

The Local Ed 2025 Conference

Post-conference report

A man in a dark suit and glasses is speaking at a podium during a conference. He is gesturing with his right hand. The podium has a microphone and a small sign that says "Local Government". Behind him is a large screen displaying the text "Local Government" and "Local voice government". The audience is visible in the foreground, seen from behind.

Jonathan Crossley-Holland,
Project Leader

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The Local Ed 2025 Conference set the question: **‘Locality Working, why it is important and what it takes’**

Introduction

This report on the Conference picks up some of the developments since the external evaluation evidence gathering was completed in September, including the discussion of the three questions posed by the Conference *‘Locality Working: Why it is important and what it takes’*.

These were explored on the day through:

- **International research.**
- **The experience of 9 pilots** tackling challenging issues which shed light on how to make progress with these and about what was important for high quality locality working. This report focuses on progress in the pilots since the external evaluation was completed in September 2024. There are links to all the presentations made by the 9 Pilots in the Pilots sections
- **Emerging proposals** combining the two to point a way forward for locality working.

The Conference Day

The Local 2025 conference was held at Smith Square on Thursday 30th January 2025, sponsored by the Local Government Association (LGA) and the AEC Trust. You can see more information from the conference including photos and presentations from the pilots [here](#).

It was attended by close to 100 representatives from Local Authorities (LAs), School-led partnerships, MATs, network leaders and other organisations all unified around the belief that locality system leadership matters. There was a real sense of excitement that this issue is rising to the top of the agenda.

John Edwards, Director-General Regions Group at the Department for Education gave the keynote address and stated his commitment to working in partnership with LAs, Combined Authorities and other local partnerships. He focused on the development of RISE (Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence) Teams and encouraged all partners to 'lean in' and support the development of this new way of working and stressed the 'importance of your local convening power'. He said that the DfE would be looking to all local authorities, he included Combined Authorities, to identify local priorities alongside national ones.

Since the Conference it has become clear that the DfE envisage the RISE teams overseeing school improvement in each of their 9 Regions. In particular, they will be charged with intervening not only in failing schools but also in those deemed to be 'requiring attention' triggered by Ofsted inspections under the new framework. This is a big extension of the Regions role. Early estimates suggest a large variation between regions for the number of schools affected; 18 for London and 98 for the north west (TES 13/2/25). The approach applies equally to the maintained and academy sectors. As John Edwards said, the DfE recognises that localities have a key role to play making the system work.

The nine pilots, which have been running for two and a half years, reported back on their findings. All could justly claim to have demonstrated innovative and cutting-edge practice as many delegates present testified.

Professor Toby Greany and Dr Susan Cousin from the University of Nottingham presented their external evaluation '[Forging Local Coherence: Local Ed Project Evaluation](#)'.

Dame Sue John, Executive Director of Challenge Partners and member of the Local Ed 2025 Project Steering Group said: *"I thought it was a great conference, and I think that the majority of the pilots exceeded my expectations. There was also a welcome focus on intellectual leadership and a sense of disciplined innovation"*.

One of a number of comments volunteered afterwards by participants not part of the Project was from Patrick Wall founder of EdPolnet: *"A milestone following years of tough, collaborative work. The case studies and overarching academic analysis was very impressive – and inspiring to see and hear how local identity and loyalty can be harnessed"*



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(Right) John Edwards, Director-General Regions Group at the Department for Education gave the keynote address



(Above) Group photograph with some pilot lead representatives, the LocalED project support team, Alan Parker from the AEC Trust and Gail Tolley, Conference Chair and Director of Children's Services Sector-led Improvement at the LGA.

International Research

Where the Pilots Come from

The ideas for these nine pilots came from research in 2021 which Dr. Susan Cousin and I undertook to explore the scope for new locality models to support English schools funded by the AEC Trust and BELMAS. We wanted to avoid some of the parochialism about the debate by first looking at what four leading (in PISA) systems could tell us. Leading both in terms of excellence and equity. One key measure of their success in achieving equity was that nine out of ten of their 15-year-olds in 2018 mastered the baseline of proficiency in reading, maths and science. All of them rated higher in PISA than in England and still do. We identified four, Estonia, Finland, Singapore and Ontario.

Evidence from these high performing international systems underlined the importance of locality working in education^[1]. What was a surprise to us, and very striking was that they all looked to Michael Fullan for inspiration. One of his key conclusions is: **Leadership from the Middle through locality-based governance and partnership working is key to building school systems that can deliver excellence and equity**. The AEC Trust challenged us to produce a proof of concept, i.e. pilots. The additional challenge we have compared to the 4 is to move on from a fragmented school system without spending a huge amount of effort in restructuring.



One of [Michael Fullan's] key conclusions is: Leadership from the Middle through locality-based governance and partnership working is key to building school systems that can deliver excellence and equity.

The Pilots

The Approach

The original research aimed to explore new models of locality working and the Pilots have sought to do this. A range of local areas, from counties to cities to towns and one combined authority were deliberately chosen. The pilots have explored locality working at 3 levels; the community around the school, the LA/School Led-Partnership and the Combined Authority. My personal view is that the most success will be achieved by finding ways to work at all 3 levels which will be different in different areas and proceed at different paces. All the Pilots have contributed to thinking about locality working which has been the focus of the external evaluation. While each group of pilots have tackled the same question there was no attempt to impose a particular approach because the Project recognised the importance of leaving the Pilots the freedom to respond in the way that worked best in their situation.

The Pilots have taken on some of the biggest challenges facing the school system over the last two years. It is important to note that the Project has provided support and challenge, publicity and independent evaluation but no additional funding. A very impressive testament, despite all the difficulties, to participants' commitment to make things better. As the comments quoted above from very experienced observers illustrate, they have managed to develop cutting edge practice. The Pilots themselves best set out, succinctly what they were trying to achieve and how far they had been successful. I have therefore provided a link to their presentations and in this report just picked out some key common threads and indicated where they have made particular progress since the external evaluation in September 2024.



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Pilot 1: Improving support for vulnerable pupils

See the presentations from Rochdale and Wakefield [here](#) and from Coventry and Wiltshire [here](#).

The four areas that took part in Pilot 1 started with a focus on “vulnerability”, not in the traditional sense of labels, but in a more pragmatic and holistic sense of understanding the needs of individual young people as a first step to addressing risks and barriers those young people may be facing. The key insight was that young people we might consider “vulnerable” are not all vulnerable in the same ways, and thus reducing the vulnerability of one young person requires the adults working with them to understand, make visible and work together to address their needs. This is the essence of the approach that the Pilot 1 areas have co-produced, which they have taken to calling the “granular approach”.

Put simply, the granular approach involves identifying a specific area of practice or lens into vulnerability. Colleagues in **Rochdale** and **Wakefield** started by focusing on severe absence as an indicator of vulnerability, whereas colleagues from **Wiltshire** focused on “transitions” as a factor that can exacerbate vulnerability. **Coventry** colleagues worked with school and community leaders in one locality to develop a menu of support, including the roles of a “School Link Worker” and a “Transitions Worker”. The influence of Shaun Brown from The Difference, and member of the Project Steering Group, who delivered a brilliant workshop for Pilot 1 leads on “the continuum of exclusion” and the need to focus on influencing day-to-day practice and interactions, was hugely influential in shaping the work of the Pilot 1 teams at a formative stage of their work.

All four areas then went through iterative cycles of identifying a small number of individual young people, using these cases to improve support for these young people and their families in real time, as well as “holding the mirror up” to the wider system and identifying lessons and practical changes that are needed. The impact is potentially transformative in those local areas.


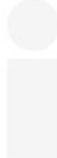
- **Rochdale** have transformed their approach to absence and the work of their Education Welfare Service, and started to apply the granular approach to permanent exclusions. The work has also inspired similar approaches across Greater Manchester (in work on absence led by the Children’s Commissioner) and in Birmingham.
- **Wakefield** have embedded a focus on severely absent pupils not known to wider services in the work of their Education Welfare Service, meaning all schools are having termly conversations about those pupils to ensure they do not become invisible to the wider system. They have also pioneered the role of a youth “mentor”, which is now a permanent feature of Wakefield’s work and their pioneering approach to their Specialist AP Taskforce. They have also used the granular approach to work with academy trust CEOs to scrutinise permanent exclusions.

- **Wiltshire** have used the learning from their case studies in Year 6-7 and Year 9-10 transitions in the induction, training and practice of new and existing services working with schools and families. They have also developed a “transitions collaborative” approach for working with clusters of primary and secondary schools to test and develop practice around Year 6-7 transition through an action learning approach. This is a scalable and repeatable approach that has the scope to influence school practice across the county.
- **Coventry** have gathered vital evidence that has demonstrated to schools the value of having a “School Link Worker” who can build rapport with young people and their families, build trust and relationships with schools, connect families to wider community services, and ultimately ensure young people remain engaged and thriving in their education. There is strong interest from a number of schools in Coventry to develop and maintain their own versions of this approach.

All four Pilot 1 areas have shown that the granular approach can demystify “vulnerability” and enable practitioners by encouraging them to focus on building a shared understanding of a young person and their family, what they value and what makes them feel unsafe, and taking small practical steps that can make a huge difference. This was also key to motivating engagement. They can all demonstrate impact as the slides including with improving persistent absence. The approach is well summed up by this [slide](#).

Pilot 1: Taking a “granular approach” to understanding and addressing vulnerability

Why is it needed?	Young people who are “vulnerable” are <u>not</u> vulnerable in uniform ways. Addressing a young person’s vulnerabilities requires an understanding of <u>why</u> that young person is vulnerable (which one cannot get from a macro level).	<div style="background-color: #fff9e6; padding: 10px; border-radius: 10px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p><i>‘The granular approach is licence to do things in a small steps way, and it shows that small steps can have a huge impact.’</i></p> <p>(Pilot lead)</p> </div> <div style="background-color: #fff9e6; padding: 10px; border-radius: 10px;"> <p><i>‘We have seen significant impact from looking at a small sample of cases ... The methodology of focusing on acute areas of an issue provides opportunities for system leaders to grapple with the issues in a completely different way.’</i></p> <p>(Pilot lead)</p> </div>
What is it?	A virtuous cycle for practice improvement – (a) pick a lens, “hold up the mirror” to an area of practice; (b) work with individual cases (both retrospectively and pro-actively); (c) draw out learning and embed in practice.	
What difference can it make?	<p>Individual children and families – improved attendance, engagement, wellbeing, and relationships.</p> <p>Local area and setting practice – inform changes to practice and routines, “ripple effect” and focused CPD.</p>	
Can it be scaled up?	Yes – the cycle of focusing on a sample of cases to test an area of practice is repeatable; and the learning from each cycle can be embedded in the work of existing practitioners.	

Summary of a “granular approach” to understanding and addressing vulnerability.

Pilot 2: Explore the scope for Combined Authorities role in school improvement

See the presentation from North East Combined Authority [here](#).

As you can see the priorities for the **North of Tyne** with 3 local authorities; **Northumberland**, **Newcastle** and **North of Tyne**; were school improvement, professional development and responding to local priorities. This work involved 270 schools across all phases and types engaged across 550 points of contact, which represents 75% of all eligible settings.

Adrian Dougherty and Andrew Garrad reported that in May 2024 the North of Tyne Combined Authority became the North East Combined Authority with 7 member LAs. The additional ones are Durham, Gateshead, Sunderland and South of Tyne. Their work now involves 492 schools engaging across 748 points of contact.

It is important to remember that the leaders of the member LAs sit on the cabinet of the CA. The evaluation found that LA DCS' were closely involved in the development of the programme and very supportive. One of our Steering Group members said how impressed he was with the enthusiasm there was amongst the schools he visited in the Northeast to work together.

Simon Day reported to the Conference on how the Rochdale granular approach to reducing serve absence had been taken on across Greater Manchester LAs and that work was going on with four South Yorkshire LAs to identify where it would make sense for them to work together. 'The Devolution White Paper' published in December 2024 sets out the Government's ambitions for all parts of the Country to have combined authorities and for increased devolution of powers and funding. See Local Ed 2025 blog 'The Importance of Combined Authorities' for further exploration of the opportunities.



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Pilot 3: Exploring New Models of Professional Accountability

See presentations from [Learn Sheffield](#), [Milton Keynes](#), [Ealing Learning Partnership](#) and [Schools Alliance for Excellence \(Surrey\)](#).

These four pilots were led by school-led partnerships from **Sheffield, Milton Keynes, Ealing** and **Surrey**.

Sheffield and Milton Keynes had focused on the development of school report cards. Milton Keynes had in addition promoted a city-wide approach to literacy. This was against an uncertain background of what national changes there might be to Ofsted, and what the DfE might propose to launch on a digital profile aimed at parents. Both areas emphasised through their consultations with parents how much this approach was welcomed. What was clear from the Conference presentations and from linked work in Camden, was that parents want:

- more regularly updated information than from a point-in-time report than Ofsted provides
- information that gives a much better feel for the school. Data on its own doesn't achieve that
- the ability to find out more about areas of particular interest; e.g support for particular pupil needs, differences in the curriculum offer, and out-of-school provision
- having lots of important and interesting information about the school in one – easy to navigate – place
- quality assurance of content so that the information felt reliable. The local partnership, the local authority, or the academy trust were seen as the obvious possibilities for this.

It was also clear that the schools and trusts that took part were enthusiastic and schools in Camden are already using the school report. There is a strong case for these locally based school reports being developed in other areas. They could include as one piece of their information a link to the new report card proposed by Ofsted.

Ealing Learning Partnership's (ELP) involvement focused on creating a peer review approach set within a culture of high challenge, low threat. Key is the development of five learning clusters, comprising sixty-nine primary and special schools, organised into smaller, triadic groups. School leaders conduct annual peer reviews in triads and engage in a 'Spiral of Enquiry' approach to further professional learning. This peer evaluation model, known as '*Peer Enquiry and Review*' (PER), moves away from a deficit model of improvement, towards a collaborative, enquiry-based methodology. Schools are encouraged to identify and build on what works well, fostering trust among leaders and promoting a culture of mutual respect. This Autumn the Pilot leads were able to report to the Conference that they have successfully engaged the secondary sector in the approach.

Surrey's School Alliance for Excellence's pilot focused on developing a new Surrey locality inclusion framework that incentivises schools to be ambitious and inclusive and captures the real story of the school placing rigorous and robust self-evaluation as a key driver for continuous improvement and professional aspiration. The Pilot Team were able to report that 160 Surrey schools had been engaged in using the new inclusion framework. The SAfE team have developed case studies and guidance material to encourage more schools in Surrey to use the framework and explain some of the different ways that schools have used the tools.



Surrey's School Alliance for Excellence's pilot focused on developing a new Surrey locality inclusion framework that incentivises schools to be ambitious and inclusive.

The importance of pupil and parental Voice

One strand that became increasingly prominent as all the pilots developed was the importance of including pupil and parental(carer) voice. It is self-evidently a key to Pilot 1 but also became so for Pilot 3. It underpinned the whole approach to developing school report cards and less obviously it became a key part of SAfE's inclusion framework and ELPs spiral of enquiry. Pilot 2 saw as an area for development.

Why strong locality working is important

The changes proposed in the *'Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill'* focused on admissions, places planning, tracking of all pupils, ensuring FAPs work will reinforce the need for closer working between LAs, the DfE and all the schools, Trusts in their area. We heard from John Edwards too that DfE see the need for the new RISE Team to work with LAs and School Led Partnerships on an approach to school improvement which embraces tackling local priorities such as attendance. He challenged LAs to 'lean in' and seize the opportunity that their unique position offers to provide a lead.

As the Pilots demonstrate, when done well locality working releases energy, it provides expression to people's commitment to their towns, cities and counties, makes better use of resources, provides a much better service because it is tailored to the capacity and local needs. Dare I say to Rachael Reeves it can improve productivity. Collaboration in providing CPD could be the key to delivering a guarantee for all teaching and support staff. What could be a better outcome than close collaboration between system leaders in a locality between LAs, School Led partnerships, MATs, school networks like Challenge Partners to provide the trauma informed training for all staff, teaching and non-teaching that everyone recognises is needed to meet the huge inclusion challenge?

I have argued elsewhere that locality working is key to overcoming the fragmentation of the current school system and meeting the challenges of an approach to school improvement which embraces SEND, pupil absence and behaviour. The engagement of Trusts in that system leadership is critical and I know many of them already participate and see the importance of helping shape the future and like my own trust benefit from local support. One of the points which was made at the Conference and warmly welcomed was the recognition that locality leadership now was not going to be achieved by a strong single leader but by system leaders working together with LAs as John Edwards suggested playing a convening role.

It would be unrealistic to expect Government to increase devolution of funding and powers to localities if we can't meet the challenge of establishing high quality working as the norm. We know there are huge challenges to be overcome before we can say that is the position. But other systems have done it, Ontario trains their system leaders together and we have huge system leadership talent in our LAs, Dioceses, School-Led Partnerships, No Government in the past has really invested in making this happen and it is likely that it is going to be down to localities at all three levels to take a lead in meeting John Edward's challenge. Is it too grandiose to claim that locality working well done is an important part of the response to the challenge we all face in society more widely to re-create a common agenda and, as Sharma in his recent BBC series, *'History of Now'* would have it, a common culture.

What does it take to do locality working well?

There was considerable focus on this in the Conference both on the model and how it might best be implemented. Professor Toby Greany and Dr. Susan Cousin put forward in their evaluation a model which drew on their experience of the Pilots and their extensive research in this country and internationally. It is explained in some detail in their report '*Forging Local Coherence: Local Ed Project Evaluation*'. P44-46. To download the full evaluation report, click [here](#).

The Model



Forging coherence was complex adaptive work which required sophisticated and overlapping skills, qualities and approaches.

The key drivers are **Collective Moral Purpose, Common Cause, Shared Priorities & Understanding** and **Integrated Ways of Working**. There was discussion about whether this could form a useful for self-evaluation by partnerships or for external assessment and part of a programme for training and support.

Supporting Implementation

The external evaluation had also highlighted how effective the Project Team had been in supporting them. Their way of working may provide a way of ensuring that effective locality working is the norm.

Its key features were:

- The Pilot areas had their own expert mentor who engaged every month in one-to-one sessions online with each of the Pilot leads on how they were tackling the challenges for their project.
- The same mentor would work across the Pilot bringing together all the pilot leads every term so that they could share learning and build a community of practice.
- It was important that the mentor Team in Dame Christine Gilbert, and the Isos Team of Simon Day, Simon Rea and Ben Bryant had people who were able to bring authority and national best practice to the discussions.
- Their role was to ensure that success criteria were set, reviewed and where necessary challenged. The expert mentors did not try to impose a predetermined model but allowed room for the Pilot leads to respond in the way that worked best in their situation.

As one Pilot lead put it but speaking for them all: *“Working together on a common theme, with opportunities to share progress and discuss common challenges via termly online workshops... was seen to support shared sensemaking and a sense of collective learning, commitment and accountability.”* P14 Evaluation Report.

- They would provide 6 monthly reports to the Project Lead.

There were two annual in-person Conferences run by the Project Team for the pilots to share experience across the pilots with a final national Conference to report on findings to a national audience.

An iterative approach was taken by the external evaluation team including an interim report at the end of year and participation in workshops which provided the opportunity to feed in information about relevant research and make comments.

This wasn't commented on in the external evaluation but it is likely that the Project's own website, and the publication in the Education Press of some 20 articles will have helped to build confidence amongst the pilots and to disseminate the findings. One article in Schools Week on the importance of locality working as the key to overcoming fragmentation had 3000 hits in 24 hours.



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

Recommendations

1. **That the website Local Ed 2025 be maintained for another year for the pilots to publicise their further work and published articles.**
2. **That a piece of work is commissioned to meet the challenge laid down by John Edwards to localities to 'Lean In' and take up the role that only they can.**

Localities here embraces all three levels; the community around the school, the LA/School Led Partnership level and combined authorities. This proposal would seek to engage all system leaders with LAs playing a key convening role. It would draw on the experience of this project, amongst others, to produce a proposal:

- For how to assess the strength of current locality partnerships.
- To develop a cost-effective model for improving the quality of locality working.
- To produce an implementation plan.

One suggestion made was that we should create a virtual national college involving system leaders to train and spread best practice in locality working.

Thank you

Thanks to the Steering Group Members; Alan Parker Chair of the AEC Trust (and funder), Dame Sue John 'Executive Director Challenge Partners', Shaun Brown from the Charity The Difference, Paul Whiteman General Secretary NAHT, Julie McCulloch ASCL Policy Lead, Emma Balchin CEO NGA, Jason Elson CEO Parentkind, Kirston Nelson ADCS and Clive Harris LGA.

Lastly a thank you to the Pilots who without additional funding have made all this happen. I have certainly been inspired by what you have done. I know the same energy and commitment to children and parents, especially the more vulnerable, will spur you on to greater things.