



Progress happens at the speed of trust

A case study report of community-university
partnerships for place-based change

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted on behalf of Local Trust by two researchers: Al Mathers, a Visiting Practice Fellow at the Urban Institute, The University of Sheffield, and an independent research consultant; and Bryony Vince-Myers, a Postdoctoral Research Associate with the Co-Production Futures Inquiry and Participatory Research Network, at The University of Sheffield.

We are extremely grateful to the case study interviewees named below. They generously gave their time, openly shared their partnership stories, and offered expert reflections that helped us refine the case study narratives.

Our thanks goes to:

- Ailbhe Máiréad Waterhouse (Community Engagement Producer, Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Colleges of Arts, University of Arts London)
- Beth Perry (Director of The Urban Institute, The University of Sheffield)
- Georgie Mitchell (Volunteer and Community Coordinator, Arbourthorne Community Primary School)
- Hannah Guthrie (Head of Public Engagement, Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Colleges of Arts, University of Arts London)
- Michael Cantwell (Senior Sustainability Officer, Wrexham County Borough Council)
- Nina Ruddle (Head of Public Policy Engagement, Prifysgol Wrecsam / Wrexham University)
- Sally Lloyd Evans (Associate Professor in Human Geography and Public Engagement with Community Research Fellow, University of Reading)
- Sandra Lynne Thomas (Gwynedd and Anglesey Public Services Board Programme Manager, Cyngor Gwynedd)
- Sonia Duval (Whitley Community Research Co-Ordinator, University of Reading)
- Vanessa Langley (Headteacher, Arbourthorne Community Primary School)¹

We are also grateful to Lucy Terry (Research Manager, Local Trust) and Jayne Humm (Head of Research and Learning, Local Trust) for their collaborative approach and expertise in helping to bring the report together.

Local Trust

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¹ All of the case study participants consented to being named in the report and were able to review drafts of the write-ups before publication.

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Executive Summary

About this report

This report explores what it takes to build genuine, lasting relationships between universities and their communities, and what gets in the way. It forms part of Local Trust's broader work on the civic role of universities, driven by lessons learned through Big Local – a place-based, resident-led programme that demonstrated how vital it is for communities to work alongside local partner organisations in order to make lasting change happen.

Universities can play an important role in this, but their capacity and capability to engage with their local community varies, and many institutional barriers persist that make meaningful co-production and collaboration difficult. The report was produced to inform an event in June 2026, which brought together universities, community organisations, funders, and policy stakeholders to identify good practice in this area and explore what it takes to make community-university partnerships work.

Drawing on four in-depth case studies, the report examines how staff within universities and their local partners have navigated the complexities of cross-sector collaboration, and what conditions are needed to make this work sustainable, equitable and impactful. Our four partnership stories span different types of universities, local and community organisations, geographies and approaches. They range from community-led participatory action research in a South Reading neighbourhood, to a regional well-being ecosystem spanning six local authorities across North Wales.

- **Case Study 1:** University of Reading and The Whitley Researchers
Community-led participatory research in Whitley, South Reading, since 2013
- **Case Study 2:** University of the Arts London and Spring Community Hub
Student and graduate community engagement across South London, since 2020
- **Case Study 3:** Wrexham University, Wrexham CBC and Cyngor Gwynedd
Public authority and university civic collaboration across North Wales, since 2020
- **Case Study 4:** The Urban Institute and Arbourthorne Community Primary School
Civic school and university alliance in Sheffield's South East, since 2019

Why these partnerships matter

When universities and communities work together well, both partners benefit. Communities gain access to skills, knowledge and resources that can strengthen their ability to lead change, including: research expertise on topics of local concern, support to evaluate their own work, the development of peer researchers from within the community, and help navigating policy, funding and influencing landscapes. Universities, as institutions embedded in a place, are well positioned to make visible the change that communities need, and to platform community-led insights to wider audiences. In turn, universities build stronger community relationships, access deeper local knowledge, and earn recognition as anchor institutions - trusted partners creating tangible, lasting impact. Done well, these partnerships unlock new ways of learning, knowing, and acting that neither side could achieve alone.

What makes these partnerships work

Trust as the foundation

Across every case study, trust emerged as the single most important ingredient. Not as a precondition, but as something that must be actively built and maintained over time. As one partner reflected: 'progress happens at the speed of trust.' This trust runs from senior leadership through to front-line officers and community members, and it is chosen, not mandated. In Arbourthorne, the alliance between the university and the school was sustained for six years not by formal agreements but by consistent, honest relationship-building, including WhatsApp messages, shared reading, and a habit of asking 'how can I be helpful?' In North Wales, five years of working together through the Wales Co-Production Network laid the relational groundwork before the North Wales Insight Partnership was formally constituted.

"It's been my anchor. It's a safe place to try new ideas, and I haven't asked one question yet where anyone's laughed me out of the room."

Sandra Lynne Thomas, Cyngor Gwynedd

Seeing communities as partners not beneficiaries

The most effective partnerships in this report reject a service-delivery model in which universities provide expertise to passive recipients. Instead, they are characterised by genuine co-production, where communities define the questions, lead the research, and shape the solutions. In Whitley, residents designed a community survey to understand local transport access experiences. The survey reached over 500 people and resulted in a bus route change. In Arbourthorne, families who might once have experienced school as something 'done to them' have become active co-producers of change in their neighbourhood. This shift in posture from expert-provider to curious partner is both socially and culturally important, in terms of rebalancing relationships, and being practically powerful. It produces research that is more relevant, more trusted, and more likely to lead to lasting change.

The University as convener not controller

Several partnerships demonstrate the particular value universities can offer as neutral convening partners. This means creating space for others to collaborate, build trust, and take ownership - not directing the work. Wrexham University's civic mission team has functioned precisely in this way across North Wales, bringing together organisations that might otherwise have remained isolated. The public engagement team at the University of Arts London (UAL) plays a similar brokering role between the university and community organisations in South London, carefully matching student and graduate capacity to what community partners actually need, rather than what might benefit students alone.

Strategic commitment from leadership

In each case where partnerships have grown and strengthened, there has been at least some degree of institutional backing from university leadership. UAL's emerging research strategy centres place-making and community partnership as explicit priorities, providing a crucial framework for the public engagement team's relational work. Wrexham University's civic mission team has grown from a single 12-month post to a team of nine members, as a direct result of leadership recognising and investing in this work. Across all four interviews it became clear that partnerships cannot be sustained by individual goodwill alone. They need strategic recognition, protected time, and institutional infrastructure to endure.

"It's not an addition to the day job. It is what we should be doing as a public services board."

Michael Cantwell, Wrexham County Borough Council

The challenges that remain

Individual goodwill is not enough and it carries a cost

All four partnerships have been sustained, at least in part, by the exceptional dedication of committed individuals. Academics who pursue this work alongside conventional research expectations, community researchers who give their time voluntarily, and engagement professionals who maintain relationships through the gaps between formal projects. This is both a strength and a serious structural problem, and one that falls on both sides of the partnership. These individuals carry significant emotional, relational, and administrative labour. Burnout is a real risk, not only for academics but also for community organisations and partners who lack equitable access to resources. And when key people move on, partnerships can collapse entirely.

“People don’t have the time to do it. It’s not valued enough as research. There are too many competing issues for academic careers now and people leave, and they find it really exhausting and there’s burnout. And the emotional toll isn’t easy either”

Sally Lloyd Evans, The University of Reading

Academic incentive structures work against this

Participatory, community-led research sits uneasily within dominant academic reward structures. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) and conventional academic career pathways tend to prioritise traditional outputs, such as journal articles and grant income, over the slower and deeply relational work of community engagement. Early career researchers in particular face a genuine dilemma, as pursuing this work can come at the cost of their career progression. This is not a new critique, but it is one that persists. Universities that genuinely value community-engaged research must reflect that in how they write job descriptions, structure workloads, and make promotion decisions. But institutional change alone is not enough. Those leading and shaping the REF have an equal responsibility to act. If community-engaged research is to be taken seriously, it must be legible and valued within national assessment frameworks, not treated as an afterthought or collapsed into impact case studies alone. This means developing assessment criteria that recognise relational and participatory ways of producing knowledge, valuing co-produced outputs alongside traditional ones, and creating space for the slower timescales this work demands. The REF has the power to signal what counts as excellent research. It should use that power to broaden, not reinforce, the boundaries of what is recognised and rewarded.

Equity and access in university partnerships

Not all community organisations can access university partnerships on equal terms. For example UAL's formal corporate partnership route, which provides managed, end-to-end project support, carries a cost that most voluntary and community sector organisations cannot meet. The Whitley Researchers received no institutional support in their early years precisely because their work did not fit conventional definitions of academic rigour. There is a risk that the most innovative, place-responsive, community-led partnerships are precisely those least likely to receive institutional backing, at least at the outset.

Sustainability and succession

Every partnership in this report faces unresolved questions about what happens when the individuals who built them move on. In Arbourthorne, partners on both the primary school and University side are candid about the challenge: Beth Perry has worked deliberately to 'wire' the partnership into university systems, but acknowledges that academia is highly individualised and relationships cannot simply be handed on. The school's headteacher, Vanessa Langley, is more confident that the values embedded in the school will outlast any single leader, but this too rests on continuity of culture, which is never guaranteed. The prevalence and normalisation of fixed, short-term and precarious contracts in universities - which are in part a consequence of academic funding models - exacerbates this. Not only do they make it difficult for researchers to build lasting

relationships with community partners from within a single institution or project, but those who do will inevitably move on. Long-term and institutionally embedded partnerships are unlikely to survive the inevitable turnover of the people who carry them, unless universities themselves commit to and embed community engagement as a strategic priority.

What this means in practice

Taken together, the four case studies point to a set of conditions that appear to be necessary for community-university partnerships to achieve real and lasting impact:

- **Long time horizons.** Real trust and genuine co-production take years to develop. Funding models and institutional expectations need to reflect this.
- **Relational investment that is recognised and resourced.** The labour of maintaining relationships between projects is invisible but essential. It needs to be named, supported, and where possible funded.
- **Community-led framing.** Partnerships work best when communities define the priorities and hold real power. Universities entering these relationships should arrive with curiosity, not with pre-formed answers.
- **Strategic leadership backing.** Leadership commitment transforms what individual practitioners can achieve. Institutions should embed civic and community partnerships in their strategies, structures, and success metrics.
- **Safe spaces to experiment and fail.** Several partnerships have flourished precisely because they created permission to try things, learn from what didn't work, and adapt. This is in tension with the risk-aversion that increasingly shapes both universities and local authorities.
- **Addressing academic career structures.** Lasting change requires universities to recognise community-engaged research in workload models, job descriptions and promotion criteria, not just in their public narratives. Without this, academic researchers - particularly early career - will continue to be discouraged from pursuing community engaged research.
- **Reforming research assessment.** Those leading the REF must develop assessment criteria that recognise and reward community-engaged and participatory research, valuing co-produced outputs and the slower timescales this work demands. Without this, national frameworks will continue to undermine what universities are being asked to prioritise locally.

"I'm radically hopeful and tenacious, and care deeply for the place I live and work in."

Nina Ruddle, Wrexham University

These are not easy asks. They require cultural change inside institutions that were not designed with community partnership at their core. But the partnerships documented in this report show what becomes possible when that change begins to happen. Bus routes rerouted, young people heard at the highest levels of regional governance, communities shaping the services they need, and academics finding genuine meaning in work that connects their institution to the world outside its walls. The title of this report is borrowed from a phrase that recurred across our conversations: *progress happens at the speed of trust*. The task now is to create the conditions inside and beyond universities, where that trust can be built, sustained, and valued.

Case Study 1: The University of Reading and The Whitley Researchers

A community-university partnership in Whitley, South Reading.

Sally Lloyd Evans (Associate Professor in Human Geography and Public Engagement with Community Research Fellow, University of Reading) and Sonia Duval (Whitley Community Research Co-ordinator, University of Reading) in conversation with Al Mathers and Bryony Vince-Myers.

Partnership at a glance

- **Type of partnership:** A community-based participatory action research network
- **Location:** Whitley, South Reading
- **Duration:** Since 2013
- **Purpose:** Identifying and addressing local social challenges through community-led, Participatory Action Research (PAR)
- **Who is involved:** Local Whitley residents, Whitley Community Development Association (WCDA), community researchers, academics and students from the University of Reading, Big Local representative
- **Focus areas:** Wellbeing and social exclusion, including transport, youth aspirations, food justice, financial exclusion and public health
- **Types of partners:** University, local authorities, and voluntary and community sector organisations

Overview

The Whitley Researchers are a community-led participatory action research network based in Whitley, South Reading. Since 2013, local residents and the Whitley Community Development Association (WCDA) have worked alongside academics and students from the University of Reading to investigate the issues that matter most to their neighbourhood - from transport and financial exclusion to youth aspirations, food justice and public health.

Together they have generated tangible local policy change, influenced service delivery, and become a recognised model for place-based, community-led research within UK universities. Over the course of their journey the partnership has been successful in securing a combination of external funding to be able to consistently pay their community team members, and grow internal university support including ongoing student internships and the award of a part-time fellowship to the lead academic in 2020 to focus on this work.

However, core funding and strategic support from the University is now needed to sustain the partnership - which currently sits on 'a cliff edge' - as key projects have finished at a time when public, voluntary sector and HEIs are in crisis, intensified by the decline in available external grant funding.

The work spans three areas:

- **Community-led research**, in which community researchers design and lead projects on self-identified challenges, alongside being commissioned to undertake research on local issues identified by partners and local organisations, e.g. digital exclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Capacity building and training**, offering local residents the skills to become community researchers.
- **Integrated learning and teaching**, through which University of Reading students undertake internships and PhD research alongside the community team, and community development training for students, academics and community researchers to become advocates in translating findings into action and local policy.

Origins and context

In 2013, the [Big Local](#) initiative invested £1 million in Whitley to support long-term community development. To understand local needs and identify where funding might be allocated, local residents, Whitley Community Development Association (WCDA), Sally Lloyd Evans from the University of Reading, and a Big Local representative, the late John Ord, came together to form a participatory research network. They called themselves the Whitley Researchers.

“It had to be tea and biscuits, and everyone at the table had a say”

Sonia Duval

Through the work of one committed academic from The University of Reading and a group of local residents, who volunteered on their days off to meet weekly, they built the foundations for a trusting and ongoing partnership to identify and address local challenges through community-led research. The partnership was built in community cafes through regular weekly meetings accompanied by tea and biscuits - creating a safe, comfortable space to establish trust - where the group ‘discussed, planned and brainstormed’ their approach to how they would undertake current research together.

Community researchers were trained in the principles of participatory action research and community engagement; qualitative and quantitative methods such as how to design surveys, lead focus groups and interviews; data analysis; research ethics; creative and visual methods such as photography and participatory mapping; and care and safeguarding. As their participatory research approach consolidated and grew, they started to employ students, who were funded through the University of Reading’s Undergraduate [Research Opportunities Programme \(UROP\)](#), to provide additional capacity and develop hands-on skills and experience in research.

Initially, they received no resourcing or strategic support from the University, which at the time was sceptical about the academic rigour of community-led work. And although the University borders Whitley geographically, local residents felt an invisible boundary separating them from the campus.

“A lot of people in the university, when I said I was going to do this, didn’t think it would work. Nobody wanted to invest in it”

Sally Lloyd Evans

Journey and development

Their first project focused on local transport access - a community-identified priority to tackle deprivation and social exclusion. Through this work the community researchers engaged over 500 residents, who participated in face to face questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. As a result of their successful engagement with a significant sample of local people, their findings were taken up by transport planners, the local authorities, and covered in the local news, ultimately leading to a bus route change to better serve Whitley residents. The project established the network's credibility amongst the public sector and other voluntary organisations, demonstrating how community-led, place-based research can provide tangible impact.

Whitley residents wanted to build on this momentum, and the team turned to other local issues such as financial exclusion and building youth aspirations, in partnership with the local school. This attracted new funding from local authorities and the formal voluntary sector – such as Reading Voluntary Action – who have supported this work through funding a series of smaller projects on employability, wellbeing and social inclusion, and [youth social action](#).

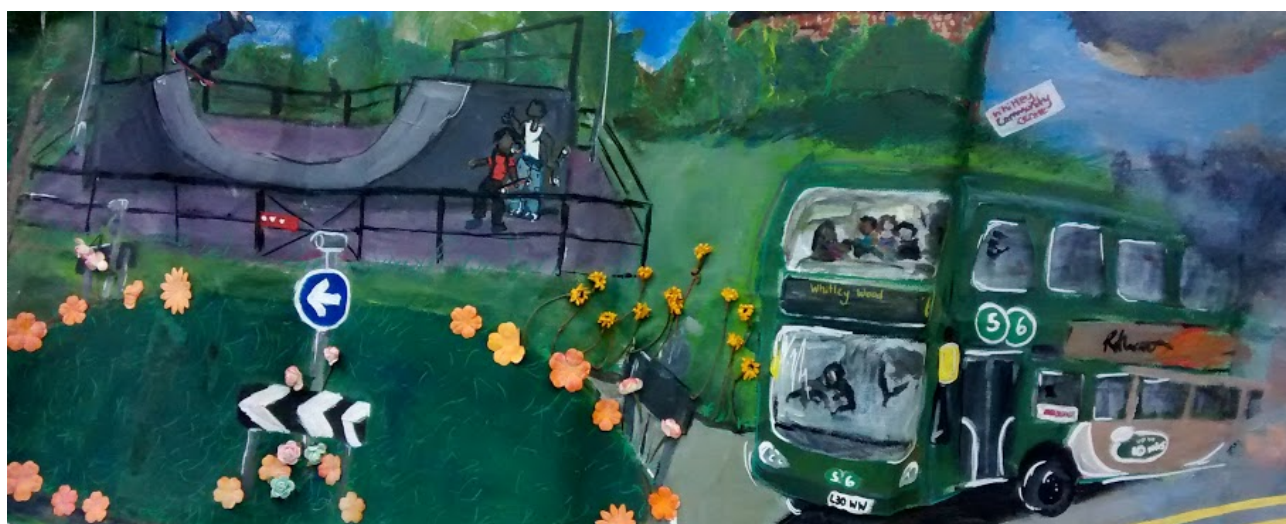
From around 2018, the Whitley Researchers began to secure more substantial funding from local authorities, including projects on Reading Place of Culture, the impact of Covid-19, and digital exclusion. The Young Whitley Researchers programme in schools was supported by Study Higher, and in 2021 the partnership was involved in the UKRI-funded [FoodSEqual project](#), which explored food systems and equality. Together, these funding streams - from local authorities and the formal voluntary sector - have provided the most consistent source of financial support for their work.

The University began to pay attention once the impact of this work became visible. Initially this was in relation to the institutional lenses of widening participation in the local area, and innovation in academic teaching and practice development, and only later through research.

“[The partnership] was largely between the community, Whitley Community Development Association (WCDA), and a small team made up of part PAR and community researchers, students at University and myself, until I developed it into something that the university became more interested in, with impact”

Sally Lloyd Evans

Since then, they have received a mixed profile of funding from local authorities, UKRI, and the university to support them in addressing local issues. Today, the Whitley Researchers are supported by the 'Participatory Action Research Team' – an informal collective including community researchers, postdoctoral researchers, research fellows, support staff and PhD students from the University of Reading.



Original artwork by schools from the Whitley Excellence Cluster

Outcomes and impact

For individuals

For community researchers, the partnership with the University has opened doors to employment, qualifications, and a sense of professional identity. After nearly 12 years carrying out research in the community and her dedication to supporting the Whitley Researchers, Sonia is now employed at the University of Reading as the Whitley Community Research Co-Ordinator. She was also recently awarded the equivalent to an A-Level in Community Development after attending a three-day intensive Community Development course, run by Trisha Bennett (FoodSEqual Community Liaison Officer and WCDA Community Development Coordinator), who was involved with Big Local from the beginning of the partnership. Sonia highlighted the personal significance of her relationship with Sally in helping her to achieve these goals, which she described as a source of both professional mentorship and lasting friendship.

“Before that [The Whitley Researchers], I was a stay-at-home mum... when we were recognised for our hard work that was a proud moment. Collecting a couple of awards and saying ‘yes, I am a researcher. I work with the University of Reading’”

Sonia Duval

For Sally, it is both the team members and the impact of their research that she is most proud of. Seeing students who came through internships and PhDs go on to work in this field, and participatory research more widely recognised across the university, is proof that the work endures beyond the partnership itself. She is also proud of how the research itself has directly challenged social inequalities and supported local communities to advocate for better services.

For the community

The partnership has produced tangible local change - most notably the rerouting of a local bus route to improve mobility for local residents, with better access to schools, work, and the hospital. Their work with young people in schools eventually led to the creation of their ‘Young Researchers’ group, who focused on the experiences of young people using the same participatory model as the Whitley Researchers. Their ‘Snakes and Ladders’ game, developed by the Young Researchers, has been used in local schools to challenge stigma around deprived areas. More recently, the Whitley Researchers have been exploring local residents’ views on food justice, helping to develop a Reading Food Partnership.



The Aspiration Game, designed by the Young Researchers

For the University

Participatory and co-produced research is now more widely recognised across the institution as a legitimate and impactful approach to research. As a result, the partnership has quietly driven institutional and cultural change from within. While working on the [Community Led Research Pilot](#), funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and delivered in partnership by the University of Reading's PAR team and the British Science Association, internal processes were improved so that intellectual property rights were held by the community. They have also developed simplified contracts for community partners, and Sonia is currently working to improve payment systems to better support participatory research. While these improvements have required sustained effort, the partnership's longevity has made progress possible. Because Sonia holds a formal role within the university, and because professional services colleagues have worked alongside the Whitley Researchers over many years, there is now an institutional understanding of what genuine and equitable participation requires and a greater willingness to adapt processes accordingly. Through their collaboration with the Whitley Researchers, students are also given hands-on experience in community-driven and participatory research. Their collective body of knowledge is now being drawn on by other universities.

For the wider place

The Whitley Researchers are now a recognised and trusted strategic partner working alongside statutory bodies such as the Local Authority and NHS. As a result they have ensured that previously minoritised and underrepresented communities are inclusively involved in shaping the services they need, and by demonstrating the impact and change that can be created through community-led research across the area, understanding people's lived experiences has become core to how social and health inequalities are addressed in Whitley.

Lessons and reflections

Strategic support and investment

The Whitley Researchers offer a powerful example of what community-university partnerships can achieve, and an honest account of the relational, emotional, and administrative labour it takes to sustain this. Sally highlighted how "the whole team remains at a cliff edge" unless they can find a way to sustain their work long-term. Currently, this work remains dependent on the commitment of key individuals, who are at risk of burnout.

"People don't have the time to do it. It's not valued enough as research. There are too many competing issues for academic careers now and people leave, and they find it really exhausting and there's burnout. And the emotional toll isn't easy either"

Sally Lloyd Evans

Academic frameworks such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) tend to prioritise 'traditional' academic outputs and do not consistently recognise participatory and community-driven research as legitimate or valuable forms of academic work. Sally emphasised that this relational work must be recognised in academic job descriptions, workload models, and career progression pathways, so that early career researchers can pursue this work without jeopardising their careers. Without core funding and changes to academic promotion criteria, civic and community-based work remains precarious, and at risk of disappearing when key individuals retire or leave.

This problem is not only experienced by academics. The lack of equitable resources to community organisations and partners equally leads to overwork and burnout. If funding is not provided in a more sustainable way, the extractive 'parachute' approach to community engagement will continue, rather than it being embedded, as will community distrust towards institutions. These partnerships require an extraordinary level of commitment, trust, and time from everyone involved, and that must be recognised and addressed on both sides of the partnership.

A university hub to embed, sustain and value this work

Both Sally and Sonia called for the establishment of a permanent university-community hub, co-created with local communities and partners with equitable resources for everyone, that embeds participatory action research, is reactive to community needs, provides training for academic and community researchers, and acts as a platform for cross-sector learning.

To find out more about the Whitley Researchers, their participatory action research project portfolio and impact, and key practice resources generated by the University of Reading's participatory action research team, please check out the following reports and webpages:

- [Learn more about the Whitley Researchers](#)
- [Projects - Community-based Research](#)
- [Community Led Research Pilot \(CLRP\) - Engagement and Impact](#)
- [Community Participatory Action Research \(CPAR\) - Working across Thames Valley](#)
- [Participatory Action Research: A Toolkit - Community-based Research](#)



The Young Researchers

Case Study 2: University of the Arts London and Spring Community Hub

A university contribution to place-making through community partnerships across South London.

Hannah Guthrie (Head of Public Engagement, Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Colleges of Arts, University of Arts London (UAL)) and Ailbhe Máiréad Waterhouse (Community Engagement Producer, Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Colleges of Arts, UAL) in conversation with Al Mathers and Bryony Vince-Myers.

Partnership at a glance

- **Type of partnership:** a community-university student and graduate engagement partnership
- **Location:** Camberwell, South London
- **Duration:** Since 2020
- **Purpose:** To support place-making across South London's three college boroughs by partnering with local community and voluntary organisations, and building UAL students' capacity for ethical community engagement
- **Who is involved:** UAL Public Engagement Team, UAL students and graduates, Spring Community Hub, wider network of community, education and corporate partners across South London
- **Focus areas:** Creative education, youth engagement, community capacity building, place-making
- **Types of partners:** University, voluntary and community sector, local authorities, education

Overview

The public engagement team at Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Colleges of Arts at the University of the Arts London aims to build meaningful, long-term partnerships with local communities, voluntary organisations, and other partners across the London boroughs of Merton, Southwark and Westminster. Their partnership with [Spring Community Hub](#), a voluntary crisis support organisation in Camberwell, is one illustration of this. What began as an act of solidarity during the pandemic has grown into an ongoing, mutually beneficial relationship, with UAL students and graduates co-designing and delivering workshops to support Spring Community Hub's activities. Sustaining partnerships like this has depended on the labour of committed individuals to keep relationships alive beyond specific projects. However, an emerging strategic shift at leadership level within the University has positioned place-making as a central commitment across both knowledge exchange and research. This creates real opportunities to formalise this community-engagement work and build the conditions needed to sustain and grow community-university partnerships long-term.

The work spans three key areas:

- **Community engagement delivery**, in which UAL students and graduates co-produce and deliver creative workshops with staff and volunteers at community-based organisations, such as Spring Community Hub, which meet their needs. The Public Engagement Team also seeks out and collaborates on external funding opportunities to further the partnership.
- **Capacity building and training**, offering students and graduates skills in ethical community engagement, facilitation, safeguarding, and public speaking through the Community Exchanges Programme.
- **Internal advice and support** for UAL academics and module leaders to develop community-engaged work in a considered and ethical way.



Community Exchanges, Kelly Avenue Park workshop. Credit: Sutirtha Chatterjee

Origins and context

The Public Engagement Team's approach to place-making is rooted in the communities where Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Colleges of Arts are located. Their work is rooted in a hyper-local approach to place-making – tailored to the needs of each community – and is grounded in a commitment to making the university accessible and useful to its local place.

Their partnership with Spring Community Hub took shape during the pandemic, when Camberwell College of Arts opened one of its buildings to Spring Community Hub to run a food bank. In 2023 they moved out of that space, but instead of ending the relationship, they began exploring ways to sustain the partnership in different ways. Those conversations led to UAL supporting Spring Community Hub's holiday programme for children and teenagers. This became the foundation of the partnership.

Journey and development

UAL's public engagement team identified Spring Community Hub's holiday programme as a natural entry point, finding opportunities for students and graduates to design and deliver workshops for young people. Over time, a particular connection developed with the teens group, and this has become a core focus of the collaboration.

Central to the partnership is UAL's [Community Exchanges Programme](#), through which students and graduates are supported to co-produce and deliver creative projects and workshops with different community groups in the area. The programme plays a key brokering role between the university

and the community. The trust built through these early exchanges often develop into deeper, longer-term relationships, as it has with Spring Community Hub. It is the starting point for building relationships with communities in the local area and understanding what they need.

The Public Engagement Team works carefully to ensure that proposed projects are genuinely useful and relevant to their community partners, not just to the students involved, and Spring Community Hub is one of a small number of established partner organisations that students are encouraged to work with. For example, in relation to Spring Community Hub's annual programme of [holiday activity camps](#), the project selection process led by the Public Engagement Team helps students tailor their ideas to the organisation's needs and operational approach. As a result, this has brought new complementary and creative activities into Spring Community Hub's existing community support offer and increased their delivery capacity, through a focus on meaningful and practical contributions that can be made by students.

However, their role goes well beyond helping to successfully deliver individual projects. They are key in maintaining these relationships in between projects, finding new touchpoints with community partners, and exploring external funding opportunities to sustain these relationships long-term.

"What we're trying to do as a public engagement team is think about how we can hold those relationships when a project is finished, and how we can have different touchpoints with those partners to maintain that relationship... With Spring, we've been trying to maintain it in ways that are mutually beneficial to them and the university... whether that's through external funding or thinking about how that relationship might develop in other ways"

Hannah Guthrie

UAL is currently undergoing a strategic shift under a new Vice Chancellor, who has positioned place-making as a central commitment across both knowledge exchange and research. Place and partnerships is now a key strand of the university's emerging research strategy, with strategic oversight at a leadership level – evidenced through their [2026-2032 Strategy](#). This has been key in supporting the work of the public engagement team. The combination of top-down strategic commitment and locally responsive, relational practice has started to create more sustainable conditions for this partnership to flourish.

Outcomes and impact

For individuals

Students and graduates on the Community Exchanges Programme have gained hands-on experience of ethical, community-led engagement. They learn facilitation, safeguarding, and public speaking alongside the practical experience of co-producing workshops. For many, this shapes how they approach community work throughout their careers. For the public engagement team, they can see the legacy of this in how the academics they work with approach writing funding applications, and in the stories they hear from academics and students about how their practice has changed. They are also proud of the team they have built within the University, and the work they have done to bring public engagement and community work together.

"I have seen a genuine impact in the way that people that we work with - whether that's on the Community Exchanges Programme or those who we support - approach their own practice when it comes to working with community groups and the public... there are lots of small and larger stories like that, which I am really proud of"

Ailbhe Máiréad Waterhouse

For the community

For organisations like Spring Community Hub, partnerships like these provide additional support to run affordable and free programmes of activities and holiday clubs for children and young people in South London. UAL students and staff bring new and creative sessions to their holiday provision. The university has also opened its venues for community use and access. Over time, this has helped to build positive, lasting relationships between the university and the children and young people in the local community.

For the University

The Community Exchanges Programme has enabled colleagues across UAL to engage with communities in a more considered and ethical way. Demand from module leaders for support has grown, and there is a visible shift in how community engagement is understood and practised across the institution. The team has also established a seed fund to support public engagement activity across the colleges, making it easier to start new partnerships as well as map who is doing what across the institution.

“I’m incredibly proud of the team that we’ve built... some of the structures that we’ve put in place internally – the seed fund, and the training – [have] really helped to support our colleagues to do the work that they want to do”

Hannah Guthrie

Lessons and reflections

The invisible labour of relational work

There is no formal agreement solidifying UAL’s partnership with Spring Community Hub. It is sustained by goodwill and the relational effort of small teams on both sides. This makes it fragile, and Hannah and Ailbhe were clear that advocating for a type of work that is, by nature, hard to make visible within an institution, is challenging.

Equity of accessing formalised university partnerships

UAL offers a formal corporate partnerships route, through which clients pay for a managed end-to-end project. This process works well but the cost makes it inaccessible to most Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) partners. The team are exploring whether their seed fund could help bridge this gap to enable VCSEs to access more formalised partnerships with the university. The Community Exchanges Programme is also only available to a small number of students. Adapting and scaling this model across the wider academic community remains a work in progress.

The importance of strategic recognition

UAL’s emerging research and Knowledge Exchange strategy, which centres place-making and partnerships, with strategic oversight at a leadership level, represents an important opportunity. These partnerships are most likely to thrive when they are recognised as an institutional priority and not left to the goodwill of committed individuals alone.

To find out more about UAL’s strategic commitment to place-based action and their public engagement work with local communities and other partners, please check out the following reports and webpages:

- [UAL’s Camberwell Space Past Projects](#)
- [UAL’s Knowledge Exchange Strategy and Placemaking Framework](#)
- [UAL’s Community Exchange Programme](#)
- South London’s Living Wage Action Group. In Owens-Crossman, L. and Roeschert, F. (2025) *Meaningful engagement between students and local communities*. Research Report. Institute for Community Studies, United Kingdom. A [National Civic Impact Accelerator](#) case study of place-based partnership working between Camberwell College of Arts and Citizens UK.
- [Camberwell College Citizens: An overview of Camberwell College Citizens' activity at Camberwell College of Arts as part of Southwark and Peckham Citizens from 2022 to 2025](#)

Case Study 3: Wrexham University, Wrexham County Borough Council and Cyngor Gwynedd

A public authority–university partnership driving community well-being across North Wales.

Nina Ruddle (Head of Public Policy Engagement, Prifysgol Wrecsam / Wrexham University), Michael Cantwell (Senior Sustainability Officer, Wrexham County Borough Council) and Sandra Lynne Thomas (Gwynedd and Anglesey Public Services Board Programme Manager, Cyngor Gwynedd) in conversation with Al Mathers and Bryony Vince-Myers.

Partnership at a glance

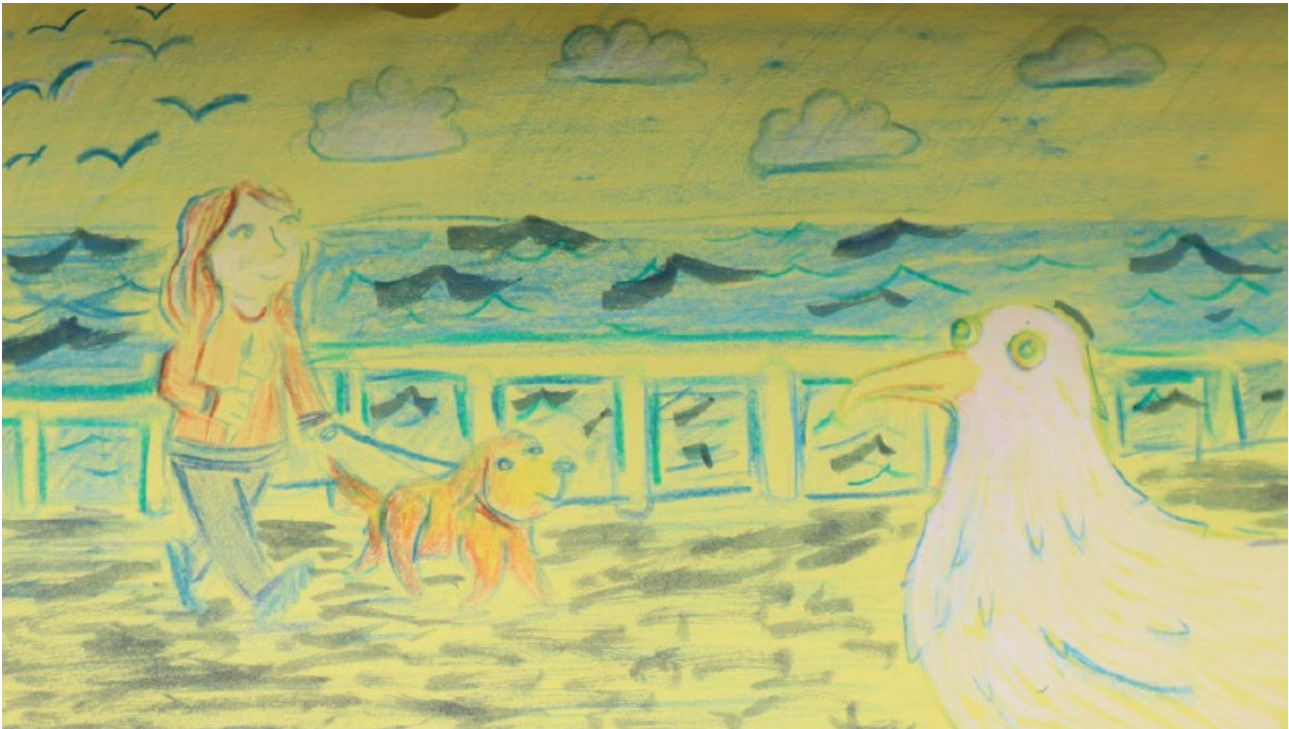
- **Type of partnership:** Civic mission, public authority–university collaboration
- **Location:** North Wales (Wrexham, Flintshire, Denbighshire, Conwy, Anglesey, and Gwynedd)
- **Duration:** Approximately 6 years and ongoing
- **Purpose:** To use data, evidence, community engagement and co-production to improve well-being and change systems across North Wales
- **Who is involved:** Wrexham University, Wrexham CBC, Cyngor Gwynedd, regional PSBs, health boards, schools, communities, Welsh commissioners
- **Focus areas:** Well-being assessment and planning; citizen and community engagement; climate change; children and young people; systems leadership
- **Types of partners:** University, local authorities, public services boards, health boards, Fire Service, Police Service, Welsh Government, voluntary sector, schools, communities.

Overview

This case study explores a trusted, evolving partnership between Wrexham University's civic mission team and Wrexham County Borough Council and Cyngor Gwynedd. Built around [Wales's Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015](#), it has grown from a shared recognition that statutory [Public Services Boards \(PSBs\)](#), which were set up to improve joint working across all public services in each local authority area in Wales, could achieve far more with the university as a convening, neutral, and innovative anchor than any single organisation could manage alone. What began as a practical collaboration to improve the quality of regional well-being assessments has become a living ecosystem of learning, co-production and systems change, now known as the North Wales Insight Partnership (NWIP). It brings together officers and strategic leaders across multiple PSBs, commissioners, communities and voluntary sector partners across North Wales in pursuit of one goal: improving the well-being of people in the region.

Its three founding pillars, which remain central today, are:

- **Data, evidence, insight and research** drawing on the gifts of a university partner.
- **Meaningful citizen and community engagement** going beyond tokenistic consultation.
- **Systems change** using evidence and engagement to shift how public services work.



Origins and context

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 placed a legal duty on PSBs, bringing together councils, health boards, police and fire services to assess and improve the well-being of their areas every five years. At the start the PSBs, who had been mandated to come and work together, faced a significant challenge in how to implement this new and innovative legislation with little or no additional resources. A different approach was needed.

Nina Ruddle, Head of Public Policy Engagement at Wrexham University, had worked in local authority and Welsh Government and so understood the pressures facing public services and the potential of a university as a civic anchor. Her vision was to build a movement for change, where organisations and communities would work together to pool resources, expertise, energy and “focus on the small things we can do to enable, mobilise and create systemic change on a regional footprint”. The university plays a key role within this: not for volunteering or traditional community outreach, but for bringing data, evidence, research and creative engagement to bear on collective challenges.

Michael Cantwell, supporting the Flintshire and Wrexham PSB, recognised that involving the university and connecting to the work of their civic mission wasn’t an add-on - it aligned strategically with exactly what the PSBs were supposed to be doing. Their partnership grew organically from that shared conviction, and when Sandra Lynne Thomas joined as PSB Programme Manager for Gwynedd and Anglesey in 2022, the regional reach expanded further.

"She's [Nina's] been really clever in the last three or four years in positioning the civic mission work. It's not an addition to the day job. It is what we should be doing as a public services board."

Michael Cantwell

Journey and development

The North Wales Insight Partnership (NWIP) was not mandated or formally constituted. It was created by a small group of committed individuals who shared similar values around being purpose-driven and taking an informal, evolving and flexible approach.

The catalyst which supported the NWIP was the building of relationships and shared understanding through five years of working together as the Wales Co-Production Network, which shifted perceptions around the value of community engagement within the public sector. The network was convened and held by Wrexham University's civic mission team, with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund and support from the [Future Generations](#) office, who set out why such an approach was important and what the benefits could be for the region. Together network members surfaced assumptions, barriers and challenges, and by creating a trusted space, forged a shared path through organisational and sector complexity, and began to mobilise a regional approach to tackle social inequality. This became the NWIP and was built around a joint agreement and commitment to 'learn from what we did before, and shape our work around collective purpose and joint effort from all'. Today the NWIP has an established small executive team, led by a group of officers closely connected to PSBs, who work together on an ongoing basis and hold open quarterly meetings to which anyone in the region is invited - to share, learn and connect. Through the NWIP they have created a thriving learning ecosystem and become a movement for change.

An example of NWIP success has been the recent development of the North Wales Climate Change Risk Assessment (NWCCRA). The NWCCRA is a practical example of the NWIP in action, showing how collaboration, shared evidence and local insight can drive better long-term decisions across public services. After years of stalled attempts it was Wrexham University's civic team who first sketched what a [regional approach](#) could look like, based on their [Civic Mission](#), and providing the critical spark that others could build on. As it evolved the NWCCRA has brought together multiple forms of insight: service-level data, professional expertise and national climate science, combined with local knowledge to ensure risks and action plans reflect real operational pressures and community contexts. PhD researchers are embedded alongside local authority Climate Change Lead Officers, supported by Climate Change Managers and Natural Resources Wales specialists, creating a shared learning process rather than a one-off report. The end result is a shared response that has evolved and been refined through multiple plans, with the trust and commitment of the partnership keeping it alive and moving forward.

"If it hadn't been for the civic mission in the first place... if we hadn't had that plan A, we would never have got to plan E."

Sandra Lynne Thomas

[The Children's University](#) is another landmark initiative in the NWEIP journey. Developed in response to insight shared by children and young people about what they wanted and needed, the scheme is managed by Wrexham University in partnership with Bangor University and partners from the [Wrexham Public Service Board](#) and the [Flintshire Public Service Board](#). Starting with just a few thousand pounds of investment, it snowballed with the help of additional funding secured by Nina into a regional programme. The 2023/24 pilot engaged 1,272 children and young people across North Wales, and as the programme expanded, Wrexham University's civic mission team grew to 9 staff to be able to support the work. Together they delivered over 27,000 hours of extracurricular learning, working with students from seven schools to develop their public speaking skills and confidence, with children and young people delivering 'Bob Talks' (TEDx-style talks) on mental health and wellbeing which were shared with leaders across the region, and are now influencing the design and direction of future projects to raise the expectations of children and young people. Through partnerships with local businesses they also provided 10,000 food boxes for families and held Children's University Graduation events at Wrexham University and Bangor University. These became moments of true transformation with 669 children and young people achieving certification across five university graduation ceremonies.



The Children's University graduation, Wrexham University

Another highlight has been the [Co-produced Community Narratives project](#), which used arts-based methods to build local trust and reveal hidden experiences from six communities across North Wales. It uncovered new understanding about the impacts of flooding in Abergele in Conwy, to transport issues in rural Bro Aberffraw on Anglesey, to multiculturalism in Wrexham town centre. This community-led insight will be used to shape the future well being assessments, and as this body of insight and learning continues to grow, the [Agenda Cymru](#) website acts as an online knowledge hub to share regional and local stories and evidence, emerging from this learning ecosystem.

However, the work isn't without its challenge. It is tiring and frustrating, and as Nina reflected, the financial pressures 'are immense'. She is constantly looking for innovative ways to secure funding and resources to deliver collective projects and programmes of work that support and sustain the NWIP and the civic team enabling some of this work. But by sharing the impact of the NWIP's approach, they have been able to strategically position and advocate for their work and co-production with local communities with both university and public sector leadership, as central to everything they do.

"We keep going on, because we are the ones that are influencing the system"

Nina Ruddle

Outcomes and impact

For individuals

For officers often working in isolation within large, complex and slow moving organisations, NWIP has provided a safe space to try new ideas, ask questions without embarrassment, and find colleagues

who share values and language. In the absence of local authority teams of data analysts or engagement specialists, the partnership fills a critical capacity gap that austerity has deepened, and provides space to focus on what motivates the individual partners the most - changing systems for the benefit of their communities. Examples include:

- Setting up a new North Wales group to pool data
- The insight and evidence generated through the co-produced community narratives
- Working with citizens to analyse climate change data from across the region to deepen understanding and challenge existing biases.

"It's been my kind of anchor. It's a safe place to try new ideas, and I haven't asked one question yet where anyone's laughed me out of the room."

Sandra Lynne Thomas

The partnership has also equipped officers to challenge upwards. Michael describes how the evidence and credibility of NWIP gives him the confidence to push back against council scrutiny processes that default to narrow organisational priorities rather than community well-being.

For the communities

In Flintshire and Wrexham, scrutiny members who once 'scored points' in PSB meetings are now genuinely interested in community impact, particularly after seeing the Children's University evaluation report. Thousands of young people across the region have accessed extracurricular learning opportunities and had their voices heard at the highest levels of regional governance. Communities affected by flooding, antisocial behaviour and other place-specific challenges have had their stories captured and acted on through the Community Narratives project.

For the University

Wrexham University has demonstrated what a genuinely civic university can look like. Not defined by conventional community engagement activities, but by embedding itself in the strategic machinery of the region. Nina's civic team has grown from a lone post on a 12-month trial to a permanent team of twelve with a research backbone. The partnership has created a model increasingly recognised across North Wales and beyond, with journal articles, reports and the Agenda Cymru platform sharing the approach.

"It's become the engine room of our region because we mobilise on what matters. We're connected to our community. But we're strategic as well."

Nina Ruddle

Lessons and reflections

Trust is the infrastructure

Every aspect of this partnership rests on relationships built over years. *'Progress happens at the speed of trust'* is a phrase that resonated through the conversation. That trust runs from chief executive level through to officers to communities, and was chosen not mandated.

Convene, don't control

The university's most powerful role has been as a convener rather than a controller, creating space for others to step forward, take ownership and deliver. This 'relay baton' model means that when the civic mission team passes the baton, other partners are confident and empowered to carry it forward. And so, whilst the informal nature of NWIP is owned by all partners and is constantly evolving, their success is enabled and sustained by the ongoing commitment of a small, core group of individuals.

Make failure safe and fast

The partnership has consciously created a safe space to try, fail and learn, which is especially important when councils are increasingly risk-averse. 'If we fail, fail fast and nobody really notices.' This has allowed genuinely innovative approaches to emerge that would never have survived a formal approval process.

Civic mission as a neutral space

In a landscape of organisational rivalries and competing priorities, the university's civic team has functioned as a neutral convening partner. They are able to bring together organisations that might otherwise remain in 'splendid isolation' and to hold the space while trust is built. This independence is fragile but essential.

Looking ahead

The partnership is now supporting the [Regional Partnership Boards \(RPBs\)](#) (who were brought together under the [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014](#)) to drive strategic, integrated delivery of social services, health, housing and third-sector support. The NWIP increased the capacity and capability of the RPBs to use evidence and insight to understand the challenges and opportunities across the region, centre a community focus and embed co-production expertise. The team is also aiming to complete the regional climate change risk assessment in time to feed into the next round of well-being assessments, and is continuing to build the Agenda Cymru platform as a shared regional learning resource. As Nina put it: "I'm radically hopeful and tenacious, and care deeply for the place I live and work in!"

To find out more civic impact work in Wrexham and across North Wales, please check out the following resources:

- Nina Ruddle and Gerardo J. Arriaga-Garcia (April 2026) From Football City to Civic Lab: How Partnership Stewardship Drives Inclusive Innovation in Wrexham.
- Paula Wood (2024) The North Wales Children's University Pilot 2023-2024 Final Report, Wrexham University.
- Hughes, R., Hughes, C., Dubberley, S., Prescott, J., White, C., Crawford, A. and Formby, L (2023), 'Evaluation of the Trauma and Adverse Experiences (TrACE)-informed university pilot'. Available at: https://wrexham.ac.uk/media/marketing/policies-anddocuments/Wrexham-University-TrACE-Project-Evaluation-Report_Eng-updated.pdf
- Audit Wales (2022) No Time to Lose: Lessons from the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Cardiff: Audit Wales.
- Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (2025) Future Generations Report 2025. Cardiff: FG Commissioner.
- Senedd Cymru (2026) Equality and Social Justice Committee Report on the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Cardiff: Senedd Cymru.
- OECD (2023), *How to Make Societies Thrive? Coordinating Approaches to Promote Well-being and Mental Health*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/fc6b9844-en>. Where the NWIPs work to support children's mental health is highlighted as a case study of innovative best practice.

Case Study 4: The Urban Institute, University of Sheffield and Arbourthorne Community Primary School

An alliance built on values, trust and a shared belief that schools can be genuine civic anchors in their communities.

Professor Beth Perry (Director of The Urban Institute, The University of Sheffield), Vanessa Langley (Headteacher, Arbourthorne Community Primary School) and Georgie Mitchell (Volunteer and Community Coordinator, Arbourthorne Community Primary School) in conversation with Al Mathers and Bryony Vince-Myers.

Partnership at a glance

- **Type of partnership:** School-university civic alliance / community-engaged research
- **Location:** Arbourthorne, Sheffield, South Yorkshire
- **Duration:** 2019 to present (approximately 6 years and ongoing)
- **Purpose:** To position the school as a civic anchor in its community, reduce poverty and support community-led change through co-production, research and shared learning
- **Who is involved:** The Urban Institute at the University of Sheffield, Arbourthorne Community Primary School, school community and families, Women in Community Action Arbourthorne, Arbourthorne Community Network, Sheffield City Council, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, Centre for Innovation in Voluntary Action
- **Focus areas:** Poverty reduction; food citizenship; community infrastructure; civic schools; co-production; place-based change; knowledge exchange
- **Types of partners:** University, primary school, charities, local community and families, local authority, voluntary sector, peer school networks

Overview

This case study explores an alliance between Professor Beth Perry, Director of the Urban Institute at the University of Sheffield, Vanessa Langley, headteacher of Arbourthorne Community Primary School in Sheffield's South East, and Georgie Mitchell, the school's Volunteer and Community Coordinator. Their partnership is one that defies easy categorisation. It is not formally constituted, or consistently funded, or driven by a specific institutional mandate. Instead, it has been sustained by shared values, deep personal commitment, and a conviction that schools in disadvantaged communities can be far more than places of education.

Arbourthorne is a community school in the fullest sense. Seventy per cent of its pupils are eligible for free school meals, and nearly half are on the special educational needs register. Yet it is, as Vanessa describes it, 'joyous to work in'. A place shaped over nearly two decades by a philosophy of listening to, and working with the families it serves. Beth's arrival as a learning partner on a National Lottery-funded project in 2019 marked the beginning of a relationship that has since grown into something neither partner fully anticipated: a model for what a genuinely civic school-university alliance can look like.

The partnership spans three areas:

- **School as community infrastructure** where Arbourthorne Community Primary School operates as a neighbourhood hub connecting families to wider support, hosting community activities, and acting as a convening space that goes beyond the traditional school model.
- **Community-led research and co-production** where researchers work alongside community members and school staff to design and lead enquiries on locally-identified challenges, from poverty reduction to food insecurity.
- **Knowledge exchange and wider influence** where insights from the partnership are shared through reports, events, networks and academic outputs, with the aim of influencing how other schools, councils and universities approach community engagement.

Origins and context

[Arbourthorne Community Primary School](#) opened in January 2003 in a neighbourhood shaped by high levels of deprivation but also remarkable community strength. Vanessa Langley arrived as headteacher in 2008 with a vision that went beyond the conventional school model, one grounded in the belief that schools could shape, and be shaped by, the communities they serve. Her early engagement with the University of Sheffield came through the School of Architecture's LiveWorks project, which brought students into the school to work with families on design challenges, such as designing and building an outdoor classroom. These experiences convinced Vanessa that the University could be a genuine partner, not telling the school what to do but amplifying what it was already trying to become.

Beth Perry, whose research focused on universities and urban development, had spent sixteen years carrying out co-production work across Greater Manchester before arriving in Sheffield in 2019. She came looking for the right relationship - not a managed partnership, but a real connection. Through Michael Norton from the [Centre For Innovation In Voluntary Action](#) (CIVA), she became a learning partner for the National Lottery Reaching Communities project, 'An Even Better Arbourthorne' (AEBA), exploring how schools could be designed for poverty reduction and community engagement. As Beth puts it, she and Vanessa 'simply clicked'.

"It was evolutionary, it wasn't something that was set in stone. It wasn't something that we knew how it would work. You didn't know how it was going to work. I didn't know. Michael didn't. But something produced the same interest in us and we found connections."

Vanessa Langley

Their funding has always run on separate tracks: Beth's through CIVA, the Urban Institute, and small pots of money such as PhD studentships, ESRC Impact Accelerator Funds and ESRC Festival of Social Science funding; Vanessa's through the National Lottery, CIVA and school budgets. All parties reflect that this separation has protected the relationship - it has never been reducible to a contract, and the absence of formal ties has kept it honest.

Journey and development

Over two phases of National Lottery funding, the partnership has generated co-produced research, community engagement and shared learning. Phase One produced a [report](#) documenting Arbourthorne's emerging model of community infrastructure, including nine elements, one of which is the 'knowledge infrastructure' represented by the school-university relationship itself. The hub school network, also convened by CIVA, is one mechanism to do this, and a graphic report is in development to share Arbourthorne's approach with other schools.

Beth has worked to bring the school's story into wider academic and policy conversations by presenting it at the [Festival of Social Science](#), contributing to the [Child of the North](#) report series, and writing a forthcoming [book chapter with the school community](#). In 2026 she secured new funding of around £20,000 through the University's impact pathway, that will position Arbourthorne as the first in a network of 'more-than-schools', develop a communiversity skills passport to recognise volunteer skills, and build connections with the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.¹



Prof Beth Perry, Director of The Urban Institute and Vanessa Langley, Headteacher of Arbourthorne Community Primary School

Meanwhile, Arbourthorne's community impact has grown organically. The Arbourthorne Community Network has been established, catalysed by [Women in Community Action in Arbourthorne](#).² Georgie Mitchell - a former parent at the school - is a vivid example of what the partnership has made possible. Appointed as a part-time Volunteer Coordinator for AEBA in March 2020, her role has since grown into a full-time community outreach and engagement role. She is now an emerging leader in the school's community activity, overseeing volunteering, food initiatives including the Community Fridge and the Flourish Community Kitchen, and the wider community network.

¹ The communiversity passport, currently being co-designed with volunteers on its leadership team, grew out of earlier work with the [REBEL skills cards](#) developed by university researchers at the University of Arts London. For Arbourthorne, this has been adapted into a stamp-based passport that recognises skills mapped directly onto the school's own core values ("we are a team", "we care", "we have a voice"), so that the language is shared between children and the community adults around them.

² Women in Community Action in Arbourthorne is an affiliated-group to the [Community-Led Savers network](#) founded in Manchester that was also created through the Urban Institute's action research programmes.

For Vanessa, giving people time and space to engage in activities on site is and has always been a central part of the school's mission. Vanessa is keen to develop more 'layers' to the work, especially around food. Flourish is an excellent example of how schools can work with the community around a local food agenda and, with the right funding, could become a model for others. The school and community is developing a vision of how this space could be used for everyone's benefit and the Urban Institute is ready to support in taking this forward.

"The intention has been for the community to be driving their own change as a result of being heard. It's not a top-down project that's improved poverty, it's that the parents and community have improved their own experiences through this approach."

Vanessa Langley

Sheffield City Council has taken notice, with visits to the school from senior officers and a growing connection with the education and skills team at the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. Despite this institutional attention, Vanessa, Beth and Georgie are clear-eyed about what makes their partnership work: it is not the formal recognition, but WhatsApp messages, shared reading, the 'undercover conversations', and the consistent question Beth brings to every interaction – 'how can I be helpful?'

"You ask that time and time again and you probably don't even realise it. How can I be helpful? How can we make this most useful? That's significant. You're cutting to the nub of it."

Vanessa Langley



Arbourthorne Community Primary School

Outcomes and impact

For individuals

For Vanessa, the partnership has connected her to a broader world of research and ideas, deepening her thinking about the school's work. For Beth, it has been a rare example of genuinely embedded, long-term, co-produced work - one she admits makes her 'really happy' when she visits, even as she carries a nagging sense of not doing enough. Both spoke of the toll of sustaining work that sits outside their formal roles: Vanessa running a complex school, Beth navigating institutional politics to justify time that the university celebrates in grand narratives but rarely funds. Their relationship has survived because of mutual respect, honesty, and a willingness to be imperfect with each other.

Georgie's story is perhaps the most telling illustration of what the partnership makes possible at an individual level. She reflected that Arbourthorne was previously a 'done to' community, with outsiders often deciding what was best. Through her relationship with Beth and the University, she has developed real expertise in co-production, helped grow the school's volunteer and community engagement programme, and broken down the idea that universities are places where communities cannot contribute. The external catalyst of the National Lottery bid and CIVA's funding was important in igniting these relationships and creating infrastructure to navigate project delivery together. Coming from a background where further education never felt like a realistic path, the long-term support from the school and University connection has quietly expanded her sense of possibility - and she now hopes the communiversity passport will help others make the same journey.

"I would never have thought about further education, it's just not really the culture from where I come from. I think it's about recognising that there are other things. I really want people to acknowledge that they can go on to do something further. It's never too late."

Georgie Mitchell

For the community

The most tangible and meaningful outcomes have been felt by the children, families and community members in Arbourthorne. Evidence has supported further funding bids addressing local needs, such as the Community Fridge. Workshops have given residents a genuine voice in identifying local challenges and shaping responses. Families who might have experienced school as something 'done to them' have become active co-producers of change. Georgie notes that before the project, there was virtually no community infrastructure in Arbourthorne; the speed of growth is itself evidence of how real and unmet that need was. Informal coffee mornings have evolved into peer support spaces where people talk openly about mental health, menopause, and SEN. Individual journeys have been quietly transformative: one parent who joined three years ago deeply isolated is now travelling internationally and looking towards employment. Outreach is most effective when it's informal - at the shops, at litter picks and over coffee.

"The environment creates empowerment. The community feels like they can ask for things or put ideas forward and it's genuinely heard"

Georgie Mitchell

For Vanessa, the shift is best measured in what she does not experience - complaint emails or a sense that people 'dislike the school.' What she sees instead is a community that feels heard, that knows the University and school care about them, and that understands nobody (not the school, researcher, or council) is working alone. As one volunteer put it, 'schools are an extension of family'. It is why all parties are determined to secure resources to keep building on the incredible work already achieved.

"They know Beth cares about them. They know everybody she works with cares about them. They're not on their own and together we've all got ideas that can go into the mix to make things better for children."

Vanessa Langley

For the University

For Beth and The Urban Institute, the partnership has been a living laboratory for what civic universities mean in practice – not at the level of strategy documents, but at the level of relationships, positionality, and the daily choices involved in being genuinely useful to a community partner. The work has generated peer-reviewed outputs, impact case studies, and an emerging, model of nine elements of community infrastructure that make up 'more-than-schools'.

Beth and Vanessa's respective leadership roles have made it slightly easier to create opportunities and champion this work. However, Beth is honest about institutional tensions: universities celebrate this kind of work publicly but rarely protect the time needed to do it well. She has had to be creative, wrapping research around engagement and moving between justifications of 'research', 'impact' and 'student engagement' to keep the work alive. The new impact funding represents a more stable footing, at least for the next year.

"It has to be research or impact or student engagement. I'm constantly moving between these different things to think, how can I justify this work? How can I keep it going?"

Beth Perry

Lessons and reflections

Alliances, not partnerships

Beth is candid about her discomfort with the word 'partnership': formal partnerships always solidify power around whoever holds the contract or the money. Because this relationship has never been formally constituted in that way, it has been able to remain flexible, honest and genuinely mutual. The informal stuff, she argues, is what really makes it work - 'alliances, activism and allyships' matter more than formal structures.

"We've built an alliance. We're allies to each other on an everyday basis and we try to think about all the different trajectories to change. Let's try this, let's try that."

Beth Perry

The right question

The single most powerful thing Beth brings to the relationship is a habit of asking 'how can I be helpful?' rather than assuming what the school needs. This genuine inquiry - not performing engagement but actually subordinating the university's agenda to the community's - positions the university not as the expert arriving with answers, but as a partner arriving with curiosity and commitment.

Staying power takes time

All three partners are clear that this kind of relationship cannot be rushed. The longevity of the connection is itself a form of infrastructure. At the same time, the partnership has shown that once trust is established, it can move quickly when opportunity arises - as when Beth spotted a Child of the North report deadline and the pair turned around a case study contribution within days.

Succession and sustainability

One of the frankest parts of the conversation concerned what happens when Vanessa and Beth are no longer in their roles. Vanessa is confident that the values embedded in her team, and the expectations the community now holds, will outlast any individual leader. Beth is less certain, reflecting that academia is so individualised that she cannot simply hand the relationship on. Her response has been to try to 'wire it into the organisation' - through Urban Institute volunteering days, impact funding, the network of more-than-schools, and an embryonic Sheffield Action Research Collective.

Looking ahead

The hub school network, the communiversity skills passport, connections with Sheffield City Council's neighbourhood devolution work, and Arbourthorne's growing profile as local political attention turns to community devolution all point toward a more formalised, but still community-led, model of community infrastructure. All partners are clear, however, that this growth must be on the community's terms, and that the model developed at Arbourthorne cannot simply be transplanted elsewhere.

For Georgie, the passport addresses a long-standing gap: volunteers build extraordinary skills through community work, but employers rarely recognise them and people seldom name what they have achieved. The passport aims to change both - building confidence, enabling next steps into work or further learning, and making clear that it is never too late.

"No model that's in one school should be the same model that's in any other school or community. You have to make it your own."

Vanessa Langley

What underpins all of it, in the end, is simply three people doing this not for career advancement or institutional credit, but because they want to make lives better. As Vanessa puts it, 'that's why this works.'

To find out more about the locally-led innovation happening at Arbourthorne Community Primary School please visit the school's website and check out the following publications:

- Arbourthorne Community Primary School website. Available at <https://www.arbourthorneprimary.co.uk/>
- Perry, B., Crookes, L. and Arbourthorne Writers (in press). Schools. In Latham, A. and Layton, J. (Eds.) *Social Infrastructure in Neighbourhoods and Cities. Studying the Facilities That Sustain Community, Social Networks, and Trust*. Available for pre-order at <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/social-infrastructure-in-neighbourhoods-and-cities>
- Perry, B. (2022) An Even Better Arbourthorne: Learning Lessons Report. Schools as Community Infrastructure. Sheffield: KANDS Collective. Available at: <https://sheffield.ac.uk/urban-institute/news/new-report-and-film-schools-community-infrastructure>

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources, and decision-making into the hands of communities.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

localtrust.org.uk

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Local Trust

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