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NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

Windsor Academy Trust

Partnership with the NHS: civic engagement as trust strategy



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

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At a glance

School group

Windsor Academy Trust: 15 schools (7 primary, 8 secondary), around 10,000 children

Place

Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent

Phase

Primary and secondary

Key partners

Ten NHS bodies including Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust and Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB, Public Health Walsall, Confederation of School Trusts, and NHS Confederation

Contributor

Claire Gething, Director of Communications, Community and HR

Put civic engagement into the Trust strategy, so building partnerships becomes part of the job, not another thing to do.

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context. Where there are educational inequalities, there are health inequalities too. Windsor Academy Trust's (WAT) schools span five local authority areas, several on the edge of former Education or Priority Education Investment Areas. WAT schools begin by listening, without an agenda, for example asking every pupil from Key Stage 2 upwards where they spend their time outside school. Through taking the time to map what was already in place, the Trust found that much health support already existed locally, but schools simply did not know about it.

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Working in partnership. A trustee who worked in health introduced CEO Dawn Haywood to the chief executive of a group of NHS trusts, and they began meeting termly. Claire describes the first year as "following the breadcrumbs": finding people with passion and goodwill. The breakthrough came from learning the NHS's own strategy and language, so both sides could see a shared purpose. Windsor then brought 10 NHS trusts and seven school trusts together, in partnership with the Confederation of School Trusts and NHS Confederation, to write the Co-creating Healthy Futures framework.

The net: building capacity together

Civic engagement is one of the Trust's five strategic pillars, which gives leaders both a mandate and capacity. Every school has a Civic Leader, and each school's civic engagement plan must include a health priority. Community hubs are created where there is both need and capacity, so each school's offer fits its place. Local Community Committees bring parents and health and civic partners into each school's local governance.

What is in place

Regular meetings with NHS leaders; the Co-creating Healthy Futures framework, now working with 10 NHS bodies; a Civic Leader and a health priority in every school; community hubs where there is need and capacity; £300,000 over three years committed by a local Integrated Care Board.

The difference it is making

The framework has been presented at the House of Commons and national conferences, and is helping others start similar work. In schools, an early years health hub at Goldsmith Primary brings health services onto a school site, and 30 students at Windsor Olympus Academy are trained as Asthma Ambassadors. A Locality Improvement Framework in Newcastle-under-Lyme is promoting health literacy and addressing health inequalities to improve attendance in schools.

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Challenges and lessons learned

National policies and structures for this collaboration don't yet exist; building capacity is essential, and the work needs someone employed to connect people.

How they made it possible

First step: a trustee's introduction led to termly CEO-level meetings, and the first year was spent finding the people with passion and goodwill.

Roles and time: civic engagement is one of five strategic pillars. Every school has a Civic Leader, who sits on the school's Local Community Committee, with a line of sight through the committee chair to a link trustee. A central director role helps schools and health communicate across sectors. The first 12 months were spent mainly finding the right people and what already existed, and the framework took a further nine months.

Funding: a community fund, rather than a separate charity, helps pay for community hubs on school sites and other civic activities. A local Integrated Care Board has committed £300,000 over three years.

Partners: NHS bodies and the CST co-wrote the framework, and an ICB is now co-funding some of this work through a Locality Improvement Framework.

Starting with what you have: ask pupils where they spend their time outside school, and find out what health support already exists locally, as much of it may already be there. The Co-creating Healthy Futures framework includes a guide to NHS roles, such as Place-Based Partnership Leads, to help you find the right people.

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What we wish we'd known at the start

Learn your partners' strategy and language first: shared purpose came once we could talk the NHS's language.

In your setting

School context: Do we know where our pupils spend their time, and what support already exists around them?

Working in partnership: Do we know our local NHS priorities, and do we speak their language?

Building capacity together: Does our strategy give leaders a mandate and capacity for civic work, or is it one more thing?

> *"Do one thing - and do it really well. Prove it works - then scale it."*
>
> **Claire Gething**

Full paper and supporting sources

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