

# ESSEX SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP STRATEGY

*Partnerships as accelerators for school improvement*

2021 - 2025

Building on the success of the School Led Improvement Strategy, this School Partnership Strategy seeks to expand and mature the system of school partnerships across Essex to accelerate school improvement and outcomes for all children and young people.

School Partnerships refers to all types of partnerships, including local authority maintained school partnerships and multi-academy trusts (MATs).

*“Local area partnerships are generating energy and commitment because they are making connections across schools and communities to improve schools and outcomes for young people. These partnerships have the potential to reduce the risk of fragmentation and dangers of isolationism in an increasingly diverse system. They can enhance the professional and social capital of teachers, and they can deepen motivation, learning and achievement.”*

*Christine Gilbert – Optimism of the Will*

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This strategy does not exist in isolation but aligns with the Essex SEND strategy, Disadvantaged strategy and other useful documents such as the Ordinarily Available Framework, Inclusion Framework and Supporting Schools Enabling Excellence.

## 1. The Vision for School Partnerships in Essex

The Partnership Board has agreed the vision for partnership working in Essex, following consultation with the wider partnership system.

We believe that every school in Essex should actively engage in a formal school partnership with a number of schools. Children and families of school communities will benefit from the strength of schools working in collaboration with each other rather than in isolation, particularly in these challenging times. Partnerships will also provide a key role in supporting leader wellbeing, which is essential at this time.

The type of partnership is less important than its ability to share practice and capacity, hold schools within the partnership to account in mutually reinforcing ways, and enable schools to access the support they need. The aim is to have a positive impact on school improvement and outcomes for children.

Within these partnerships, schools will work together to develop and share best practice, utilising a system of peer reviews and self-evaluation. System Leaders will play a key role in enabling schools in the partnership to improve and empower schools across Essex to own and develop their own future.



## 2. System and structure

The partnership system in Essex consists of a series of school partnerships, multi-academy trust partnerships, quadrants and a Partnership Board.

The partnerships each have nominated a Partnership Lead to co-ordinate and facilitate the activity of the partnership and each partnership has dedicated support from the Local



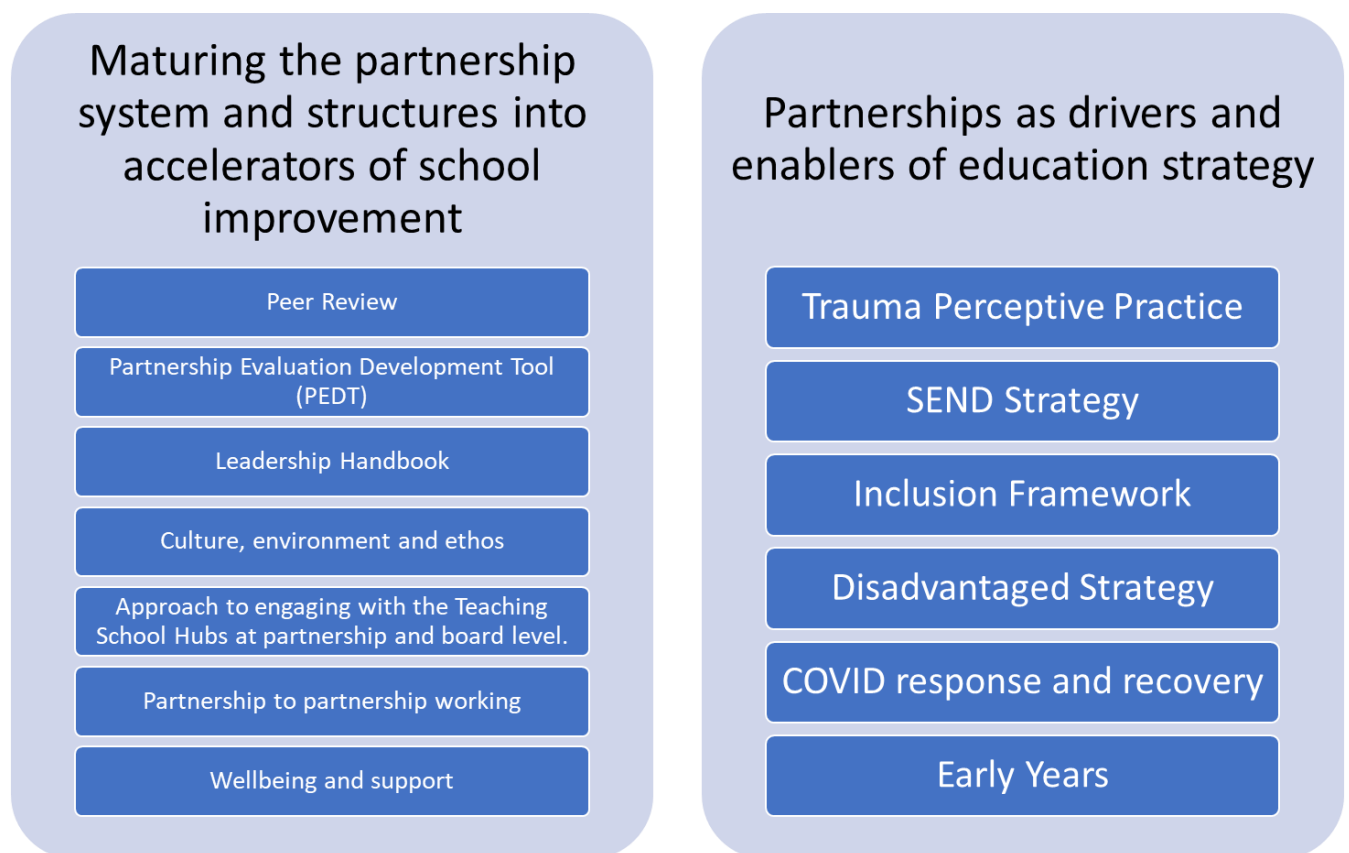
The remit of each part of the system is set out below:

Partnership Board	Quadrants	Partnerships	Schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Set the strategic direction for the Essex partnership landscape through the development, implementation and embedding of the Essex School Partnership Strategy</li> <li>•Source and review regional, national and international research and evidence to inform the future direction of partnership working</li> <li>•Identify and track progress against key priorities for the county, which will               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•mature and sustain the partnership system</li> <li>•accelerate school improvement</li> </ul> </li> <li>•Actively advocate and share the Essex Schools Partnership strategy and the impact of partnership working</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Support and encourage the engagement of schools in partnership working.</li> <li>•Advise and support with the development and growing maturity of the partnerships.</li> <li>•Facilitate the sharing of best practice between partnerships within the quadrant.</li> <li>•Support the sustainability and impact of partnerships within the quadrant.</li> <li>•Ensuring take-up and best use of available support to partnerships within a quadrant.</li> <li>•Set and track progress against key priorities for the quadrant, reflecting countywide priorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Collective accountability for pupil outcomes across the partnership</li> <li>•Growing leadership capacity and succession planning to ensure sustainability of the partnership</li> <li>•Facilitate the sharing of best practice between schools within the partnerships</li> <li>•Develop and implement robust partnership systems and structures, such as MOU, action plan and data sharing</li> <li>•Consider strengths and areas of vulnerability for schools and identify common priorities for the partnership, considering the quadrant priorities</li> <li>•Seize opportunities for joint working such as; curriculum and extra-curricular development, professional learning, research, transition, staff recruitment and mentoring</li> <li>•Develop and implement a partnership structure for peer review</li> <li>•Evaluate the ongoing maturity and impact of the partnership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Actively engage within the partnership to ensure its maturity, sustainability and impact</li> <li>•Support the delivery of key priorities set by the partnership</li> <li>•Enable pupils, students, staff and governors to engage in partnership activities e.g. peer review, subject leaders CPD, secondments, sharing of resources etc</li> </ul>



### 3. Aim of the School Partnership Strategy

The aims of this strategy are to **mature partnerships into accelerators of school improvement** and to enable partnerships to become **enablers and drivers of education strategy**. This means that partnerships have a tangible, sustainable impact on school improvement outcomes for children and young people, school staff and wider community. Through direct partnership working, partnership to partnership working and through shaping and implementing the wider education strategies of Essex.



### 4. Outcomes the School Partnership Strategy

The Essex Education School Partnership Strategy will deliver the following outcomes:

- a) Improved outcomes and opportunities for all children and young people, including access to a wider and richer curriculum, cross partnership events and best practice.
- b) Wider pool of resources to better assess and meet the needs of vulnerable learners.



- c) Successful education response to the COVID19 pandemic, including the re-engagement of all children and young people, and the well-being of all pupils and school staff.
- d) A county-wide partnership system in which every child can attend a school which is at least good and improving.
- e) A culture in which each Headteacher has aspirations for all the children in their partnership to achieve their highest outcomes.
- f) Improved opportunities for staff to access informal and formal continuing professional development and professional learning at all levels and the collaborative development of new practice as a result
- g) Successful recruitment, talent management, succession planning and retention of high-quality staff through improved career progression and opportunities to work across a range of schools and in a range of contexts.
- h) Extending the reach of the best leaders through talent spotting and the development and support of future leaders with the opportunity to work across the partnership and be mentored by experienced leaders
- i) School leaders' wellbeing is improved and sustained, and they feel supported
- j) Partnerships that take responsibility for their own improvement by using regular external challenge, promoting cohesion, confidence and skills through networking with colleagues
- k) Governing bodies and Trust boards with the skills, knowledge and understanding to accelerate school improvement through the promotion of partnership working.
- l) Cost savings and efficiencies through sharing of staff, back-office systems, administrative functions, HR functions, maintenance contracts, purchasing and supplies and policies



## 5. Agreed actions

The board has agreed a series of actions to achieve the broader outcomes of the new Essex Partnership Strategy:

- Set a clear Strategic Direction for partnership working in Essex
- Agree an annual set of priorities, which is informed by the work of the partnerships and quadrants and agreed by the board as county priorities
- Strengthen the focus on cross-phase working
- Enable partnerships to share best practice
- Enable partnerships to evaluate their impact, through models such as peer review
- Clarify the partnership system, the roles and responsibilities of each part and the resources available to support partnerships e.g. co-ordination and facilitation
- Review the membership and representation of the Board
- Take an active role in the promotion of partnership working
- Support development of focus groups to take forward specific actions and feedback to the board
- Continue development of tools and support for partnerships around school improvement
  - o Peer review
  - o Partnership evaluation development tool
  - o Leadership handbook

## 6. Roles and Responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of each part of the system have been refreshed, following the review of the previous strategy, to achieve the above aims:

### **Partnership Board members**

- Engage in Partnership Board meetings, representing peer group
- Oversee the development and implementation of the Essex School Partnership Strategy
- Promote the Partnership Strategy, structure and partnership working in other forums as appropriate
- Gather wider feedback and engagement as appropriate
- To agree an annual set of priorities, and the resources and support partnerships will require for these to be achieved
- To facilitate the sharing of best practice across quadrants
- Oversee the development and implementation of tools to support the partnerships to grow in maturity and impact



### **Partnership Steering Group**

- To bring together the chairs of the four Quadrants and their LA link in order to share relevant priorities and actions in each Quadrant, consider barriers and potential solutions to more effective partnership working, and develop shared approaches and greater consistency between the work of the four Quadrants
- To plan, steer and drive forward the work to develop school partnership working across Essex, including planning the work of the School Partnership Board
- To consider how to connect to and develop effective relationships with other key stakeholders and providers in order to support school partnerships across Essex
- To develop and support approaches to and opportunities for peer review across school partnerships in Essex
- To support Quadrants to consider how to engage effectively with other Essex strategies supporting schools

### **Quadrant chairs**

- Represent quadrant at the Partnership Board
- Dissemination of messages from Partnership Board to partnerships
- Create and seize opportunities for partnership-to-partnership collaboration within a geographical quadrant of Essex
- Organise opportunities for the partnerships across the quadrant to meet and work together
- Facilitate the quadrant to identify any isolated schools and encourage them to engage in the partnership structure

### **Partnership leads**

- Co-ordinate the work of the partnership, organising the opportunities for the schools to meet and work together and facilitating effective communication
- Facilitate development of the partnership action plan
- Create and seize opportunities for partnership-to-partnership collaboration
- Represent partnership at quadrant level
- Engage in co-production and implementation of key Essex strategies

### **The Local Authority**

- Provide data and intelligence to partnerships, quadrants and board level to inform priority setting and impact assessment
- Allocate School Effectiveness Partner resource, tools, advice and guidance to support school partnerships to develop, mature and accelerate school improvement

- Engage in co-production and implementation of key Essex strategies
- Support the development, sourcing and sharing of regional, national and international research and evidence
- Co-ordinate and facilitate Partnership Board meetings and quadrant meetings
- Actively advocate and share the Essex Schools Partnership strategy and the impact of partnership working

### **Teaching School Hubs**

- Engage with the partnership strategy and structure in the delivery of Teaching School Hub KPIs



## 7. Measuring Success

We will measure the success of the strategy through on an ongoing basis with a focused review by the Partnership Board annually. This review will focus on:

- **Improved outcomes** – educational outcomes for all CYP including vulnerable and disadvantaged
- **Response to COVID19** – financial, attendance data, educational outcomes, sickness data
- **Schools at least good and improving** – number of schools in partnerships, Ofsted data, qualitative data on engagement with partnerships, partnership evaluation tool outcomes
- A culture of aspirations for **all the children in their partnership** – partnership data
- **High quality teaching and learning** – CPD data, peer review data, qualitative partnership info, CYP educational progress data
- **Recruitment and retention** – staff turn-over data, qualitative partnership info, costs of recruitment
- Partnerships that take responsibility for their own improvement – networking take up, evaluation tool outcomes, educational outcomes, Ofsted data
- Governing bodies and Trust boards with the skills, knowledge and understanding – survey of school leaders in partnerships re support from GB, survey of GBs re partnerships .

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Context and Background

### 1. What is a partnership

School partnerships are strong strategic alliances between two or more schools and/or organisations.

These partnerships can be formal or informal, and help all educational settings benefit by sharing their knowledge, experience and resources, so that they can provide better learning outcomes for their students through a self-led, self-improving school system.

Over the years, data has shown considerable positive benefits that come from schools coming together to share in mutually beneficial partnerships.

### 2. The initial partnership strategy: The Essex School-Led Improvement System (SLIS)

The first school partnership strategy for Essex was delivered in collaboration between the Essex Professional Associations (EPHA, ASHE, ESSET and ESGA) the Local Authority and school leaders in 2016 and was titled The Essex School-Led Improvement System (SLIS). The vision for the strategy was to establish a system in which schools improved themselves by working in partnership with each other as part of a school-led improvement system, supporting children and young people aged 0–25 to achieve their highest aspirations in education and employment.

The strategy was informed by the direction of education policy in England from 2010 onwards that encouraged schools to work with and support other schools. The approach was underpinned by research that advocated the benefits of schools working in collaboration and argued that this was the most effective way of securing rapid and sustained improvement.

From 2016 a county-wide Project Board was established to oversee the implementation of the strategy. The Project Board is an example of the co-development of the strategy between the LA, schools and other key stakeholders.

Partnerships were invited to be trained in the Education Development Trust's School Partnership Programme to develop peer review skills, provide a structure for engagements, and share a set of tools to facilitate peer reviews. SLIS Partnerships each

identified a lead from amongst its Headteachers to chair meetings, co-ordinate activity, and support the work of the other school leaders across their Partnership. From 2018, four quadrant groupings were established to facilitate the sharing of learning, engage with the Teaching Schools, review health and capacity of partnerships, share strengths, collaborate on areas of development and provide peer support between Partnerships.

Essex County Council have supported the development of the SLIS strategy by providing funding, designating capacity to co-ordinate the strategy and the work of the Project Board, and re-aligning their advisory capacity. All LA School Effectiveness Partners (SEPs) were aligned to a number of SLIS Partnerships and had their time allocated to support partnership activity as well as individual schools.

## **Appendix 2: Review of the Essex School-Led Improvement System (SLIS)**

In 2019 a project was initiated to review and refresh the Essex School-Led Improvement System Strategy to ensure it continued to be effective and aligned to the future vision for Education in Essex.

This review period covered:

- What has gone well to date
- What are the challenges and strengths of the current model?
- Updated research on the benefits of school partnerships both nationally and locally?
- Next steps for partnerships and the partnership system in Essex

The outputs of this review are summarised in this section of the document. The review led to the rebranding of the SLIS Project Board to the School Partnership Board, the development of the new Essex Education Partnership Strategy and a proposed action plan.

The new strategy is set out in section 3 of this document, and covers the below topics:

- The vision for the strategy going forwards
- The outcomes we are seeking to achieve
- Our aims and objectives
- How we will hold ourselves to account
- The structure and systems needed for the future

### **1. What has the initial Essex School-Led Improvement Strategy achieved?**

#### **Progress and impact**

The aims for the SLIS strategy have been consistent: helping schools to support children to achieve their potential; further improving outcomes and the proportion of 'good' schools; developing partnership and system leader capacity; and strengthening school improvement

support across Essex and reducing the number of schools that are isolated from engaging with each other.

The work of Essex school-level partnerships has been recognised in Ofsted inspections, see [appendix](#) summary of quotes from Ofsted inspections about the positive impact of partnership working.

The Essex approach has been recognised nationally as an example of the positive outcomes that partnership working can achieve. With the Essex SLIS strategy mentioned amongst examples across England of the development of area-based local partnerships in Christine Gilbert's think piece for the Institute of Education: [Optimism of the Will: the development of local area-based education partnerships, 2018](#)) and the [School Partnership Programme see <https://www.schoolpartnershipprogramme.com/in-your-area>](#).

### **Established system and structure**

The initial strategy developed a structured partnership system for the county, consisting of the board, 37 partnerships of schools, with partnership leads and later four quadrant groupings, all of which remain in place.

Task and Finish Groups were established by the board to develop thinking on specific issues, for example, tools to support partnership working and the design of the system. External capacity was commissioned from the Education Development Trust and Isos Partnership - national research and advisory organisations that were able to share examples of effective practice from other areas. Over time there was development support for Board members, membership was streamlined to facilitate strategic discussions, and a new chair was appointed with experience of strategic partnerships in other local authorities.

The definition of School Partnerships was widened to include all partnerships including Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) and representation of MATs on the School Partnership Board.

The addition of quadrant meetings has provided stronger local support for partnerships based on the context of their geographical area, leading to more effective and mature partnerships with schools learning from each other. This has been more effective in some quadrants than others due to consistency, capacity and engagement.

The SLIS strategy - that has been jointly developed by schools, the Local Authority and other key players across Essex - was considered to be maturing into a multi-layered approach to school-led improvement across the County.

In 2018, a survey of Essex school leaders was undertaken which found over 95% of respondents to agree that there were benefits to schools working in partnership. With two thirds stating that their SLIS Partnership had improved the quality of teaching and learning in their school.

### **Peer Review**

One of the key activities undertaken by all the SLIS Partnerships has been a programme of peer review. All Partnerships were invited to be trained in the Education Development Trust's

School Partnership Programme to develop peer review skills, provide a structure for engagements, and share a set of tools to facilitate peer reviews. Strong positive feedback was received around peer review from the partnerships and school representatives we spoke to during the strategy review period.

A set of case studies from the SLIS Partnerships demonstrated the impact of Peer Reviews and summarised how each of the Partnerships have developed over time and highlighted some of the gains that were achieved:

- wider learning opportunities for children
- growing leadership opportunities and capacity for staff
- developing the quality of teaching and learning across the partnership
- strengthening trust between and feelings of responsibility for schools across the Partnerships
- building partnership capacity at different levels including for middle leaders.

During the pandemic an approach to virtual peer reviews were trialled. These found evidence to demonstrate how school partnerships have supported each other and, in some cases, become stronger, with their response to the COVID19 crisis.

### **Tools to support partnerships to mature and develop**

A series of tools to support the development of the Partnership Leads has been produced and shared, including:

- Partnership Leads Handbook
- Partnership Evaluation Development Tool (PEDT)
- Access to new resources on the Education Development Trust SPP members' site:
  - o Virtual and blended peer review
  - o Covid rapid response review
  - o Curriculum recovery review

### **Wellbeing and support**

The review specifically highlighted the positive impact that partnership working in Essex has had on support for headteacher wellbeing. There has never been a more challenging period in education, than the last 18 months, and the collaborative nature of partnership working in Essex has shown benefits, not only with school improvement, but also practical support and the creation of networks of support for school leaders.

### **In summary the review found that the initial strategy had enabled:**

- i. all schools to have an awareness of the benefits of partnership working and the impact on school improvement
- ii. a significant proportion of schools in Essex to have a desire to be part of a successful, mature partnership and contribute effectively



- iii. opportunities to collaborate and share resources for the benefit of children, staff and the wider community
- iv. wellbeing support for leaders in particular
- v. strong relationships between schools, partnerships and the local authority

## 2. Challenges of the current model

During the strategy review period the Partnership Board reflected on the current strengths and challenges of the partnership system in Essex. They were asked to reflect on what had been going well in terms of school partnership working in Essex over the last 12-18 months, what they considered to be the strengths and successes as well as challenges and areas for improvement on which the next phase of the strategy should build.

A series of focus groups was established to unpick these challenges further. School leaders, partnership leads, quadrant chairs and local authority education colleagues were all invited to contribute their thoughts on the challenges and strengths of partnership working. A summary of the feedback is below, categorised into themes:

### **Purpose, direction and impact of partnership working**

- Having clarity and consistency on the purpose and strategic intent of this work
- Purpose and leadership capacity of quadrant structures
- Limited attendance at quadrant level
- Conflict of multi-belonging between school, partnership and MAT creates challenges around capacity, purpose and impact
- Consistency across the county - the robustness and depth of school-level partnerships is patchy
- Maintaining participation and interest with a clear purpose
- Competition for pupils between local schools can impact partnership working
- Effective use of data to inform development
- Peer reviews – seeing the impact of these and ensuring they have purpose
- COVID19 has prevented bringing people together and some plans were halted
- Governors seeing the benefit of time spent on collaborative working

### **Engagement in partnership working**

- Lack of connection between partnerships and special schools and providers of alternative provision.
- Getting the size right - small scale partnerships don't always provide value for money and some large partnerships lack joint planning
- Capacity and time to reflect and work together, particularly for Heads
- Lack of engagement of some partners and the effect this has on the whole partnership.
- School leaders needing to understand why they should work together in partnerships, and the benefits to them and their

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<p><b>Clarification of roles and responsibilities</b></p>	<p>schools. This is especially true at a time of immense challenge to schools. It can also be dependent on where a school is on its journey and the priorities it needs to address at that time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of secondary school/ cross phase engagement</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of consistency of lead roles and representatives impacts the value of conversation</li> <li>• There are some questions about how informal partnerships would strengthen and deepen without greater accountability (“schools in some partnerships don’t want to hold each to account”), while others said now is not the time to push for further accountability for school-to-school work.</li> <li>• Role and impact of the board is unclear</li> </ul>

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### 3. Strengths of the current model

The partnership board and focus groups of stakeholders from the local authority, schools, quadrants and partnerships all reflected individually and together on the strengths of the current model. The feedback is summarised below, into the same themes:

<p><b>Purpose, direction and impact of partnership working</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Across the Partnership Board and within the partnerships themselves many schools support the idea and importance of partnership working with partnership working described as “crucial” or “very positive”</li> <li>• There is a positive appetite to know ‘what next’ and a high level of engagement across the system</li> <li>• Sharing different practice and developing shared approaches</li> <li>• Closer working together in different partnerships to resolve issues and support each other</li> <li>• Greater/ mutual understanding of each other’s systems</li> <li>• Developing system leadership and capacity</li> <li>• COVID19 challenges have brought some partnerships closer together and enabled schools to respond collectively</li> <li>• Schools feeling stronger together</li> <li>• Supporting each other’s well-being</li> <li>• Peer reviews and meaningful follow up from these</li> </ul>
<p><b>Engagement in partnership working</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many schools support the idea and importance of partnership working. Partnership working is seen as “crucial” or “very positive”. There is a positive appetite to know ‘what next’</li> <li>• There are good examples of strong school-level partnerships working across Essex. This is particularly the case where partnerships are long-standing and have had time to become embedded.</li> <li>• Comprehensive coverage – most schools within a partnership and the structure enables more to come on board</li> </ul>

- Different types of partners coming together and engaging in different types of partnership e.g., individual schools, academies and MATs
- Engagement and connection
- Improved communication between schools
- Partnership working with a supportive and informed Local Authority

## Roles and responsibilities

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- Some Quadrants are working effectively and bringing schools and teaching schools together, due to strong and positive LA facilitating role, effective quadrant leadership, strong engagement from partnership leads, and clear expectations of and benefits for people participating.
  - Ownership by schools – not LA driven
  - The LA is seen as having a crucial role to play to support, facilitate, and co-ordinate.
  - Some changes to SEP ways of working have promoted partnership working
  - SEPs see potential benefits: “greater credibility as our role will be broader”
  - a strong message from all partnership leads that the support the LA have given to individual schools and to the system during CV-19 has been invaluable. This has in many cases helped the partnerships to focus on partnership-based approaches to their Covid- response, building on the strong and trusted platform of support provided by the LA.

## 4. Research and evidence on the benefits of school partnerships

Since the initial white paper was released in 2010, there has continued to be national (and international) research and evidence gathering around school partnerships. We reviewed the latest research to ascertain whether partnerships are still considered beneficial. We also gathered some focus groups from the Essex partnership system and asked them about the benefits of the Essex partnership system. The findings are summarised below.

### i. National research and evidence:

There is a solid body of national evidence that schools working together can drive up standards and improve outcomes for children and young people.

In March 2021 a new report, [‘Developing a new Locality Model for English Schools’](#) part-funded by the Association of Education Committees Trust and the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society and based on extensive research and contributions from a broad range of education experts was released by **Susan Cousin** and **Jonathan Crossley-Holland**, examining the operation of high performing education systems and make recommendations for a new model in England. The research was commissioned to investigate how high-performing education systems operate, in order

to develop a set of criteria by which any revised governance model for the English education system can be judged and to outline clearly the role(s) of a middle tier.

Partnerships are referred to positively throughout the research but section three in particular looks at current approaches to place-based working. It is seen by interviewees to provide clear benefits: essential “glue” or coordination of activities; a collective sense of responsibility and pride, to reduce local competition which drives local hierarchies and increases the effects of disadvantage; and a focus on contextual factors which can provide barriers to achievement or offer solutions. In addition, it has the potential to increase cost efficiencies, provide external quality assurance and prevent ‘reinvention of the wheel’. Government and professionals have recognised the potential of place-based approaches to reduce the social attainment gap which is beginning to widen again as Covid-19 exposes societal inequalities. Opportunity Areas and Area-based Education Partnerships (AEPs) demonstrate the value of collaboration between LAs, early years providers, schools, multi-academy trusts, dioceses, colleges, universities, businesses, health professionals and voluntary and community organisations, working beyond organisational boundaries towards a shared aim.

**In November 2020 the NAHT released their report [Improving Schools: A report of the School Improvement Commission](#)**, which stated that no school should see itself as an island and by working together in a structured way, teachers and schools can improve faster and more sustainably. Research has highlighted the potential of local strategic partnerships for bringing all providers together across an area to work in partnership towards the success of all schools. Peer review offers one method for school-to-school collaboration, which, done well, can help provide schools with a different perspective and fresh insight on the nature of challenges faced.

**The Institute of Education Research Paper entitled “Optimism of the will: the development of local area-based education partnerships. A think-piece” (Sept 2019) found** *“Partnerships offer a range of opportunities for all involved in schools to learn from each other. They support knowledge sharing and in doing so can build skills and expertise across the system. Many school leaders already see system leadership as an essential part of their role, central to their professionalism and bringing reciprocal benefits for their school.”*

## ii. **Essex specific feedback on the benefits of partnership working**

During the strategy review period we asked school leaders to reflect on the benefits of partnership working for them and their wider school community, and the feedback was broad. Summarised below:

### **Driving school improvement**



- Moderation of pupil progress - validating judgements and secure and confident
- Keeps the creative drive for improvement working
- Support for all areas of the school whether you are an NQT, SBM or SLT
- Finding the 'things' that teachers find improve their quality
- Critical friend and a supportive accountability system

- Opportunity to regularly reflect upon education provision and benchmark with similar context schools within similar locality
- Working with other schools that have a good understanding of the contextual issues

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**Opportunities to share to save cost, time and increase consistency**



- Group purchase of shared services economically
- Collaboration between subject leaders. Sharing resources and ideas
- Sharing staff training
- Reducing workload
- Shared recruitment
- Sharing funding/bids
- Shared expertise - e.g. pooled funding and buy in finance/premises support
- Shared policies across groups/ schools e.g. attendance
- Time saving in terms of developing new policies/practices
- Consistency of approach across local area
- Share the costs of CPD
- Co-ordinate inset dates supports staff and families

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**Wellbeing Support**



- Mutual support from colleagues
- Can ask for advice and assistance
- Support for headteacher wellbeing
- Avoiding isolation
- Team support
- Informal support

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**Professional Learning and Development**



- Professional development for Heads in a supportive environment
  - Effective delivery of support and CPD
  - Mentoring opportunities for new headteachers within similar context locality
  - Potential opportunity for staff (all levels) CPD development through secondments
  - Targeted groups e.g. for Subject Leads/Phase Leaders/DHTs
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Our analysis concluded that partnerships are very much still valued and many schools are seeing benefits from the time spent on partnership work, but it is not without its challenges to establish, sustain and mature successful partnerships. We found several links between the

national research and the experience of the partnership system in Essex – as demonstrated below.

**The key challenges**

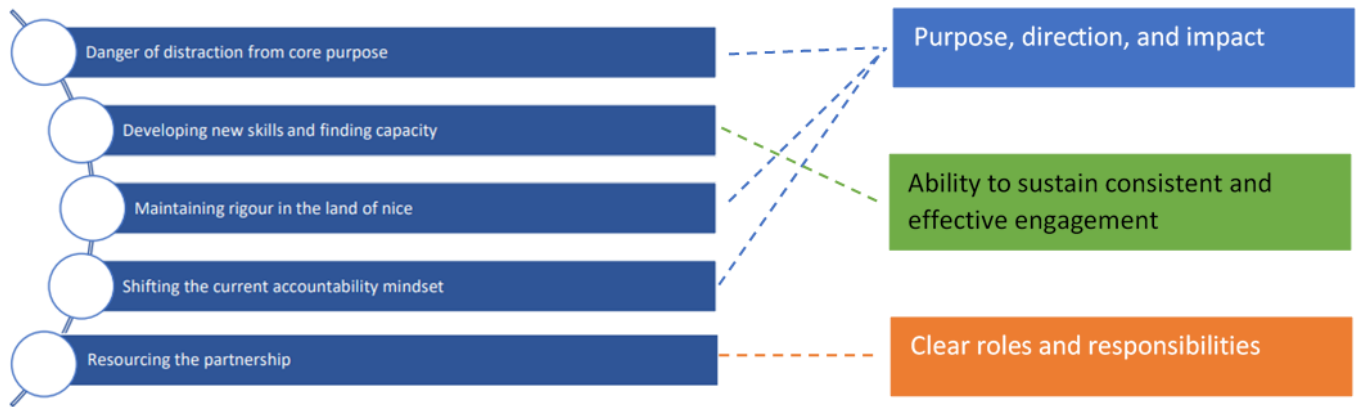


Figure 1 Optimism of the Will - Christine Gilbert and alignment to Essex findings

**Characteristics of successful area partnerships**



Figure 2 Optimism of the Will - Christine Gilbert and alignment to Essex findings

**5. Impact of COVID19 on Partnership Working**

During the COVID19 response period school partnerships provided essential practical and wellbeing support for their members. The Partnership Board increased the frequency of meetings to come together and ensure best practice and learning was shared across and between partnerships. Partnerships mainly focused on sharing ideas, working together to

share resources and providing peer wellbeing support. The areas positively impacted by partnership working during this time were:

- Re-opening and re-integration arrangements
- Transition for children, particularly EYFS and year 6
- Resolving staffing issues
- Implementation and interpretation of DFE guidance
- Sharing policies and examples of practices, e.g. action plans
- Provision for critical worker children
- Virtual training opportunities
- Bereavement counselling
- Sharing premises
- Shared cover arrangements for holiday periods

The pandemic's challenges have brought some partnerships closer together and enabled schools to respond collectively. In addition, a strong message from all Partnership Leads that the support the LA have given to individual schools and to the system during the COVID period has been invaluable. This has in many cases helped the partnerships to focus on partnership-based approaches to their COVID response, building on the strong and trusted platform of support provided by the LA.

Partnership Leads feedback was that “partnerships and collaboration through this period had helped them to survive”. It helped to create stronger connections and reduced isolation; the focus has been on the “softer side of collaboration”. Peer review helped to develop trusting relationships that in turn helped school leaders support each other to respond to COVID challenges. Virtual partnership meetings had some benefits: reduced travel time had increased attendance.

COVID challenges have resulted in some partnerships working less closely with some fragmentation. The last nine months have challenged all school leaders in the time they have had available and it is more likely that strategic work has “gone on the back burner”.

Now more than ever, Essex supports the aim of schools working together in mutually reinforcing partnerships to help respond to the challenges of the COVID19 pandemic.

## **6. Next steps for partnerships and the partnership system in Essex**

It is clear that the appetite for school-to-school partnership working remains high in Essex. All stakeholder groups that took part in the review identified many benefits and strengths of the partnership model in Essex and the national research supports the links between partnership working and school improvement.



It is also clear however, that there are opportunities to strengthen the partnership working system, improve consistency and engagement with partnerships and drive more tangible school improvement outcomes from partnership working, through the provision of a clearer direction and leadership from the Partnership Board.

In order to realise these improvements, the Partnership Board have proposed that the refreshed School Partnership Strategy, has a focus on maturing the partnership system and structures, and enabling the partnerships to become more involved in the development, delivery and embedding of wider education strategy. This will respond to the challenges and sustain the strengths of the current model, as well as provide a greater clarity of purpose and direction, and more tangible links to school improvement outcomes.

## Maturing the partnership system and structures into accelerators of school improvement

Peer Review

Partnership Evaluation Development Tool (PEDT)

Leadership Handbook

Culture, environment and ethos

Approach to engaging with the Teaching School Hubs at partnership and board level.

Partnership to partnership working

Wellbeing and support

## Partnerships as drivers and enablers of education strategy

Trauma Perceptive Practice

SEND Strategy

Inclusion Framework

Disadvantage Strategy

COVID response and recovery

Early Years