THE REACH FOUNDATION'S

Cradle-to-Career Catalyst





What is possible in *your* place?

You know your school cannot do everything alone. You see the pressure points up close.

Children arriving with needs that began long before they reached your gate. Families repeating their story to different professionals. Transitions that feel more fragile than they should. Attendance, belonging, mental health, speech and language, post-16 progression—all shaped by forces bigger than any one institution.

At The Reach Foundation, we say that **"great schools are necessary, but not sufficient."** We believe that if we want every child to grow up to enjoy a life of choice and opportunity, we need more than excellent institutions working hard in isolation.

We need stronger connections *between* the institutions, services and relationships that surround children as they grow.

That is the idea behind our Cradle-to-Career Catalyst.

It is not about distracting leaders from the core work of education. It is about helping school leaders work with others to strengthen the local conditions around children; shifting our practice so that support becomes **more coherent**, **more consistent** and **more connected** over time.

For many leaders, that starts with a simple but important question:

"What would it take for every child in this place to experience joined-up support from early years to early adulthood?"

This document is designed to help you decide whether this is something you would like to explore further.

Why “cradle to career”?

In every postcode in the country, there are committed people doing extraordinary work for babies, children and young people.



Early years settings are nurturing language, attachment and development. Primary schools are building strong foundations. Secondary schools are holding together ambition, learning and belonging through adolescence. Colleges, training providers and employers are opening doors to adulthood and opportunity.

But too often, the system around children feels fragmented.

Transitions between institutions are fragile. Vital intelligence about children and their families gets stuck in silos. Support depends on who knows who. Families navigate disconnected thresholds rather than being held through a clear pathway. Leaders work hard to solve problems whose roots sit beyond their remit.

A cradle-to-career approach starts from a simple observation: children do not experience life in institutional boxes. Instead, their lives move across home, school, neighbourhood, services, peer groups, and eventually the world of further study and work.

If the adults and institutions around them are disconnected, children and families feel that disconnection too.

That is why cradle-to-career is not about replacing what works. It is about connecting what already exists in a more intentional way, so that children and families experience support as:

- **Coherent:** It makes sense across phases and services.
- **Consistent:** It does not disappear at key transition points.
- **Connected:** Professionals act together, not in isolation.

This work is less about improving one institution at a time, and more about strengthening the knowledge, relationships and local infrastructure *between* institutions and around children.

Why this matters for education leaders

If you are leading a school today, none of this will feel abstract. You are likely already carrying issues that do not begin or end in school.

Children are arriving in Year 7 with complex unmet needs. Families need support from multiple agencies, but often find those systems hard to navigate. Attendance and safeguarding patterns cannot be understood through school data alone. Young people's paths beyond 16 or 18 are being shaped as much by local opportunity structures as by GCSE outcomes. Staff are trying to respond compassionately to needs that require a broader, more joined-up response.

The question is not whether your school is already affected by these things. It is whether there is a more intentional way to respond to them.

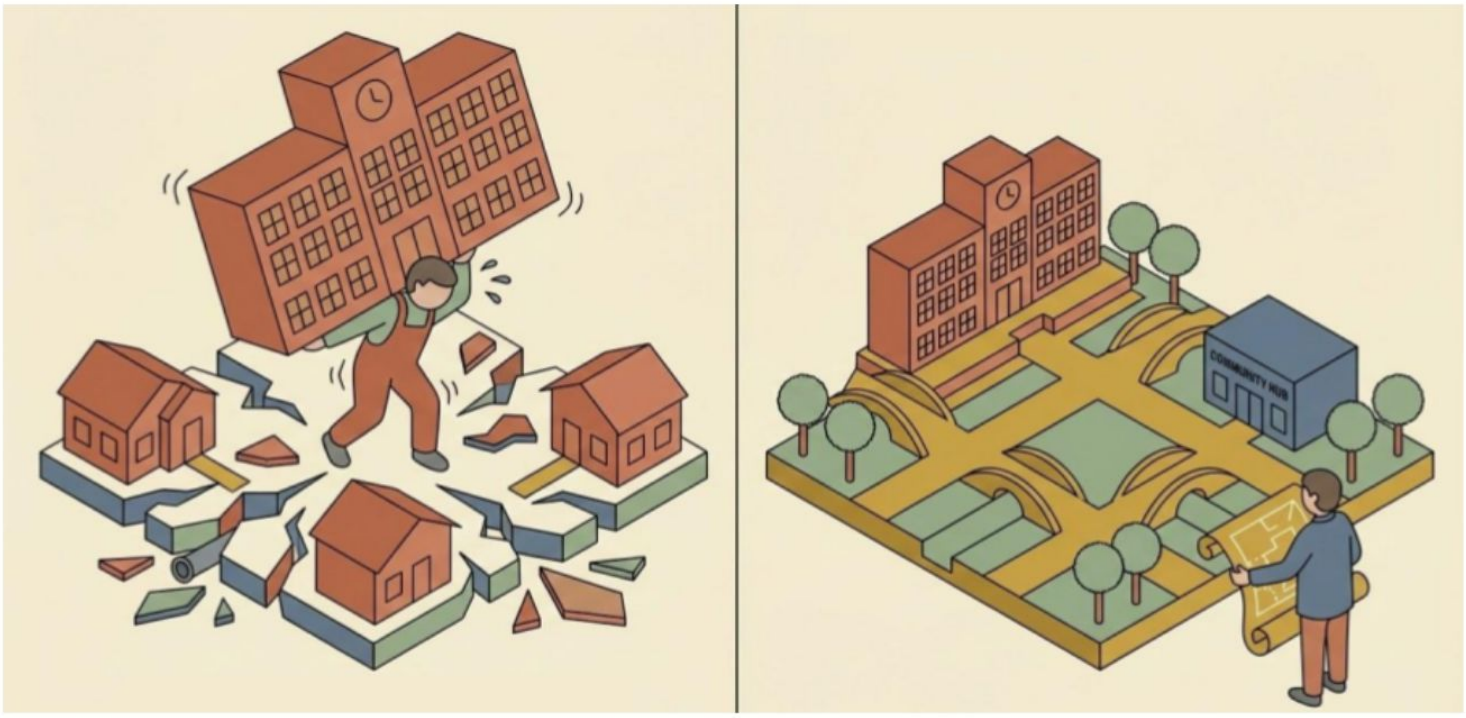
Our Cradle-to-Career Partnership is for leaders who understand the limits of what schools can do alone, but who also believe schools can play a powerful civic role in helping a place organise itself better around children.

That does not mean doing more of everything. It means working differently with what already exists.

For school leaders, that shift can be significant. It is a move from being cast as the "heroic" leader who is expected to solve *every* problem within the boundaries of a single institution, to becoming a civic architect: someone who helps shape the relationships, understanding and local infrastructure that make better outcomes possible across a wider ecology.

That may sound ambitious. It is. But it is also very practical. In practice, this often begins with very grounded questions:

- *Where exactly do children fall through the cracks in our place?*
- *Which transition points feel most fragile?*
- *Where are relationships with families strongest, and where do they fray?*
- *What local assets already exist, but remain poorly connected?*
- *What would become easier for children and families if institutions worked together with greater clarity?*



What we are building instead

The good news is that we know exactly what every child needs to thrive.

All children need:

- To be safe and well supported. Every child needs to be free from harm and enjoy secure, nurturing, positive experiences—especially in their first 1,001 days.
- To be healthy. Every child needs to develop positive well-being—physically, mentally and emotionally.
- To achieve well academically. Every child needs to be challenged and supported by great teaching and a rigorous curriculum.
- To build strong, trusting relationships. Every child needs to have strong peer and familial relationships and engage positively with their local community.

We also know what conditions, or "elements," **every neighbourhood needs** to secure to enable the above for *all* children:

Seamless Paths

A child's journey should not feel like a series of disconnected handovers.

Cradle-to-career work helps leaders think about where pathways break down between phases and how to design those transitions more intentionally.

That might include stronger transition planning between Key Stages, clearer progression routes, shared protocols, better use of data, or a more aligned local narrative about what opportunity looks like.

The aim is not uniformity for its own sake. It is to reduce the number of points where children are forced to start again.

Relational Bridges

Many of the most important problems in a place are not simply technical. They are relational.

Families can feel like outsiders. Schools and services can drift into parallel working. Institutions can hold different assumptions about the same children. Trust is treated as an incidental outcome, rather than being intentionally designed for.

Cradle-to-career work helps leaders strengthen the bridges between home and school, between phases, and between institutions that serve the same community.

In some places that may mean better family-facing systems. In others it may mean shared learning, clearer relational handovers, or stronger professional trust across organisational boundaries.

Shared Infrastructure

In many places, support for children depends too heavily on personal heroics.

A cradle-to-career approach asks what happens when a place starts to create shared infrastructure instead: common tools, aligned functions, clearer referral pathways, community-facing hubs, or services that are brought closer to where children and families already are.

This is where the work becomes more than goodwill. It starts to become part of how a place is organised.

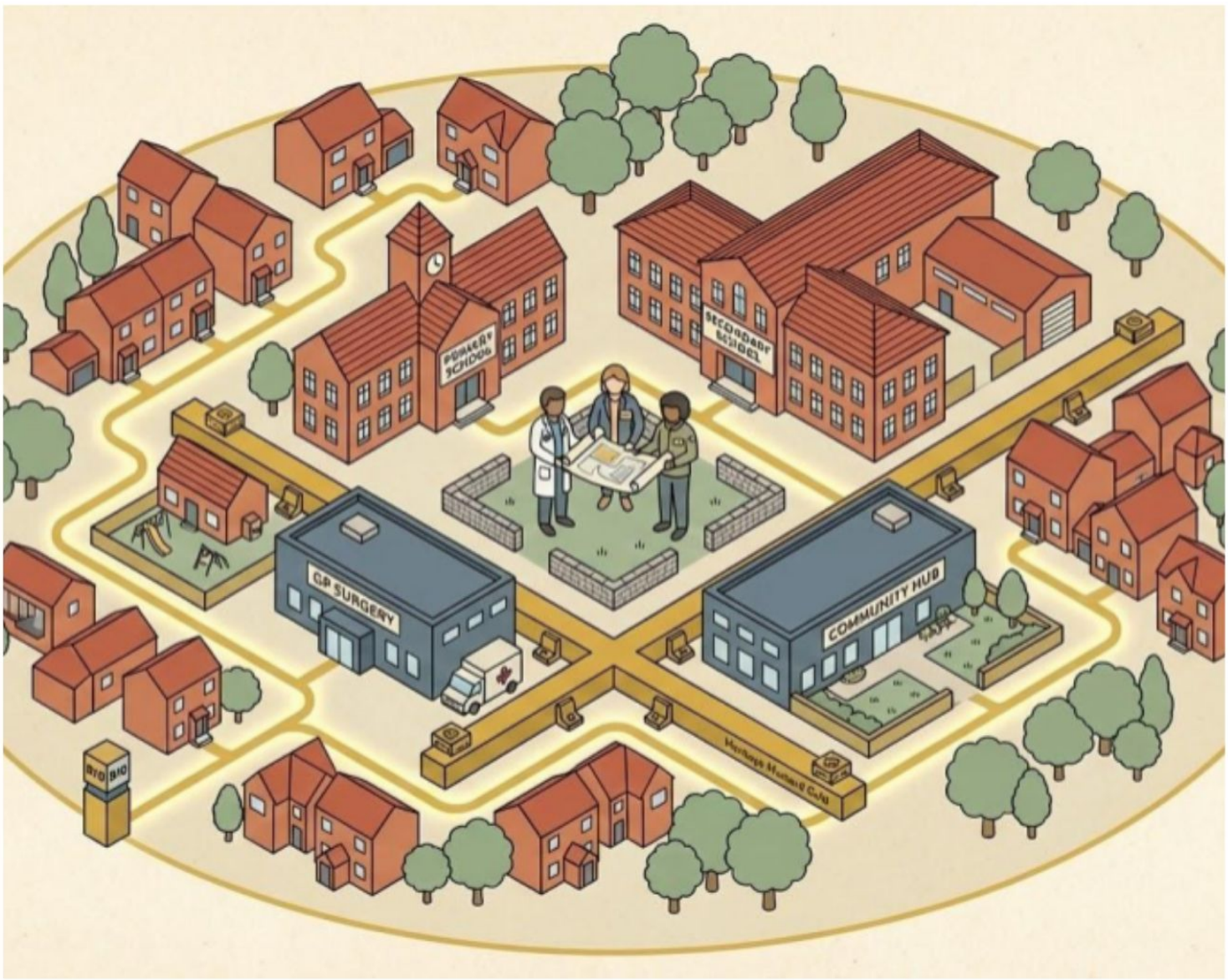
Why we need to work together

Every neighbourhood in the country maintains a unique and constantly evolving blend of challenges and opportunities. That means that , while sharing a common approach, “cradle to career work” looks different in every place.

Similarly, leaders drawn to this work bring a range of motivations for doing so, too. Self- or institutional-interest is a powerful force when channelled effectively.

Our Partnership is deliberately structured to raise , understand and align these ambitions to realise shared, systemic benefits at the neighbourhood level.

The point of partnership is not to flatten those differences. It is to help leaders in different parts of the journey see how their work *connects*—and where greater coherence could make a material difference to children’s lives.





What's in this for early years leaders?

If you lead in the early years, you are closest to the beginning of every child's story. You see language development, attachment, routines, parental confidence, behaviour, and developmental needs before they are dressed up in institutional language. You also see how quickly gaps can widen when support is inconsistent, fragmented or hard for families to access.

A cradle-to-career approach creates the possibility that early years is not treated as a separate stage that hands children over and hopes for the best. Instead, it becomes part of a longer local pathway with clearer onward connections into primary school, family support, health services and wider community provision.

In practice, that could mean:

- Stronger relationships with receiving primary schools.
- Better transition conversations rooted in the whole child, not just paperwork.
- More joined-up family support around speech and language, attendance habits, behaviour and routines.
- A greater chance that early concerns are understood as part of a shared local picture rather than isolated incidents.
- More influence for early years leaders in shaping how a place thinks about school readiness, belonging and family partnership.

For early years leaders, this work says: your phase is not a prelude to the "main event". It is foundational.



What's in this for primary leaders?

If you lead a primary school, you are often where the effects of fragmentation first become fully visible.

You may be holding the consequences of unmet need, family stress, weak service coordination or poor transition into school, while also trying to build culture, literacy, attendance and belonging in some of the most formative years of a child's education.

A cradle-to-career approach can help primary leaders move from carrying those pressures alone to becoming part of a stronger local fabric around children and families.

In practice, that could mean:

- Closer relationships with early years settings so children arrive with more continuity and fewer avoidable ruptures.
- Stronger links with local secondary schools so the transition out of primary is designed earlier and more intentionally.
- Better coordination around families who are navigating multiple services.
- A clearer local understanding of what children need socially, emotionally and academically by the end of Key Stage 2.
- More opportunity to shape a shared local culture around reading, belonging, attendance and aspiration.

For many primary leaders, one of the most powerful aspects of this work is that it validates something they already know: that many of the issues arriving in school are not school-created, and many of the outcomes that matter later on are being shaped in these years.



What's in this for secondary leaders?

If you lead a secondary school, you are often standing at one of the most pressured junctions in the system.

You inherit children from multiple primary schools, often with uneven transition information, varying family relationships and needs that have built over time. You are also expected to prepare young people for qualifications, post-16 destinations and adulthood while responding to safeguarding, attendance, belonging and mental health pressures that do not always fit neatly within institutional boundaries.

A cradle-to-career approach helps secondary leaders situate those challenges in a wider local ecology rather than carrying them as if they belong to the secondary school alone.

In practice, that could mean:

- A clearer local narrative about progression, opportunity and belonging for young people.
- Stronger KS2>KS3>KS4 transitions, with better relational and pastoral handover.
- Greater shared responsibility for attendance, vulnerability and family support across local institutions.
- More connected pathways into post-16 education, training and employment.
- A shift from being the institution that receives the consequences of fragmentation to being one of the leaders helping reduce it.

For secondary leaders, this can be a significant mindset shift. It is not about becoming responsible for everything. It is about recognising that many of the most persistent problems are ecological, and that part of leadership now involves helping a place respond to them more coherently. It requires a mindset shift from "heroic leader" to "civic architect".



What's in this for post-16 leaders?

If you lead in sixth form, FE, training or wider post-16 provision, you are often where the promises of earlier phases are tested against reality.

You see whether young people arrive with the confidence, clarity, qualifications, guidance and support they need to take the next step. You also see what happens when pathways are poorly joined up: students who drift, young people whose options narrow too early, families who are unclear about what comes next, and progression routes that feel more accidental than designed.

A cradle-to-career approach creates the conditions for post-16 leaders to be involved earlier in the story, not simply left to pick up the pieces at the end of compulsory schooling.

In practice, that could mean:

- Greater visibility of the local labour market and opportunity structures across the whole partnership.
- Stronger alignment with secondary schools around readiness, aspiration and progression.
- More coherent local pathways into college, apprenticeships, training and employment.
- Better support for young people at moments of drift or dropout.
- A stronger shared understanding that "career" is not an add-on at the end, but part of a longer journey that should be shaped intentionally from much earlier on.

For post-16 leaders, this work says: you are not simply the destination at the end of the school system but a core part of the local infrastructure that helps young people move into adulthood with real choices and genuine opportunities.

What you *might* be wondering now

"Is this just *another* initiative?"

No. A cradle-to-career approach is not meant to sit on top of existing work as an extra layer of meetings, reporting and language. If it creates bureaucracy without improving coherence, then the task has been misunderstood.

The aim is not more volume. The aim is better alignment.

"Will this overwhelm my staff?"

It should not. This work works when leaders are open to innovation while respecting the realities of school life; aligning activity with existing structures.

The right starting point is not *"How do we do everything?"* It is *"Where is one place we could create more coherence than exists right now?"* That may be a transition point. It could be relationships with families. A local service gap. A recurring attendance or vulnerability pattern. The discipline is to start where the work is both meaningful and possible.

"Do I need to have a local coalition already in place?"

The model assumes that many movements begin with small groups of people. Often, initially, it's a few leaders drawn together by concern and/or curiosity. And the group grows over time.

You do not need to arrive to this Catalyst with a complete group. But you do need to be willing to think beyond your own gate and begin building the conditions for a stronger local collective in the long run.

"Is this about becoming a social service?"

No. Schools remain schools. Teaching, curriculum, attendance, culture and outcomes still matter enormously. In fact, part of the argument here is that schools are often being asked to deliver those things while operating in fragmented local conditions that make the task harder than it needs to be.

A cradle-to-career approach does not replace school improvement. It strengthens the wider conditions that help school improvement endure.



What this work is, and isn't

This is a long-term commitment
This is generational work. The goal is not to produce a quick win for a report, but to strengthen the civic architecture around children so that support becomes more coherent over time.

This is a partnership of equals
No single institution can do this alone, and none should dominate it. Schools, early years settings, colleges, local authorities, employers and voluntary organisations each hold part of the picture.

This demands a shift in how we organise ourselves
It is about aligning what exists, designing transitions intentionally, sharing insight earlier and acting collectively when patterns emerge.

This is focused on outcomes for children
Success is not measured by the volume of meetings, steering groups or communications. It is measured by whether children experience greater consistency, fewer cliff edges, stronger progression and clearer pathways.

This is about your place
There is no template to copy and paste. Each place will shape this work differently, according to its history, relationships, assets and ambitions. That is a strength, not a weakness.

This is not about new bureaucracies
If this adds layers of paperwork without improving coherence, it has failed.

This is not about short-term pilots
This is not a time-bound initiative to be evaluated and archived. The point is to create durable local infrastructure and shared practice.

This is not about institutional prestige
This is not about whose logo comes first, who hosts, or who gets the credit. If the narrative becomes competitive, the work will fragment.

This is not a criticism of existing provision
This work begins from a place of respect. It assumes that people are already working hard and often working well, but that alignment can amplify that effort.

This is not a silver bullet
A cradle-to-career approach will not rapidly improve outcomes overnight. What it can do is reduce fragmentation and increase collective agency.

Phase One

Duration	**Seven months** (October 2026 to May 2027)**.**
Focus	This phase is designed to help you step back from the immediate pressures of school life and to see your place more clearly. Rather than responding reactively to each issue as it surfaces, you will develop a strategic understanding of the extent to which your neighbourhood is organised around children, and where the most promising leverage points for change exist.
Structure	**Three in-person conferences:** Held in October, November, and February to deepen your understanding of the cradle to career approach, to develop insight about the challenges and opportunities in your own neighbourhood, and to build a supportive cohort of peers around the country. In 2026/27, *each conference will be delivered in Sunderland (Oct. 1st, Nov. 19th, Feb. 25th), Manchester (Oct. 6th, Nov. 25th, Jan. 19th) and London (Oct. 8th, Nov. 26th, Jan. 21st). Partners will be invited to attend whichever location is most convenient.* **Regular check-ins** with cradle to career specialists from The Reach Foundation.
Outcomes	**Seamless Paths:** Participants leave with a clear diagnostic of the specific "transition fractures" in their local system and a defined plan for which educational gaps to bridge first. **Relational Bridges:** Leaders have built the necessary trust and relationships across their local group to reach families who currently feel disconnected. **Shared Infrastructure:** Partners move from initial mapping to a practical "first cut" Theory of Change, ready to make strategic decisions about how to organise local support more coherently around the daily lives of children.
Cost	£2,000 per group
Next steps	Transition into Phase Two of this work; bringing in local colleagues—from within your own institution and others—to work on specific aspects of your emerging local model.

Why now?

Across the country, more leaders are recognising the same truth: many of the challenges shaping children's lives cannot be solved by stronger institutions alone. They require stronger local ecosystems around those institutions.

At The Reach Foundation, we are working to make the case for national adoption of cradle-to-career approaches by helping leaders cultivate the leadership, connections and local models needed for this work to thrive. Our longer-term ambition is to support hundreds of local school groups to build greater educational, relational and system coherence in their communities.

But that bigger ambition only becomes real one place at a time. It starts when a leader looks honestly at their context and decides that fragmentation should not simply be endured as the background condition of the work. Or, when someone asks:

"If we were designing support for children in this place from scratch, would we organise it the way it currently operates?"

If the honest answer is no, that does not automatically tell you what to do next. But it may be reason enough to explore.

We are still building the evidence base for this work, and we want to be honest about that. This is not a story of instant transformation. It is a story of places beginning to work differently: building stronger local relationships, creating shared tools and infrastructure, improving transitions, reducing duplication, and creating more joined-up support around children and families.

Early case studies and results from partner places point to promising signs of this kind of change, especially where leaders are starting with relationships, local context and practical questions rather than abstract system design.

An invitation

You do not need to have all the answers before beginning. You do not need a perfect local partnership already in place. You do not need to be ready to transform everything at once.

But this may be worth exploring if:

You believe schools have a wider civic role to play in shaping the conditions around children.

You can see where fragmentation is making life harder for families and professionals in your place.

You want to move from reacting to problems towards understanding them more strategically.

You are interested in building a local group of institutions that can act with greater coherence over time.

You want to do this in a way that is practical, relational and grounded in the realities of school leadership.

Cradle-to-career is not about stepping away from the core work of school leadership. It is about asking whether the children you serve would be better supported if the adults and institutions around them were more joined up than they are now. If that question feels alive for you, we would welcome a conversation.

Please contact us at
https://www.cradletocareer.uk/contact