

# Developing an Integrated Anchor System: The Leeds City Inclusive Anchor Network

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## Abstract

The Leeds Anchor Network (or system) was established in 2017 with eight founder organizations. In 2024, membership was 14 and represented 1 in 7 of the Leeds city workforce. Leeds Beckett University is a founding member. This paper explains how the system originated and developed, the role Leeds Beckett University has played in that process, and how it has learned to frame and maximize its contribution to the city's prosperity, particularly through rearticulating its model of service learning.

**Keywords:** anchor system, service learning

## Introduction

Leeds Beckett University (LBU) is a public university based in Leeds, England. LBU was formed in 1970 by amalgamating a series of long-established “trades colleges” that served the needs of local industry, commerce, and public service. It has built strong relationships with over 12000 organizations, which underpin and inform the delivery of its teaching and research. In 2017, Leeds City Council proposed the development of the UK’s first “anchor system” to support the development of a new economic and social strategy based on the concept of “inclusive growth.” This paper explains how Leeds Beckett University is managing the process of aligning its strategy, goals, and service delivery to those of the emergent network.

The paper has three sections. First, the genesis of the Leeds network or ‘system,’ which is now five years old – explains its context, processes, and development. Second, how Leeds Beckett University developed and embedded its role as a founder member of the Leeds network determined how best to frame its Anchor contribution, animate Anchor programs, and specifically, develop a model of service learning. Third, we will summarize what we have learned during this complex process.

## The Genesis of Anchor Institutions Thinking in the UK and Leeds

Leeds is a city of 810,000 people located in the north of England. It is the second largest of England’s 11 “core cities” and sits at the heart of the wider Leeds City Region which encompasses ten local authorities, with 2.3 million residents and a £70 billion economy. In common with most UK cities, Leeds juxtaposes many of the features of a prosperous and advanced economy with pockets of deep deprivation. The seismic split between the UK and the European Union (“Brexit” for short) exposed a growing sense of alienation among sections of the community who felt excluded from economic success and did not feel their voices being heard by politicians. In response, Leeds City Council developed a new social and economic strategy it called the ‘Best City Ambition’ At its heart are three policy “pillars.”

- *Inclusive Growth* – an economy that works for everyone, where the gap between the most and least advantaged in the city is reduced, and the benefits of economic growth are distributed fairly, creating opportunities for all.
- *Health & Wellbeing* – a healthy and caring city where health inequalities are narrowed, and people from all social and economic backgrounds are living healthy lives for longer.
- *Zero Carbon* – rapid progress towards carbon neutrality by 2030, achieved through a “just transition” for the city’s communities.

To help catalyze and achieve these goals, the city has developed the concept of “Team Leeds.” This concept rests on two clear principles. First, that actors in the city all have a duty to play a

more active part in making Leeds a better place to live, work, and prosper, and will benefit if that can be achieved. Second, progress will be faster if organizations work better together by building deeper and more collaborative cross-sectoral partnerships. The Leeds Anchor network is a key element of this “Team Leeds” approach.

UK Anchor work has developed in two phases over the last decade. The first is based on what Paul Garton’s taxonomy identifies as a combination of a “financial” strategy in which purposive local purchasing is developed to drive local economic development, increase local living standards, and promote greater equity and fairness and a “human capital” strategy in which employers place greater emphasis on local hiring into “good” jobs. A powerful example of this approach is the work of the progressive think tank, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) to help the city of Preston develop a local procurement strategy. Research conducted by Leeds Beckett University and York St John University (Devins, 2017) identified the presence of 70 potential Anchor organizations in the Leeds City Region. It analyzed the potential impact that changes in their procurement and employment practices might generate. It concluded that if ten of these organizations shifted 10% of their spending to local suppliers, this could contribute an additional £168-196m to the City Region economy with a consequent opportunity to improve employment prospects for thousands of local people.

The second impetus for the Leeds Anchor movement came after the UK Brexit referendum in 2016. One of the drivers of the vote for the UK to leave the European Union was a sense of disillusionment among much of the electorate in declining industrial heartlands about their economic prospects following the global market crash in 2008. Leeds City Council developed, with support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a progressive model of *Inclusive Growth*<sup>iii</sup> (Stott, J. 2014) to counteract this trend. Discussions with major public-facing organizations in Leeds revealed a strong sense of commitment to the idea of inclusive growth and a willingness to explore the development of an “inclusive growth partnership” to facilitate it. There was a strong sense that while a drive towards more local purchasing would be a necessary condition of increasing inclusive growth, it would not be sufficient, and that Leeds could expand beyond the “financial/human resource model developed in Preston.

In 2017, with the support of two consultants, Les Newby and Nicky Denison, Leeds City Council facilitated discussions about a model of collaborative activity that could underpin the development of a place-based “anchor network” in Leeds. The key decision was to determine the scope of anchor system activity and a common language and set of principles that would bind members of the system together.

The result is the Leeds Anchors *Progression Framework*, the first of its kind in the UK. Based on a detailed literature review of anchor work in the UK, Europe, and the USA and discussions with leaders of key actors in Leeds, it defined the role of the anchor system, and the range of

commitment members of the network would make. It encompasses 40 practical actions grouped under five themes. The five core themes are:

- **First, Corporate and Civic.** To be a member of an organization, commitment from the top is required. Anchor members agree to embed Anchor principles in their institutional ethos, strategic planning, and actions and commit to working with other partners and community groups.
- **Second, Employment and human capital.** Anchor members commit to being good employers. We seek to hire locally so our workforce more closely mirrors the population we serve. We agree to pay the “real living wage,” which offers our colleagues dignity and a good standard of living; we create workforce practices that help our colleagues reach their potential; we promote the health and well-being of our colleagues through the development of a positive working environment.
- **Third, Procurement.** We aim to direct more of our discretionary purchasing to local organizations and to develop and embed notions of social value in our decision-making about the award of purchasing contracts.
- **Fourth, Environment and Assets.** We seek to reduce carbon emissions and use our estates and property assets to build better connections with our local communities.
- **Fifth, Service Delivery.** We shape our service delivery to deliver our core purpose in ways that maximize the benefits for local people and create a greater positive impact.

These proposals were adopted by Leeds City Council in 2018. The five commitments, which map closely to Paul Garton’s classic 2020 taxonomy of anchor activity (Garton, P.2021) gave the Leeds Network a broader scope than most others then operating in the UK and turned what had been a well-received but practically elusive idea into a concept that could spark tangible action.

Professor Peter Slee, Vice Chancellor of Leeds Beckett University, was appointed the network’s first Chair. By the network's first meeting in November 2018, nine large public-facing organizations, drawn from local government, education, and health, had been co-opted.

The first Leeds Inclusive Growth Strategy was published simultaneously, embedding anchor institutions as a key part of strategy delivery and the anchor network as a key mechanism for delivering a strong, inclusive local economy.

The network agreed:

1. Membership of the Leeds Anchor Network would be open to institutions that met three core criteria: being rooted, weighty, and service-oriented. In other words, they would be based in Leeds, a large employer, a big purchaser, and the deliverer of essential services to the local community.

2. The Leeds Anchor Network focuses its actions under the five core themes; every Anchor member would adopt the Progression Framework tool to define its Anchor role, its ambitions, and make progress and actions.
3. Governance and practical arrangements.
  - a. The network would be governed by Anchor Executive Group, chaired by Professor Peter Slee (Vice-Chancellor of Leeds Beckett University)
  - b. Four thematic subgroups—employment, procurement, climate, and communications—would scope areas for action and opportunities for collaboration between members. These subgroups would be chaired by colleagues drawn from member organizations.
  - c. Independent consultants Nicky Denison and Les Newby would provide support for Anchors to complete annual Progression Framework self-assessments. They would seek to facilitate leaders' open and honest reflection to help prioritize their own areas and actions within the network.
  - d. The Network would develop an annual Business Plan informed by priorities identified by the Executive Group and in Framework reviews.
  - e. The Network would adopt a metrics framework to assess progress against the business plan, enable anonymous benchmarking to provide constructive challenge, inform decisions and priority setting among members, and communicate progress to the wider community.

Over 2018-2020, supported by the convening role of Leeds City Council, the network expanded to encompass 14 organizations, now moving beyond “eds, meds and feds” to include major utilities (gas, electricity, water) and the British Library. Together, members employ over 59,000 people who work in the Leeds City region, including 2,000 apprentices, and purchase within the City’s economy £720million.

The Covid pandemic slowed some of the planned developments between 2020 and 2021. However, the trust and relationships developed by anchor members did enable effective collaboration in managing infection control, particularly among the city’s 80,000 higher education students, sped up the roll-out of vaccination programs, and the return of university students to the city after the Government-controlled lockdown period ended.

During the pandemic the crucial role third sector organisations played in supporting communities became more evident. Building on the new relationships formed at this time, the Leeds Community Anchor Network was established, and underpinned by funding secured by the Anchor Network in 2021 from the Health Foundation's Economies for Healthier Lives program. This program explores how targeted and co-designed economic actions, including actions within the workplace by Leeds Anchor Network members, can reduce health inequalities in less advantaged communities.

The Leeds approach is now embracing further evolution with the engagement of private-sector businesses in the city. This is backed by a tailored business version of the Progression Framework, developed and piloted before being applied by all nine members of the new Leeds Business Anchor Network to assess their contribution to inclusive growth and identify priority actions and shared opportunities. Our challenge over the coming years is to find ways of integrating these three strands of anchor activity (public, private, and voluntary) so that their impact is intensified and targeted to areas of greatest need.

## **Part 2: Leeds Beckett University's Approach to Aligning with the Leeds Anchor Network**

Leeds Beckett University (LBU) is based on two campuses, one in “downtown” Leeds and the other 3 miles away “uptown” in the residential district of Headingley. We support 25,000 students in undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs. We became a university in 1992, but our origins date to the formation of Leeds Polytechnic in 1970, which in turn came into being through the amalgamation of a range of technical schools established in the city over the previous 150 years. Those technical schools were founded to support the development of the Leeds economy through the training of skilled workers and the supply of technical innovation. We remain true to these principles today. We develop and deliver our work through partnerships with more than 12,000 employers who hire our graduates, enrich our learning opportunities, co-fund our research, and sell us goods and services. We have been involved in the development of the Leeds Anchor network since 2017 and, from 2018, began to build its five principles of operation into our strategic planning framework.

We began this process with our University Senior Management Group. This consists of our Executive Team, our Deans of School, and the Heads of our Professional Services. We agreed the principles of the Leeds Anchor network were consistent with our own published purpose and impact statements and that to engage effectively with the four thematic sub-groups established by the network, we needed to complete the Progression Framework to understand our current impact, the scale of our future ambition, and priorities for future commitment. Our analysis was as follows:

### **Corporate and Civic**

We agreed we needed to formalise our public commitment to the Leeds Anchor movement through our new strategic plan, which we completed and published after broad consultation and with the agreement of our Board, in July 2020. We now have a firm and public commitment to the principles of anchor working.

## Employment and Human Capital

Our analysis showed clearly that our employment terms, pay, working environment, and colleague well-being initiatives are positive and fully in keeping with agreed anchor norms. We are high performers compared with Anchor benchmarks established by amalgamating the data collected through the progression framework. But we agreed that our workforce is not fully representative of the communities we serve. We agreed this must become a priority and that we would develop plans to improve our standing through our University Workforce Development Plan. This is driven by our Executive Team, and plans are approved by our Board of Governors. Our Deputy Director of Human Resources was elected to serve as our representative on the Anchor employment sub-group and to support the broader anchor strategy. We have contributed to the network's employment data dashboard, through which all organizations publish their core employment data and make a public commitment to plans for development, and we are fully engaged in the "healthy workforce" initiative, which seeks to set standards for all progressive employers to follow.

## Procurement

We had never adopted a formal local purchasing plan. We agreed to do so and facilitate this to develop a social value criteria framework to help determine the role "locality" should play in allocating contracts. We agreed to work in a wider partnership through the anchor sub-group on purchasing to improve opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to learn about purchasing opportunities and gain access to tenders. Our Head of Purchasing was elected as our representative on the sub-group. Our Finance team is responsible for purchasing and producing an annual progress report for our Executive Team and Board of Governors. In the four years since the operation of the network, we have increased the proportion of our discretionary spending with local organizations to 70%, and two-thirds of that is with SMEs. Our Business School has developed a purchasing network club to provide direct support to aid growth down our supply chain. We hope to be able to share more of this work with CUMU members in another edition of the Journal.

## Environment and Assets

Our internal analysis, using the anchor progression framework, showed clearly that we were making strong progress in reducing our carbon footprint but that we had not made a sufficiently strong public commitment to action and had not sufficiently integrated planning to reduce carbon emissions in every aspect of our work. We agreed immediately to develop an integrated plan, which was published and adopted by our Board in 2022. Engagement through the anchor network led us to join the "Leeds Pipes" initiative through which our downtown campus heating needs are now met by energy generated through recycled waste. We found plenty of evidence of

strong community engagement through our sports and recreational facilities, and through our community health clinical work. We felt we were “undercooked” in our contribution to cultural facilities. We have since developed a much better interface with our local community in performing arts and cinema and are partnering with a local community gallery to provide better access to fine arts. Our understanding and analysis of the work carried out by our individual faculty is weak, and we are considering how best to capture data on engagement and impact in these fields without creating a further layer of bureaucracy.

## Service Delivery

This is the dimension that has given us the most pause for thought. It is the only area of the anchor network’s mission where there is not yet an operational sub-group. It is also the area where, instinctively, we feel we can make the deepest and most durable contribution to our city. We are a university, and the effective deployment of intellectual capital is the core of our collective endeavour. Adopting the typology developed by Doberneck, Glass, and Schweitzer helped clarify some of our challenges and shape our priorities. As a condition of Government funding for research and innovation, we are required to map our engagement and impact on the community-based research, consulting activities, and commercialization of intellectual property. And we employ a team of colleagues in our Research and Enterprise Office to support this work. We are one of the top 10 performers among UK universities for knowledge transfer research partnerships. We sit among the top quartile of UK universities for public and third-sector partnerships and are in the second quartile for business research partnerships. But it became very clear, very quickly, that in service learning, we relied completely on the work of individual staff to develop community-based relationships as part of their own professional endeavours. This meant two things. First, at a university level, we could not say readily and without a great deal of effort who we were working with. And second, we could not readily describe in aggregate the scale of our commitment or its impact. So, while we could talk convincingly about our commitment to anchor principles of employment, purchasing, environment, and research and could show evidence of the scale of our work and its impact, our work through core business, the education of students, and the development of good citizens, was less well developed. It was a difficult reckoning to come to terms with.

In deciding how to address this fundamental issue we were influenced by the observations of Conrad Parke. (Parke, 2020) Parke works for CLES and has been part of the team supporting anchor work in Preston, Birmingham, and London. He noted that often, the people who sign up the organization to new ideas are not always those who do the delivery work. That goes to people who already feel plenty busy enough, thank you. For them, the boss’s big idea is often just one more piece of work they don’t need. The secret of success, he said, is to position new ways of working as a means of solving problems everyone shares, so doing different, not doing more. We agreed that effective service learning must be based on the win-win idea. It has to offer our



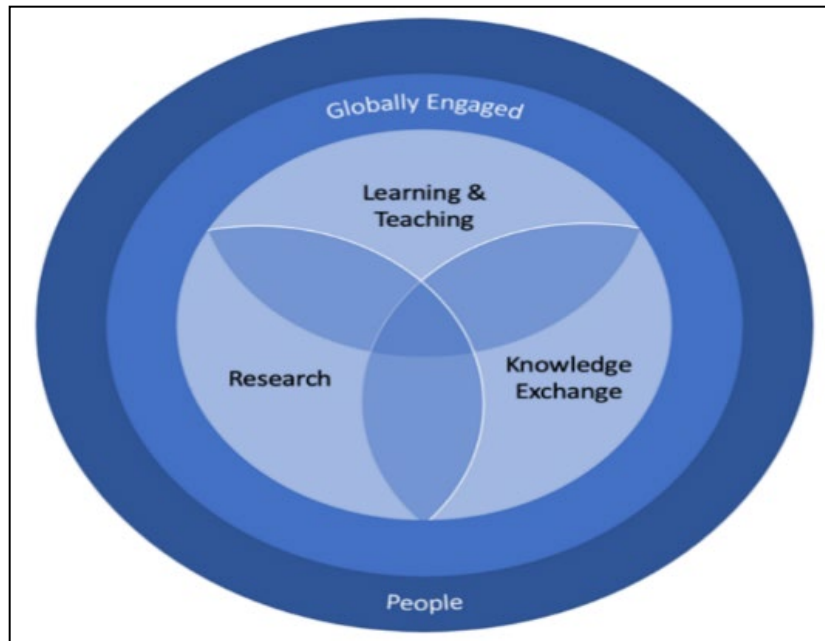
students a richer learning experience and a more effective way of achieving learning outcomes while at the same time delivering additional benefits to the communities we serve. Those benefits are the ones the community identifies, not the ones we decide for them.

So how do we get to win-win? At LBU, we have rethought the relationship between what we do (learning and research impact) and the society we serve. For more than 40 years, the dominant mode of discourse about the operation of UK universities has been based on a tripod. We teach students. We conduct research. And then, we develop a third leg in which we apply learning or research through the concept of “enterprise” and “community engagement.” This is measured in terms of spinouts, applied research grants, consultancy contracts, visitor numbers to campus, and reach out to schools and community groups. This approach is embedded in a national Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) driven by observable metrics.

Our Anchor commitments led us to reconsider and rearrange the elements of this model. We began by putting the communities we serve and the relationships we build with them at the centre. As trust develops through those relationships, we gain a deeper understanding of the needs of the people we serve. That understanding then informs how we can develop our provision, in this case, learning and research, to help meet those needs. That approach then makes the educational experiences we develop for our students more meaningful, the application of our research skills more impactful, and the benefit to those we serve more direct. It creates a win-win by design, not by afterthought.

We have begun to develop this approach with professional and intermediary organizations in the Leeds City region, with whom we act in partnership to deliver benefits to the wider community. This, in turn, changes perceptions. Our communities are made up of myriad groups, interests, and organizations. It is rarely possible to eat this elephant all at once. We must start somewhere and with someone. The trick, then, is to build outwards and inwards as we make progress.

As part of its 2021-26 strategic plan, the Carnegie School of Sport (CSS), one of LBU’s eight schools, has developed a schema (Figure 1) to encapsulate our approach.



**FIGURE 1.** CSS strategic plan schema.

The three main “legs” of the School’s portfolio—learning and teaching, research, and knowledge exchange—are not mutually exclusive. They form an academic ecosystem where each supports the other symbiotically, facilitating authentic learning, teaching, and research with a social and economic impact that benefits our economy and society.

This ecosystem is built on strong relationships between academics (the people) and community organizations, through which problems and opportunities are discussed and understood, and ideas and solutions are developed and shared. Collaborative activity may build on the synergies between any combination of the three main legs, often depending on the need of the community organization and their value systems and considerations about the effective and efficient use of finite resources.

CSS has a diverse portfolio spanning exercise science, sport coaching, physical education, and sport management, which is delivered through undergraduate, postgraduate taught, and postgraduate research curricula. With a strong heritage as the first male PE teacher training college in England, a tradition of graduates being employed within the Leeds city region and being recognized globally as one of the top 100 academic departments for sport (QS reference), the school has a strong reputation and reach from which to foster and build relationships.

While there are many examples of how our research activity in every discipline underpins knowledge exchange and teaching, one of the richest is our work in high-performance sports. Ben Jones and colleagues (Jones,2019) explored how researchers, practitioners, and research practitioners can work together to undertake and integrate research into better practice. While the

researcher and practitioner often have similar aims, (Coutts, 2016) the researcher tends to work relatively slowly (off-field brains) to solve complex problems. In contrast, the practitioner is required to work fast (on-field brains). Without mutual understanding, this difference can often create tensions, leading to a breakdown in the relationship. Collaboration between the off-field and on-field brains is essential to ensure there is an alignment of research questions, expectations, and usability of outcomes into practice.

This model is the foundation for collaboration between CSS and professional sporting clubs in the Leeds city region and, from them, as a gateway to addressing both local and global issues. The depth of collaborative activity has produced evidence which, in some cases (head injuries in Rugby), has provided the foundation for a broader national and international dissemination and influence. This applied research model generates opportunities for learning and teaching through integrating postgraduate research and masters' level students with our partner clubs, and the alignment of applied research with locally relevant organizations provides meaningful content for undergraduate programs underpinning curriculum development and supporting student engagement. More than 200 of our sports undergraduate students are engaged in working with our partner clubs in coaching, physiotherapy, sports science, marketing, digital development, advertising, sales, and community outreach in issues like tackling crime, inequality, and health. This activity enriches our student education, our partners have access to graduate talent, and we can help tackle broader community issues.

External engagement with local community-based organizations to facilitate applied research opportunities, knowledge exchange, and authentic learning experiences are more broadly at the heart of the practice within CSS and LBU. Through our engagement, we are learning that where we can develop genuine mutually beneficial relationships with our community partners, we must also use them to promote “inward knowledge exchange,” which embeds the expertise our community practitioners and professionals share with us in improved teaching and learning. We must also demonstrate reciprocity by engaging our partners in teaching delivery and as co-authors in appropriate applied research publications. CSS and LBU have recently developed five new BSc (Hons) Applied Sport Studies degrees, each in partnership with a professional sporting club in the city region. Each club has been involved in co-creating the curriculum, with a portion of credit-bearing provision being delivered by partner practitioners within their environment, providing an authentic learning experience to students and a “talent pipeline” for the clubs.

### **Part 3: Learning Points from our Collective Leeds Anchor Work**

So, what conclusions can we draw from our approach to founding and enacting a unique anchor system in a major UK city? And what have we, as a network university partner, learned about the animation of anchor thinking in practical delivery?

**It is paramount that a small group of influential large organizations across sectors commit to an initial commitment. In Leeds, three organizations—Leeds City Council, Leeds Beckett University, and Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust—were instrumental in establishing the Leeds Anchor Network.**

**Establishing a Network typically requires one organization to lead driving things forward,** including taking soundings from potential partners, convening initial meetings, and investing resources to make things happen or commission support. Leeds City Council played this role here. However, it is good to broaden the leadership base and share responsibilities between partners as soon as possible to instil ownership and shared intent towards a common goal.

**Strong relationships between Anchor organizations' executive leaders are crucial to starting a network.** It must be based on shared high-level commitment. The strategic and collaborative benefits that arise may not be the easiest to measure. Still, they are some of the most powerful benefits that an Anchor Network brings to a place and its ability to achieve its ambitions. Senior leaders are responsible for communicating their role as Anchors within their own organizations and embedding this in strategic direction and culture. This empowers others in the organization to apply Anchor principles in their work and, as such, underpins progress and contribution.

**A shared long-term commitment to place, articulated in strategic ambitions, is key.** In Leeds, this is the city's Inclusive Growth Strategy and Best City ambition. Both help define why the Network exists and what it wants to achieve. This retains focus and purpose and differentiates the Network from other partnerships that will exist in places.

**Anchors need to recognize the organizational levers available to them and be willing to use them to deliver local benefits.** In Leeds, these are our employment, procurement, environmental, and corporate practices. While these will vary by institution, Anchors must pursue action and apply influence where they can have the greatest impact. Anchors can also leverage their specialisms, as described earlier in this article, in the case of Leeds Beckett University.

**A clear shared action plan, governance, and having the right people in place is key to making practical progress.** As well as the city's shared strategic narrative, the Leeds Anchor Network uses its annual Business Plan framed around the five themes of the Progression Framework to provide direction for the action that will be taken. Governance arrangements and thematic working groups mirror these themes, bring in wider expertise within organizations, and empower them to drive forward action in their day-to-day organizational work and in collaboration with other Anchors where there is an opportunity to respond to shared challenges.

**Anchor organizations must be prepared to commit resources for the Network to function well and deliver change.** These include senior executive time; senior officer time in expert areas, e.g., Human Resources and Procurement; secretariat time; expert consultant support to help with specific functions (e.g., metrics/benchmarking, supply chain analysis, Progression Framework reviews); and budget to deliver key projects/change on occasions.

**In our experience, Anchor Networks work best when** they are designed to fit the place and its institutional make-up when you focus on those committed to making change happen, and when it is made as tangible as possible. Communication is also key to demonstrating what is possible, galvanizing others to get involved, and sharing practice. Overall, this is a long-term game, and progress can take time to deliver (e.g., procurement). It will not happen at all without ambition, leadership, and persistence.

**Individual organizations cannot treat anchor work as a “bolt-on.” It must be integrated into their core purpose. In this article, Leeds Beckett University demonstrates how best to achieve this. That means framing the commitment to anchor partnership working and alignment to anchor goals as helping develop solutions to problems we all share.**

**Relationships come first.** Relationships build trust. Trust builds partnership. Partnership delivers change. Change comes from aligning core business to shared goals.

**Organizations need to adapt.** LBU has recognized that it is too easy for a big organization to assume that it is already making a big contribution to anchor goals by its size, presence, and activity. But that is the price of admission to the club. The aim of the network is to encourage a greater contribution and better alignment. There has to be humility, along with commitment and a willingness to adopt “inward knowledge exchange.” Without a win-win, there is no sustainability.

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