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LocalEd 2025

**Educating for the future: developing new
locality models for English schools**

Year 1 (2022-2023) evaluation report

October 2023

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from an independent evaluation of the first year (2022-23) of the LocalED/Educating for the Future project. LocalED is testing new locality models for the English school system led by local authorities, combined authorities and school-led partnerships. Each of the nine localities involved is focussed on one of three 'pilot' areas: i) improving outcomes for vulnerable children, ii) working as a combined authority, or iii) strengthening professional accountability.

The evaluation asks: 'What are we learning about leading successful locality working?' Data was collected via interviews, focus groups, observations, analysis of documentary evidence and a survey. Informed by a literature review, the evaluation focuses on the following four areas, which have been shown to be important for successful locality working.

Shared commitment to the locality

The four Local Authorities (LAs – Coventry, Rochdale, Wakefield and Wiltshire) involved in Pilot 1 (vulnerable children) all make their commitment to the locality and its vulnerable young people explicit through various strategic visions and plans designed to respond to national reforms and local requirements, often by integrating services. 'One Coventry', 'Raising Rochdale', 'Wakefield Families Together', and Wiltshire's 'Together for All' reflect these aspirational visions. Partnership working is central to these efforts, founded on the belief that collaborative working will better respond to the complex needs of vulnerable children and make better use of scarce capacity and resources. All four areas report growing levels of trust developing from the emphasis on collaborative working, in a context where this has had to be built following systemic fragmentation and the roll-back of many services.

Pilot 2 involves the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA), established in 2018. While all CAs have a remit for skills and careers, NTCA is unusual in also having a mandate for school improvement. A school improvement strategy, co-produced with education leads in the three constituent LAs (Northumberland, North Tyneside and Newcastle) and through wider stakeholder engagement, sets out shared priorities and principles to address academic underperformance. These priorities are being addressed via a £1m programme (2022-23).

All four projects in Pilot 3 are led by 'school-led' partnerships (Ealing Learning Partnership, Milton Keynes Education Partnership, Learn Sheffield and Surrey Alliance for Excellence), each of which maps on to an LA boundary. The partnerships were all formed in the decade after 2010 in response to increased academisation and the roll-back of LAs, driven by an aim to sustain local collaboration and the collective good. The partnerships had different starting points and reflect different levels of 'shared commitment to the locality': for example, 93% of schools in Ealing; 91% of schools in Sheffield; and 59% of schools in Surrey pay to be members of their local partnership, while just over 30% of Milton Keynes schools are reported to be participating in the pilot work.

Leadership and governance

In Pilot 1, the projects are all led by one or two LA leaders of varying seniority, in two cases co-leading across different LA teams. All the projects work through partnership groups, including local school alliances/networks and multi-agency fora, located within established reporting structures. There is variability (at the end of year 1) in terms of how far the projects have a political mandate and approach to quality monitoring: partly reflecting the fact that they are, by their nature, exploratory.

In Pilot 2, the work is led by NTCA's team of four, with strong political support, as evidenced by Cabinet's agreement to fund a second year of activity. NTCA works closely with the three constituent LAs, including through an Education Directors Strategy Group.

In Pilot 3, the three formally constituted partnerships (ELP, Learn Sheffield and SAfE) employ staff who have led the pilot work, sometimes drawing on colleagues and consultants where required. These partnerships have established governance groups which also oversee the pilot work, although Surrey also convened a separate steering group. In Milton Keynes, the pilot work is led by the Chair of the secondary heads group (a serving head), working with a volunteer co-ordinator and a Project Development Group comprised of school/trust leaders. The political mandate for the partnerships and their specific pilot projects is bound up with their relationships with their respective LAs: this is relatively unproblematic in Ealing (where ELP is not separate from the LA), but more complex in the other three cases.

Clarity of focus and approach

The four Pilot 1 projects aim to make a difference to vulnerable students and address issues which currently present barriers to learning and achievement. Pilot 1 has a clear theory of action: to make vulnerable pupils more 'visible' so that they do not 'slip through gaps' in provision; gain insights into the causes of vulnerability so that, through the agreed collective responsibility, these can be addressed; test possible solutions, and thereby narrow performance gaps between vulnerable students and their peers. A core focus in all four LAs is on strengthening partnership approaches and build trust to ensure greater consistency across provision which was, at the start of the pilot, variable. This commonly involves integrating services in a 'team around the school/family' approach. Attendance has been an early focus for all four pilots, as an early indicator of vulnerability. The 2019 DfE non-statutory guidance has led the LAs to re-evaluate their strategy for attendance: for example, Coventry and Wakefield have moved from 'traded-only' services to a universal offer for all schools and academies, with persistent absence linked to an integrated early help offer. All four LAs have worked to agree a definition of 'vulnerability' and to establish or enhance data systems to identify vulnerable students. There has been a growing focus over year 1 on building relationships with key stakeholders and complementary 'insights' work – often focused on small cohorts at a hyper-local level in deprived areas - to understand what lies behind the data and to prototype new ways of working with stakeholders. For example, in

Coventry, this has led to a focus for year 2 on a transition pilot which will offer an enhanced bespoke transition package to 10 Year 6 pupils as they move into year 7, including support from youth organisations and for parents.

The focus of pilot 2 is broadly school improvement, seeking to complement existing statutory responsibilities held by LAs and trusts. The strategy is focused on five strands: 1. post-Covid recovery; 2. the development of teachers and leaders; 3. improving transitions between schools; 4. supporting schools in challenging contexts and 5. careers and progression pathways. School engagement has been high, with over 200 schools and 15 Trusts signed up to one or more of the funded projects within these strands.

In Pilot 3, each local partnership has developed one or more projects aimed at strengthening professional accountability. Most of these projects were proposed in the initial application and have then been developed and, in two cases, implemented over the course of the year, but some reflect a change of tack mid-way through the year. The projects differ widely, but most have a focus on strengthening individual school and/or collective evaluations of 'quality' education and how quality can best be developed; for example, through school self-evaluation with a focus on inclusion (SAfE), school peer enquiry and review (ELP), and report cards/profiles (Sheffield and Milton Keynes). The two report card/profile projects also include plans to communicate what schools mean by 'quality' education to parents and wider stakeholders.

Sustainability and impact

Across the three pilots, the implementation of new projects and initiatives is generally at an early stage or will commence in year 2, so there is limited evidence of sustainability or impact at this stage. That said, the projects which built on pre-existing strategies and approaches – for example in Wakefield and Ealing – made clear progress and highlighted the ways in which expert leadership and management can sustain commitment and embed change. Each locality is being supported to develop and track its own KPIs/success measures for its specific interventions in year 2.

The year 1 evaluation highlights several indicators which should support long-term sustainable impact, including: clear ambitions and a sense of shared moral purpose; well evidenced understandings of the barriers to and enablers for change; theories of action which underpin the interventions; strong stakeholder engagement in each locality; and a growing community of practice involving the project leads in pilots 1 and 3 which is allowing for shared learning and mutual support. In addition, we see the commitment and quality of locality leadership in each of the nine localities as an important factor for sustained impact, as outlined in the following section.

What are we learning about leading across localities?

Locality leadership must always be adapted to the context in which it operates. There is no one 'best way' to lead across a locality – not least because there are differences in the positions leaders hold and the work they do: some fulfil statutory functions and can assume some hierarchical authority, others must rely on volunteers and lateral, network leadership.

Locality leaders are place makers. England's educational landscape has become more fragmented, as schools join different MATs and as LAs have been rolled back, geographically 'local' identities have begun to dissolve. In these contexts, locality leaders were working to forge and sustain a shared sense that 'this locality' (still) matters and that 'we' have a collective moral responsibility to ensure that all children here succeed.

Boundary spanners. We heard how 'the locality' is not one thing, but involves multiple communities, geographies, contexts, organisations, structures, silos and scales. These boundaries – sometimes real, sometimes attitudinal – were commonly at the heart of local tensions and challenges; for example, if some schools or MATs did not participate in local inclusion arrangements. Bridging these boundaries required local leaders to understand different perspectives and priorities, to resolve differences where possible, or to encourage shared dialogue and sensemaking where not. They did this through their professional credibility and by drawing on their trusting relationships with a range of local stakeholders.

Systems leadership and competent managers of change. Local leaders involved partners in identifying a 'common cause', such as attendance, inclusion, parental engagement or professional learning, which could strengthen collective moral purpose and action. This required a balance of top-down steering and bottom-up co-construction, drawing on systems leadership qualities, including: clear core values and integrity; commitment and perseverance; 'big picture' awareness and strategic thinking; practical problem-solving skills; and expert communication and facilitation skills. Designing and implementing an intervention to address this 'common cause' required sophisticated management, including an ability to remain open to ongoing feedback, learning and adaptation. Leaders needed to juggle competing priorities in a context of tight resources, requiring political acumen and an ability to build capacity and distribute leadership so that responsibility and agency became shared. Beyond this, locality leaders needed to maintain a focus on delivery.

In sum, local leaders must work to forge coherence in terms of how different partners work together to improve place-based outcomes. Coherence emerges through complex combinations of collective moral purpose, shared priorities ('a common cause') and integrated ways of working. It requires systems leaders who can convene local partnerships, boundary spanners who can bridge silos, shared/distributed leadership which gives everyone a voice, and sufficient capacity to enable tangible action and progress.

Three issues to consider in Year 2:

In the second year of the evaluation, we will continue to focus on progress within and across the nine localities, including through interviews with a range of stakeholders, seeking to refine the emerging learning on locality leadership. We highlight here three issues that we see as important areas of focus for the project and evaluation in year 2:

- I. **Sustaining engagement and building capacity:** This applies at two levels – the LocalEd project as a whole and within each locality. As we explore in more detail below, the LocalEd project has been successful in sustaining engagement from all nine localities this year, largely thanks to the expert facilitation and support provided by Isos Partnership /Christine Gilbert. In Year 2, we see scope for strengthening the communities of practice that have developed in Pilots 1 and 3 – for example by including the Combined Authority team in workshops and activities where relevant. At the level of localities, most teams have struggled to carve out the time and resources required to shape and implement new initiatives in year 1, although this challenge has been most evident in the ‘school-led’ partnerships. Equally, the schools and other partners that local leaders have sought to consult and engage in these initiatives have been stretched. This is hardly surprising in the current financial context and with ever increasing demands on public services post-pandemic, but it will be important to explore whether and how local leaders can address these twin challenges as they work to implement their initiatives. In part this is about identifying urgent challenges that are widely shared by all partners – the ‘common causes’ and shared moral purpose we note above. Where proposed solutions to these challenges are practical and can be built into mainstream ways of working there is potentially greater scope for sustainable change, although this might lead to only incremental improvement. Some of the more innovative projects, such as report cards, multi-agency work to support transitions for vulnerable students, and the combined authority, offer scope for more transformative change and impact, but only if engagement and capacity challenges can be addressed.

- II. **Scaling up:** linked to the above point, we are particularly interested to understand how initiatives can best be scaled to achieve maximum engagement and impact. It is hardly surprising that localities have often tended to work with ‘coalitions of the willing’ in year 1 – i.e. existing partners who ‘get’ the need for collaboration. These existing partners can help to design and prototype new approaches, but the real challenge will be to engage wider schools, trusts and partners in adopting these approaches and adapting their behaviours where necessary. This challenge looks slightly different across the three pilots: in Pilot 1 a key issue will be how to take small-scale, hyper-local and bespoke ways of working with vulnerable children to scale, in particular where this requires ‘less’ inclusive schools to adapt their behaviours; in Pilot 2, the Combined Authority itself is likely to grow to encompass 7 LAs, so there will be a need to engage these additional LAs while also ensuring that its work aligns with and adds value to existing roles and

requirements; finally, in Pilot 3, there are slightly different challenges in different localities – Ealing must develop its work with secondaries, special schools and early years, SAfE must ensure that enhanced self-review by participating schools engages a majority of schools and enhances locality-wide practices and outcomes; while Sheffield and Milton Keynes must work with their respective LAs, parents, governors and others to develop legitimate and meaningful report card models.

- III. Assessing progress and impact: Isos Partnership has worked with local leaders to develop KPIs – including, in most cases, proxy or process measures, such as levels of school engagement - and to agree how these can be tracked. All localities have access to a range of data and many have combined this with qualitative insight work, all of which can be drawn on to assess progress. Nevertheless, it is important not to under-estimate the challenges involved in assessing complex change, particularly given the capacity issues highlighted above, so it will be important to carve out time for this as the project progresses.

Outline:

This report draws together findings from the year 1 (2022-23) evaluation of the LocalEd/Educating for the future project. The independent evaluation was commissioned by AECT and is being undertaken by Toby Greany and Susan Cousin at the University of Nottingham. It is focused on drawing out evidence and learning from across the nine project localities and three pilot areas in relation to the leadership of successful locality working.

The following sections briefly outline the LocalED project and the evaluation approach, including four areas (shared commitment to the locality; leadership and governance; clarity of focus and approach; and sustainability and impact) identified from the literature as key for successful locality working. These four areas provide the structure for the evaluation findings in subsequent sections.

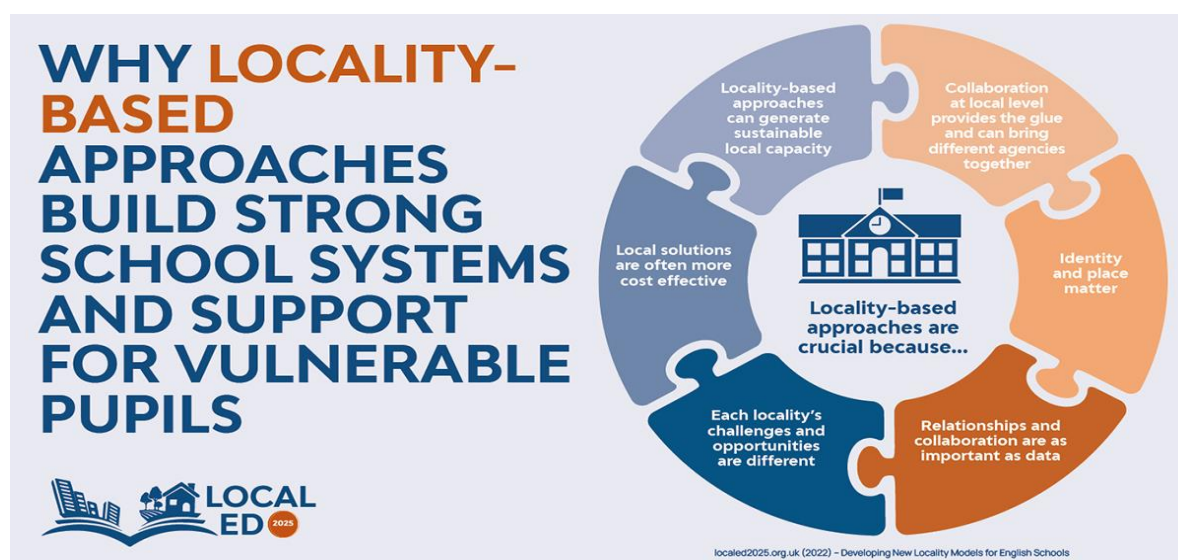
Following this, the main body of the report (pages 16-40) provides a synthesis of themes and insights that emerge from the first year of the project evaluation. This section starts by commenting briefly on the overall project design and approach. It then includes a section for each of the three pilots, providing a synthesis of cross-cutting findings in each area. It concludes with a section drawing out findings on leading across localities.

About the LocalEd/Educating for the Future project

The LocalED/Educating for the Future project is designed to test new locality models for the English school system led by local authorities, combined authorities and school led partnerships. The two-year project runs from April 2022 to July 2024. See <https://localed2025.org.uk/> for details.

The AEC Trust oversees the project, with day-to-day management undertaken by the Project Leader - Jonathan Crossley-Holland. A project Steering Group, including representatives from a range of key stakeholder organisations, supports and guides this work. Isos Partnership together with Christine Gilbert has been commissioned by AECT to provide hands on advice and support to the nine localities involved in the pilot.

At the outset of the project, the infographic below was developed by the AECT team to capture the key reasons for focussing on locality working:



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

- Pilot 1 – Vulnerable Children. This pilot is testing approaches to fostering a sense of collective responsibility, on the part of schools, trusts and other agencies, for the progress and outcomes of vulnerable young people.
- Pilot 2 – Combined Authority. This pilot is testing the potential benefits of a school improvement arrangement that works across a combined authority.
- Pilot 3 – Professional Accountability. Local areas are piloting approaches to accountability that are rigorous but less 'high stakes' than the current model, including through strengthened accountability to parents and students.

About the evaluation

The core question that this evaluation seeks to address is: 'What have we learned about leading successful locality working?'

The evaluation sits within an 'improvement science' approach.¹ Improvement science recognises that organisations and localities are complex and so assumes that teachers, schools and other stakeholders must be individually and collectively engaged in a continual process of learning how to improve, in the process developing 'practice-based evidence'. This learning is structured in cycles of improvement, designed to develop, test, review and refine interventions aimed at addressing specific problems. Improvement science emphasises the importance of peer networks and is focused on strengthening the professionalism of teachers and leaders. It involves practitioners engaging with researchers to enhance the practical work of schooling, using common measures, inquiry methods, and communication mechanisms to anchor collective problem solving.

This description clearly aligns with the LocalEd project model, in which the nine localities are collaborating in networks to undertake cycles of improvement, supported by Isos Partnership/Christine Gilbert. The evaluation team seeks to complement this approach by providing independent and objective feedback on progress and learning, including offering formative as well as summative insights to locality leads and the wider project.

The initial plan for the evaluation was that it would be structured in four phases:

- Phase 1 – preparation - by May 2022. Complete literature review. Workshop with the AEC project team to agree the evaluation approach and plan; develop research instruments; secure ethical approval and sign off for data management plan.
- Phase 2 – baselining – by September 2022. Initial interviews, observations and a workshop involving key leaders in each locality to understand background and to clarify theories of action, desired outcomes, KPIs/measures and starting points in relation to its area of focus. Issue a short, online survey to assess baseline views and practices.
- Phase 3 - Tracking progress – September 2022 to December 2023. Draw together data generated by the pilots. Identify three localities (one per pilot area) for 'in-depth' study and six for 'lighter touch' review. Undertake stakeholder interviews and observations in each locality. Autumn 2023 - repeat the online survey.
- Phase 4 - Analysis and summative/formative reporting – April 2024. Develop nine locality case studies and a cross case analysis.

In the event, the evaluation has needed to respond and evolve to meet the changing needs of the project. This included a revised timeline for the project which, in late 2022, was

¹ Peurach, D. J., Russell, J. L., Cohen-Vogel, L., & Penuel, W. R. (Eds.) (2022). *Handbook on improvement-focused educational research*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

extended from April 2024 to July 2024, to give more time for the localities to make progress. We have also agreed with the AEC team and Steering Group: a) not to differentiate between in depth/light touch localities, instead capturing consistent evidence across all nine localities, b) not to use national performance data to track change/impact within or across the localities - instead, Isos Partnership is working with localities to clarify their specific KPIs and monitoring approaches, including to inform the evaluation.

During the initial baseline phase of the evaluation we completed a literature review of international and national evidence on locality working and place-based change, which is available on the project website.² This has informed the development of an evaluation framework (Box 1 - below) which we have used to structure the collection and analysis of data. The revised evaluation approach, incorporating this framework and addressing the overall evaluation question is shown in Box 2.

The data collected during the first year of the evaluation was as follows:

- Interviews with locality pilot leads (Summer 2022 x 9 and Summer 2023 x 9)
- Evaluation workshops with 5-10 key stakeholders in each locality (Autumn 2022 x 7)
- Survey (Winter 2022/23 - 202 responses)
- Observations of Isos Partnership-run workshops (x 8)
- Interviews with Isos Partnership leads (Summer 2023 x 3)
- Observations of locality events and meetings
- Workshop with pilot 3 leads on evaluation and tracking progress – spring 2023
- Analysis of documentary evidence (locality plans, Ofsted reports, websites etc)

In summer 2023 we synthesised this evidence to produce nine draft 'locality baselines' – or case studies. These were sent to the pilot leads to check in advance of an end of year interview with each lead.³ Informed by these additional interviews we produced a final version of each baseline. This report reflects a cross-case analysis of the nine baselines. One point to note is that stakeholder views in each locality were collected early in the year (via the workshops and survey), but we rely on the locality lead interviews in summer 2023 for our assessment of how each project progressed over the course of the full year.

One challenge in undertaking a study of this nature is how best to ensure anonymity for participants (in line with the evaluation's ethical approval by the University of Nottingham School of Education Ethics and Integrity Committee), whilst still providing sufficient contextual detail on each locality to inform the findings. We have sought to get this balance right by anonymising all quotations, while still naming the localities.

² Cousin, S. and Greany, T. (2022) *Developing a new Locality Model for English Schools: Literature Review Update*. Nottingham

³ In practice, several of these interviews involved two or three 'leads' from a single locality. In total, around ninety locality leads and stakeholders attended the evaluation interviews and workshops.

Box 1: Locality working evaluation criteria

1: A shared commitment to the locality

To what extent do key stakeholders have a shared understanding of what is meant by ‘the locality’?

Does this definition align with the pilot area (e.g. LA or partnership boundaries)?

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

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

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

2: Leadership and governance of the partnership

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

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

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

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

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

3: Clarity of partnership focus and approach

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

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

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

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

4: Sustainability and impact

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Box 2: The revised evaluation approach

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

The nine localities involved in the pilots are all operating in a context of change – largely driven by national policy reforms which, since 2010, have restructured LAs’ relationships with schools, reduced their funding and revised their duties and responsibilities.⁴ Responses to these changes have varied according to contextual features including historical relationships between the LA and schools and between schools; LA size, geography and demographics; rates of academisation; and socio-economic factors which can contribute to performance differences between schools as well as different levels of demand on LA services. Similarly, the nine localities had different starting points, in terms of the extent and maturity of local partnerships. The Covid-19 pandemic has further impacted on these issues, commonly leading to increases in the need for services to support vulnerable children. These contextual differences have affected the starting points and progress of different initiatives across the nine localities: for example in terms of degrees of reciprocity and trust. In the following section we seek to draw out common themes across the different localities, while still recognising how their contextual differences influenced their work and levels of progress during the first year. However, in doing this, we acknowledge that there were important nuances within as well as between the localities, so these high-level summaries and comparisons should be treated with caution.

⁴ Greany, T. and Higham, R. (2018), *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks: Analysing the 'Self-Improving School-led System' Agenda in England and the Implications for Schools*, London: UCL IOE Press. Cousin, S. & Greany, T. (2022) *Developing a new Locality Model for English Schools: Literature Review Update*. University of Nottingham

Part 1: Overall findings

1A. Project design and approach

The evaluation has not included a significant focus on how the AEC project itself is structured and operates to support locality working, so we have limited evidence to draw on in this area, but nonetheless make some general observations.

The decision to structure the project in three 'pilot' areas (vulnerable children, combined authority and professional accountability) has helped to give a focus to the locality work. This has been most obvious in Pilot 1, where the focus on vulnerable children fits well with the remit of the four local authorities and has a clear locality and moral purpose dimension, which appears to have been important in galvanising different partners to engage. Similarly, in Pilot 3, the four locality partnerships are all focussed on strengthening professional accountability; this seems to reflect their belief that strengthening professional accountability will also enhance local commitment and collaboration as a counterbalance to external forms of accountability. In practice, while the Pilot 1 localities have certainly needed to focus on how best to define 'vulnerable children' as a starting point for shared action, it seems that 'professional accountability' has been a more challenging concept to define and operationalise. Meanwhile, the focus on what roles a Combined Authority might play in relation to compulsory education (Pilot 2) has been important given the wider thrust of devolution policy and practice.

Where locality pilot leads work on a common theme (Pilots 1 and 3), with opportunities to come together in termly online workshops (facilitated by Isos Partnership) to share progress and discuss common challenges, this has supported shared sensemaking and a sense of collective learning, commitment and accountability. In addition to observing the development of these communities of practice ourselves, through attendance at the workshops, we heard multiple examples in interviews with pilot leads of how they were collaborating with each other on various bi-lateral topics and/or reflecting on how their own work compares with progress and developments in the other pilot localities. Having a single Combined Authority (CA) in Pilot 2 has prevented the development of an equivalent community of practice approach, although we see scope for involving the CA leads in workshops with the other pilot sites in Year 2.

The role played by the Isos Partnership team (Ben Bryant – Pilot 1, Simon Day – Pilot 2, Christine Gilbert and Simon Rea – Pilot 3) has been essential to the progress of the overall project and highly valued by pilot leads. This contribution has four interlinked features:

- i. The credibility and expertise of the Isos Partnership team, which is well matched to each pilot.

- ii. A shared methodology for structuring the thinking and work, including early work to identify a set of four hypotheses for each pilot to test and a regular cycle of reporting against clearly articulated questions and common templates.
- iii. Skilled work advising, challenging and supporting individual pilot leads in relation to their projects. This was structured through a cycle of monthly meetings but generally involved additional visits, observations and taking on additional roles when asked (e.g. chairing a local project steering group, speaking at a launch event, or facilitating a local workshop). The challenge aspect of this role was particularly notable, in particular in Pilot 3, where the Isos Partnership team were prepared to critique work and steer projects away from one course of action and towards another where they felt this was appropriate.
- iv. Facilitation of the termly action learning workshops in Pilots 1 and 3, which, as noted above, helped to develop strong communities of practice characterised by shared commitment and learning.

Finally, it is important to recognise the commitment and expertise of the locality leads and their teams. It is impressive that all nine localities have remained engaged in the project, often despite significant challenges such as staff absence, organisational restructures, or sheer workload pressures as staff dealt with multiple, competing priorities and demands. Although well understood from the outset, the absence of any funding from AEC for localities to participate in the project has sometimes been challenging, in particular for some of the locality partnerships which have needed to carve out time and justify how this work supports core business. The fact that all have remained engaged is testament to the perceived importance of the project aims and the quality of the support from Isos Partnership.

1B. Pilot 1: Vulnerable Children

Pilot 1 - A shared commitment to the locality

All four projects in Pilot 1 are led by a Local Authority (LA) - Coventry, Rochdale, Wakefield, and Wiltshire. The focus at the start of the pilots (academic year 2022/23) was on LA-wide strategies for identifying and supporting vulnerable pupils (who, nationally, are not well-served by the system). Two of the four pilots evolved their focus onto smaller locality sites and specific groups of young people, as outlined below.

All four localities are operating in contexts of high levels of disadvantage. Coventry overall has 24.3% of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) against a national average of 26% but, like Wakefield, has pockets of affluence alongside areas of high deprivation. Rochdale has 32% FSM, and Wiltshire 35.3%.

There is wide variation between the four pilots in size, geography and rates of academisation. Coventry is a relatively compact city with 85 primary schools, 22 secondary schools and 9 special schools. 100% of secondary schools are academies. Wakefield LA covers the City and five adjoining 'districts' each with strong local identities. Academisation has been rapid and widespread: 67/113 primary schools and 17/18 secondaries are academies and there are 14 MATs of which only 5 are based solely in the locality. Rochdale is part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority: the LA works with Tameside, Salford and Oldham on national DfE-led initiatives, as a Priority Educational Investment Area. Academisation has been slower in Rochdale than nationally: 10 out of the 14 secondary schools are academies and 9 out of the 69 primary schools. Of the 19 academies, 8 are sponsored academies. Wiltshire is a large county, with 229 primary schools, including some very small rural schools. 51/ 55 secondaries are in a MAT, most of which are relatively small and local to Wiltshire.

Shared commitment to the locality and its vulnerable young people is made explicit in each locality, through various local strategic visions and plans designed to respond to national reforms and local requirements, often by integrating services. 'One Coventry', 'Raising Rochdale', 'Wakefield Families Together', the Wiltshire Learning Alliance 'Together for All' reflect aspirational visions co-constructed with partners to improve services to children by delivering multi-agency responses to families in need. All come with a strapline which commits to collective accountability for improving the life chances of all children and young people in the locality; in all four areas the LA and all schools are signatories, as well as a range of other services.

Partnership working is central to the four visions for new ways of working, founded on the belief that collaborative working will better respond to the complex needs of vulnerable children as well as make better use of capacity and resources in a locality. In Wakefield and

Wiltshire, the 'Team around the School' includes the school and all agencies that provide early support to prevent exclusion, including health professionals, VCS and the police, in a 'tell us once' approach for the family. The pilot leads in both these LAs saw the pilot as a means of strengthening partnership approaches and delivering greater consistency across provision whose effectiveness was, at the start of the pilot, variable. 'Raising Rochdale' started with school leaders considering their common moral purpose to young people and is developing to include wider aspects of work across housing, the NHS, policy, public health and local care organisations. Coventry, on the other hand, began with a community prototype project but has the same aim of further integrating local services and early support for families; the AEC pilot aims to embed schools within these partnerships.

All four pilot areas report growing levels of trust developing from the emphasis on working collaboratively, in a context where this has had to be built. Stakeholder responses to the survey conducted after one term (autumn/winter 2022) testify that this was, at that point, a 'work in progress'. Response levels of 32 pilot 1 respondents (mostly from two of the four localities) mean that findings are tentative, but testify to a strong commitment to inclusion, to effective partnership working between schools and with other agencies and a majority belief that local collaboration has a positive impact on both educational outcomes and well-being of pupils. Survey questions with less positive responses included 'A lack of trust between schools/MATs in this locality hinders meaningful collaboration' and 'Some schools/MATs tend to dominate local decision-making forums' (Coventry and Rochdale). As in pilot 3 areas, respondents identified clear local hierarchies of schools and local competition which disadvantages vulnerable children (Rochdale). Only 5/15 respondents (from Rochdale) agreed that 'the outcomes and experiences of children and young people who are vulnerable are made visible to all school and trust leaders', supporting the pilot 1 commitment to make 'visibility' of vulnerability a focus of the project.

Pilot 1 - Leadership and governance of the partnership

Being part of a bigger strategic plan, with commitment from across the Council, from schools, and from other agencies supporting young people, brings benefits to the pilots of a broader focus, existing structures to feed into and, potentially, a political mandate. It also brings challenges (discussed in the next section) of defining a clear focus for the pilots in a context of multiple inter-related programmes and initiatives.

The four pilots are all led by one or two LA leaders, of varying seniority, in two cases co-leading across different LA teams (Coventry, Wiltshire). There is variability (at the end of year 1) in terms of how far the projects have a political mandate and quality monitoring: partly reflecting the fact that they are, by their nature, exploratory. In Wiltshire, a new Targeted Education Service was formed from a restructuring of Wiltshire Council services in 2021, bringing together existing teams with a sharpened focus on improving educational outcomes for all vulnerable children and broadening the definition of 'children missing

education' to include transitional safeguarding priorities. The pilot reports vertically to the Director of Education and Skills and horizontally to teams across the LA; there has not yet been a report to the Performance Outcomes Board which includes the DCS and elected members. Wakefield's project has the clearest formal governance, reflecting the decision to use the AEC pilot to integrate existing initiatives: it reports to the Children and Young People's Partnership (CYPP) Board which feeds into the Cabinet Members' briefing. The Rochdale pilot reports into Children's Services leadership team. Coventry is different from the other 3 pilots: it is built on a corporate community prototype within which an education specific strand has been shaped. Sitting within a workstream of community work in one area of high deprivation, the Coventry pilot reports to the LA Director of Communities, who reports into the cabinet member for communities.

All the pilots work through partnership groups within established reporting structures. Partners in Wiltshire include the recently formed Wiltshire Learning Alliance of all schools; the Safeguarding Partnership and FACT, which brings together the LA, health, police and the voluntary sector. The Rochdale Children and Young People's Partnership Board (CYPP) has commitment from schools and partners including the Rochdale's Pioneers Trust (a trust of all secondary schools and the LA set up in 2012 with the aim to become a 'self-improving' local system to self-evaluate and collectively support and challenge each other through school-school collaboration), Rochdale Children's Safeguarding board, the Local Care Organisation, Rochdale Borough Housing, the NHS, Greater Manchester Police, Public Health, Positive Steps and Rochdale Connections Trust representing post 16 Colleges and training providers. The Wakefield CYPP Board oversees groups including the Inclusion Strategy Group, the NEET strategy board, Early Years strategic partnership board, a SEND group and a "fairly hard-edged" Improvement Board. The Coventry pilot, led jointly by leads in the LA Education Team and Communities Team, interacts with the Early Help Outcomes group, which feeds into the Education partnership (which has representation from primary, secondary and special headteachers).

Leads in all four pilot areas referenced the desire to build on enhanced partnership working during the Pandemic to safeguard vulnerable children. Pre-existing examples of strong partnership service delivery are demonstrated through the development of locality hubs to deliver the Wakefield 'Families Together' service, and the community-based navigation hubs in Coventry, both commended in ILACs inspections.

Pilot 1 - Clarity of partnership focus and approach

The four Pilot 1 projects have a clearly identified aim – to make a difference to vulnerable students and address issues which currently present barriers to learning and achievement. This aim, with a clear imperative and moral purpose, is one that attracts support and demands a degree of urgency from the range of partners and stakeholders described above.

Pilot 1 also has a clear theory of action: to make vulnerable pupils more 'visible' so that they do not 'slip through gaps' in provision; gain insights into the causes of vulnerability so that, through the agreed collective responsibility, these can be addressed; test possible solutions, and thereby narrow performance gaps between vulnerable students and their peers. The issue is a significant one, both nationally and in the four locality areas, and one which has been exacerbated by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which research shows impacted more negatively on those already vulnerable, as well as increasing their number through social isolation during lockdowns, increasing mental health issues and, for some families, a breaking of the social contract through which school attendance was accepted as compulsory. The pilots have a clear focus on equity and each pilot site holds clear data on indicators of vulnerability which presents the degree of the challenge. Key performance indicators to assess the impact of the pilots are being agreed in each locality, but readily available and relevant impact measures include statistics on attendance, numbers of EHE, suspensions and permanent exclusions.

Attendance was an early focus for all four pilots, as an early indicator of vulnerability. Attendance is an example of how some challenges to be navigated arise from system issues. For example, in workshops run by the evaluation team, stakeholders in both Wakefield and Coventry highlighted the tension between the DfE 'expectation' of fining parents for non-attendance and LAs' and schools' reluctance to add to the trauma of families in crisis by doing so. The 2019 DfE non-statutory guidance has led pilots to re-evaluate the LA's remit and strategy for attendance. Coventry is moving from a 'traded-only' service to a universal strategy where levels of absence are consistently linked with the Early Help offer. Wakefield held workshops with school/system leaders and co-constructed a new attendance strategy which includes an EWO provided for every school including academies, based in locality hubs alongside Early Help and Social Care teams, to help facilitate integrated working around the school and family.

The pilot aims, expressed in the bids (and, indeed, the AEC brief) were initially to agree a definition of 'vulnerability' and establish reliable data systems to identify the most vulnerable students in order to provide targeted, preventative support. Wakefield and Rochdale have followed the initial plan to build integrated service partnerships informed by 'big data' collection and analysis. Rochdale's 'data warehousing project' has been implemented and a 'stratification analysis' completed. This has 'shone a light on' processes and gaps and brought deeper understanding of some previously 'invisible' children. For example, "attendance has been perceived generally as a school's issue and it doesn't necessarily meet the criteria for children's social care" (project lead) but the analysis identified children who would benefit from services and education working together. As a result, five strands of work have been highlighted for development in year 2, including five schools and the PRU for support on inclusivity, and 10 children for support from a family key worker. In Wakefield, too, a data dashboard is now established, to be used by the Inclusion

Board and by each locality to improve consistency in response to need and provide outreach support, reintegration and transition support.

All pilot leads agree that LA-wide data is needed for resource management and strategic planning. There has been a growing focus over year 1 on complementary 'insights' work to understand what lies behind the data, which has led to much closer working with stakeholders. Wiltshire already had a whole-county data-sharing system in place to 'flag' vulnerable students but has undertaken additional analysis to identify groups at risk, while Coventry found that the data gathering "was leading us to ask more questions". These two pilots refocused from a service-led approach to one described as "hyper-local", talking to headteachers and/or families and pupils in a single highly deprived local area to try to understand the causes of vulnerability. The ability to respond to individual causes requires a system which has the capacity to offer bespoke support and the empowerment of local services to work in a much more flexible way, 'closer to the ground'. Pilot leads in Coventry held three workshops with school leaders and partners (nursing, police, third sector organisations, early help) to identify the causes of absence, share good practice and existing partnership work and propose initiatives to pilot. They then met with key officers at the LA, from the virtual school, crime, violence reduction, public health, to talk through the challenges and suggestions arising from the workshops. The result is a focus for year 2 on a transition pilot which offers an enhanced bespoke transition package to 10 Year 6 pupils as they move into year 7 and includes support from youth organisations and for parents. In Wiltshire too, evidence was noted that transitions (not only between schools, but also at other key points, outlined below) exacerbate vulnerabilities, often reflecting a lack of shared understanding between agencies/schools and/or a lack of formalised support structures and materials to ensure consistency of response. Year 2 will test support strategies at each of four 'transition points': 1. between educational settings; 2. between inclusion and exclusion; 3. in or out of 'drivers' of vulnerability such as poverty or involvement with a social worker or other agencies and 4. changes in family circumstances such as parent separation, bereavement, caring responsibilities.

The theory of change in the hyper-local approach is that by building a relationship with a young person, listening to what they describe as their needs and understanding the dynamics and influences in their life, support can be tailored to address their needs. The belief of the pilot leads is that schools identify early changes of behaviour that signal vulnerability, e.g. changes in friendship group, drops in attendance – and that inclusive schools deal with these signals as 'behaviour as communication' rather than via disciplinary approaches. At the same time, closer integration of attendance teams and early help teams can provide support via a 'team around the child' approach.

A major challenge these insights bring is the need to ensure a consistency in approach to pupils with challenging behaviour across the locality by working with some schools to

change from a focus on disciplinary action which increases a pupil's sense of alienation to the use of more graduated interventions which start with the nature of pupil-practitioner interactions. Many schools are, of course, already inclusive and it is unclear at the end of Year 1 how many schools would need such culture change or how far it would reduce the level of need for external expert support: some localities have identified as many as 1,500 students as 'vulnerable'.

Scaling up from hyper-local to locality wide is a challenge to be explored further in year 2. Strategies to be tested include the development of 'toolkits' for wider use, e.g. in Wiltshire an on-line tool has been co-produced by SENCO colleagues in the LA and primary schools: the 'ordinarily available provision' for all learners (OPAL) takes a quality first teaching approach. Specific actions are suggested whereby schools can provide a graduated response to children demonstrating additional needs; this is now at the implementation phase and is being adapted for secondaries. It is also hoped that case studies will provide powerful examples of the effectiveness of the personalised approach which will inspire others.

Pilot 1 - Sustainability and impact

The AEC pilot project has provided no additional funds for localities so there has been a need to embed any new initiatives into the on-going work of pilot teams as far as possible. This arguably makes sustainability more likely, while the wider project approach – in particular via Isos Partnership – offers the potential to 'hold up a mirror' on how each locality is working to support vulnerable children, with the potential for impact. For example, the project leaders and their teams are asked to reflect on questions such as 'how is your transformation project impacting on vulnerable learners? How does this fit with new work around early help? How does this fit with the new attendance duties? And how do insights into causes of absence fit with what you're doing around AP and exclusions? Sharing reflections in a community of practice with peers addressing similar challenges in different contexts brings both support and challenge, facilitated by the expertise of the Isos Partnership team. In this way, the pilots provide an intense learning experience as well as the sharing of practical solutions.

The stakeholder survey and evaluation workshops conducted early in year 1 raised several challenges for the work: impact can be seen in the ways these have been addressed, albeit as yet sometimes partially or as aspirations for year 2. Examples of common challenges and responses across the four pilots include:

Developing more inclusive and integrated approaches: meeting need once vulnerability has been identified. An important element of the pilots is the refocus on schools' inclusion and behaviour policies. Wiltshire has encapsulated this in a guiding principle: '*a highly visible, inclusive school culture, underpinned by positive relationships*' and is providing training for school staff and joint development of resources. This will also go some way to addressing

perceptions expressed in the stakeholder survey by school leaders of a lack of fairness: some schools are perceived as inclusive in practice while other schools or MATs are perceived to 'redirect' vulnerable learners to other settings. Some partnerships are also providing a vehicle to exert peer pressure from other school leaders. In addition, the move to integrated services aims to reduce silo-working within LAs (with separate business plans and unshared resources) identified in early workshops. Ofsted have identified the impact that a multi-agency approach is having on vulnerable pupils (Wakefield ILACS report, 2021).

By far the most common issue raised in both LA and school stakeholder feedback was a **lack of consistency** in identifying and responding to need. This included variability in schools' tolerance and speed of suspension/exclusion as well as 'piecemeal' responses often dependent upon resourcing and capacity in a locality. Discussions with school staff during year 1 have identified that one cause is a lack of awareness of the locality 'offer' or how to access it. A directory is under production in two localities, as well as better inductions for new headteachers to understand the systems and protocols, essential in contexts where 'churn' is an issue (e.g. 7 or 8 new headteachers appointed in a single term).

Data: consistency is aided by knowing whether a school, for example, has accessed 'Team around the school meetings' before moving to exclusion – this can guide the appropriate degree of challenge by the LA. Data can also help in the allocation of scarce resource – e.g. by comparing the demographics of statistical neighbours to assess the need for AP places.

Roles, responsibilities and service support: 'othering' can occur where professionals under pressure in a system undergoing change see responsibilities as belonging with other services. Pilot leads described how data sharing and integrated services can reduce 'othering' by highlighting, for example, that when a child is 'signed-off' from social care, a continuing lack of attendance means they are still vulnerable and need schools and services to work together. One pilot lead suggested that schools sometimes lack confidence in responding to additional needs, which they hope to address by providing additional training. However, the number of comments on the evaluation baseline survey (winter 2022) from headteachers from all three pilot strands, indicate schools' concern about the lack of expert provision available from Educational Psychologists, Social care, specialist SEND provision: they perceive that thresholds are too high to address need at an early stage and waiting times too long. Post-pandemic, demand has grown, while resources are shrinking. While greater inclusivity in some schools will address the needs of some vulnerable children, it will not, alone, address the lack of resources in the system.

Resources and staff churn: the main resource is people and two factors are challenging for locality work. The first is the level of churn in the system: while relationships are the bedrock of collaborative working, constant changes in personnel due to LA restructures and short tenures of headteachers, demand time, effort and reiteration of 'this is how we work'.

The second is recruitment and retention. Pilot leads identify “across the board” shortages of social workers, teachers, TAs and police.

Engagement of stakeholders: schools, parents and pupils. Engagement of schools has been a clear focus in all the pilots; though it has been more challenging in some localities than others, where attendance at events was ‘disappointing’ particularly in the summer term due to the number of schools in their ‘Ofsted window’ and teacher strikes. The challenge of shifting school and MAT cultures to become more inclusive and engage more effectively with wider local services should not be underestimated. Parental and pupil engagement has taken a lower profile and needs to be a priority in year 2. In some localities, where parental trust in professionals is seen to be low, engagement is improving from locating key workers in community hubs or venues. The importance of repositioning Early Help teams, social care teams, public health, youth hubs and EWOs into locality areas offers a practical way of facilitating joined-up integrated working. Analysis of the data generated from such local collaborations can provide valuable information, but this needs to be synthesised and used to inform wider LA priorities and work. There has been little appetite so far for locating services in schools, partly due to fears they will be ‘swallowed up’ in the daily life of a school rather than providing targeted support and longer-term training for school staff, although Wiltshire’s new team will allow this model to be explored in year 2.

Cohesion in a fragmented system. There is limited evidence to date of the pilots addressing this challenge, despite it being a significant claim for locality working. There are, however, signs of a growing awareness of the potential for MAT CEOs and LA DCSs to work more closely together. Wiltshire and Coventry have existing partnership arrangements which enable this dialogue to take place, while both Wakefield and Rochdale have been working proactively to establish such relationships. One pilot lead noted the value of attending regular meetings with “much more professional CEOs who realise that they're in the same role as us, that they're responsible for the outcomes of all those schools. And actually, they've got to be across performance in the same way that we have to be with our maintained schools. Collectively, we're across the performance of the system.”

Evaluation and feedback: Pilot leads hope that involvement in the pilots will help them to evaluate the impact of any new approaches being trialled. Most pilots have built in feedback loops such as the VAR approach (identify Vulnerability, take Action, Review) explicit in Wiltshire’s transition strategy. The collection of case studies capturing the ‘stories’ of pupils and parents in year 2 are intended to act as motivation and practical guides for scaling up the specific hyper-local work. Nevertheless, now that the pilots have clarity on their focus and approach, there will need to be a continuing focus on gathering and reviewing progress and impact within and across the Pilot 1 localities in the coming year, supported by Isos Partnership.

1C. Pilot 2 – Combined Authority

Pilot 2 - A shared commitment to the locality

The North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) was established in 2018 as part of the Conservative Government's Industrial Strategy, which aims to improve living standards and economic growth in areas of low productivity and entrenched deprivation. The theory of action is that investment (in this case, £20M for 30 years) together with devolved decision-making on its use, will support delivery of a strategic economic plan for the area. While all CAs have a remit for skills and careers, NTCA is unusual in also having a mandate for school improvement, arising from the Joint School Improvement Strategy which was outlined in the North of Tyne Devolution Deal (2018). This strategy, co-produced with education leads in the three constituent local authorities (Northumberland, North Tyneside and Newcastle) and the result of wide stakeholder engagement with schools, teaching unions and other sector professionals, has an agreed set of shared priorities and principles to address academic underperformance. The hope is for additional funding for a North of Tyne Education Challenge, but pending its award, the priorities are being delivered via a £1M programme funded for 2022/23 by Cabinet and a second year's funding agreed in summer 2023. A linked strategy funded to an equivalent amount by Cabinet is the Child Poverty Reduction strategy.

The CA covers 365 schools including PRUs and AP, positioning it, in terms of size, as slightly smaller than one of the other localities (SAfE) in the AECT programme. It therefore offers a rich vein of learning about locality working across LA boundaries and the scaling up of initiatives, as well as insights into the role of a regional body and its integration into a 'crowded' school improvement landscape.

Stakeholder commitment to the CA is high. Of the 202 responses to the stakeholder survey (winter 2022), 28 were from the North of Tyne, 18 of which included open text comments. Responses to Question One were positive and compare well with the other localities: between 2/3 and 4/5 of respondents agreed with a range of benefits of the CA, including the greater range of expertise and capacity, economies of scale, greater school and Trust engagement and the potential to connect school improvement with other local, regional and/or national priorities such as skills. Responses to questions 2 and 3 of the survey were also positive and compare well with the other localities. For example, a strong majority of respondents agree that partnership working is a regular occurrence and that local collaboration between schools, MATs and other agencies has a positive impact on educational outcomes for pupils.

Discussions with the DfE are currently (summer 2023) underway about a new Devolution Deal which will extend the CA's remit to 7 LAs. Transition to the new combined authority is expected following the Mayoral elections in May 2024.

Pilot 2 - Leadership and governance of the partnership

The pilot is led by the small central NTCA team of four. Formal accountability is to the cross-party Cabinet, the Mayor and the Overview and Scrutiny committee. There is strong political support for the programme, as evidenced by Cabinet's endorsement of the plans and agreement to fund a second year.

NTCA works closely with the Education Directors of the three constituent LAs and LA teams to take forward the agreed education strategy and review progress against the agreed objectives. An Education Directors Strategy Group meets bi-monthly and comprises the NTCA lead, the Assistant Director of Education and Inclusion, North Tyneside Council, the Assistant Director of Education and Skills, Newcastle City Council and the Director of Education, Northumberland County Council. They report to the Inclusive Economy Board (an advisory group to Cabinet). Below this strategic level, discussions are underway about how operational governance will work in a CA of 7 LAs and an advisory board of key partners is being considered. In the meantime, requests are managed on an ad-hoc basis to individual lead officers, with changes in personnel making this more challenging.

Nevertheless, school engagement has been high over the first year, with over 200 schools and 15 Trusts across the region signed up to one or more of the individual strands of activity. Delivery of programmes is via existing bodies on a commissioned basis: partnerships are in place with the regional Teaching School Hub, Newcastle Research School, the Association of Education Advisers, the Local Economic Partnership and local employers, Newcastle and Leeds Beckett universities. Links with other partners include the Apprenticeships hub, EEF, the Regional Schools Director, Blended Learning Group, STEM and Digital engagement programme, the DfE early career teachers programme, Launchpad for Literacy and the NHS integrated care board.

Unlike pilot 1, the leads have no statutory responsibility and do not directly employ those who deliver services. Like pilot 3, they work through influence and facilitation of connections although they arguably have a stronger political mandate at regional and national levels. They also have resources to incentivise engagement.

Pilot 2 - Clarity of partnership focus and approach

The focus of pilot 2 is broadly school improvement, seeking to complement existing statutory responsibilities held by LAs and trusts. The aim is to pilot a model that works across several LAs that is based on the principles of collaboration and open sharing of good practice, adding value by complementing the work of individual LAs, trusts and schools and supporting schools to develop innovative ideas and practice. A major benefit they bring, as well as being an 'honest broker' and proving a wider pool of resource and capacity than is available within a single LA, is the facilitation of connections with partners outside of the school system such as the local economic partnership and employers, the health service and

those working to reduce child poverty. There are similarities with pilot 1 on broadening perspectives across a locality and breaking down silos. A pilot 1 lead observed that there are “benefits of identifying priorities that were far broader than school improvement where school improvement partnerships [have] fallen down, was [where] they were purely focused on school improvement It was very Ofsted framework focused what you didn't find was the common cause across those priorities.” The Joint School Improvement Strategy provides both a clear strategic plan and a social, economic and moral imperative. Work is focused on 5 strands: 1. post-Covid recovery; 2. the development of teachers and leaders; 3. improving transitions between schools; 4. supporting schools in challenging contexts and 5. careers and progression pathways. Like pilots 1 and 3, specific strategies arose from stakeholder engagement and show a high degree of responsiveness to schools’ priorities: examples include a focus in strand 1 on pupils’ mental health and in strand 4 on literacy and oracy.

Pilot 2 - Sustainability and impact

The Devolution Deal is a 30-year commitment, so investment in education is expected to be long-term, although the scale each year is subject to political decisions at Cabinet level. The positioning of the combined authority across individual local authorities, trusts, schools and other agencies is proving successful in being able to draw in a wider range of expertise and good practice than would be possible by any single LA, trust or school acting alone. There has been good engagement from school improvement leaders from trusts, schools and local authorities to common development programmes. Plans to develop this early engagement into a powerful system-wide network for deploying system leaders across the region are in the early stages and year 2 will need to focus on the mechanisms to be agreed about the deployment of these capacities and how best to gain agreement for system leaders to work beyond their own institutions or LA.

It is unclear at the end of year 1 how far the development opportunities have been accessed by schools and professionals most in need. The model of a very small central team commissioning delivery via other agencies has the potential to increase sustainability by working through agencies already in place, often with DfE funding. Mechanisms for holding them to account for impact will need to be fully worked through during year 2.

The overlaps in pilot 2’s work themes with those of other pilots in the programme, e.g. links with local businesses (Coventry), literacy (Milton Keynes) and transitions (Coventry and Wiltshire) provide an opportunity for pilot 2 to be more closely integrated with the overall AEC programme, in order that the leads benefit from being part of the powerful community of practice described in earlier sections of this report.

The strategies have yet to have a significant impact on the entrenched disadvantage in the area. In 2022, the North East overtook London as the region with the highest proportion of

children living in both absolute and relative poverty. Almost two out of five children in the North East (38%) are living in poverty. Together with this challenge, there is uncertainty about arrangements for and remit of the new combined authority which is expected to be put in place following the Mayoral elections in May 2024. The team are exploring what working across 7 LAs will mean for the model being developed and considering whether there is any learning to be gained from Greater Manchester, who have operated on a 10 LA basis, but without a remit for school improvement.

While the progress made by the CA in year 1 is impressive, reflecting skilful engagement by the core team, it is important to recognise that this progress has relied in large part on being able to provide additional funding. The commitment to funding by the CA is long term, offering clear scope for sustainability, but it will be important to ensure that the additional resources are targeted to achieve sustained impact in ways that no other body or agency could achieve. This suggests a need to define more clearly what is the added value of regional working in this area and what are the implications for existing bodies and processes. Such work could have profound policy implications in future, assuming that devolution continues to develop and encompass the compulsory education phase.

1D. Pilot 3 – Professional Accountability

Pilot 3 - A shared commitment to the locality

All four projects in Pilot 3 are led by existing ‘school-led’ partnerships, each of which maps on to an LA boundary. The partnerships were all formed in the decade after 2010 in response to increased academisation and the roll-back of local authorities, driven by an aim to sustain local collaboration and the collective good. Despite this common driver, each partnership has its own history and structure and each serves a distinctive context, as noted above. Reflecting these contextual differences, the four partnerships had different starting points and different levels of ‘shared commitment to the locality’, which helps to explain differences in approach and the progress they made through the course of the year.

Shared commitment to the locality was most evident among primary schools engaged in the Ealing Learning Partnership. ELP is an established partnership serving a relatively small and densely populated LA area, with very low levels of academisation at primary level, and with integrated and sustained support from its LA political and executive leadership. Our survey and interview data indicate high levels of commitment among primary school leaders to the locality and the partnership, while ELP’s own monitoring data shows that membership increased from 92% to 96% of all primary schools between 2018-2023. That said, engaging secondary academies (and, indeed, some primary academies) in a shared way of working has proved more challenging. ELP has established a model of peer reviews between primary schools working in triads within clusters since 2018, but the project has focussed on evolving this into a less ‘mocksted’ style model, with greater emphasis on honest self and peer evaluation, called Peer Enquiry and Review. This highlights that even where existing commitment to a locality is relatively strong, there is a need for constant energy and commitment from local leaders to build and reinvigorate this over time. The Isos Partnership leads commented on how well the ELP team had done this, by gripping the ‘high maintenance nature of supporting a system’ and by recognising the need to continually induct and train newly appointed leaders across the locality to keep the model on track.

Like ELP, the other three partnerships – Learn Sheffield, SAfE and the Milton Keynes Education Partnership – were established in the years before the pilot started. However, they operate in quite different contexts: while Milton Keynes is only slightly larger than Ealing (110 state-funded schools, vs 93), Sheffield is twice the size (183 schools) and Surrey is more than four times as large (400 schools). All three localities have much higher proportions of academies and MATs than Ealing, including at primary level, arguably making them more typical of localities nationally. Sheffield is also distinctive as a city with extremes of affluence and disadvantage in different areas, although socio-economic diversity is a characteristic of all four localities. These three partnerships also have different organisational and membership arrangements, and different relationships with their respective LAs (as we explore in the following section). Although ELP has a membership

relationship with schools, in organisational terms it is part of the LA and its staff also lead on the LA's statutory functions. Learn Sheffield and SAfE have some similarities to ELP, but also important differences: both are constituted as non-profit companies, holding time-limited contracts to deliver services on behalf of their respective LAs, and receiving income from schools which subscribe as members. These arrangements enable both partnerships to employ core staff who have built sustained, multi-level relationships with local schools. Meanwhile, MKEP is not formally constituted and so cannot hold funds or employ staff, meaning it is reliant on volunteers for its core project management and school engagement.

Suffice to say, these differences appear to make 'shared commitment to the locality' more challenging in these three localities, although such engagement is nonetheless strong, if variable: for example, 91% of schools in Sheffield and 59% of schools in Surrey subscribe to the partnership, while just over 30% of Milton Keynes schools are reported to be participating in the pilot work.

Pilot 3 - Leadership and governance of the partnership

The three formally constituted locality partnerships (ELP, Learn Sheffield and SAfE) have established governance groups which enable shared decision-making and oversight of their wider work. These arrangements are similar but slightly different in each locality: ELP's board includes local headteachers who serve with LA officers for two-year periods, with various committees reporting in; SAfE's board is chaired by a MAT CEO and includes representatives of the county's four Phase Councils (primary, secondary, special, post-16) as well as Surrey's two Teaching School Hubs and various other stakeholders; Learn Sheffield's board is chaired by a non-local MAT CEO, with elected representatives from each school sector, and linked to additional phase-specific reference groups as well as local clusters. In Surrey, an additional steering group has been convened to support the pilot project work. Meanwhile, the Milton Keynes Education Partnership Board includes representatives from schools, MATs, MK College and the Local Authority, but this group has not met in 2023; instead, a Project Development Group has been meeting regularly, bringing together 12 attendees who are leading the development of the pilot project school report.

The political mandate for the partnerships and their specific pilot projects is bound up with their relationships with their respective LAs. This is relatively unproblematic in Ealing, but more complex in the other three cases. In Ealing, where ELP is not separate from the LA, the Council sees the partnership as integral to its wider educational work and mission. The senior pilot lead there explained that they would always seek support from elected members for any significant developments in the partnership. In Surrey, the background to the formation of SAfE is a history of challenging relationships between the LA and many schools, including as a result of challenges around the provision of high-quality wider children's services, although relationships are reported to be improving. In this context, the LA commissions SAfE to undertake its statutory school improvement and governance

functions and clearly recognises and values SAfE's credibility and relationships with schools, indicating a level of political support for the pilot work. In Sheffield, the LA played a key role in establishing the partnership in 2015 and owns 20% of the company. In subsequent years the LA commissioned the partnership to undertake statutory school improvement functions, but at the start of the pilot the LA pulled back from this commitment, which led to significant tension and instability for the partnership. Interestingly, early in 2023 Learn Sheffield published a 'position statement', which helped to raise awareness of these issues, including at a political level in the Council. Towards the end of Year 1, the LA reengaged with Learn Sheffield and a new DCS was appointed. As a result, Learn Sheffield will continue to be commissioned to provide a more limited set of statutory duties beyond September 2023, with the LA taking on the statutory intervention aspects. In Milton Keynes the LA is named as a partner in the AEC proposal and has previously supported the work of the Partnership and reported on MKEP projects/initiatives to the Education Scrutiny Committee. However, in practice, the LA staff member who provided this connection to the partnership has now left the Council and supports the AEC projects as a volunteer, so there is no apparent strategic engagement with the LA. Given the focus in both Sheffield and Milton Keynes on developing a 'school report card', there will be a need to explore whether and how their LAs might take ownership of these developments in order to give them legitimacy in the eyes of parents and to ensure they can be used by all schools and academies, including those that are not members of the partnerships.

Turning to project leadership, we outline the learning from these projects in relation to locality leadership separately below. Here, we focus only on the structure of the four locality teams and their working arrangements. In Milton Keynes, the pilot work is led by the Chair of the secondary heads group (MKSH), herself a serving head, working with the ex-LA official mentioned above as a volunteer and the 12 Project Development Group members, who are all serving heads or MAT leaders. In Sheffield the work is led by Learn Sheffield's CEO, who has employed a data specialist (who previously worked at the LA) to support the technical development of the 'report card' and draws on wider members of the partnership team as required. In Surrey, the CEO leads the project together with the partnership's Communications and Partnerships Manager. In addition, two former heads were employed on fractional contracts to facilitate the two school leader working groups. In Ealing, the pilot is led by four colleagues: the LA Director for Learning Standards and School Partnerships, ELP's Primary Advisor, the Chair of the Learning and Achievement Committee (a serving head), and the LA Secondary Lead. The Primary Adviser – who is also a part-time headteacher – has played a central role in developing and embedding the Peer Enquiry and Review model, working closely with ELP's five primary Cluster Leads – serving heads who have dedicated funding to lead their clusters.

Finally, we consider stakeholder engagement beyond school and trust leaders. As far as we are aware, engagement from teachers, school governors, pupils, parents and wider

communities has not been a significant feature of any of the projects, although some teachers and staff within participating schools will have been engaged in some projects (for example, the secondary reading project in Milton Keynes). Involvement from these groups was mentioned in several of the project proposals and action plans; for example, Learn Sheffield stated that it would develop an additional reference group to access the voice of parents, carers and communities. While there are always practical challenges in engaging these groups, we argue that it will be important to prioritise this aspect in year two, in particular on the topic of report cards/profiles, given that the internal versions will have implications for teachers and school governors and the external versions will be largely aimed at parents. We note that in the survey, fewer than half of respondents in any of the localities agreed that:

- Parents and pupils in this locality have sufficient information about school performance and quality – covering both academic attainment/progress and inclusion measures
- Parents and pupils in this locality have sufficient opportunities and mechanisms for holding schools to account for their performance.

Pilot 3 - Clarity of partnership focus and approach

Each locality partnership has developed one or more project or initiative aimed at strengthening professional accountability as a focus for its AEC pilot work. Most of these projects were proposed in the initial application and have then been developed and, in two cases, implemented over the course of the year, but some reflect a change of tack mid-way through the year. Reflecting the point above that ‘professional accountability’ is a relatively open-ended concept, the nature of these projects differs quite widely, although most have a focus on strengthening individual school and/or collective evaluations of ‘quality’ education and where and how quality can best be strengthened; for example, through school self-evaluation, peer review and report cards/profiles. The two report card/profile projects also include plans to communicate what schools mean by ‘quality’ education to parents and wider stakeholders.

In Ealing, as outlined above, the focus has been on implementing a new Peer Enquiry and Review approach within primary school clusters, with some parallel work to support collaboration between secondary academies and, separately, between early years settings. In Sheffield, the initial plan was for two projects: school report cards and a model for moderated MAT-to-MAT peer reviews across the city. In practice, the team has prioritised work on the report card and plans to revisit the MAT-to-MAT review project in 2023-24, partly for pragmatic, capacity-related reasons, and partly because the Labour party commitment to report cards offers the potential for wider impact if Labour wins the election. Following significant co-design work with school and trust leaders, by summer 2023 Learn Sheffield had developed a prototype ‘report card’ (with two versions, a more detailed ‘internal’ database that can be accessed by schools to support self-evaluation and

comparisons with other schools, and one that will be 'external', aimed at parents and other), ready for piloting in the autumn. In Milton Keynes, one project focusses on promoting reading across local secondary schools, with a focus on understanding needs and supporting teacher development. A second proposal was to build on existing peer review work between some local primary schools, but in early 2023 there was a decision to focus on developing a local school report card instead. By summer 2023 Milton Keynes had developed its version of a report card ready for piloting. SAfE also changed tack during the year, although the core focus on strengthening schools' commitment to inclusion and progress for disadvantaged students remained constant. Two groups of volunteer schools were brought together initially to decide 'bottom up' how to strengthen professional accountability in relation to this issue, with both groups choosing to focus on peer reviews. However, over time it became clear that it was too much to expect busy school leaders to shape and implement a rigorous model of peer review, so the pilot leads decided to refocus the work onto school self-evaluation, building on existing tools and projects that the partnership had in place.

These projects and developments illustrate several of the locality leadership issues we explore in the final section. For example, the three formally constituted localities have needed to balance their existing commitments and capacity (i.e. business as usual) with a desire to strengthen professional accountability through more or less ambitious innovations. Equally, all four localities have needed to align 'bottom up' ownership of the initiative with wider strategic priorities and practical feasibility considerations. ELP's PER model is an evolution of the existing peer review approach, offering a good fit with existing priorities and capacity and a degree of collective ownership, although a different approach has been needed to engage secondary academies. Meanwhile, Learn Sheffield and Milton Keynes' plans for report cards are clearly not 'business as usual': this has allowed for a level of 'bottom up' ownership among those school and trust leaders who have helped to co-design the approach, but it has also stretched participants' capacity and questions remain around how feasible these innovations will be when the pilot work starts in practice. Finally, SAfE's experience of giving the two school groups 'bottom up' latitude to decide on their approach clearly offered scope for local ownership and culture change, but also presented practical and strategic challenges, leading to a change of tack and the new focus on school self-evaluation. Unsurprisingly, these considerations relate to the sustainability and impact of the initiatives, as we explore in the following section.

Pilot 3 - Sustainability and impact

The definitional issues associated with 'professional accountability', highlighted above, make it inherently difficult to assess whether any given initiative has achieved impact in a causal sense. One interesting outcome of this project may be to strengthen our understanding of how 'professional accountability' might best be assessed and the outcomes it might achieve, for example in terms of: horizontal accountability to peers (e.g.

which might lead to practice being freely shared); accountability to parents (e.g. do they feel better informed?); and/or to pupils (e.g. has the pressure of perverse incentives which lead to not admitting or excluding vulnerable pupils been reduced?). Similarly, at a locality level, does strengthened professional accountability support inclusion and the success of all pupils (e.g. indicated through reduced exclusions)? At this stage we focus more on the process indicators for sustainability and impact outlined in the evaluation framework (Box 1).

Leaders in all four localities are certainly working to address these issues and have emerging clarity on what they aim to have achieved by the end of the project. At this stage, however, only two AEC Pilot 3 projects have really begun implementation in schools (i.e. PERs in Ealing and the reading project in Milton Keynes). The ELP locality baseline sets out clearly how the team there is working to ensure sustainable impact from the PER primary model, for example through a focus on enhancing the capacity and skills of the five cluster leaders and by initiating a research group to review progress and ensure feedback loops. Across the other three localities, work with Isos Partnership has certainly helped to clarify plans and success indicators for the coming year as the planned initiatives move into implementation during year 2 of the programme.

1E. Leading across localities

The synthesis above reflects a range of activity aimed at addressing numerous complex challenges. It is challenging to draw out a concise set of findings and implications in relation to locality leadership. Our tentative conclusions are as follows, but we are keen to test and refine these during Year 2 and as we collect further data from the project:

Locality leadership must always be adapted to the context in which it operates. This finding is not surprising but is important to highlight nonetheless, not least because it indicates that there is no one ‘best way’ to lead across a locality. This conclusion reflects the range of pilot projects we observed - establishing an education function across a Combined Authority is very different from working in an LA or a ‘school-led’ partnership. Equally, as we highlight above, there are significant contextual, historical and cultural differences between the four LAs, the four school partnerships and the CA sub-region. There are also differences in the positions that local leaders hold and the types of work they are engaged in: some fulfil statutory functions and can assume a (limited) level of hierarchical authority, others must rely much more on volunteers and lateral, network leadership. These differences all play into the points we make below, shaping where and how leadership operates.

Locality leaders are place makers. England’s educational landscape has become more fragmented, as schools join different MATs and as LAs have been rolled back, geographically ‘local’ identities and arrangements have begun to dissolve.⁵ In these contexts, the locality leaders we observed were all working to shape a shared and meaningful conception of why and how a particular notion of ‘local’ matters. We see this in the various partnerships and straplines they have developed – ‘One Coventry’, ‘Raising Rochdale’, ‘Learn Sheffield’ and so on. **Forging and sustaining a shared sense that ‘this locality’ (still) matters and that ‘we’ have a collective responsibility to ensure that all children here succeed was at the heart of leaders’ place making.** This involved working with local stakeholders to identify a ‘common cause’ underpinned by moral purpose that everyone could subscribe to. However, this work was never straightforward: local leaders described the **challenge of competing priorities and agendas**, where ‘everyone wants a piece of you’ so it can be hard to stay focused on a coherent, shared vision and agenda. Leaders acknowledged that this remained a work in progress, particularly given the lack of statutory requirements for local collaboration: indeed, one interviewee described their partnership’s potential as a genuine ‘anchor institution’ for the locality (unlike, in their view, MATs, which do not have a specific geographic focus), but explained that “without legislation or without a top down organisational structure imposed, it's really hard.”

In most of the nine localities, **place-making required a focus on multiple scales simultaneously**, often zooming in and out to consider how hyper-local, local, regional and

⁵ Greany, T., Noyes, A., Gripton, C., Cowhitt, T. and Hudson, G., (2023) *Local learning landscapes: exploring coherence, equity and quality in teacher professional development in England*. University of Nottingham

national contexts interact to impact on children, families and the services that support them. In many cases this involved **an ability to combine big data with qualitative insights**. For example, in Coventry there was a focus on prototyping approaches in hyper-local areas, while in Rochdale the focus was on understanding the experiences and needs of 10 vulnerable young people in depth, all to inform wider work. Leaders emphasised the importance of case studies and stories as a way of bringing issues to life and galvanising partnership action. In Wakefield we heard how the strategic ‘Wakefield Families Together’ push was adapted to reflect the City and its five adjoining ‘districts’, with local multi-agency teams linked to LA-wide fora and data-informed strategic approaches. In Surrey, SAfE’s initial project was carefully designed to involve both a geographically clustered group of schools and trusts and a second group drawn from across the wider county, as a way of testing different models of collaboration and securing county-wide engagement. In Sheffield and Milton Keynes, a key challenge in year 2 will be to ensure that report cards go beyond school-level marketing tools to become mechanisms for locality-wide change.

Place making required local leaders to be boundary spanners. Time and again we heard how ‘the locality’ is not one thing, but involves multiple different communities, geographies, contexts, organisations, structures, silos and scales. These boundaries – sometimes real, sometimes attitudinal – were commonly at the heart of local tensions and challenges; for example, if some schools or MATs did not participate in local inclusion arrangements, or if some LA service areas were seen by schools to be unresponsive or incoherent. Bridging these boundaries required local leaders to be adept at not only **understanding different perspectives and priorities, but also at resolving differences where possible or encouraging shared dialogue and sensemaking where not**. “To lead these projects, [we] need to be able to connect with people from the range of services and be able to appreciate the different perspectives of social care, health, education and find a common ground” (pilot lead). Local leaders did this through their **professional credibility** and by drawing on their **trusting relationships with a range of local stakeholders**, leveraging these to develop shared language and understanding and to agree proposals for how to move forwards. Critically, locality leaders were willing to spend time understanding different frontline perspectives, using these insights to inform their strategic work. “You have to understand what it's like on the ground as well as understanding it at a strategic level. ... by being part of core group meetings, I've learned a heck of a lot that I have then been able to apply” (pilot lead). We observed multiple examples of boundary spanning – including across sectors (for example to link businesses, community groups and schools in Coventry); across LAs and urban/rural contexts (North of Tyne); across service areas (health, social services, police etc in Pilot 1); and across maintained schools, trusts and other partners (pilot 3). Three specific examples include:

- One LA leader (Wakefield) described how they worked with school and public health leaders to identify shared benefits from improving school attendance. Through this, headteachers came to appreciate how non-attendance impacts on wider outcomes (e.g.

obesity and mental health) and how by working collectively with other agencies they could address shared priorities. Equally, the LA leader came to understand that the LA's Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) were incentivised wrongly – their salaries were covered by parental fines, encouraging them to impose ever more fines, which school leaders argued only added more pressure onto relationships with parents. In order to address this the LA now provides core funding for EWOs.

- A headteacher interviewee (Ealing) explained that they sit on a governance board for the partnership – a role which requires them to join up different agendas and act as a boundary spanner, as they explained: “There is a big challenge in getting your head around all of the different committees, because the Learning and Achievement Committee is what we're talking about predominantly here in this project, but we have also got committees on SEND, on safeguarding, and on making the partnership sustainable - and you need to be able to understand that breadth and make all of those [committees] fire in the right ways that they're supposed to, and then link together, which is hard, and you have that problem of siloed working that happens everywhere, but also the difference between the Local Authority... and the head teachers... (but) now I think we are more strategic than we used to be.”
- Boundary spanning sometimes involves working ‘upwards’ to secure political support for change. We saw this in Sheffield, where the partnership’s decision to publish a ‘position statement’ helped to ensure that key local politicians became aware of recent developments within the LA which threatened to disrupt the partnership’s established work and impact, leading to changes in personnel and a renewed political mandate.

Place making required locality leaders to be skilled systems leaders, meaning that they displayed, in different combinations and to different extents, the kinds of qualities and capabilities necessary for the complex, adaptive work they were engaged in.⁶ This included: **clear core values and integrity; commitment and perseverance; ‘big picture’ awareness and strategic thinking coupled with practical problem-solving skills; and the ability to engage stakeholders through expert communication and facilitation skills.** These skills enabled the locality leaders to involve partners in **identifying a ‘common cause’**, such as attendance, inclusion, parental engagement or professional learning, which could strengthen collective moral purpose and shared action. Agreeing on a ‘common cause’ that all stakeholders would commit to required **a sophisticated balance of top-down steering and bottom-up consultation**, but this worked slightly differently across the three pilots, reflecting the different roles played by LAs, school partnerships and the Combined Authority. In Pilot 3, partnership leaders needed to identify issues and approaches that member schools would value and support: for example, the Ealing Learning Partnership

⁶ Greany, T., and Kamp, A. (2022) *Leading Educational Networks: Theory, Policy and Practice*. London: Bloomsbury. Cousin, S. (2019). *System Leadership: Policy and Practice in the English Schools System*, London: Bloomsbury.

aimed to make collaborative working “so compelling that there's no reason not to be in it”. However, SAfE’s pilot lead came to think that she had given too much latitude to the volunteer schools to define a ‘bottom up’ approach, leading to an unviable focus on peer review and later change in direction. In Pilot 2, the CA needed to establish productive ways of working with its three constituent LAs, by identifying niches where its additional funding and capacity could best add value. Meanwhile, the Pilot 1, LA leaders were keen to focus on areas (such as attendance or looked after children) where they still have a remit and some capacity to achieve change, although they recognised a need to shift away from service-driven approaches and to integrate work across health, social care and education where possible. These LA leaders understood that they could not operate alone, with a need to engage academies and MATs in particular, given these schools operate largely outside statutory LA frameworks. LA leaders focussed on moral purpose arguments (“no-one will say ‘I think poor attendance is fine’” - pilot lead) but backed this up with hard data and by drawing on the LA’s inherent democratic legitimacy and convening power. This highlights that local leaders build strong relationships and credibility by **providing challenge as well as support** to partners. For example, in Wakefield the pilot lead explained:

“I speak to Ofsted every month. I speak to the DfE every month. We let schools know that if we've got concerns about schools, we will make them explicit... it always surprises me the number of head teachers who think that those conversations don't happen because ‘I'm in an Academy and you're in the local authority and you're not supposed to have anything to do with us.’ And we keep reminding them – ‘they're all Wakefield children we are responsible for their outcomes. They're all our business’.”

Designing and implementing an intervention which could help to address a ‘common cause’ might sound simple, but in practice this involved numerous challenges. Indeed, the overall AEC project has been extended because it has taken longer for the localities to shape and begin implementing their projects. Some projects hit dead ends and needed to be refocused, as we saw in Surrey (peer reviews), Milton Keynes (peer reviews) and Wiltshire (primary exclusions). Even those projects that remained broadly on track required changes in thinking and approach as the work progressed. Across all the projects, leaders needed to juggle competing priorities in a context of tight resources – keeping their core ‘day job’ work on track while also responding to changing external requirements and pushing forward with new initiatives. This points to the importance of locality leaders being **politically astute** (‘knowing which way the wind is blowing’) and capable of engaging in ‘collaborative thuggery’ (Vangen and Huxham, 2003) where necessary. We also noticed the importance of **bravery** in the face of sometimes fierce challenge from schools and **professional wisdom**; for example in Sheffield, where the partnership leader described how they had resisted pressure to narrow down the focus of the ‘report card’ they were developing too soon:

“I think we did really well in, in resisting the need to have too much clarity of focus and approach too early... if that makes sense.... (the wider team) would all have liked us to narrow down that focus earlier... But I think we will end up in a better place. We’ll either succeed or will fail. But it will be a better success or a better failure for allowing it to run and allowing people to come to a point where they made the decision to say it's two products, everybody understands that.” (Pilot lead)

Having worked collaboratively to identify a ‘common cause’ and the interventions that would be trialled to address it, locality leaders needed to be **competent managers of projects and change processes**. This included working to **distribute leadership** and enlist champions so that responsibility and agency became shared; although, as we saw in the example of the headteacher cluster leads in Ealing who received additional funding and support, it was important to invest in such shared leadership to ensure it worked effectively. Most leaders are also working to **build capacity** and ensure that their projects have wider, sustained impact: for example, in Wiltshire, 11 new members of LA staff are being appointed to support children identified as vulnerable, working largely in schools but linked to the county’s new family hubs, while in the North of Tyne the headteachers who have been accredited by the Association of Education Advisers can hopefully be deployed to support systemic improvement capacity in year 2. Ealing’s partnership lead explained the need to foster a sense of schools **“buying into a partnership not purchasing a service”** – this was about being clear about the terms of collaboration, sustaining shared ownership, modelling collaborative behaviours and creating a “psychological contract” which fosters both a “fear of missing out” and a “fear of letting down” (i.e., your peers are counting on you). Leaders also needed to remain **open to ongoing feedback, learning and adaptation** – as was clear in the cases where they decided to change tack because an approach was not deemed to be working. Finally, achieving sustained change required **a relentless focus on delivery**, as one project lead explained:

“Reestablish trust... reestablish those really key relationships across your key partners. And do what you said you were going to do. Make it really explicit that you've done what you said you were going to do... And work at pace. Hold people to account. Really sharp action planning, RAG-rated, and independent scrutiny. Have a clarity about how we operate so it is not personality-dependent.”

Drawing this together, we conclude that **local leaders must work to forge coherence** in terms of how different partners overcome fragmentation and work together to improve place-based outcomes. Such coherence seems to emerge through complex combinations of collective moral purpose, shared priorities (‘a common cause’) and integrated ways of working, as outlined above. It requires systems leaders who can convene local partnerships, boundary spanners who can bridge silos, shared/distributed leadership which gives everyone a voice, and sufficient capacity to enable tangible action and progress.