A New Settlement for Education

Why we need a new theory of place-based improvement

Jonny Uttley

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This paper is intended as a contribution to public policy debate rather than as an academic review. Where possible, claims are supported by publicly available evidence. Several proposals are original policy propositions developed by the author.

Emily Verow, CEO of Three Spires Multi-Academy Trust and Mark Wilson, CEO of Wellspring Academy Trust, collaborated with the author to develop the policy propositions.

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Foreword

It is all but certain that Andy Burnham MP will enter Downing Street as Prime Minister. Last year he joined – as Mayor of Greater Manchester – our *Ambitious About Inclusion* roadshow (held in partnership with Mission 44), speaking passionately about the need for a more inclusive education system: one that works for every child, whatever their aspiration, wherever they live and whatever their background. This has been a central call of the Centre for Young Lives since our launch in 2024.

It is heartening that inclusion, once almost a taboo in education policy, is so firmly on the agenda. But a word on its own does not change lives. It does not improve attendance among those missing school; or ensure schools meet the needs of all their children; or close the regional and socioeconomic attainment gaps that hold our country back. For inclusion to matter, it must mean systemic change and a willingness to move beyond models of education that fail too many young people.

While the next Prime Minister has yet to set out a detailed programme for education reform, his commitment to devolution and a stronger sense of place are principles we wholeheartedly welcome and should be at the heart of a genuine shift towards inclusive education. The challenge is to turn that vision into action, backed up by specific policies.

This briefing paper, written by our Visiting Fellow, Jonny Uttley, charts the way forward. As Jonny argues, there has been great progress over recent years around improved school standards and professional leadership – with most children doing well as a result. But millions of others face challenges that are deep, complex, and increasingly shaped by the places where they grow up. And too often, the education system writes them off rather than helping them to thrive.

As this paper sets out, England has developed a sophisticated theory of school improvement, but no real theory of place improvement. The consequences of this vacuum are visible in the SEND crisis, the NEET crisis, rising mental health challenges and the stubborn inequalities that blight too many childhoods. A system designed to optimise the academic performance of individual schools is ill-equipped to solve these problems.

The Centre for Young Lives has consistently argued that inclusion cannot be delivered by schools alone. It relies on good housing, health, family support, transport, and employment. It depends on whether children feel safe and happy, whether families can access support when they need it, and whether public services work together rather than operate in silos.

That last point is crucial – we cannot have inclusive schools without inclusive *communities*. Places where schools, trusts, councils, health services, youth organisations, employers, and community groups unite around a shared mission: ensuring that every young person in the area is thriving.

Devolution has shown us pockets of good practice where this is being done. The next Government has both the opportunity and the duty to turbo-charge this and make it a reality in every corner of the country.

Because if we are serious about raising standards, widening opportunity, and unlocking the potential of the next generation, inclusive schools and places cannot be an add-on to education reform. They must be the foundation on which it is built

Haroon Chowdry - Chief Executive, Centre for Young Lives

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Why we need a new theory of place-based improvement

The challenge for the next forty years is not simply to build better schools. It is to improve places, so where a child grows up no longer determines the opportunities available to them.

Executive summary

England stands at a generational moment in education policy.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 created a system built on competition between schools, parental choice and institutional accountability. That model succeeded in raising standards and improving many schools. But this 40-year-old system of education no longer works for all young people, and the challenges facing England today are fundamentally different from those the architects of the 1988 settlement sought to solve.

The central challenge of the late twentieth century was improving institutions. The central challenge of the twenty-first century is improving places.

Problems such as persistent absence, the SEND crisis, youth mental health, child poverty, regional inequality and the growth in the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) are not institutional problems. They are place-based problems. Yet England continues to rely on a system designed primarily to improve individual organisations rather than collective outcomes.

This paper argues that we need to build a system that works for all young people, with academic and technical education as clear equals, and that the next phase of education reform must move beyond a model based on competition and towards one based on collaboration, place and collective responsibility.

The experience of the COVID pandemic demonstrated that when traditional accountability mechanisms were suspended, schools and trusts became more accountable, not less, to their communities, acting as civic institutions that coordinated support for children and families. This experience revealed the potential for a different model of educational leadership rooted in trust, professionalism and civic responsibility.

The paper argues that the future lies in combining two powerful traditions that have often been presented as competing alternatives. The academy and trust movement has demonstrated how strong organisations can drive school improvement through professional expertise and organisational capacity. The growth of devolution and regional leadership has demonstrated the potential of place-based approaches that bring together education, employers, health services, local government and wider public services around shared priorities.

Rather than choosing between these approaches, England should combine them. Trusts should remain the primary engines of school improvement – and schools must continue to get better. Places should provide democratic legitimacy, civic leadership and collective responsibility for outcomes, while communities should become the primary focus of accountability.

A central argument of the paper is that England currently lacks a coherent theory of place-based governance. The decline of the traditional local authority model has removed much of the system's capacity for place stewardship, while the trust movement was never designed to provide democratic accountability for local outcomes. As a result, ***England has developed a theory of school improvement but not a theory of place improvement.*** The success of the former is held back by the absence of the latter.

The paper proposes a new settlement built around place-based partnerships that bring together trusts, schools, colleges, employers, local authorities, health services and regional government around shared outcomes for children and young people. But this new settlement cannot happen without fundamental accountability reform.

The paper supports the current government's nascent thinking around collective accountability but argues that we must go much further. Current accountability measures, particularly Progress 8, continue to reward a narrow definition of institutional performance while failing to recognise contribution to wider community outcomes. It holds back true innovation around technical education, and the perverse incentives within the current accountability framework have become a cause of too many young people failing and becoming NEET.

National government should begin the process of developing a local outcomes framework around the needs of young people. Any framework should, in addition to measuring academic and technical outcomes, consider a broader range of factors, including:

- Participation and completion of education
- Attendance and absence
- Suspension, exclusion and elective home education
- NEET rates
- Economic participation
- Employer engagement
- Wellbeing and mental health
- Health, safety and resilience
- Community connectedness

This is not a case for less accountability. It is a case for more intelligent accountability that recognises complexity rather than ignoring it and that supports institutions across communities to drive improvement and growth.

The paper also argues for curriculum reform. Every young person should continue to study a rigorous academic core. However, schools and trusts must have greater flexibility from age fourteen to develop pathways connected to local economies and local labour markets. A new Progress 5 model would be one way to retain academic rigour while creating space for high-quality technical and employment-focused pathways. We are seeing some promising innovation in this area, such as the Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc) and the West Midlands Baccalaureate (WMBacc). And we have an opportunity to address one of England's most significant economic and social challenges: the growing number of young people who become disconnected from education and employment. One of the biggest barriers to this is the current accountability regime. Accountability reform can unleash local curriculum reform which can drive economic growth.

The Netherlands provides a powerful example of what is possible. Through strong regional structures, integrated support systems and high-quality vocational pathways, Dutch NEET rates are 2.5 times lower than those in England. If England achieved similar levels of youth participation, the economic benefits could exceed £80 billion. The paper therefore argues that education reform should no longer be viewed separately from economic policy. A place-based education system is not only socially desirable; it is essential to long-term economic growth.

The core proposition is simple. For forty years England has organised education around the question of how institutions compete, driven by a belief that central government control works best. The next forty years should be organised around how communities thrive. Achieving this will require a new settlement that aligns place, accountability and curriculum around a shared goal – schools acting as civic anchors and constructive partners within inclusive, healthy and prosperous communities.

1. Introduction

There are moments in public policy when a system that once drove progress first constrains it, then puts it into reverse. English education has reached that moment.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 was one of the most influential pieces of legislation in modern British history. It introduced parental choice, competition between schools, national accountability measures and a belief that market forces could drive improvement. Those reforms shaped a generation of educational policy that in many respects transformed outcomes. School leadership became increasingly professionalised. Standards rose.[i] More young people left school with strong qualifications and the academy and trust movement then created powerful new mechanisms for improvement. [ii]

But it is also true that forty years later, the challenges facing England are fundamentally different from those the architects of the 1988 reforms sought to solve. The central challenge of the late twentieth century was raising standards within institutions. The central challenge of the twenty-first century is improving outcomes across places. Those are not the same thing.

The system we have now is designed for the former, not the latter. Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence that it has done as much good as it ever can in improving individual schools and is now causing many of the problems we now face. The consequence is that too many young people, particularly those not served by solely academic pathways, are left behind by a system that was never designed around their needs or ambitions.

This is why we stand at a generational moment for education policy. The next phase of reform should not be about making marginal adjustments to accountability measures, curriculum or inspection frameworks. It should be about reimagining the relationship between schools, communities and place.

The question is no longer just how to create better schools. The question is how to create stronger, healthier, more prosperous communities, with great schools at their heart. And while England has spent forty years developing an increasingly sophisticated theory of school improvement, it has never developed an equivalent theory of place improvement. That is now the missing piece in English education reform.

2. Time to end the market era

The defining assumption of the post-1988 settlement was that competition would drive improvement. Parents would choose. Schools would compete. Performance measures would expose failure. And the market would incentivise improvement. That logic has shaped every major reform that has followed.

Yet many of the most pressing challenges facing children and young people today cannot be solved through competition – the SEND crisis, [iii] persistent absence,[iv] mental health challenges, youth violence, child poverty, regional inequality, the underachievement of white working-class children and nearly a million young people not in education, employment or training.

These are not individual institutional problems. They are place-based problems. Not only has the current system failed to tackle these problems, but often in-built incentives have actively discouraged the collective action required to solve them. Schools are judged individually but children experience services collectively; schools are encouraged to optimise institutional outcomes, but communities need collaborative solutions; schools are held accountable for their own performance while many of the problems affecting children sit beyond the school gate.

The result is a system that rewards individual success while failing to empower collective success. This is perhaps most visible when we think about inclusion and exclusion. Almost every leader says they want to build inclusive schools, yet they all work within a system where the incentives pull in a different direction. When accountability measures place overwhelming emphasis on institutional outcomes and those outcomes are competitive, difficult decisions become inevitable. And children whose needs are complex have too easily been pushed out to become someone else's responsibility. The forty-year-old marketised system is holding the country back and we need the courage to bring it to a close.

2.1 The lesson we learned during COVID

Perhaps the strongest evidence that another model is possible came during the pandemic. For a brief period, the traditional mechanisms of accountability disappeared. League tables were suspended. Inspections paused. The normal school performance measures became irrelevant.

According to the harsh assumptions of the market model, we might have expected standards to slip, effort and moral purpose to weaken. Instead, something remarkable happened. Schools and trusts demonstrated extraordinary leadership and leveraged their new-found agency: They delivered food parcels; they provided devices and internet access long before the government did; they made PPE; they checked on vulnerable families; they worked with local authorities, charities, community groups and public health services.

Across the country, many schools became civic institutions in the truest sense of the phrase. The motivation was not fear of inspection or league table advantage, it was responsibility to community. Accountability was not upwards to Whitehall – it was outwards to families.[v]

The lesson really matters. When faced with an unprecedented crisis, school leaders did not become less accountable, they became more accountable to what mattered most. That experience should make us question some of our assumptions about how improvement happens. It tells us that trust, collaboration and civic responsibility are much more powerful drivers of improvement than policymakers have often assumed.

3. Why Whitehall cannot solve place-based problems

For too long, English education policy has been shaped by a relatively small group of policymakers, advisers, think tanks and commentators concentrated around Westminster and Whitehall who put their faith in national averages, national solutions and hold similar views of education. But increasingly, the complexity of the challenges facing children means solutions cannot be designed centrally and imposed nationally. [vi]

This is not a criticism of the people who work in Whitehall. It is a recognition of the limits of central government itself. Whitehall is necessarily designed to create national consistency, allocate resources fairly and develop policy that works, on average, across the country. But children and communities do not live their lives as national averages.

The opportunities available to a young person growing up in Hull are fundamentally different from those available in Richmond. The labour market in the North East bears little resemblance to that of Cambridge. The transport challenges of rural Devon are not those of inner-city Birmingham. So, a curriculum pathway that prepares young people well for one local economy may leave them poorly prepared for another. A single national accountability framework cannot capture these differences because it is designed to treat them as exceptions rather than starting points. The more complex challenges become, the less effective central prescription becomes.

This is why the future of English education cannot be built on better national policies alone. It must be built on stronger local leadership, greater trust in communities and a system that gives places the responsibility and agency to solve their own problems while remaining accountable for the outcomes they achieve. This is not to say that local leaders possess all the answers, but they understand the context. And if they don't already, they should be empowered and incentivised to understand the labour market, to know local employers, to understand transport challenges, housing pressures and the opportunities and barriers families in their communities face.

There is already some superb work going on in this area. The Reach Foundation's Cradle to Career approach provides a blueprint for deep community collaboration. In Hartlepool, leaders at IncludEd, a small Alternative Provision setting, connected with local services to develop a free therapy offer, not just for pupils but for parents too. At Wellspring Academy Trust in Yorkshire, some of the most vulnerable young people are leaving school and entering apprenticeships with the trust itself and parents can do paid work in a school while training to be a plumber or electrician, using the apprenticeship levy to fund it. In the North East, the charity SHINE has supported Future Ready Sunderland, which connects thousands of students with local employees through meaningful workplace experiences. And Tees Valley Education Trust is taking a multi-faceted approach to tackling child poverty through partnership working beyond schools.

These examples, and many others, are working models of place-based transformation and point to a better way. Place allows us to see children not simply as pupils moving through schools but as young people growing up in communities. That matters, because outcomes are shaped by far more than what happens in classrooms. Educational attainment, health, employment, housing, family stability and community wellbeing are deeply interconnected. National policy has failed to see those connections or has seen them but found them too complex to tackle. Place makes them impossible to ignore.

3.1 Beyond inclusive schools

For several years many have argued that inclusion should be the defining mission of the next generation of educational leadership. And by inclusion, we mean high standards for all, without social division. That argument still stands. But increasingly, even that ambition looks too limited. The challenge is no longer simply creating great inclusive schools where all young people succeed. It is placing great schools at the heart of healthy, thriving, prosperous communities.

A truly inclusive school sets the highest standards for all and does not settle for just some or most young people succeeding. But operating within a fractured community or surrounded by noninclusive schools, it can only achieve so much. A genuinely inclusive community requires schools, trusts, colleges, employers, health services, local government and community organisations to work together around a shared mission and a collective commitment that all young people will succeed.

This is why inclusion and devolution have to be part of the same conversation. Because both are fundamentally about collective responsibility and community agency. Both require institutions to see themselves as part of something larger than themselves. Both challenge the idea that success can be achieved through competition alone.

3.2 Trusts or democratic leadership: A false choice

Some will argue that a place-based system requires a return to local authority control, while others will argue that trusts should remain entirely independent from local democratic structures. Both positions are rooted in yesterday's debate.

The real opportunity lies in combining the strengths of both. The academy and trust movement, at its best, has demonstrated the power of professional expertise and organisational capacity. Many trusts have become highly effective engines of school improvement. We must not lose that, and no trust should ever take its eyes off its core work, to improve the schools it serves.

At the same time, leaders like Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham have demonstrated through their Mayoral roles the potential of place-based leadership. They have shown how devolved institutions can bring together employers, transport systems, skills providers, health services and local government around shared priorities.

The future lies in synthesis, with trusts as engines of improvement, places as the source of democratic legitimacy and communities as the focus of accountability. This is not a compromise between two competing models: it is the next evolution of both.

3.3 The missing theory of place-based governance

Perhaps the greatest weakness in English education policy is that we have never resolved a fundamental question: who is responsible for a place?

For forty years, in focusing on reforming institutions, we have debated local authorities, grant maintained schools, academies and trusts. We have argued about governance structures, inspection frameworks and accountability measures. But too little attention has been given to how all of these institutions work together to improve outcomes for a community. The old local authority model provided a form of place stewardship. It was imperfect, often bureaucratic and frequently inconsistent. But it carried a democratic mandate and an explicit responsibility for the children and families within a locality.

The academy and trust movement did something else. It created stronger institutions, improved professional capacity, accelerated school improvement and built organisations capable of delivering excellence at scale. But while many trusts have become increasingly effective at improving schools, they were never designed to provide democratic legitimacy or collective stewardship of place. As a result, England now finds itself in a position where the old model of place leadership has largely disappeared, but nothing coherent has replaced it.

We have a theory of school improvement. But we do not yet have a theory of place improvement.

That gap is becoming ever more problematic because of the increasingly complex place-based challenges we now face. Improving attendance, reducing exclusion, supporting vulnerable families, meeting the needs of children with SEND, strengthening pathways into employment and tackling the growth in young people who become NEET cannot be achieved by schools acting alone. Nor can they be solved by Whitehall.

They require leadership that sits between the national and institutional levels.

The next phase of reform must therefore focus on creating a new settlement between trusts, local democratic leaders and communities themselves. Trusts should remain the primary engines of educational improvement. But they should increasingly operate within place-based partnerships

that bring together schools, colleges, employers, health and housing services, local authorities and regional government around shared outcomes for children and young people. The goal should not be to recreate the past. It should be to build something new and something better.

A system that combines the professional strength of trusts, the democratic legitimacy of devolved leadership and the collective responsibility required to solve the complex challenges of the twenty-first century. That is the missing piece in English education reform. And until we address it, we will continue trying to solve place-based problems through institution-based solutions. And no matter how hard we try, we will always fall short.

4 A new accountability settlement

This vision is impossible without accountability reform. Indeed, accountability reform may be the single most important enabling condition for the next phase of improvement. The current Government deserves credit for beginning to move the debate forward. The proposal on collective accountability is perhaps the most significant education reform contained within the White Paper, yet it has received remarkably little attention. Properly developed, it can bridge the gap between school improvement and place improvement. It represents an important and long overdue acknowledgement that some problems can only be solved collectively.

But we need to go much further. For too long accountability has been based on a simplistic assumption: if we measure institutions more intensely, outcomes will improve. The evidence increasingly suggests that this is no longer true. If competitive, high-stakes accountability that pits one institution against another is effective, then why are so many children suspended and excluded? Why do we have the worst school attendance in a generation? Why is the SEND system shattered? Why has elective home education doubled since the pandemic? And why are one-in-eight young people aged sixteen to twenty-four not in education, employment or training?

The challenge is not that we have too much accountability, it is that we have got accountability wrong. The role of national government now should be to develop a broad Local Outcomes Framework around the needs of all young people – a modern accountability framework that asks better questions:

- How well do young people across a community achieve academically and/or vocationally?
- Do vulnerable and disadvantaged children do less well?
- How many children across a place are suspended, excluded or move into home education?
- Are attendance rates improving across a place?
- Are fewer young people becoming NEET?
- How many young people are on track to become economically active?
- How effectively do employers engage with schools?
- How healthy are young people in a community, physically and mentally?
- How healthy, safe and resilient are young people in a community?
- Are families confident in local services?
- Are trusts contributing to wider community outcomes?

These are much harder questions to answer, but they are the questions that matter. Instead of just measuring things that are easy and convenient, we must measure the things that really count for young people, communities and the country. This is broader and more intelligent accountability that recognises and addresses complexity rather than pretending complexity does not exist.

4.1 Ditch Progress 8 and unleash a technical revolution

The Progress 8 measure that became the 'gold standard' for school performance represented an improvement on what came before. But it is increasingly clear that not only can it not provide the foundation for the next phase of reform, but it is a major barrier that must be removed.

Firstly, it values academic routes above creative and technical routes and blocks the development of genuinely equal pathways. Secondly, it blocks real curriculum innovation post-fourteen, forcing schools to stick to a broadly academic curriculum for all. For University Technical Colleges to offer a different curriculum to mainstream schools, alternative accountability measures were introduced, and Progress 8 was disapplied.[vii] And thirdly, it reinforces the structural advantages of schools serving affluent communities and of a disproportionately large number of London schools who benefit from factors that are not easily replicable elsewhere. As a result, we end up beating up schools and leaders who serve the most challenging communities and continue with a missionary work approach to school improvement, with external 'experts' parachuting in to save schools who seemingly can't save themselves.[viii]

It is time we finally broaden our understanding of success and stop seeing high-quality technical pathways and apprenticeships as the poor relation of A-levels and university. A move to a Progress 5 performance measure would be one way to unleash the local agency required to deliver this new vision. Every young person would continue to study a rigorous academic core comprising English, mathematics, science and either a humanity or a language. That foundation matters and should remain a basic entitlement for every young person in the country. But alongside this, schools and trusts would have real flexibility to develop high-quality pathways linked to local economies and local opportunities, starting at fourteen rather than sixteen, while still allowing those who want to the opportunity to study an entirely academic GCSE suite.

By sixteen, many young people have already disengaged and fallen out of the system. The MBacc offers an example of what is possible, with young people much better connected to the world into which they will move. The WMBacc – pioneered by Three Spires Trust and others – points in a similar direction, creating flexible pathways linked to the regional economy while maintaining the flexibility for young people to alter course. These initiatives, one led by the Mayor's Office and the other driven by trusts, recognise something that policymakers have often struggled to acknowledge: not every young person flourishes through the same uniform route. These place-based innovations are currently constrained from becoming truly transformational by the refusal of Westminster to let go of Progress 8, loosen its vice-like grip and empower schools and trusts to do what is right for the young people and communities they serve.

That does not mean standards should fall. In fact, it means the opposite. In an education system in which 30% of sixteen-year-olds leave school without a standard pass in English and maths [ix], a damaging myth has developed, claiming that offering different pathways means lowering expectations. This tired, elitist argument has become a substitute for serious thinking. Helping a young person develop advanced engineering skills is not lowering standards. Helping a young person access a high-quality apprenticeship is not lowering standards. Helping a young person secure sustainable employment within a growing local economy is not lowering standards. The real question is whether we are currently preparing all young people for successful futures. If the answer is no, then defending existing structures under the guise of standards becomes increasingly difficult.

4.2 The road to growth runs through schools

All this matters because curriculum reform is not simply an educational issue, it is an economic issue, and one of social justice. England faces a crisis in economic inactivity [x] and a severe skills shortage. [xi] Too many young people leave education without a route into meaningful work, too many employers struggle to recruit the skills they need, and too many communities see talent leave forever because opportunities do not exist locally. A genuinely place-based curriculum can help address all three problems. It would create stronger links between schools and employers, clearer pathways into skilled employment, and reduce the number of young people becoming NEET. In doing so, it would support regional economic growth. Most importantly, it would recognise that inclusion, economic growth and social mobility are inseparable. A place-based education system is not simply socially desirable; it is an economic necessity, putting the country on a path to sustained economic growth.

The Netherlands offers a striking illustration of what is possible. If England matched Dutch levels of youth participation in education, employment and training, estimates suggest the long-term economic benefit could exceed £80 billion. [xii] That figure should force us to rethink what education reform could unleash. Too often debates about curriculum, accountability and qualifications are treated as if they exist separately from economic policy. They do not. Every young person who becomes disconnected from education or employment represents not only a personal tragedy but also a loss of economic potential. Countries with the lowest NEET rates tend to share several important characteristics, including stronger vocational pathways, deeper employer engagement and regional systems that coordinate education, employment and support around young people. [xiii] In other words, they have built education systems around places rather than institutions. [xiv]

5. The challenge for the next government

For forty years, English education has been shaped by a model built around competition between institutions and that model delivered important gains. But it is becoming increasingly clear that this model is no longer capable of solving the deeply complex challenges we face.

The next phase of reform requires a different question. Not just “how do we improve schools?” but “how do we improve places?” That means moving beyond individual accountability and towards collective accountability. Beyond competition and towards deep collaboration. And beyond inclusive schools, towards schools as civic anchors and constructive partners within inclusive, healthy and prosperous communities. The challenge for the next generation of leaders, including regional mayors and a future Prime Minister, is whether they are prepared to seize that opportunity.

Because the truth is this. Whitehall cannot design thriving communities. Westminster cannot engineer belonging. National policy cannot solve every local problem. But local leaders, empowered communities, ambitious trusts and strong partnerships can.

The era that began in 1988 transformed schools, but it never developed a compelling theory for how schools should collectively transform communities. This is the moment to draw that era to a close and begin a new one, that transforms places. We must build a new settlement that aligns place, accountability, curriculum and economic growth around a single shared purpose: to ensure every young person grows up in a thriving community with genuine opportunities to flourish.

If we get this right, we will not just build a better education system, we will build a fairer, more united, more prosperous country for everyone. ***For forty years we have organised education around the question of how institutions compete. The next forty years must be organised around how communities thrive.*** [xv]

Appendix A: Policy and legislative reform

To make this vision a reality, reform must happen at three levels: policy, accountability and legislation. Some changes can be made through DfE guidance, funding rules and inspection reform. Others would require primary legislation because they would change who is responsible for outcomes across a place.

1. A new government should pause any White Paper reforms that do not support a place-based approach for young people

We do not need to start from scratch and many promising reforms have begun. These should continue but any proposed reforms that do not support a place-based approach should be paused.

2. Create a statutory duty for place-based education partnerships

The most important legislative change would be to create a formal duty for schools, trusts, local authorities, colleges, health services, employers and regional leaders to work together around shared outcomes for children and young people.

At present, many organisations hold separate responsibilities and no single framework requires them to collaborate around the overall success of a place.

A new legislative framework should establish **Local Education and Skills Partnership Boards** or **Children and Young People Partnership Boards**. These would bring together:

- academy trusts and maintained schools;
- FE colleges and training providers;
- local authorities;
- health bodies;
- employers;
- combined authorities where relevant;
- voluntary and community organisations;
- parent, youth and community representatives.

Their role would be to improve outcomes for all young people across a broad range of measures.

3. Move from institutional accountability to collective accountability

The current system judges schools individually and nationally. A move to a place-based model will require national government to create a shared local outcomes framework for all young people. The primary focus of this must be how well the whole local system is serving **all** children and young people in a local area.

This means retaining *school-level accountability* but reforming it to focus on factors within a school's control and developing ***place-level measures*** such as:

- attendance and persistent absence;
- suspension and exclusion rates;
- elective home education;
- pupil movement;
- SEND provision timeliness and sufficiency;
- NEET rates;
- post-sixteen participation and completion;
- employer engagement;
- wellbeing and safety;
- economic participation;
- community resilience.

4. Reform or replace Progress 8

The current secondary accountability framework would need substantial reform. Progress 8 is too narrow to support a genuinely place-based education system because it prioritises a largely academic model and limits the space for technical, vocational and employment-linked pathways.

A new government should pause the re-introduction of Progress 8 and move to a **Progress 5** model as a first step, protecting a strong academic core while freeing up curriculum space for local pathways.

This could include:

- English language and literature;
- mathematics;
- science;
- a humanity or language.

This will provide schools and trusts with more flexibility from age fourteen to offer high-quality technical, creative, digital, vocational and employer-linked pathways, without closing off a full GCSE curriculum for those who wish to pursue university entry, particularly Russell Group universities. This would help make models such as the Manchester Baccalaureate and West Midlands Baccalaureate more than local pilots.

5. Give statutory recognition to local curriculum and skills pathways

Government should formally recognise local curriculum and skills pathways within the national system.

This should involve:

- approved local curriculum and skills compacts;
- regional 14-19 pathway frameworks;
- funding incentives for schools, trusts and colleges that build local pathways;
- stronger links between schools, employers and local skills plans;
- clearer routes into apprenticeships, technical education and employment.

6. Strengthen local and regional stewardship without returning to old-style local authority control

This vision does not require a return to local authority control of schools. However, it does require clearer responsibility for the stewardship of place. A time-limited national commission should be launched to re-engineer our fractured system architecture.

Legislation or statutory guidance should clarify who is responsible for:

- school place planning;
- admissions coordination;
- SEND sufficiency;
- alternative provision;
- children missing education;
- pupil movement;
- post-16 participation;
- local skills alignment;
- inclusion strategy.

Local authorities need the powers to coordinate more effectively, particularly around admissions, while trusts should remain responsible for school improvement. In combined authority areas, mayors should have a stronger convening role around education, skills, transport, employment and youth opportunity.

7. Reform inspection to recognise contribution to place

The new Ofsted framework has doubled down on high-stakes competitive comparative judgement of individual schools. Inspection must move beyond judging individual schools in isolation with no regard for what goes on around schools, who attends individual schools and who doesn't. Ofsted, or any successor inspection model, should consider how schools and trusts contribute to wider local outcomes and the barriers and opportunities in a community or local area.

This could include inspection of:

- trust contribution to place-based improvement;
- partnership working;
- inclusion across a locality;
- the school roll in the context of community;
- SEND and alternative provision arrangements;
- pupil movement and managed moves;
- transitions between phases;
- employer engagement;
- local curriculum pathways;
- the extent to which schools reduce, rather than export, disadvantage.

This could be achieved through a new model of *area education inspection* alongside revised school or trust inspection.

8. Change funding incentives

A place-based system will require changes to funding. At present, funding largely follows individual institutions or individual pupils. Some funding should support shared local priorities.

Possible reforms include:

- pooled inclusion funding;
- shared attendance and family support funding;
- place-based SEND and AP funding;
- NEET reduction funding;
- employer engagement grants;
- transition funding between primary, secondary and post-16;
- local curriculum innovation funding.

Funding reform should empower place-based partnerships to move beyond advisory forums to become dynamic delivery bodies.

9. Reform data-sharing rules and expectations

Partners will need to share information safely and lawfully. That requires clearer statutory gateways, national guidance, a live national school roll and digital infrastructure to allow schools, trusts, councils, health bodies and post-sixteen providers to identify risk earlier and intervene sooner. This will prevent more children from falling between services.

10. Amend academy trust regulation and funding agreements

Academy trusts will need a clearer formal duty to contribute to place outcomes, not just the performance of their own academies. Trusts will remain the engines of school improvement, but their success must also be judged by how they contribute to wider local outcomes.
This could be reflected through:

- revised academy trust funding agreements;
- changes to the Academy Trust Handbook;
- updated trust quality descriptors;
- DfE commissioning decisions;
- regional improvement expectations;
- intervention frameworks

11. Make inclusion a system-level duty

Inclusion must become a shared duty across a place, not simply an aspiration for individual schools.

This should include:

- local inclusion strategies;
- shared responsibility for vulnerable pupils;
- live national school roll;
- transparent pupil movement data;
- statutory guidance and stronger oversight of managed moves and off-site direction;
- accountability for alternative provision quality and national guidance for unregistered AP;
- clear expectations around reintegration;
- duties on mainstream schools and trusts to contribute to SEND and inclusion capacity.

This will prevent the system from rewarding schools for protecting their own outcomes while vulnerable pupils are moved elsewhere.

While some of this may require legislative change, in the short term much of the existing system architecture could pivot the existing system towards a more inclusive and local partnership approach before legislative and organisational changes hardwire the new education and skills settlement for the long-term.

Endnotes

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