Forum**Strategy**

Reflections on System Leadership in 2025: The Power of Place

Exploring locality leadership for academy trust CEOs and the communities they serve

September 2025

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Executive summary

Following our exploration of system leadership through two papers in 2023 and our third paper focusing on the specific system leadership issue of teacher retention in 2024, this fourth paper builds on this, delving into a critical component of effective system leadership - **locality leadership**. In an education landscape characterised by fragmentation, complex societal challenges, ever-tighter finances and resources, and a growing political emphasis on the potential of 'place', the ability of academy trust leaders to work closely with and through their local communities - generating collective commitment and expertise - has never been more vital. This paper is a call to action for all trust leaders to consider how they empower and enable their local communities to thrive; with a specific focus on CEOs acting as locality conveners to bring key stakeholders together to connect around shared purpose and to deliver shared goals for communities.

In 2023, within our initial system leadership paper, we defined system leadership at CEO/academy trust level as having three key aspects:
- Locality leadership
- Trust to trust support
- Informing policy and national and regional system development

This paper, drawing on the insights of the 2025 Forum Strategy CEO System Leadership Programme's Professional Learning Community (PLC), seeks to define and explore the first element - **locality leadership** - in greater depth and with reference to emerging, impactful examples of practice.

We propose that, in essence, locality leadership is **purposeful, place-based leadership which is deeply rooted in shared moral purpose and collective endeavour to achieve defined outcomes for communities**. It requires a shared and collectively owned vision, collaboration beyond traditional boundaries, and a deep understanding of local context - including where expertise and capacity sits - to address complex challenges and seize opportunities at a local level. Locality leadership represents a fundamental shift from leading an organisation in a place, to leading as part of the fabric of that place.

"Locality leadership represents a fundamental shift from leading an organisation in a place, to leading as part of the fabric of that place."

We explore the essential skills and behaviours required of CEOs and executive leaders, such as curiosity, humility, strategic networking, and the ability to convene diverse partners around a shared, compelling purpose and sense of ambition - whilst taking accountability for outcomes. In Appendix B, we provide a summary matrix as a one-page overview of key behaviours, skills and knowledge that enable effective locality leadership. Through a series of case studies, detailed in Appendix A, we illustrate what this leadership can look like in practice and the positive, tangible impact it can have on children, families, the wider community, the organisation and the education system.

The paper also examines the key enablers and barriers to this work, acknowledging the challenges of time, resources, and a sometimes-unhelpful shifting national political context. However, it concludes that the moral imperative and the potential for profound, positive, sustainable change make locality leadership an essential endeavour for trust leaders and that contributing to locality working should become a core part of trusts' mission and strategy, where it is not already.

Finally, we offer a set of clear, actionable recommendations for trust CEOs and their boards. These are designed to help leaders embed a locality focus within their strategic vision, build the necessary partnerships and capacity, and champion a more place-based approach to accountability and improvement, ultimately ensuring that our schools and trusts are true civic cornerstones of the communities they serve. With thanks to the CEOs who took part in our CEO professional learning community (PLC) and their valued contributions to this paper:

- Jill Messham, CEO, Vantage Academy Trust
- Nick Cross, CEO, King's Group Academies
- Nicole Reid, Executive Principal, New Wave Federation
- Rob Carpenter, CEO, The Inspire Partnership

And with thanks to Alice Gregson, CEO, Forum Strategy, who chaired the group; and to Sarah Ginns, Research Manager for Forum Strategy, for her contributions towards developing this paper.

We also give special thanks to Jonathan Crossley-Holland, Education Researcher and to Jeppe Hansgaard, CEO at Innovisor, for their thought-provoking presentations to the group as they developed the paper

1. Introduction: Why Locality Leadership, Why Now?

In our previous papers, ['What does system leadership look like in 2023 and beyond?'](#)[1] and ['Reflections on system leadership in 2024'](#)[2] we established a clear case and set of recommendations for developing a more collaborative, outward-facing education system. We outlined why the evolution of the academy trust model presents a significant, yet still developing, opportunity for leaders to drive improvement beyond their own organisational boundaries. The growing role of trusts as conveners and enablers of placed-based leadership was first recognised by Forum Strategy in 2019, in sharing the article ['a new narrative for a new decade - academy trusts at the heart of their communities'](#)[3] . Ever since, the sector has built upon this vision, with many more trusts recognising and realising their potential for influencing and improving the wider eco-system within which children and families live and grow.

This paper builds directly on these foundations by focusing on one of the most powerful expressions of system leadership (and one of our three defining areas) - **locality leadership.**

The context and timing for this paper is critical. The education system remains fragmented, and trusts and schools are contending with profound societal challenges, from issues such child poverty and declining mental health, to the impact of significant technological shifts, which cannot be solved in isolation. Simultaneously, finances and resources across the sector (and public services more broadly) are incredibly stretched. Many of these challenges are so complex and far-reaching that they require effective collaboration if they are to be addressed sustainably, efficiently and with a focus on lasting impact.

We are also seeing a policy landscape placing growing emphasis on locality working, evidenced by the introduction of [DfE Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE)](#)[4] teams and a renewed emphasis on the role of local authorities and wider [influential local figures (such as mayors)](#)[5] , indicating a growing recognition that solutions to some of our biggest challenges need to be rooted in local context.

As our CEO Professional Learning Community (PLC) discussions highlighted, with the constraints we have across our sector (and beyond it) on time, resources, funding and capacity, we must strategically and meaningfully collaborate around the development of solutions to complex issues. Building on many people's affinity to place presents an opportunity to come together towards common purpose – empowering communities and creating the opportunity for all to thrive within local areas.

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1   https://forumstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/System-leadership-in-2023-and-beyond.pdf
2   https://forumstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Reflections-on-system-leadership-in-2023.pdf
3   https://forumstrategy.org/a-new-narrative-for-a-new-decade/
4   https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regional-improvement-for-standards-and-excellence-rise/regional-improvement-for-standards-and-excellence-rise
5   https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-growth-plans-england

"Building on many people's affinity to place presents an opportunity to come together towards common purpose - empowering communities and creating the opportunity for all to thrive within local areas"

We need to be clear though that this work is not about adding another task or priority to the ever-growing list of responsibilities for trust leaders. Instead, this is about reframing the role of Chief Executive and trust leader itself. It is an opportunity to move beyond the confines of traditional accountability and limited organisational parameters, to working strategically with local partners in a different way to solve common issues and realise shared opportunities. It is about recognising that our allegiance to 'place' can be a significant enabler and motivator of those around us when supporting our ambitious endeavours.

Considering the multitude of challenges our system faces - from growing SEND demand, recruitment and retention issues, financial constraint, accountability pressures, the influence and impact of technological advancement, and much more; we must recognise that each of these issues (and others) can be better addressed if we identify and unleash the social and professional capital, expertise and capacity that exists within our localities. We must therefore work together strategically across invisible boundaries - be they organisational or otherwise - if we are to address these issues in a sustainable and impactful way. Exploring how this can be done at a local level offers us a way to bring partners together through a shared ambition to improve the lives and experiences of our communities.

Alongside the manifold benefits externally, locality leadership is also a significant enabler internally, particularly around ensuring organisational effectiveness. This is strongly referenced throughout [Forum Strategy's Thriving Trusts](https://forumstrategy.org/thriving-trusts-thinkpieces/)[6] thinkpieces:

"Thriving Trusts are deeply aware and mindful of the educational, social, and economic needs and challenges of their areas, and galvanise social and professional capital around serving the next generation. They often generate public accountability (or pure accountability as we describe it) within their localities to ensure they are delivering upon their vision and commitments, creating a healthy counterbalance to top-down expectations and accountabilities that can otherwise readily dominate agendas. Trusts are also liberated and distant from local party politics and the churn of town hall policies, placing independent trustees and professional people in the position of setting vision and direction. In doing so, thriving trusts involve their schools, staff, pupils and communities on a regular basis, through genuine participation"

Thriving trusts have locality leadership well embedded into all they do, and they see the positive outcomes of doing so - benefits can range from improved outcomes for children and young people through to a more positive reputation among members of the community; from improved recruitment and retention experiences through to widening local partnerships that offer reciprocal support and opportunities.

Alongside, the importance of locality working is also being recognised by those

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6   https://forumstrategy.org/thriving-trusts-thinkpieces/

responsible for inspecting schools. Ofsted, in their new framework proposals reference the importance of local context and area by referring to their plans to include more local contextual data to support inspections and make their own commitment to better understanding communities and locality. Undoubtedly, they will want to see trusts and schools doing the same.

This paper captures the work of Forum Strategy's 2025 System Leadership Programme PLC, which brought together a small group of trust CEOs to explore this theme in depth. It offers a clear definition of locality leadership, outlines the skills and behaviours leaders need to draw upon and build (including a summary matrix in Appendix B for this), showcases some examples of impactful practice, and provides tangible recommendations for leaders seeking to harness the power of place for the benefit of all children and young people.

2. Defining Locality Leadership

Throughout the group's discussions, it became clear that locality leadership is more than just community engagement or the development of local partnerships. It is a deeper, more strategic and purposeful approach that must lead to tangible progress and outcomes for communities. Drawing on the group's work, we propose the following definition with further detail offered below this and case studies to illustrate this in practice:

"Locality leadership is purposeful, place-based leadership which is deeply rooted in moral purpose and collective endeavour to achieve defined outcomes for communities. It requires a shared and collectively owned vision, collaboration beyond traditional boundaries, and a deep understanding of local context - including where expertise and capacity sits - to address complex challenges and seize opportunities at a local level"

Purposeful and place-based: Leadership is intentional and directed towards achieving specific, positive outcomes for a defined geographic community. It requires leaders to fully understand and connect with their local area, its history, its strengths, and its challenges. As the recent report 'Radical Leadership' from New Local [7] suggests, it is about leading the community as well as the organisation – the two are inextricably linked.

Rooted in moral shared purpose with a collectively shared vision: The driving force behind this work is a shared commitment to improving the lives and life chances of people within the locality, particularly children and young people. This moral purpose is the 'hook' that engages diverse stakeholders and provides the resilience to overcome inevitable obstacles and differences in priorities. This moral purpose is underpinned and enhanced by the ethical standards we expect of all public office holders, as articulated in the Seven Principles of Public Life (the Nolan Principles) [8]; the standards can offer a useful basis for shared language and focus when working with a range of public services and sectors. But the purpose (or mission) must also go a

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7   https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/radical-leadership-power-possibility-and-public-service/
8   https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2

step further and be brought to life through a collectively owned vision that identifies and outlines where the community wants to be. Through the vision, clear goals and outcomes are defined that turn the shared moral purpose into a tangible way forward.

Collaboration beyond traditional boundaries: Locality leadership is fundamentally about working with and through others. It requires leaders to act as conveners, facilitators, and enablers across a diverse range of stakeholders. It also requires leaders to create the capacity for collective action and shared endeavour towards the vision, rather than simply being the direct deliverers or acting in isolation. Effective locality seeks to reduce fragmentation and bridge the gaps between different stakeholders and organisations, putting shared purpose at its heart and putting aside feelings of competition and ego.

Understanding local context: Effective locality leaders are well tuned into the complexity of their local landscape. They understand that even within one local authority, different neighbourhoods can have vastly different priorities and dynamics. They listen intently to the lived experiences of children and families to inform their approach. Importantly, leaders seek to understand the local context from the community perspective (not just from their own experiences and assumptions), and they are invitational rather than directive – encouraging the community to share their views, experiences and ideas. They also find ways to identify the range of expertise, skills and capacity on offer across the local area and harness these towards collective endeavour, so that the locality benefits from the widest possible range of expertise and experience.

Locality leadership ultimately represents a shift in mindset. It moves from a position of institutional accountability to one of wider social responsibility, where the success of the trust is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of its wider community.

“Locality leadership moves from a position of institutional accountability to one of wider social responsibility, where the success of the trust is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of its wider community.”

Within the definition of locality leadership, the PLC group expanded further to offer some key principles that can help to guide and underpin locality leadership.

Convening stakeholders: There must be the ability to bring together diverse perspectives - from the police, health services, local businesses, charities and community groups (and more) - and to facilitate a focused dialogue. This often requires a skilled, objective convener who can expertly navigate and overcome any local ‘politics’ or specific agendas. This aspect (and several others) is explored in detail in Section H of our first paper ‘What does system leadership look like in the English education system in 2023’ [9]

Narrative building: Locality leaders need to be able to shape and offer a compelling story to engage diverse stakeholders – this can be particularly powerful when focused

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9   https://forumstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/System-leadership-in-2023-and-beyond.pdf

around building on the community's strengths and its potential. An asset-based, positive narrative is a key enabler for unlocking engagement and securing buy-in. Within this, the narrative needs to be adjustable to different service/sector priorities if it is to resonate with different stakeholders and their viewpoints (for example, the narrative for engaging the NHS will need to reference health benefits and healthier communities and for the police, crime prevention and safer communities).

Capacity building: The principle of empowering and enabling others to act is a vital part of the work. The role of locality leaders is not to do everything themselves, but to identify, coordinate, and to untap capacity and expertise across the locality so that the work is sustainable and well distributed. Given it is unlikely that locality leaders will have formal or direct leadership, management or oversight of those involved, this work requires a different type of leadership - one that motivates and inspires, and one that encourages personal accountability and commitment rather than a 'top down' model from a formalised structure.

Outcomes focused: While the work is collaborative, which in and of itself is a rewarding endeavour, it must be clearly focused on achieving measurable, meaningful outcomes for the community. This means starting the work at an agreed baseline and having a degree of governance and oversight to ensure progress is made and that it is measurable. Pure accountability[10] has a key role in ensuring ownership and commitment here.

3. The Role of the Locality Leader: Skills, behaviours and knowledge

To be as effective as possible, locality leadership requires a distinct set of skills and behaviours. A summary matrix of these aspects can be found in Appendix B, including suggestions on how these can be developed. We also explore this in detail in Section H of our first paper 'What does system leadership look like in the English education system in 2023' [11]

Our PLC group identified the following as being crucial for locality leaders to possess or, to be actively working towards developing. Our case studies offered later in this paper illustrate many of these in practice.

Curiosity, empathy, and humility: A genuine desire to understand the perspectives of others and a recognition that no single person or organisation has all the answers. Approaching the work with a mindset of 'what do I not know yet?' and seeking out opportunities to grow knowledge, understanding and contextual wisdom. Professional generosity: Proactively sharing time, knowledge, resources, and opportunities with colleagues to support their growth and success without necessarily having an immediate personal or direct gain.

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10   https://forumstrategy.org/in-practice-guide-pure-accountability/
11   https://forumstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/System-leadership-in-2023-and-beyond.pdf

Strategic thinking and network building: Having the ability to take a step back to see the bigger picture and to understand the full (and at times complex) contributing factors. A significant part of this is also the ability to utilise the knowledge and expertise of others, seeing or making connections that others don't, and therefore building a robust, diverse network of highly skilled, knowledgeable stakeholders.

Courage and open-mindedness: Approaching the work with bravery to tackle difficult issues, to challenge the status quo and groupthink, and working hard to cultivate an openness to new ideas and ways of approaching things. Having the courage to carve out time to lead on something (and hold oneself accountable within this) where there hasn't been a direct ask or request to do so, but knowing this is the right thing to do for those you serve (pure accountability).

Commitment and resilience: Demonstrating an unwavering dedication to the work and consistently guiding and supporting others to stay on track toward shared goals, even through challenging times and a seemingly endless list of priorities. Within this, developing and deploying effective project management skills to ensure oversight, accountability and delivery.

Community presence: Finding ways to cultivate a visible and authentic presence in the community and a demonstration of long-term commitment to its success. This doesn't need to be in overt ways (such as presentations or large events) - undertaking low profile listening exercises can, for example, demonstrate commitment in more subtle ways and shows an ability to be humble and open to feedback.

Political awareness: Developing and demonstrating astuteness to navigate local and national political contexts without being driven or overly influenced by them. The ability to be politically aware without being overly focussed on this side of things. This also includes the ability to be able to bring in political representation where it is needed and/or make representation to political figures if the work requires it.

Invitational leadership: Intentionally welcoming diverse stakeholders' views, perspectives and ideas and creating the space for them to contribute. The invitation to contribute and to have a level of ownership across the work can help to engage those who ordinarily might not proactively come forward, offering new opportunities to discover new experiences and perspectives. This leadership is not directive in nature and does not draw on formal oversight or management structures; it instead seeks to motivate, inspire and persuade so that individuals feel personally committed and accountable.

Developing knowledge: Acquiring different types of knowledge will be an important part of effective locality leadership and the acquisition of that knowledge needs to be a proactive endeavour. Examples of different areas of knowledge important to this work include:

- Local knowledge of issues (ideally from the perspective of the community or communities themselves)
- National knowledge (often related to legislation, compliance, political landscape)

- Knowledge of networks and influential people (knowing who these people are and using that knowledge to bring them into the work)
- Knowledge of what you don't know – i.e. knowing where you have gaps that need to be addressed

Importantly, in this area, locality leaders do not need to possess all this knowledge themselves but where they don't have the knowledge directly, need to be adept at acquiring it through others.

Putting these principles, skills, behaviours and knowledge into practice requires navigating a complex landscape of opportunities and challenges. The examples detailed later in our report illustrate the powerful impact of effective locality leadership when these aspects are applied successfully. However, the work is not without its challenges.

4. Enablers and Barriers to Effective Locality Leadership

Several key enablers were identified by the group that facilitate success, alongside some significant barriers that can hinder progress. For effective locality leadership to take root, trust leaders need to be able to grow and build on the enabling factors and find ways to mitigate or creatively navigate aspects which may create setbacks. It is important to note in this section that this is not an exhaustive list and there may be other enablers and barriers that relate specifically to particular localities and communities. Those set out below are offered as shared barriers and enablers commonly cited across a range of localities and are worth considering when beginning work that has a locality focus.

"For effective locality leadership to take root, trust leaders need to be able to grow and build on the enabling factors and find ways to mitigate or creatively navigate aspects which may create setbacks"

Enablers to effective locality leadership

A shared, positive narrative: The nature of locality working is such that there will need to be a diverse range of stakeholders brought together to tackle a common challenge. To bring individuals on board there will need to be a story or narrative shared that makes the issues clear and looks at them through different lenses but with a common goal (for example, if we take the issue of community cohesion, the police, NHS and education need to have a shared goal but may need an emphasis on slightly different priorities to bring them to the table and to sustain engagement). Beginning with an asset-based approach that first recognises and celebrates a locality's strengths is a powerful starting point – considering what the locality already does well and building on this to explore how these strengths can be harnessed to support wider areas of need.

Strong partnerships and collaboration: Effective locality leadership is directly related to the quality, depth and diversity of partnerships and collaborative opportunities. Trusts are well placed in this respect as they have often formulated partnerships (formal and informal) over the years as part of the wide range of work and support they provide. The important point here is that this isn't about numbers of partnerships but more about the quality of partnerships – developing relationships that are based on mutual trust and respect and are ultimately sustainable over time. Liz Richardson refers to several factors that enable strong, strategic partnerships in her book 'Nudge, nudge, think, think'[12] including the need to co-design and define a shared problem; gain buy-in and navigate bureaucracy; bridge culture gaps; and ensure trust, communication and clear roles. These factors reinforce the need for proactive, sustained effort in order to secure long-lasting and impactful partnerships.

Strong, focused governance and oversight: For locality working and leadership to be successful, it requires effective systems, processes, and clear lines of accountability and responsibility to be in place. One of the big risks of bringing a range of stakeholders together towards a common purpose, is the loss of engagement and momentum over time. The establishment, upfront, of agreed lines of oversight and responsibility is a key enabler to establishing and then sustaining this work. However, unlike government driven or 'top down' approaches, there may not be any formal lines of accountability to draw on; therefore making motivation, inspiration and personal commitment and accountability central components. This will inevitably mean that an individual(s) will need to take on the role of convener. This role includes not only establishing the common purpose and narrative, key motivations and inspiring 'hooks', and who to bring around the table, but also outlining how agendas, actions and progress will be maintained and captured. In this recent report from the thinktank Reform[13] , they outline the how and why 'hyperlocal governance' could be established in communities, offering a practical framework for how these structures might be established.

Harnessing the potential, skills and capacity of knowledge-rich locality focused organisations: Trusts, as one example, are in a unique position to forge ahead with locality working given the range of expertise, knowledge and, in some cases, capacity they have developed. Leveraging the expertise, systems, and capacity within academy trusts to support wider community initiatives makes sense; and alongside, demonstrates to those who don't understand the benefits of trusts, the unique value they can add to the system and the wider communities they serve. Similarly, there are many other organisations in the locality who are well positioned and can bring a lot to the work in terms of knowledge, capacity and skills. How locality leaders become adept at identifying and then harnessing this potential across the community will be a key determinant of the success of the work.

Maximising trust governance skills, knowledge and structures: One of the unique enablers in trusts is the social and professional capital trust leaders potentially have access to through their Board and through their local governing bodies. These professionals

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12   Liz Richardson et al; Nudge, nudge, think, think: Experimenting with Ways to Change Civic Behaviour; Bloomsbury; September 2011

13   https://reform.uk/publications/local-actually-establishing-hyperlocal-governance-in-england/

are very often drawn from local communities and areas and therefore have a lot of insight, networks and influence to offer in the locality leadership space. We can enhance this by ensuring that when trusts recruit trustees and governors, they seek out those with deep local knowledge and set an expectation from the outset that part of the trustee/governor role is to continue to grow and make use of this knowledge.

Accountability at different levels: When there are different layers of accountability for this work, it can be extremely helpful because it can offer a mutually reinforcing structure for ensuring commitment to the work sustains and outcomes are delivered upon. In practice this would ideally mean being held to account through a range of measures - national measures (e.g. through Ofsted, DfE etc.), trust-level measures (e.g. through the Board and executive) and through one's own personal accountability. The saying 'what gets measured, gets done' often holds true, so having these different levers of accountability can enable the work to be prioritised. However, in reality, it will more likely be the case that this work is self-enabling and self-sustaining - there will be little by way of national level measures to keep focus where it should be. Therefore, the importance of drawing on pure accountability[14] (i.e. measures that you know are the right measures for your children, young people, communities and staff) should be kept at the forefront of the work and utilised as the main lever through which accountability is defined and fully committed to.

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Effective use of technology: A significant enabler to locality leadership is undoubtedly the use of technology and AI to improve communication, build capacity, and alleviate administrative burdens. Technology can be utilised in a number of different ways including cutting down the time spent on manual research and data collection and analysis, supporting communication and collaboration through the utilisation of different platforms, enabling network mapping through software and tools, and it can even support though undertaking particular administrative tasks (such as minute-taking, agenda creation, article writing and such like). When technology is deployed effectively, it can make locality leadership more efficient and much more effective by ensuring that human time, expertise and skill is deployed to where it adds unique value.

Barriers to locality leadership

Time and resource perception: The issue of whether individuals have the time and resources available to become involved with locality focussed work is likely the top barrier locality leaders face. The belief that this work is too time-consuming or costly and that it may detract from other core priorities may make securing engagement from the wide range of stakeholders quite challenging. This links back

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14   "pure accountability is formative accountability at a local level, that puts the end user and the communities we serve in the driving seat of holding our organisations to account; empowering those we serve and work alongside to provide feedback and insights that contribute to the strategic direction, ongoing improvement and responsiveness of our organisations over time." Forum Strategy in Practice Guide: Pure Accountability. 2024

to the importance of storytelling or narrative building to secure buy-in and to see the importance of the work, finding a way to present the work as an enabler to core priorities not as an additional add-on. Clarity around the potential time commitment and roles/responsibilities upfront can also help which links back to the importance of strong project management skills being at the forefront of locality work to keep it on track and well disciplined.

Latent competition: In a context where funding and resources are ever tighter, and a (flawed) perception that 'bigger is better' is often promoted, some trusts and schools can fall into the trap of feeling an element of competition as they endeavour to secure more resources, more funding and potentially an increased profile. This is an element rarely aired or discussed but instead, exists under the surface of some relationships and partnerships. To address this barrier, effective locality leaders will bring these potential feelings of competition into the open, skilfully outlining why collaboration rather than competition serves the local community (and sector as a whole) better. Leaders should facilitate an open and transparent discussion that brings partners and stakeholders to a shared understanding and agreement that latent competition serves as a barrier to effective collaboration and needs to be acknowledged and addressed in order to move forward.

"To address this barrier, effective locality leaders will bring these potential feelings of competition into the open, skilfully outlining why collaboration rather than competition serves the local community (and sector as a whole) better"

A fragmented education landscape: We are working within a system (as we've acknowledged throughout our system leadership papers) that has a range of different structures and competing priorities which can make collaboration more complex. The challenge here is for locality leaders to bring different education stakeholders to the table in a given area – whether from another trust, an LA maintained school, independent school or other structure – finding a way to put the politics of organisational structure aside in favour of collaboration towards a shared purpose and outcome for the community. We know that an underlying sense of competition (as referred to above) has been raised as a significant systemic barrier in many areas, driving the exhibiting of behaviours by some that put the narrow needs of an individual organisation ahead of the betterment of the system. It will be important for locality leaders to acknowledge some of these politics and behaviours while finding a way to bring individuals' focus back to what really matters – serving children and young people and the shared local communities - and shifting priorities to put the potential of shared locality work first, over and above individual level success.

Political and civil service churn: Whilst we acknowledge that for system leadership the focus is firmly on the system itself moving forward together and with shared purpose, the support and enablement from government can significantly help. However, given the relatively short political windows and regular 'churn' between political parties and within the civil service itself, this instability at national and local levels can be a disrupter to long-term relationship building, and locality work needs protecting (as far as possible) against this. Therefore, getting the balance right between seeking

political support and influence where it is needed but ensuring the work does not rely too heavily on government policy, funding or investment is key. In [this report from Locality](https://locality.org.uk/reports/the-locality-manifesto)[15] , they offer a 10-year vision for putting communities at the heart of supporting neighbourhoods to thrive, outlining how the government can play an important role in empowering localities to lead for themselves.

Misconceptions about locality focused work: There can be the view from some areas or organisations that locality work is 'someone else's job' to lead or that it creates a distraction from the core purpose of ensuring high educational standards in schools. Tackling this misconception upfront is critical to securing (and sustaining) engagement. Demonstrating (through research, data and feedback) how some of the issues and challenges across a locality inevitably impact on schools' core purpose and work means more stakeholders are likely to come on board (and stay on board). The work needs to be seen and understood as an enabler to education (and wider sectors') priorities, not as an add-on or additional responsibility.

Funding: While moral purpose is ultimately the primary driver for locality work, a lack of seed funding can be a deterrent for initiating projects. With an incredibly tight public services funding landscape, individuals may struggle to see how work across the locality can take form without a certain level of funding to enable it. It will be important to bring through skills related to innovation and creativity in this area, convincing people that there will be ways and means of sourcing funding that may not be immediately obvious (for example, local business sponsorship or donations or fundraising / crowdfunding routes). The issue around funding should be a key element of developing the work together, but not necessarily something that needs to be in place before the work can begin.

Overcoming the barriers to locality leadership requires a conscious and collective effort. It requires permission and buy-in from Boards for leaders to invest time in this work (and likewise buy-in and permission from leaders for the wider workforce to invest time) and it also requires a commitment to building trust-based relationships that can withstand the pressures of political churn and resource constraints.

5. Recommendations and Ways Forward

For academy trust CEOs and their Boards (as well as others across a trust) to fully embrace their role as locality leaders and to contribute tangibly to their local communities, a deliberate and strategic approach is required. Based on the work of the PLC, we propose the following recommendations for trust leaders:

1. **Embed locality leadership into your strategic vision:** When individual trusts formally commit to this work at an organisational level, it feeds into collective momentum in a local area, as more trusts within the locality begin to contribute to local area priorities. To do this, your trust's core mission, vision, and strategic plan should explicitly articulate a commitment to your community and locality working, the outcomes it will achieve, and how this commitment will be measured, tracked and shared with key stakeholders. This begins with a clear

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15   https://locality.org.uk/reports/the-locality-manifesto

articulation of the role of the ['academy trust at the heart of the community'.](#)[16] Some trusts reinforce this through naming themselves after a local area or a place, others reference this in other ways. More tangibly, unless locality leadership forms a component part of or underpins your trust strategy, it will struggle to gain the traction and long-term commitment it needs.

2. **Champion and embed 'pure accountability':** Have the courage to commit to publicly stated goals and measure success - beyond national data - with a commitment to success for your local area and communities. Work with your community to define what a successful education and healthy development looks like for children and young people in your local areas and hold yourselves and encourage others to hold you accountable to those measures. Be clear on the shared sense of responsibility and ownership in public documents, including clearly outlining the shared goals and measures of success.

3. **Enable a community-focused culture internally:** Embed locality leadership into the roles and responsibilities of staff across your trust, particularly those with leadership responsibilities. Consider including community-focused goals and behaviours into performance reviews and wider line management mechanisms to signal its importance and the expectation that all contribute. Support individuals to find specific community work to become involved in (as some may struggle to know where to start without guidance) - this might include identifying volunteering opportunities (something [explored in detail through Forum Strategy](#)[17] in recent years). T[his example from the Local Government Association](#)[18] offers an example of how key locality leadership skills sets were defined for Councillors as part of their development.

4. **Map and nurture your local network and partnerships:** Actively identify the key stakeholders in your locality. Seek out the people across your communities that have credibility and influence (keep in mind that these may not necessarily be the most senior people) as well as the skills, knowledge, capacity, and experience that you need. Make time to fully understand the breadth and reach of the networks you have and consider where your gaps might also be. Trusts should consider formally mapping their networks (including the skills and expertise these networks bring) and then developing a clear plan for engagement with critical stakeholders. CEOs could consider serving on other local boards (e.g., other trusts, local authority boards, local business boards) to build connections and understanding.

5. **Emphasise the importance of representative and robust governance:** The trust board and local governing bodies should draw from and reflect the communities you serve as far as possible. The chair should consider making this a deliberate recruitment strategy to ensure local nuance and perspective are at the heart of decision-making at a governance level, without compromising the need for deep professional experience and expertise. Encourage and support your trustees and governors to share their community knowledge and ideas and

16 https://forumstrategy.org/a-new-narrative-for-a-new-decade/

17 https://forumstrategy.org/members-masterclass-maximising-the-potential-of-volunteers-to-support-thriving-trusts/

18 https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-leadership-framework-councillors#local-leadership-skill-sets

to harness their connections with local groups and experts to the benefit of the trust and its place-based efforts.

6. **Advocate for and contribute to system change:** Don't wait for change to happen. Proactively use your role, voice and influence as trust leaders to call for and lead the changes you want to see. This includes aspects such as pushing for the recognition of locality-based work within national accountability frameworks (e.g., Ofsted inspections) and being clear on the need for more open, consistent access to anonymised local data from the government to better identify and address local needs. Use a range of routes and platforms to make your voice heard – writing to local MPs and government representatives, sharing ideas and reflections on social media, joining networks and groups to challenge and shape thinking. When seeking government level support or seeking to have 'a seat at the table' for particular groups, remember to 'intrigue upwards' so that those in influential positions take notice of your work and see the impact you are having on key issues.

7. **Proactively inform RISE teams and DfE strategic leads:** The new DfE RISE teams have a significant role to play across localities alongside DfE strategic leads. Trust leaders should find ways to engage proactively with the teams, highlighting local issues and intelligence and sharing helpful practice that can be built upon and/or replicated elsewhere. Encourage these teams to have a role in providing support for locality-related work and challenge them to provide a context-appropriate universal offer that recognises the importance of place.

Ultimately, effective locality leadership can create ripples of positive influence. It has the potential to address many of the most pressing issues facing schools - from attendance, behaviour and inclusion to staff wellbeing - by creating a strong sense of belonging, not just for children and young people, but for everyone across a school and local community. This is where the potential (and track record) of the work of many trusts really comes into its own, and we must seize the opportunity to demonstrate this clearly. Many trusts have been at the very heart of their communities for years (as the examples in our case studies below demonstrate), so let's build on these successful foundations to fully realise the potential of effective locality leadership.

"Many trusts have been at the very heart of their communities for years so let's build on these successful foundations to fully realise the potential of effective locality leadership."

Appendix A: Examples of locality leadership in practice

The following examples, shared by members of the PLC, illustrate the powerful impact of effective locality leadership in practice.

Case Study 1: Gosport Community Hub – King's Group Academies (KGA)

Gosport, like many areas, has faced long-standing challenges in unemployment, levelling up, educational equity, community engagement, and youth aspiration. Historically the education landscape has been divided, with many children experiencing a limited curriculum which has been reflected in performance measures. This historic narrowing of educational focus often excluded subjects and experiences vital for personal growth, cultural awareness, and community identity.

Locality leadership is about leading with and through the community not just for it and is something that has been a significant part of the collaboration of schools in KGA Gosport for several years. It involves harnessing local knowledge, values, and partnerships to co-design and deliver opportunities and a curriculum that reflects and serves the community's unique needs and strengths.

In Gosport, this has meant Headteachers have 'self-convened' and have been working across schools rather than in isolation. Inviting businesses, youth organisations, and cultural groups into the heart of curriculum planning. Ensuring that education became a shared civic mission and not just the responsibility of its schools. Specifically, the creation of the community hub has involved:

1.Community Forums and Partnerships

School leaders initiated forums bringing together local businesses, voluntary organisations, youth services, and health professionals and two years ago, established the Gosport Community Hub to continue this vital work. This created significant funding opportunities, alignment across sectors and gave the community a collective voice in shaping the journey of local children in the town.

2. Bridging Education with Cultural Capital

Schools actively partnered with local sports clubs, theatres, and youth groups to reintroduce students to cultural experiences they had been missing out on. Access to these opportunities was deliberately designed to be equitable, ensuring all children, regardless of background, could benefit. The curriculum previously has included 'real-life', values-based learning that engages students. Schools in the past have worked together to design a shared curriculum that reflects Gosport's local identity, challenges, and opportunities. So it was important to build on this.

3. Regenerating Aspiration

By framing education as a preparation for life and now offering Opportunity and Success on a Global Stage, school leaders continue to raise aspirations not only among young people, but also among generations of Gosport families and the wider town.

The impact of locality leadership in Gosport has been manifold. Schools have worked hard to ensure there are no silos or isolated institutions. They strive to be hubs of civic connection and collaboration. Children experience a better, richer, more relevant curriculum that values who they are and where they come from. The joined-up, purposeful work has opened doors to new partnerships and funding streams that would not have been possible in silos and have gained national recognition for this in multiple platforms, including a visit from the HRH Princess Royal, awards, increased work with national organisations, and taking part in national studies. Gosport continues to shift from a narrative of limitations to one of opportunity and success on a local and global stage not just for students, but for the whole community.

The key learning points around locality work are that local leadership only works when it's collective. No single school or leader can drive sustained local change alone. Partnerships are the key to momentum and sustainability. Community partnerships turn vision into action. In Gosport, progress accelerated when schools invited others in, not just to consult, but to co-create. Leadership is about more than roles - it's about purpose; rooted in values driven leadership at all levels and demonstrating Honesty, Courage and Faith in every school's endeavours. A local strategy can also unlock global relevance. By focusing on community, Gosport's progress has been showcased to wider education conversations nationally and internationally.

Content and data provided by Kings Group Academies (July 2025)

Case study 2: Collaborative STEM Development Across Local Schools: ENTHUSE Projects – King's Group Academies (KGA)

The trust applied for and led two ENTHUSE Partnership projects funded by STEM Learning, following a recommendation from the Solent Local Education Partnership (LEP). These projects were designed to improve STEM provision and outcomes across multiple schools in Gosport - not just those within the trust.

The initiative focused on raising attainment in Maths and Science, strengthening pedagogy, and enhancing real-world STEM learning through enriched CPD, curriculum time, and engagement with employers. Gosport, an area of significant deprivation, faced systemic underperformance, especially in Maths where pupils were 10% below the national average. The ENTHUSE programme provided a platform to address this through shared leadership, capacity building, and a strong locality focus.

The Executive Headteacher of King's Academy Gomer and King's Academy Rowner led the secondary ENTHUSE projects, drawing on her role and experience as Executive Headteacher and a local leader across multiple schools. She co-led the Primary ENTHUSE Partnership with King's Academy Gomer's Associate Headteacher. While KA

Gomer's KS2 STEM model had gained national recognition (RAEng, Real World Institute and a TES STEM team of the Year Award), this project enabled the scale-up of good practice beyond the trust and to tailor support for other local schools at varying stages of development.

Some of the key behaviours and leadership approaches included:

- Cross-phase collaboration, with leadership teams from Early Years to KS4.
- Strategic facilitation of CPDL across multiple schools and settings.
- Equity-focused thinking, ensuring all schools accessed tailored support regardless of baseline.

Barriers were overcome through trust-building and shared ownership of success. Crucially, each school's identity was respected while enabling collective growth, co-planning, and shared learning experiences. The project avoided "top-down" replication and instead focused on adaptation and enhancement.

In terms of impact, teachers from all the schools involved across the local area engaged in sustained STEM-focused CPDL, with time allocated for co-planning and reviewing impact. Curriculum time was protected in several schools for STEM teaching, including half-day weekly timetables in some primary schools and dedicated Y7 STEM slots in secondary. There was increased cultural capital for learners through STEM-themed enrichment, e.g. the Dendrite Glider competition, BAE Roadshow, QinetiQ boat building and partnerships with the University of Portsmouth and industry professionals.

The programme raised aspiration and attainment, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, by embedding engineering, design, and mathematical reasoning into meaningful, contextualised projects.

The key learning points from this work were that local leadership unlocks collaborative energy when it's built on trust, respect, and shared ambition - not imposed models. Investment in time, co-planning, and shared CPD is essential for genuine pedagogical change. Success is amplified when strong practice is scaled outwards, not just upwards. Sustainability remains a challenge that needs continued work - ongoing funding and dedicated staffing are essential for embedding impact long term.

Content and data provided by Kings Group Academies (July 2025)

Case study 3: Addressing Youth Violence in Hackney's Shoreditch Locality – New Wave Federation

Shoreditch, within the London Borough of Hackney, had seen a concerning rise in youth violence, particularly incidents involving knife crime and gang-related activities, over an 18-month period. This wasn't confined to a single area but manifested across various public spaces, impacting community safety and the well-being of young people. The challenge was multifaceted, involving issues including disengagement, a lack of safe spaces, information silos and community fear.

Locality leadership was crucial in bringing together disparate efforts and resources to tackle this complex issue holistically. Instead of top-down directives from the council, the focus shifted to empowering local stakeholders to co-create solutions.

Locality leadership was a collaborative effort, not solely vested in one individual. It was initially catalysed by a proactive Ward Councillor for Shoreditch who had deep community ties and a strong understanding of the local dynamics. She co-led with a Head of Community Safety for Hackney Council, who brought strategic oversight and access to council resources, and crucially, a respected local youth worker (e.g., Marcus "MJ" Jones, who ran a small community youth project) who had direct credibility and trust with young people. This triumvirate formed the core of the locality leadership.

Convening Power: The Councillor and Head of Community Safety used their roles to convene regular, inclusive meetings. These weren't just formal council briefings, but active workshops held in community centres, inviting a wide range of stakeholders: local police sergeants, school headteachers and pastoral leads, youth service providers, local charities, faith leaders, parents' groups, and most importantly, young people themselves (through existing youth forums and outreach).

Shared understanding: The initial phase focused on building a shared understanding of the problem through data (crime statistics, school exclusions) but also through qualitative insights from young people and community members (e.g., mapping unsafe areas, understanding root causes of disengagement).

Solutions: The local leadership team facilitated discussions to move from problem identification to solution generation. Instead of presenting a predetermined plan, they challenged attendees to identify local assets and resources that could be mobilised.

Clear, localised goal: The common goal became: "To significantly reduce incidents of youth violence in Shoreditch by increasing positive engagement opportunities and strengthening local support networks for young people by a set date". This was then translated into actionable, localised priorities.

The presence of the youth worker was instrumental in building trust with young people and ensuring their voices were heard authentically, not just in a tokenistic way. The Councillor's deep community links ensured parent and resident concerns were integrated. The skills and behaviours that enabled this work included:

Active listening: The leaders genuinely listened to all perspectives, even dissenting ones, creating an environment where everyone felt heard.

Facilitation and mediation: Skilfully managing diverse group dynamics, mediating disagreements, and steering discussions towards constructive outcomes.

Empowerment: They empowered local groups to take ownership of specific actions rather than dictating.

Flexibility and adaptability: Willingness to adjust plans based on new information and community feedback.

Resourcefulness: Identifying and leveraging existing local assets (e.g., underutilised community halls, volunteer networks).

Advocacy: The Councillor and Head of Community Safety advocated within the council for necessary resources and policy changes to support the locality's initiatives.

Persistence and optimism: Maintaining momentum and belief in the collective ability to make a difference despite setbacks.

The impact achieved as a result of effective locality leadership was that within 18 months, the Shoreditch locality saw significant positive changes including:

Reduced Incidents: A 25% reduction in reported youth violence and knife crime incidents within the Shoreditch ward, as measured by police data.

Increased positive engagement: Establishment of three new after-school clubs in local community centres, run by local volunteers and youth workers, offering diverse activities (e.g., coding, music production, sports, mentoring).

Renovation and extended opening hours for a previously underutilised multi-use games area (MUGA) in a local park, making it a safe and well-lit space.

Increased participation in local youth outreach programmes and mentoring schemes by 40%.

Stronger networks: Creation of a formal "Shoreditch Youth Forum," providing a regular platform for young people to voice concerns and contribute to solutions.

Improved information sharing: Regular inter-agency briefings between police, schools, and youth services, leading to earlier identification of at-risk young people and more coordinated support.

Enhanced community trust: Residents reported feeling safer and more confident in the local authorities' ability to address youth violence.

The key learning points taken from this were the following. Shared ownership is paramount - locality leadership thrives when the community feels a sense of ownership over the problem and its solutions. Top-down approaches often fail to gain traction. Diverse leadership is stronger - don't rely on a single leader. A collaborative leadership model involving formal authorities (e.g., councillors, council officers) and credible community leaders (e.g., youth workers, faith leaders) builds broader trust and expertise. Listening is key - genuine active listening to all stakeholders, especially those most affected by the challenge (e.g., young people), is critical for understanding the true root causes and identifying effective, sustainable solutions.

Leveraging local assets has also been key - every community has hidden strengths and resources (people, spaces, existing groups). Effective locality leadership identifies and mobilises these assets rather than solely relying on external funding or new initiatives. It's also important to focus on relationships first - before action plans, invest time in

building strong relationships and trust among stakeholders. This social capital is the foundation for collective action, especially on sensitive issues.

It's vital that work celebrates small wins by acknowledging progress, however small, to maintain momentum. Leaders need to be prepared to be flexible and adapt strategies based on continuous feedback and evolving local dynamics. And finally, don't forget the importance of 'Data + Lived experience'. Combine quantitative data with qualitative insights from lived experience to get a comprehensive picture of the challenge and the impact of interventions.

Content and data provided by New Wave Federation (July 2025)

Case Study 4: Edlington Regenerative Neighbourhoods – Exceed Learning Partnership

The Exceed Learning Partnership has a track record for turning around struggling schools. Over the years, they have turned around some of the region's most stubborn and hardest to improve schools, ensuring that every child, regardless of background, has access to a high-quality education.

However, driven by moral purpose and their trust mission: "Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day" the trust also understands that schools alone cannot tackle the wider societal challenges that impact negatively on children and young people.

The trust, working closely with school leaders from Edlington Victoria Academy and a range of local service providers, embarked on a wide-ranging strategy to tackle some of the community's deepest challenges that were impacting children's life chances. The trust understood that for young people to thrive, they need safe communities, stable homes, opportunities, and strong support networks.

The challenges facing Edlington were manifold and included:

- Edlington has deep-rooted challenges, and the impact of COVID-19 has only widened the gaps for many families:
- 81% of parents are in the 0-10% most deprived for education and skills, meaning that many children start school significantly behind their peers.
- Many pupils enter Nursery without being toilet trained, with delays in social, emotional, and cognitive skills.
- Hunger is a real issue - many children come to school without having eaten, affecting their ability to focus and learn.
- High levels of anti-social behaviour, crime, and domestic abuse in the Royal Estate mean that children are living in difficult, and often unsafe, environments.

As Beryce Nixon OBE (CEO of Exceed Learning Partnership) describes:

"We knew that real change wouldn't happen overnight - but we also knew that with the right approach, we could make a real difference. This led to the creation of the Edlington Regenerative Neighbourhoods Programme. As we moved forward with the Regeneration Programme, it became clear that to create real, lasting change, we

needed a focused, structured approach. Through extensive local engagement and analysis, four key priority areas emerged as the foundation of our Local Delivery Plan."

"These four areas shape the day-to-day actions of our programme, ensuring that we target resources effectively and create tangible impact across Edlington" The four areas were:

1. **Safer Communities –** Tackling crime, anti-social behaviour, and ensuring community safety through enforcement, prevention, and stronger local policing partnerships.
2. **Housing & Environment –** Addressing derelict properties, improving green spaces, and enhancing the built environment to create a cleaner, more liveable community.
3. **Children & Families –** Strengthening early years support, improving school readiness, and developing pathways that ensure young people can thrive from cradle to career.
4. **Community Engagement & Well-being –** Placing local voices at the centre, empowering residents, and investing in leisure, health, and social initiatives that bring people together.

This Local Delivery Plan provides structure, but it remains flexible and responsive - able to evolve as new challenges and opportunities arise. Each area is underpinned by collaboration across agencies, ensuring joined-up thinking and a sustained, long-term approach to regeneration.

Through deep engagement with the community, the trust and local delivery partners identified five key priorities:

1. **Royal Estate Renewal –** Tackling crime, housing dereliction, and environmental decline.
2. **Children & Family Zone –** Creating a 'cradle to career' framework to ensure every child can reach their potential.
3. **New Leisure Centre –** A long-standing community priority to improve health and well-being.
4. **Future Parks & Edlington Pit Wood –** Investing in green spaces to enhance well-being and community life.
5. **Community Engagement & Empowerment –** Placing residents at the heart of decision-making and strengthening local organisations.

These priorities shaped what the group has done, ensuring that the right resources are directed to the areas of greatest need. To drive this work forward, they established the Edlington Delivery Board in January 2023. This brought together: local schools, the Town Council, community organisations, and Team Doncaster partners. Having this structure ensured a strong collaborative structure to ensure real action and accountability and a long-term approach that put residents in control of their community's future.

The work of the delivery board was underpinned by three key mechanisms:

1. Tasking Group – Addressing immediate concerns such as crime, housing issues, and environmental clean-ups.
2. Clear, Hold, Build Strategy – A Home Office framework to disrupt serious organised crime and strengthen community resilience.
3. Local Solutions Group – A multi-agency team ensuring early intervention and safeguarding.

In terms of impact, this has been wide-reaching. Every two months, the group meets to review progress, ensuring they are on track and continue to drive meaningful change. Already there is strong evidence that the plan is working with impact measures including:

• Crime rates are falling, with increased visibility of law enforcement and community action.
• Housing conditions are improving, with derelict properties being secured.
• Community spaces are being revitalised, including new green space projects and clean-up initiatives.
• Children's opportunities are expanding, with better early years support and stronger educational outcomes.

Reflecting on this work and the role the school and trust has played as a convener of community regeneration, Beryce comments: "This isn't just about buildings and statistics. This is about real children and their futures. The way children play and interact has changed - screen time has skyrocketed, social skills have declined, and too many young people lack safe, engaging spaces to be active. That's why we are investing in Forest Schools, new leisure facilities and MUGA pitches - we are creating a community where children can thrive beyond the classroom."

The results are clear from local level data:

• Academic outcomes are improving, exceeding both Doncaster and national averages.
• Attendance has risen to 96.1%, 1.3% above national levels.

"Children choose to come to our schools because they feel safe, supported, and inspired. When you invest in a child's environment, safety, and well-being, you transform their education and future prospects."
Content and data provided by Exceed Learning Partnership (July 2025)

Case Study 5: Family Support Market Day Delce Academy – Inspire Learning Partnership

Following a particularly challenging community incident which spilled into the school environment, the headteacher from Delce Academy, supported by the chair of trustees, worked closely with the local ward councillor (Councillor Murray) to organise a community event which brought together a range of service providers and health

charities to help provide better access to support services for families across health, play and education. This event was well attended by families as it was located in their community (the school) and met family's needs on their terms.

The CEO held a meeting with the local ward councillor to raise awareness of how poor access to community support services was impacting negatively on how some parents perceived relationships between home and school. The discussions extended between the chair of trustees, headteacher and the local authority to explore how to work together to ensure families had better access to information and build stronger relationships between service providers, the school and community. The decision was made to hold a 'Market Day' event where a range of service providers came into the school community to work directly with families.

In his evaluation report, the headteacher, Michael Harris described the event as a resounding success, bringing together a diverse range of organisations that provided invaluable resources and information to families. Michael Harris commented that:

"The breadth of services represented, from educational support to health and well-being, was truly impressive and met a real need. We were particularly delighted to see the positive interactions between the organisations and the families who attended."

"The feedback we received from the children and parents was overwhelmingly positive. They highlighted the event's helpfulness, the engaging atmosphere, and the sense of community spirit it fostered. It was wonderful to see so many people connecting and supporting each other."

This event marked a significant step towards strengthening relationships, establishing the school as a trusted partner for residents to access vital services. It showcased the power of collaboration and the positive impact that can be achieved when we work together. It has laid a strong foundation for future initiatives and partnerships.

Critically, the relationship between the ward councillor and community leaders was crucial in understanding issues that families were experiencing. The headteacher and chair of trustees, in recognising the need to convene and broker support from Councillor Murrey, played a pivotal role in bringing together an event which has built trust and deepened the home school partnership, supported by the local authority.
Content and data provided by Inspire Learning Partnership (July 2025)

Case Study 6: Embedding locality leadership into the trust strategy – Vantage CE MAT

In 2024, following the appointment of a new CEO Vantage CE MAT, a trust of 10 thriving schools in the Northwest, co-produced a new strategy with leaders across the organisation. Building on the success of the MAT and the conditions of high trust and deep collaboration that had been established since its inception in 2012, and navigating some uncertain times, it was timely to set a new strategic direction that reaffirmed the trust's mission to: 'support and sustain a community of exceptional schools that serve their communities well and deliver an excellent education which

enables children and young people to enjoy life in all its fullness.'

Having witnessed firsthand the power of co-collaboration of a strategic plan through work in local government, the CEO was keen to establish a MAT strategy that was co-constructed by all leaders in the organisation, cultivating shared purpose and enabling leaders at all levels to move beyond passive implementation toward active stewardship.

Creating a strategic plan in this way brought a diverse range of talents and perspectives together, it transformed moral purpose into collective action and clarified the role we all have in improving the lives of the children and communities we serve. It also created a culture shift within the organisation and has generated a tangible sense of impact and purpose across trust schools and teams.

Three core pillars have been identified as foundational tenets of the trust's vision and ambition, each shaping the strategic priorities and guiding collective purpose:

Pillar 1
Great Schools: Operating in 5 geographical hubs, the trust's family of exceptional schools will provide a world class education. Vantage students will excel academically and socially; flourish spiritually, morally, and emotionally and develop the social capital required to thrive now and in the future.

Pillar 2
Great People: Exceptional schools need exceptional people. The trust aims for every Vantage school to be the destination of choice for pupils, parents, and professionals; operating as trusted and responsible partners and employers in the communities served. To achieve this, the trust will recruit and retain the very best, invest in their development and create innovative and flexible working practices fit for the 21st century and beyond.

Pillar 3
Great Communities: At Vantage, allegiance to place and community matter. The trust's ambition is to work collaboratively with trust schools and other stakeholders, leading place-based work that seeks to eradicate socio-economic barriers to learning, promotes a strong sense of belonging and fosters strong ambition for all.

Each pillar is also aligned to a trust value, combining strategic vision and a codification of behaviours that bring to life the core values of togetherness, aspiration and service.

Intelligence gathering through self-evaluation, school visits, conversations with Local Advisory Boards, central team staff and workshops, attended by school leaders, chairs of LABS, trustees and heads of central services, captured the lived experiences of those working in the trust and allowed an assets-based approach to be taken to trust development, developed a shared language and approach, crystalised vision and ambition whilst also retaining a sense of operational reality.

A 'Guided Group' for each pillar, led by an Executive leader (to ensure collective ownership across the executive team, rather than being led by the CEO) has helped

to shape and develop the trust wide strategy into clear priorities and developmental actions. This inclusivity of a broad range of leaders – from schools, to HR, to finance and estates has fostered deeper buy-in and psychological investment, a recent peer review noted 'There is a genuine sense of belonging to something bigger among staff, pupils, and leaders, with shared mission and values felt across all levels. In a shared view in one school, one teacher stated, "It feels like we're all on the same page."

This co-constructed strategy is transforming leadership from a top-down function into a dynamic network of collaborative influence. The Peer Review also noted: 'Vantage Academies Trust has made impressive strides in demonstrating its values of Aspiration, Service, and Togetherness. The commitment to placing schools "at the heart of their communities" is evident in the strategic choices made and the lived experiences of pupils and staff. While some systems and structures are still embedding, the trust has created the conditions for continuous improvement through a culture of empowerment, relational leadership, and high expectations.'

A closer look at Pillar 3: Great Communities

Great communities are important to Vantage CE because they align with the trust's values and ambitions to create inclusive, thriving environments that support the educational and social development of children and families and serve our communities well.

Specifically, this pillar promotes:

1. **Allegiance to Place:** The trust's mission and vision emphasise the importance of schools being deeply rooted in their local communities, fostering a culture of belonging and civic responsibility. As a CE MAT it is important that all the schools retain their distinctiveness – and alignment to locality is one way this can be achieved.

2. **Eradicating Socio-Economic Barriers:** Based in the Northwest of England, and working across 5 local authorities, the trust serves a diverse set of communities. Many children live in areas that are at the sharp end of economic turbulence and multi-generational poverty. The trust seeks to take a holistic approach to improving outcomes for children and recognises the power of education in breaking down generational poverty and disadvantage, and the importance of collective convergence and partnership working to address barriers to success. The trust has a forensic focus on 'smashing glass ceilings' in all that it does.

3. **Community Impact:** It is the trust's absolute belief that by working deliberately and collaboratively with stakeholders, they can a much greater influence on local communities, providing services, opportunities, and support that extend beyond education, and ensure not only that school buildings and the communities within and around them are maximised as a resource for all, but that the community we serve recognises our schools as safe havens and nurturing environments.

4. **Environmental Responsibility:** The trust's Great Communities pillar takes seriously the trust's role as partners in advancing the climate change agenda,

with the ambition that the schools serve as agents of change through environmentally friendly practices.

5. **Charitable and Social Action:** Vantage CE values the role of communities in fostering social action, charitable activities, and student-led initiatives that contribute to societal well-being.

6. **Strengthening Relationships:** The trust believes that strong communities help build resilient organisational structures, improve educational outcomes, and create a supportive environment for students, staff, and families.

7. **Expand Strategic Partnerships:** The trust collaborates with local authorities, the DfE, and other organisations to support schools in need, participate in Priority Area work and enhance services available to children and families through working proactively with Children's Social Care.

Ultimately, great communities are integral to Vantage CE's mission of delivering excellent education and enabling children and young people to thrive as global citizens.

In summarising all of this…

Strategic Challenge Addressed: Vantage CE MAT sought to address entrenched socio-economic barriers to learning and the need for stronger place-based collaboration across its school communities. The challenge centred on fostering belonging, ambition, and equitable access to enrichment opportunities for children and families.

Lead Conveners and Governance: The strategy was convened by the Trust's Executive Leadership Team, led by CEO Jill Messham, in consultation with school leaders, trustees, and community stakeholders. Governance oversight was provided by the Trust Board, with input from locality-based advisory bodies.

Primary Aim and Launch Approach: The main aim was to embed community allegiance and place-based leadership into the trust's strategic framework. The work was initiated through a series of locality workshops, stakeholder surveys, and strategic planning sessions, culminating in the formal adoption of Pillar 3: Great Communities within the Trust Strategy.

A 'soft' implementation of the strategy commenced in 2024, and updates have been provided through highlight reports and CEO / Trust termly newsletters. The trust strategy will be published publicly in September 2025 once re-branding work has been completed.

Planned activities include:

- Mapping community assets for each locality we serve, identifying key delivery partners and fostering deep collaborative relationships.
- A mandate for leaders across the organisation to join community/charitable boards and forums, demonstrating professional generosity and community advocacy with a commitment to 'time-back' within the working day from the trust whenever possible.

- Consideration of the repurposing of school facilities for broader community use – including the development of a community café, and school-based clothes/food banks.
- The provision of purposeful training for trust and non-trust delegates on the power of relational practice, and importance of civic duty.
- Horizon scanning culture - Case studies and impactful examples of community action included in the CEO newsletter raising awareness across the Vantage community of the work of others outside of the trust.
- Trust schools already partner with private providers to deliver summer schools or use their own staffing structures to offer summer camps, weekend clubs, a trust letting team is in place and a mapping exercise is planned to explore how local partnerships can further extend this work.
- A review of school curricular will also consider how student led social advocacy can be embedded into The Vantage Standard and lead to societal change and impact, and the establishment of trust-wide student philanthropic programs.
- Establishment of Forest school provision in every primary school and a business model that enables usage by communities.

Early Impact and Measures: Whilst in its early stages of implementation feedback from staff indicates a growing sense of belonging and shared purpose across the Trust's neighbourhoods.

Content and data provided by Vantage CE MAT (July 2025)

Some wider short examples of locality leadership

Bridgend Farmhouse Community Project – Edinburgh
In Edinburgh, the Bridgend Farmhouse Community Project transformed a derelict 18th-century farmhouse into a vibrant community hub. Initiated in 2010 by local residents, the project aimed to create a space for community development, learning, and social engagement. They formed a grassroots community group that undertook extensive community consultation and collaboration to shape the vision.

Through extensive community consultations, the group secured funding from various sources, including the Big Lottery Fund and Historic Environment Scotland. In 2015, the City of Edinburgh Council transferred ownership of the property to the community for £1, marking one of Scotland's first urban asset transfers. The restored farmhouse now hosts workshops, training courses, and events, fostering community cohesion and providing opportunities for active citizenship.

The leadership remained firmly community-based, although they partnered with local and national funders and support organisations throughout the process: https://www.bridgendfarmhouse.org.uk/ [19]

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19   https://www.bridgendfarmhouse.org.uk/

Granby Four Streets – Liverpool

In Liverpool's Toxteth area, the Granby Four Streets project revitalized a neglected neighbourhood through community-led efforts. Residents formed the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust (CLT) to combat decades of decline. They purchased vacant properties for £1 each from the council and, with support from partners like HMS Housing Solutions and Liverpool Mutual Homes, renovated them using low-cost materials. The CLT also acquired derelict shops, transforming them into functional spaces. This grassroots initiative not only improved housing conditions but also fostered a sense of ownership and pride among residents, serving as a model for community-driven urban regeneration: https://www.granby4streetsclt.co.uk/[20]

City of Peterborough Academy & HumanUtopia: Empowering Student Leadership

At the City of Peterborough Academy, a partnership with the social enterprise HumanUtopia was established to cultivate student leadership and community engagement. Through the "Heroes" programme, students were trained to mentor peers, support transitions between key educational stages, and act as positive role models. This initiative emphasised the development of self-efficacy, resilience, and communication skills among students. Importantly, the programme extended its impact beyond the school by involving parents and carers, fostering a holistic approach to community development. The sustained, iterative nature of the programme ensured that students became active agents of change within their communities: https://www.humanutopia.com/case-studies/elevating-social-and-emotional-learning-at-city-of-peterborough-academy/[21]

Tendring Primary School Wellbeing Hubs – Essex

In Tendring, Essex, a collaborative initiative was launched to support children's mental health and well-being through the establishment of wellbeing hubs in 33 primary schools. This partnership involved Tendring District Council, local schools, the NHS, the University of Essex, and various community organisations. The hubs operate as after-school clubs providing structured support to children, focusing on building resilience, self-esteem, and addressing issues like anxiety. Parents are also engaged through sessions on topics such as nutrition, sleep, and developing resilience. The NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service supported the pilot phase, while organisations like Virgin Healthcare and Interact contributed by delivering nutrition sessions and mental health first aid training, respectively. The University of Essex conducted project evaluations to assess impact. Qualitative outcomes have shown that participants feel more resilient, equipped, and empowered, with increased participation in after-school activities: https://www.districtcouncils.info/tendring-primary-school-wellbeing-hubs/[22]

20   https://www.granby4streetsclt.co.uk/
21   https://www.humanutopia.com/case-studies/elevating-social-and-emotional-learning-at-city-of-peterborough-academy/
22   https://www.districtcouncils.info/tendring-primary-school-wellbeing-hubs/

Appendix B: Skills, behaviours and knowledge to enable locality leadership

Individual level (personal attributes and mindsets)	Organisation level (leading from within)	Wider community level (engaging outwardly)
1. Curiosity, empathy, and humility A genuine desire to understand others' perspectives and a recognition that no single person or organisation has all the answers. Drawing on a range of perspectives, ideas and intelligence to better understand issues **How to develop it:** • Ask more questions • Be invitational • Listen more • Share what you don't know	**6. Locality leadership is embedded into the vision** The trust's core mission, vision and strategic plan explicitly articulates a commitment to the community, with clear metrics and tracking mechanisms **How to develop it:** • Bring the Board with you and ensure they develop ownership of the commitment • Develop clear goals and outcomes • Provide clarity on resource, time and funding requirements	**11. Knowledge and understanding of community issues and perspectives** Spending time understanding how the community sees itself – the strengths, challenges and opportunities. **How to develop it:** • Identify your gaps in knowledge • Seek to fill gaps through direct knowledge acquisition or the knowledge of others. E.g. undertake community surveys, community events and form partnerships • Make time to read, listen, engage and reflect – access books, papers, events
2. Courage and open-mindedness The bravery to tackle difficult issues, challenge the status quo, and be open to new ideas and ways of working. Continuing to do what's right even when challenged. **How to develop it:** • Take calculated risks • Voice different opinions and views and embrace those of others • Avoid assumptions. Draw on curiosity 'what else might be going on here?'	**7. A community-focused culture is developed internally** Embed locality-focused goals and behaviours into the roles and responsibilities of staff, particularly leaders **How to develop it:** • Share the case for 'why' with staff • Build specific goals into performance reviews • Invite ideas and views • Suggest community focused activities they can undertake	**12. Network mapping and building** Identifying the key influencers and stakeholders who will commit to the work and have influence within the communities How to develop it: • Undertake a mapping exercise • After mapping, understand where you still have gaps • Spend time developing (or further developing) partnerships and connections • Be continually invitational
3. Commitment and resilience An unwavering dedication to the work, with the ability to guide and support yourself and others through challenges and competing priorities. **How to develop it:** • Anchor to clear purpose • Set clear boundaries and goals • Reframe failure as learning • Regularly revisit progress • Celebrate progress and capture good practice to reinforce commitment	**8. Representative and robust governance is developed and utilised** Support and encourage the recruitment of a trust board and governing bodies that draw from and reflect the local community, ensuring local perspective is at the heart of decision-making. **How to develop it:** • Invite Boards and GBs to contribute • Recruit from local communities	**13. Convening stakeholders** Skilfully bringing together diverse groups to facilitate a focused dialogue and navigate any local 'politics'. **How to develop it:** • Be open and invitational • Offer a shared challenge or opportunity – a narrative for why • Listen more than you speak • Generate clear next steps and shared goals, with clarity on responsibilities. Reinforce accountabilities
4. Professional generosity Proactively sharing time, knowledge, and resources with colleagues and partners without expecting an immediate or direct personal gain **How to develop it:** • Share something with others without personal gain and/or without being asked to do it • Offer time and resources or support to someone else's project or priority • Signpost to areas or sources of support or insights you are aware of	**9. Pure accountability is championed** Have the courage to commit to publicly stated goals defined in partnership with the community and hold the organisation accountable for achieving them. **How to develop it:** • Identify (with the community) shared goals and outcomes • Make clear public promises together • Use qualitative and quantitative data to track progress and inform next steps • Communicate progress, celebrate success and learn from failures	**14. Skills, expertise and capacity are identified** Utilising networks and partnerships to develop an understanding of where a range of skills, expertise and capacity might be available across the area **How to develop it:** • Undertake a skills and capacity audit • Define what you need and encourage people to come forward • Build on existing partnerships • Forge links, convening on defined shared outcomes, avoiding collaborative overload
5. Political awareness Developing and demonstrating astuteness to navigate local and national political contexts without being driven or overly influenced by them **How to develop it:** • Make time to listen to, read and learn from key political updates • Understand networks and dynamics between groups of people • Champion locality leadership by sharing its impact with local and national politicians and civil servants. Identify areas they can add support.	**10. Capacity, capability and engagement is unlocked** Identify where there might be valuable capacity, capability and skills across the organisation you can draw on to take the work forward **How to develop it:** • Undertake a skills, interests and capacity audit' to understand how staff contribute their wider passions and expertise to communities already • Define what skills you need and encourage people to come forward	**15. A clear governance and accountability structure is in place** Ensuring the work has effective project management, defined roles and responsibilities and an agreed level of oversight to secure continued momentum. **How to build it:** • Secure project management skills • Ensure roles and responsibilities are defined from the outset • Set measurable, shared outcomes and publicly state them

Appendix C: Useful reports and resources related to locality leadership

[Thriving Trusts Thinkpiece Series](https://forumstrategy.org/thriving-trusts-thinkpieces/)
https://forumstrategy.org/thriving-trusts-thinkpieces/

[Pure Accountability In Practice Guide](https://forumstrategy.org/in-practice-guide-pure-accountability/)
https://forumstrategy.org/in-practice-guide-pure-accountability/

[System Leadership Papers](https://forumstrategy.org/system-leadership/)
https://forumstrategy.org/system-leadership/

[A new narrative for a new decade | Forum Strategy](https://forumstrategy.org/a-new-narrative-for-a-new-decade/)
https://forumstrategy.org/a-new-narrative-for-a-new-decade/

[Collaboration In A Changed World: Five Mindset Shifts Needed For Sustainability and Success](https://forumstrategy.org/collaboration-in-a-changed-world-five-mindset-shifts-needed-for-sustainability-and-success/)
https://forumstrategy.org/collaboration-in-a-changed-world-five-mindset-shifts-needed-for-sustainability-and-success/

[Locality working in education: Why it matters and what it takes, 30 January 2025 (presentations from the conference)](https://www.local.gov.uk/locality-working-education-why-it-matters-and-what-it-takes-30-january-2025)
https://www.local.gov.uk/locality-working-education-why-it-matters-and-what-it-takes-30-january-2025

[Forging Local Coherence: LocalEd project evaluation report](https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/crelm/documents/localed.pdf)
https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/crelm/documents/localed.pdf

[Local, Actually: Establishing hyperlocal governance in England](https://reform.uk/publications/local-actually-establishing-hyperlocal-governance-in-england/)
https://reform.uk/publications/local-actually-establishing-hyperlocal-governance-in-england/

[Trusting Place: Improving the lives of local people through place-based approaches Building Thriving Neighbourhoods](https://re-state.co.uk/publications/trusting-place/)
https://re-state.co.uk/publications/trusting-place/

[Dundee's Locality Leadership Scheme](https://www.dundeecity.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dundee_locality_leadership_scheme_handbook.pdf)
https://www.dundeecity.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dundee_locality_leadership_scheme_handbook.pdf

[Local leadership skill sets for Councillors](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-leadership-framework-councillors#local-leadership-skill-sets)
https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-leadership-framework-councillors#local-leadership-skill-sets

[Guidance for Mayoral Strategic Authorities on developing a Local Growth Plan](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-growth-plans-england)
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-growth-plans-england

[Five ways to develop a place-based response to absence](https://schoolsweek.co.uk/five-ways-to-develop-a-place-based-response-to-absence/)
https://schoolsweek.co.uk/five-ways-to-develop-a-place-based-response-to-absence/

[The Revolution Will Be Informal: The 3% Rule in Place-Based Work](https://www.emilyyoung.space/journal/unlocking-the-power-of-informal-networks-for-systemic-change-the-3-rule-in-place-based-work)
https://www.emilyyoung.space/journal/unlocking-the-power-of-informal-networks-for-systemic-change-the-3-rule-in-place-based-work

[A trust at the heart of its community – Batley Multi-Academy Trust](https://forumstrategy.org/a-trust-at-the-heart-of-its-community-batley-multi-academy-trust/)
https://forumstrategy.org/a-trust-at-the-heart-of-its-community-batley-multi-academy-trust/

[The transformative power of parental and community engagement](https://forumstrategy.org/the-transformative-power-of-parental-and-community-engagement/)
https://forumstrategy.org/the-transformative-power-of-parental-and-community-engagement/

[The Education Alliance - Building partnerships with local business and industry for the benefit of students | Forum Strategy](https://forumstrategy.org/the-education-alliance-building-partnerships-with-local-business-and-industry-for-the-benefit-of-students/)
https://forumstrategy.org/the-education-alliance-building-partnerships-with-local-business-and-industry-for-the-benefit-of-students/

Organisations who offer support and research in relation to locality leadership

[Forum Strategy](https://forumstrategy.org/about/)
https://forumstrategy.org/about/

[Locality](https://locality.org.uk/)
https://locality.org.uk/

[Power to Change](https://www.powertochange.org.uk/)
https://www.powertochange.org.uk/

[Nurture Development](https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/)
https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/

Forum**Strategy**