

Office for
Students



Regional access partnerships: Call for evidence

Summary of OfS next steps

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1. Introduction

The Office for Students (OfS) launched a call for evidence in June 2025 to inform the development of regional access partnerships, a proposed successor to the current Uni Connect partnership programme. We invited views on how best to structure and implement regionally coordinated work to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education.

The response to the call for evidence was substantial, with 220 valid submissions from a wide range of stakeholders. These included higher education providers, Uni Connect partnerships, schools, local authorities and sector bodies. The feedback revealed strong support for collaboration and offered important input on the proposed size and shape of regions, governance models and the integration of regional work into access and participation plans (APPs).

Pye Tait Consulting independently analysed all responses to the call for evidence and highlighted themes and key messages using a coding framework. We have published the Pye Tait analysis report as a separate document alongside this one. In this document we set out key themes from the analysis report and a summary of our next steps, including further engagement with the sector and a phased implementation approach.

In the call for evidence, we set out ambitions to implement regional access partnerships in September 2026. However, feedback in responses suggested a longer transition period would be beneficial. We also want the new regional partnerships to align with wider reforms initiated by the government's post-16 education and skills white paper,¹ including potential recommendations from the Higher Education Access and Participation Task and Finish Group,² established following its publication in October 2025. As a result, we now intend to implement regional access partnerships in September 2027, subject to funding decisions.

We remain committed to working collaboratively with the sector to develop a regional model that improves outcomes for disadvantaged learners, reduces duplication and strengthens the strategic coordination of higher education outreach activity across England.

¹ See [Post-16 education and skills white paper - GOV.UK](#).

² See [Higher Education Access and Participation Task and Finish Group - GOV.UK](#).

2. Background and purpose

We regulate equality of opportunity in higher education with the goal that every student - regardless of their background, circumstances or pathway - should have the opportunity to benefit from high quality education that meets their needs and equips them to succeed.

We use APPs as a key mechanism to hold providers accountable for identifying and addressing barriers faced by underrepresented groups, including those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, care-experienced students, disabled students and others who may face systemic challenges.

We currently facilitate collaboration between higher education providers on work to improve access to higher education by funding the Uni Connect programme. Funding for Uni Connect is allocated through the annual Strategic Priorities Grant.³ The Department for Education (DfE) sets out priorities for funding to the OfS in an annual guidance letter. We see collaboration as a critical component of work to improve equality of opportunity and this call for evidence was part of our work to develop new frameworks for regional collaboration.

From academic year 2027-28, we aim to establish a new regional collaboration programme as a successor to Uni Connect, which will take into account the government's post-16 education and skills white paper and recommendations from the Task and Finish Group on access and participation, established following its publication in October 2025. We expect the extent of funding for the new collaborative access work for 2027-28 to be determined during the next academic year.

Collaboration

Collaboration is vital for improving equality of opportunity in access to higher education. This is because it enables providers to work together to address local barriers in a coordinated and strategic way. By pooling resources, data and expertise, providers can deliver better targeted activity to under-served communities, reduce duplication of effort and ensure that learners across different geographies—particularly in rural, coastal and disadvantaged urban areas—receive consistent and meaningful support. By working collaboratively, providers can share practice and develop place-based strategies that reflect the lived realities of learners, ultimately creating a more equitable and responsive higher education system.

Regional collaboration can also strengthen the alignment between higher education outreach and other civic priorities, such as local skills strategies and economic development plans, thereby helping to ensure that interventions are both locally relevant and nationally coherent.

Context of the call for evidence

In 2024 we completed a review of collaborative support for improving equality of opportunity in access to higher education.⁴ The purpose of the review was to inform the future development of collaborative outreach through any OfS funded programme. In December 2024 we published 'Developing a theory of change for a future national collaborative outreach programme', which

³ See [Guidance from government - Office for Students](#).

⁴ See [A review of collaborative support for improving equality of opportunity in access to higher education: Uni Connect - Office for Students](#).

outlined our intended principles for a future programme or infrastructure.⁵ The review recommended rationalising and reducing the number of current regional partnerships by bringing them in line with existing regional structures, such as combined authorities. With this, and other key questions for the future of regional collaboration in mind, we wanted to test proposals and gather input from those involved in collaborative access work.

In June 2025, we published a call for evidence to inform the development of regional access partnerships, a proposed successor to the current Uni Connect partnership structure. Regional access partnerships are intended to help higher education providers within a geographic area work together to widen access. While the Uni Connect programme was primarily created to deliver outreach, we recognise that many local partnerships have since built broader relationships. These enable them to contribute to local and national activity to address skills needs alongside risks to equality of opportunity, influence local policy and collaborate with others to coordinate outreach activity. In a future funded programme, we propose to place greater emphasis on this strategic coordination work, connecting the work of regional stakeholders. Giving these new partnerships a sharper strategic focus will help align efforts across the sector more effectively and avoid fragmented work or competition that could weaken overall impact. It will also create mechanisms to accurately identify and agree the most significant risks to regional equality of opportunity and enable the pooling of regional resources and expertise, to strengthen the collective impact on those risks.

The call for evidence was an opportunity for us to hear from key stakeholders early in the development process. We set out early proposals for a smaller number of regional partnerships than the number of current Uni Connect partnerships, and provided an indicative map of potential regions, to stimulate discussion about appropriate geographical boundaries.

In October 2025 the government published the post-16 education and skills white paper setting out reforms to the post-16 education and skills system.⁶ The white paper puts forward a vision for improving access to higher education through more collaborative working across all aspects of post-16 education. It sees further and higher education providers working more closely together in local areas, both to improve pathways for lifelong learning and skills development and to support local economic growth. In the white paper, the government challenges education providers to specialise in areas of strength and deliver improvements to access and participation.

The white paper also announced a Higher Education Access and Participation Task and Finish Group, which will provide practical proposals to help more students from disadvantaged backgrounds and under-served areas access higher education.⁷ Chris Millward, the interim OfS Director for Fair Access and Participation, is a member of the Task and Finish Group, which has been meeting since November 2025 and will complete its work in January 2027.

Before implementing new regional access partnerships, we expect to run a funding consultation, in which we will consider all aspects of Strategic Priorities Grant (SPG) funding relating to access and participation, alongside other areas of the SPG. We will draw on the responses we have received to this call for evidence, as well as any guidance issued by the DfE in developing these proposals.

⁵ See [Developing a theory of change for a future national collaborative outreach programme - Office for Students](#).

⁶ See [Post-16 education and skills white paper - GOV.UK](#).

⁷ See [Higher Education Access and Participation Task and Finish Group - GOV.UK](#).

We are also continuing to work closely with the Task and Finish Group to ensure that its perspectives and advice can be fully considered as we prepare for the consultation.

Call for evidence response

This response document sets out our reflections on the feedback we received through the call for evidence, summarises the key themes raised by respondents and outlines the next steps in the development of regional access partnerships. We have communicated to Uni Connect partnerships that, subject to confirmation with the DfE, funding and requirements for 2026-27 will remain largely the same as they were in 2025-26. We are continuing to discuss our developing approach to encouraging regional collaboration with the higher education sector and other key stakeholders.

3. Summary and next steps

Key themes from the responses

- **Strong support for collaboration:** Respondents expressed enthusiasm for working together to improve equality of opportunity, but stressed the need for adequate support, funding and time to build effective partnerships.
- **Protecting existing relationships and partnerships:** Over half of respondents urged the OfS to build on the success of Uni Connect and avoid disrupting well established relationships and delivery models.
- **Transition period:** Respondents suggested a phased implementation approach, with some calling for alignment with APP cycles or more time for planning and continuity in the transition to new regions.
- **Localised outreach and local knowledge:** There was widespread agreement that regional boundaries should reflect meaningful geographies and local contexts, with flexibility to address disparities within and between urban, rural and coastal communities. Many respondents advised that place-based networks and contextual knowledge must be preserved in new models.
- **A student-centred focus:** Respondents called for partnerships to be designed around learner needs. Some respondents argued that regions should be defined by where and how learners experience disadvantage, rather than other regional boundaries.
- **Avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy:** Respondents raised concerns that new regional layers could create additional reporting burdens or duplicate existing structures.
- **Ensuring fair and equitable resourcing:** Respondents fed back that there was a risk of unevenly distributed resources within large, diverse regions. There were calls to recognise differential costs across the country, and differing resources within higher education providers.
- **Detailed feedback on all proposed regions:** Some proposed regions were supported by the relevant respondents, while others felt that certain regions were too large or misaligned with existing civic and educational structures.
- **Integration with APPs:** While some supported embedding regional collaboration within APPs, others raised concerns about burden, autonomy and shared accountability.

We note that several of the themes raised by respondents resonate with the priorities of the post-16 skills white paper, particularly its emphasis on place-based collaboration between universities and further education colleges. The strong support for this among respondents aligns with the white paper's vision for joined-up working across providers, employers and regional bodies such as mayoral authorities and Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs).⁸

⁸ See [Local skills improvement plans and designated employer representative bodies - GOV.UK](#).

Likewise, respondents' calls to preserve localised outreach, contextual knowledge and existing place-based networks mirror the white paper's commitment to grounding skills planning in meaningful geographies – ensuring that local labour-market intelligence, community context and regional disparities shape decision making and provision. Finally, concerns about avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy mirror the white paper's ambition to streamline systems, reduce burden on providers and enable local partnerships – including devolved authorities and employer-led planning bodies – to focus on effective delivery rather than administrative complexity.

We are grateful for the thought and time given by many colleagues within and outside the higher education sector in their responses to the proposals and questions in the call for evidence. We have reflected on these responses, especially on areas where recurring themes appeared in the feedback, and this will inform the development of a future approach to regional collaboration for access. Our next steps in response to this feedback are summarised below.

Supporting a stable transition

Implementation in 2027

Feedback from the call for evidence indicated that implementing the reforms by September 2026, as originally planned, would create significant transition pressures. In response, we intend to implement regional access partnerships from September 2027 onwards, subject to funding confirmation. This new timeline will also enable us to take into account recommendations from the Task and Finish Group established following publication of the post-16 white paper, which is considering regional approaches within its work.

Stability

Many contributions to the call for evidence highlighted well established and successful partnerships, and collaborative working that is already happening. We will build on the collaborative and partnership-led approaches demonstrated by Uni Connect partnerships in setting out our priorities for a successor programme.

Adapting our approach

We know that effective implementation of a collaboration framework will depend on ongoing dialogue and the ability to respond to changing circumstances. Feedback highlighted risks of disruption if new structures are implemented without iterative engagement and refinement, including in designing regional structures. We will respond to policy and sector changes throughout the transition period, adjusting our approach where necessary and remaining engaged with stakeholders.

Governance and leadership

Strategic leadership

Responses emphasised the importance of transparent, well structured governance that brings together higher education, further education, schools and local partners. They also stressed the need for a shared strategic approach to avoid fragmented activity. Similarly, the post-16 education and skills white paper places emphasis on collaboration across higher and further education in local areas. As a result, we will ensure that leadership roles and governance structures reflect higher and further education partnerships with a broad range of relevant regional stakeholders. We will encourage new partnerships to engage with existing strategic leadership structures and

specifically build in relationships with mayoral or combined authorities as well as local employers. We want partnerships to be strategic in their approaches to collaboration so it can have the maximum impact for students in their regions.

Local knowledge

Over half of respondents highlighted the need for regions to remain responsive to local contexts, and we heard consistently that strong local knowledge is essential to deliver effective regional collaboration. We agree and see regional knowledge as vital within these reforms, including existing structures such as LSIPs,⁹ which provide the opportunity for regional access partnerships to account for local skills planning within their work. We will also recognise the importance of local knowledge and leadership in governance arrangements.

Accountability and evidence-led practice

Local evidence and data

We heard clearly that regions need a strong, evidence-led foundation to target their efforts effectively, and responses made it clear that any regional activity or strategy should be based on local evidence and data. We will work with future regional access partnerships to conduct systematic analysis of risks to equality of opportunity in post-16 education in their areas.

Independent coordinator

We recognise the breadth of feedback on the independent regional coordinator proposal. Many responses raised considerations or asked for further detail, and because of this we will continue developing details of potential mechanisms for ensuring robust oversight, accountability and reporting for partnerships.

Diverse pathways

We heard clearly in the feedback that collaboration must reflect the full diversity of pathways into and through higher education, and not only traditional degree routes directly from school. We will ensure future collaborative arrangements involve improving equality of opportunity across the full range of routes into and through higher education and include all types of higher education providers.

Building national and regional collaboration infrastructure

Funding regional infrastructure

We recognise the role funding plays in supporting collaboration. Responses in the call for evidence emphasised the importance and positive impact of long-term, stable funding, which we will continue to discuss with the DfE. This will include consideration of the number of strategically focused regional networks necessary to maximise impact and effectively target work to improve equality of opportunity.

Size and shape

We are grateful for the detail and nuance of feedback provided on the early proposals for the individual regional access partnerships, which will inform the further development of our proposals.

⁹ See [Local Skills Improvement Plans \(LSIPs\) - GOV.UK](#).

Responses recommended specific changes to proposed regions to ensure better alignment with existing or developing local infrastructure; to better reflect students' needs; or to reflect factors, such as long travel times, pertinent to the geography of particular rural or coastal regions.

As discussed above, the Higher Education Access and Participation Task and Finish Group is considering place-based approaches to access, so we are working closely with the group to inform our future approach. We will ensure that the taskforce is aware of broader feedback we have received through this call for evidence.

We will continue to keep stakeholders updated on our thinking about regional access partnerships and will seek to engage with regional groups of stakeholders to test ideas. In particular, we will continue to work with Uni Connect partnerships as we develop our plans. We recognise that some Uni Connect partnerships have already started thinking about how they could support the broader vision for post-16 education identified within the white paper. We are open to discussions about enabling changes in the final year of Uni Connect funding, pending the outcome of funding decisions for 2026-27 by the DfE. If partnerships wish to discuss this, they should contact us to share proposals at uniconnect@officeforstudents.org.uk. We expect providers to be able to explain how their proposed partnership arrangements demonstrate diverse and strategic collaborations to collectively address challenges to equality of opportunity relating to access to higher education in their region.

4. Next steps for higher education providers

After listening to the feedback in the call for evidence, we now intend to implement regional access partnerships from September 2027, subject to confirmation of funding. In the meantime, we will be further developing guidance and parameters for a new regional access programme. For higher education providers, we have included below some steps your organisation may wish to take following the outcomes and updated proposals included in this document:

- Begin or continue discussions with stakeholders within your region to explore shared priorities, learner needs, and opportunities for collaboration.
- Continue to build and maintain existing relationships within or outside the current Uni Connect programme – for example, with mayoral strategic authorities and employer representative bodies such as LSIPs.
- Contact unicconnect@officeforstudents.org.uk if your local Uni Connect partnership would like to adjust their regional configuration.



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