

- **Continuous co-design – listening and learning:** Co-design was a feature of the work in all nine localities. The locality leaders were adept at drawing on their relationships to bring different stakeholders together to shape and agree new ways of working, often using these to work through challenging issues, such as whether or not to include a school inclusion measure in the report cards. Critically, these co-design sessions did not only occur at the start of a new project or initiative – they were continued in order to support ongoing sensemaking and iterative improvement. The localities adopted different approaches – SAfE started in year 1 with a fully 'bottom up' approach, with volunteer schools facilitated to design their preferred approach to professional accountability, Coventry involved a wide range of local community organisations in its initial consultations, while Wiltshire's Transitions Working Group brought primary and secondary school leaders together. Critically, through these processes, the localities helped diverse professionals to develop shared understandings of the issues, shared ways of describing their new practice and shared systems, processes and tools to support adoption.

- **Sensemaking and feedback loops:** Making progress in these messy and unpredictable environments required individual and collective learning, so that dead ends could

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25 Hargreaves, D. (2010) *Creating a Self-improving School System*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

be identified and abandoned and new approaches agreed and then iteratively tested. Organisational theorist Karl Weick coined the term 'sensemaking' to describe the ways in which key leaders come together to reflect on data and experience.[26] This requires feedback loops – ways of capturing evidence on progress (whether positive or negative), ideally drawing on shared measurement approaches as we outline below. The communities of practice enabled by the LocalEd project provided a key mechanism for sensemaking, but we also saw many examples within the localities, such as the various governance boards, working groups and co-design sessions which involved reflecting on challenges and feedback from stakeholders.

- **Distributed system leadership:** Locality working became most powerful where multiple leaders took ownership of the 'common cause' – recognising they had a role to play in influencing their peers and taking collective action.[27] This ethos was strong in the four 'school-led' partnerships (Pilot 3), where multiple stakeholders described themselves as 'invested' in the partnership. Critically, membership was seen as *"buying into a partnership not purchasing a service."* Distributed system leadership was also essential for integrated working in Pilot 1, where diverse professionals were trusted to

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Locality working became most powerful where multiple leaders took ownership of the 'common cause'.

make decisions about the individual needs of children, without being overly driven by defined rules and protocols. In Pilot 2 the small CA team relied on leaders in the three LAs and middle leaders in schools to unlock 'blockages' and implement change.

Integrated ways of working:

Integrated working was a core focus for the four LAs in Pilot 1, as they sought to ensure that professionals from different organisations and disciplines worked together to meet the needs of vulnerable children, as outlined in section 2.2. We also saw efforts to develop shared language, systems, processes and/or tools (often described as epistemic communities)[28] as key to success in Pilots 2 and 3, since this enabled rapid and meaningful collaboration, and avoided time consuming work to 'reinvent wheels' each time professionals came together. Examples in Pilots 2 and 3 included: the various cross-LA programmes run by NTCA (e.g. Linking Leaders, AEoA accreditation) which helped to develop shared ways of working; the PER and Spirals processes in Ealing, the Inclusion Framework in Surrey and the report cards in Sheffield and Milton Keynes. This involved:

- **Tight-loose – consistency and flexibility:** We argued above that coherence is not about straightjackets and that professionals were trusted to work flexibly in the interests of children, not driven by prescriptive protocols. Getting the balance right between consistency and flexibility was a subtle but hugely important feature of successful integrated working across the localities. One example was Ealing, where the secondary schools did not want to work together in a single cluster or to emulate the primary peer review model: the locality leads accepted this

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26 Weick, K.E. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

27 Cousin, S. (2019). *System Leadership: Policy and Practice in the English Schools System*. London: Bloomsbury.

28 Glazer, J. L., & Peurach, D. J. (2015). Occupational control in education: The logic and leverage of epistemic communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 172–202.

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and worked to agree a different approach which *"(has) still got the same type of ethos about collaboration and learning from each other"*. Balancing tight and loose was a particular feature of the projects which required significant innovation and where wider political change, such as the election of a Labour government committed to report cards, required agility.

- **Shared measurement:** The need for shared measurement fits closely with the approaches to delivery, sensemaking and feedback loops, described above. By defining shared ways of measuring the issues that diverse teams were working to address – such as attendance in Pilot 1 – there was increased scope for collective learning on progress and barriers to success. In Pilot 3, SAfE's school self-evaluation tool provided a common way to assess inclusive practice, while the school reports provide a shared tool for assessing quality and reporting to parents. As we outlined above, the NTCA had not developed a clear shared measurement approach across all strands of its work but was considering ways of doing so in the future.

- **Boundary spanning:** Time and again we heard how 'the locality' was not one thing, but involved multiple different communities, geographies, contexts, organisations, structures, silos and scales. These boundaries – sometimes real, sometimes attitudinal – were commonly at the heart of local tensions and challenges; for example, if some schools or MATs did not participate in local inclusion arrangements, or if some LA service areas were seen by schools to be unresponsive or incoherent. Over the course of the two years we saw how key boundary spanners – individuals who were outward facing but also well-connected to local networks and stakeholders – could help to overcome silos

and move knowledge and expertise around. For example, in Pilot 1, the TAS model relied on having one individual who had a relationship with each young person and could broker in wider early help and support.

- **Commitment and capacity – communication, tools and training:** Scaling up approaches required careful attention to professional learning and support across the localities. This generally involved codifying and translating the learning into systems, processes and tools – and sharing this via formal training and informal learning networks. This work carried risks – that the core values and deep understanding developed by pioneer groups would not carry across into training materials and 'train the trainer' cascade models. While the evaluation included various positive examples, longer-term impact will depend on whether this can be achieved successfully.

- **Delivery and impact focus:** Facilitating networks that feel democratic and shared, but which still make necessary decisions and drive focussed collective action which achieves efficiencies and enhances effectiveness requires sophisticated skills.[29] All nine localities made significant progress with their LocalEd projects, but they also faced challenges: some interviewees argued that too much time was spent going round in circles, some approaches were abandoned or put on hold, delivery was never linear and few projects ended up exactly where they planned. Within this messy reality, local leaders were able to keep stakeholders on board by articulating how progress was being made and how impact would be achieved, while still allowing for flexibility and ownership. In addition, delivery and impact required strong project and programme management to ensure progress on the ground.

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[29] Greany, T., and Kamp, A. (2022) *Leading Educational Networks: Theory, Policy and Practice*. London: Bloomsbury. Cousin, S. (2019).

4. Conclusion

All the localities have made significant progress in relation to their chosen 'common cause', even if that change has not always developed in the ways that were originally anticipated. The fact that all nine localities have remained engaged in the project despite receiving no funding to participate is testament to the commitment of the local leaders and the strength of the LocalEd model, in particular the skills and expertise of the Advisory Team.

We argue that local leaders across England – and, potentially, more widely – can learn from the work outlined here and that it offers some clear implications for national and local policy. These implications include the overarching message that local coherence is important for successful and inclusive educational systems, and that that coherence can be strengthened through relatively low-cost forms of challenge, support and encouragement as provided through LocalEd itself. This could provide reassurance to policy makers about how to overcome the uneven quality of local partnerships nationally.

Equally, there are many more specific implications embedded in this report, such as:

- Where local leaders take time to really focus on granular 'human stories' of individual children, and to understand what these examples tell them about fault-lines in their wider systems and support structures for vulnerable children, this can support transformative change.

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All the localities have made significant progress in relation to their chosen 'common cause', even if that change has not always developed in the ways that were originally anticipated.

- Where a Combined Authority works in collaboration with LAs, trusts, schools and wider partners to identify and address gaps in provision and to connect up professionals across boundaries, this can generate economies of scale and stimulate new ways of working.

- Where local school partnerships take collective ownership of professional accountability, taking time to think through where and how pupil and parental voice can be strengthened or how 'quality' education can best be developed, this can help to overcome some of the perverse outcomes that arise from hierarchical accountability systems.

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