

# Every child flourishing, every community thriving

**Our ambitious vision and strategy to transform life chances by  
extending educational excellence**



November 2025

## Foreword: Combining educational excellence with the best of business to transform lives

**Susanna Eastham, Chair of Trustees**



My journey with Challenge Partners began in 2019, volunteering through the Social Business Trust on a project to strengthen knowledge exchange. As a knowledge management professional at EY, I was impressed by Challenge Partners' commitment to identifying and sharing educational excellence and fostering a culture of collaboration. I was also excited to apply my professional skills to a mission that reflects my values and allows me to contribute to lasting, positive change.

When I joined the Board of Trustees in May 2020, I witnessed schools and communities facing extraordinary disruption - navigating COVID, recovery efforts, and wider societal disadvantage. These experiences demonstrated the power of our practitioner-led model, rooted in reciprocal collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Challenge Partners also fosters leadership development - at scale - nurtured through experiential learning and peer review. In the world of business we know what a difference great leadership makes. By investing in developing thousands of leaders across the country, Challenge Partners creates a ripple effect that strengthens schools and trusts nationwide.

As Chair of Trustees since April 2025, I am proud to share our 2030 strategy. It is ambitious and intentional, with a focus on ensuring our impactful approach reaches more of the pupils and communities who stand to benefit most. Our growth plan is not just about numbers; it's about deepening our impact to improve life chances and address inequality.

Challenge Partners is in good health, thanks to our dedicated central team and strong partners across the sector. I'm proud to play a role in supporting Challenge Partners to cultivate the unique blend of leadership and collaboration that can transform lives.

I want to conclude by expressing my gratitude to school and trust leaders, fellow trustees, and to the businesses and donors whose support makes our shared mission possible. Your ongoing partnership is vital as we work together to build a school system that delivers excellence and supports every child to flourish.

## Introduction and Summary: A bold vision and a systemic solution

**Dr Kate Chhatwal OBE, CEO**

Imagine a society where every child has the opportunity to flourish, where vibrant, resilient communities thrive alongside a strong economy; a society where education equips young people with the skills, confidence, and curiosity to shape their own futures and the world around them.



Persistent, systemic inequalities stand in the way of this vision. Socio-economic background, postcode, and individual needs profoundly influence pupils' attainment and life chances. Some schools have found ways to overcome these obstacles, providing an exceptional education for all pupils - but too often that knowledge isn't shared.

**Challenge Partners provides systemic solutions to these systemic problems**, working at scale to help schools learn from each other and leading practice, building leadership and improvement capacity and spreading excellence across the system. By collaborating and learning from what works elsewhere, schools respond more effectively and creatively, delivering stronger support and improved outcomes for every pupil.

Challenge Partners was founded in 2011 by headteachers integral to the success of the 2003-11 London Challenge programme, which transformed London schools from the worst to the best in the country. Building on this legacy, Challenge Partners has developed a **proven, nationwide, evidence-backed approach** which harnesses and spreads the combined wisdom of our vibrant and diverse commonwealth of schools. Independent evaluations and analysis consistently show that disadvantaged pupils in our schools achieve more than their peers in other schools, while our programmes and networks drive continuous school improvement and stretch performance at the top end.

In 2023 we set the goal of scaling our approach to **benefit half a million pupils each year by 2027**. We are on track, having already reached 420,000 pupils by the end of 2024 - around 130,000 of whom are eligible for Free School Meals. **If all schools were as effective as Challenge Partners schools, thousands more disadvantaged pupils would achieve good results in crucial English and maths assessments at the end of primary and secondary school each year – life-changing differences.**

Our refined strategy responds to an evolving environment where school budgets are under strain, local services are shrinking, and many families face rising poverty, poor health, and social challenges that spill into the classroom. It ensures no school leader or teacher has to face these challenges alone. It retains our focus on extending educational excellence and better life chances for all, while targeting schools in areas of higher deprivation, improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and strengthening our influence across the wider education system. **It helps to create a school system where every child has an equal chance to succeed.**

## Systemic Problems

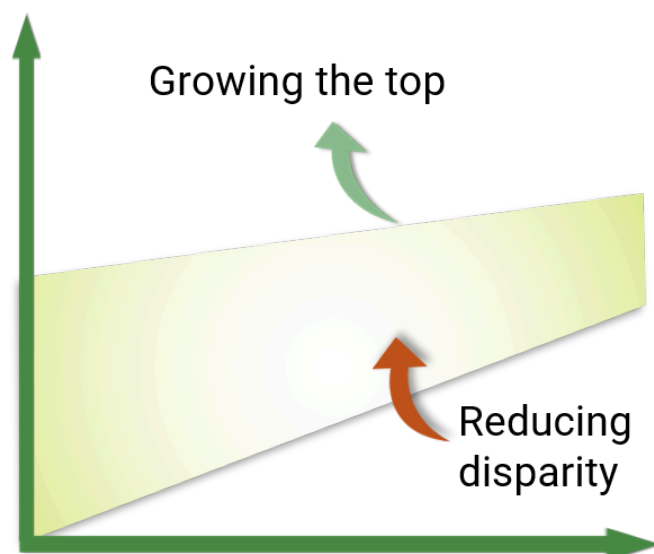
### Deep-rooted inequalities diminish educational outcomes; solutions are trapped in individual schools

Our vision for a country where every young person can flourish, contribute to vibrant communities, and help build a strong economy is threatened by persistent, systemic inequalities:

- By GCSE level, disadvantaged 16-year-olds are on average **19.1 months behind** their more affluent peers (EPI, 2025).
- Regional disparities are stark - in 2024, disadvantaged pupils in parts of northern England were over **21 months behind** at GCSE, while fewer than half met expected standards in English and maths (EPI, 2025).
- Poor attainment harms life outcomes - those leaving school with no qualifications can earn **£160,000 less** over a lifetime and are twice as likely to be unemployed (IFS, 2022; ONS, 2023).
- Lower educational attainment links to **higher rates of ill health and shorter life expectancy** (EPI, 2020).
- Closing these gaps could yield **annual economic benefits of £14-20 billion** through improved skills and productivity (EPI, 2021).

Added to these socio-economic disparities are barriers in the education system itself. Best practice in the key drivers of school and pupil performance - teaching, leadership, curriculum, and pupil support - often **remains trapped within individual schools**, while many schools serving disadvantaged communities face isolation from high-quality professional development and peer support. Government interventions focus on the worst performing schools, not on continuous improvement across the system or fostering excellence to move the whole system up - something we call '**upwards convergence**'.

### Upwards convergence in school and pupil performance



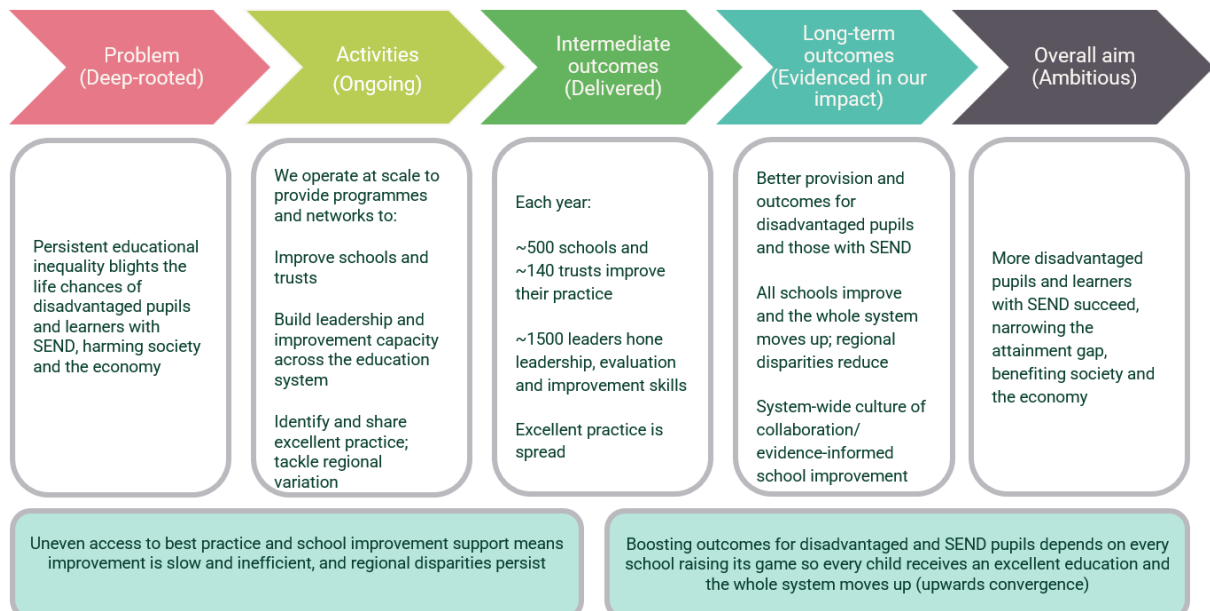
# Systemic Solutions: Our proven approach and impact

## Collaboration, challenge, and spreading excellence at scale

Challenge Partners provides **systemic solutions** to systemic problems, working at scale to help schools learn from each other and leading practice, growing leadership and improvement capacity across the system. Our externally-validated approach:

- Identifies and spreads **proven effective practice** in teaching, leadership, curriculum, and inclusion through independently-evaluated programmes and networks
- Drives upwards convergence by **growing school performance at the top end**, building capacity to move the whole system up
- Delivers national programmes which foster **continuous school improvement and leadership development at scale**, whatever a school's starting point
- Sustains a national network of practitioner-led Hubs where schools collaborate to address each locality's most pressing educational priorities, **responding to local context and need**
- Harnesses data and insight to **track impact, inform policy, and amplify what works** across the system

### Our proven approach



## Impact Story: LEO Academy Trust

Formed in 2015, LEO Academy Trust serves over 4,500 pupils across the London Borough of Sutton and Surrey through a family of ten primary schools. As long-standing members of Challenge Partners, LEO have participated in our full suite of school and trust improvement programmes. They lead our South West London Hub, bringing together 20 schools from three trusts.

LEO are trailblazers in their use of technology to support teaching and learning, and their pioneering use of one-to-one devices has enabled highly personalised learning, particularly benefiting pupils with special educational needs. It has been so successful they have reduced the number of pupils added to their special needs register.

Through the Challenge Partners programmes and knowledge exchange structures, LEO have shared their expertise nationally, helping schools in vastly different contexts to adopt and adapt their successful strategies. Schools in areas of high deprivation, from North Liverpool to an ex-mining village in the North East, have adopted LEO's digital and inclusive practices to transform outcomes for their own pupils.

**“Through Challenge Partners, one class teacher in one school, somewhere in the network can share something, and it can then ripple, not just across one other school, but across multiple schools. And that one idea that they had can then shape the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of children.”**

**Philip Hedger, CEO, LEO Academy Trust**



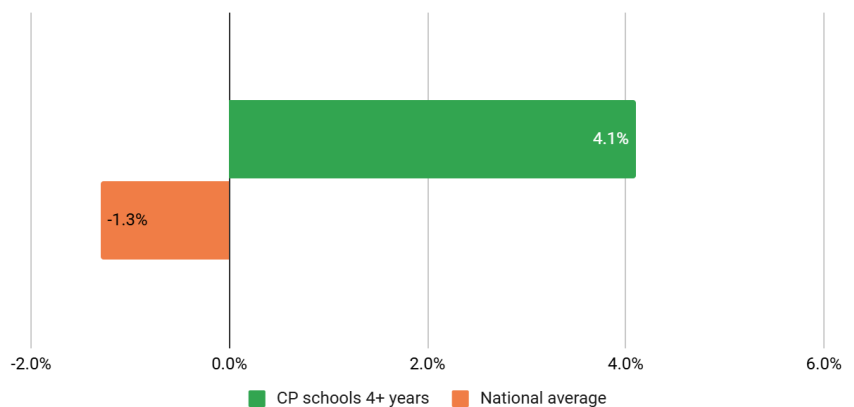
## Our proven impact

Every year, our systemic approach benefits hundreds of thousands of children from Cornwall to County Durham - reaching **420,000 pupils in 2024/25**, an estimated **130,000 of whom were eligible for Free School Meals**.

**Independent analysis** by one of our donors reveals how, between 2019 and 2024, schools in Challenge Partners showed greater improvements in results for disadvantaged pupils than other schools. According to the data:

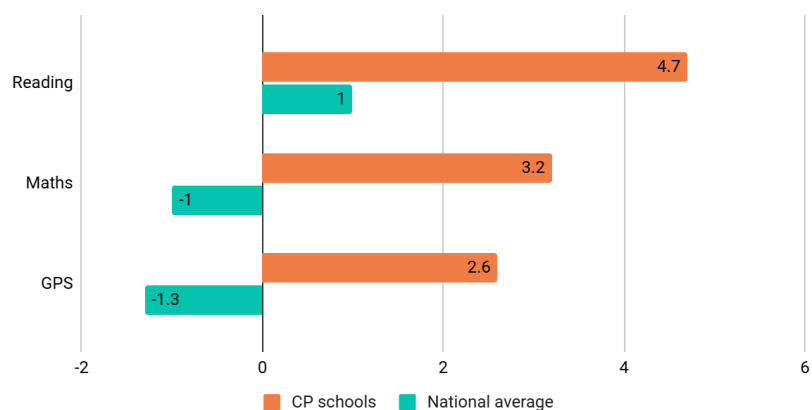
**Secondary schools** in our partnership for 4 or more years **bucked the national trend** of decline, securing an average 4.1% improvement in the proportion of disadvantaged 16 year-olds passing vital GCSEs in English and maths, compared to a 1.3% decline nationally.

**5-year change in proportion of disadvantaged students achieving grade 4+ in GCSE English and maths (2019-2024)**



**Primary schools** in our partnership **improved disadvantaged 11 year-olds' scores** in reading, writing, and grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS) by up to 4.7 points against a backdrop of national decline in maths and GPS, and only a small national increase in reading.

**5-year change in KS2 scaled scores for disadvantaged pupils (2019-2024)**



If all schools were as effective as Challenge Partners schools, thousands more disadvantaged pupils would achieve good results in crucial English and maths assessments each year.

Of course, what we do at Challenge Partners is very different from organisations working directly with individual beneficiaries. We know that the performance we measure is impacted by a range of factors,

and it is not possible to prove direct causation. However, the independent data analysis cited here aligns with other indicators of impact – including **independent academic evaluations, inspection data, and school feedback and retention rates** - and it is worth remembering that **the impact we achieve is at scale.**

### Impact Story: Rushey Mead Academy

Rushey Mead Academy is a large, mixed secondary school on the outskirts of Leicester, serving a community with above-average deprivation and a high proportion of students for whom English is an additional language.

A founding member of Challenge Partners, Rushey Mead has been an active part of the partnership for 14 years and was one of the original six schools in the East Midlands South Hub.

The school consistently demonstrates exceptional performance, having been rated Outstanding by Ofsted three times. It has also achieved eight 'Areas of Excellence', peer-accredited during annual Challenge Partners Quality Assurance Reviews - recognition of strong, replicable practices with measurable impact on student outcomes.

**Through Challenge Partners, Rushey Mead's expertise and impact has spread well beyond its own students and community. By sharing its Areas of Excellence with schools in our national Network of Excellence, and supporting the growth of the East Midlands South Hub - now 31 schools serving over 20,000 pupils - Rushey Mead has fostered collaboration, strengthened professional practice, and helped raise standards across the East Midlands and beyond.**

This example from Rushey Mead Academy exemplifies how - through Challenge Partners' unique structures and frameworks - high-performing schools can drive sustained improvement and create lasting, scalable impact beyond their own classrooms. It is an example replicated in hundreds of schools across our nationwide partnership.

**"I truly believe that our ongoing partnership with Challenge Partners has been invaluable. The collaborative approach and sharing of expertise continue to enhance our ability to support our diverse student population and ensure that all students, particularly those facing additional challenges, receive the best possible education."**

**Vicky Barwell, Principal, Rushey Mead Academy**

## We are on track to achieve our 2027 ambitions and ready to extend our horizon to 2030

In 2023 we launched a strategy to ***Enhance and Extend our Partnership*** ('Grow for Good'), setting out ambitious plans to:

- Benefit **500,000 pupils** annually by 2027
- Grow fastest in areas of greatest need in the **North** and **Midlands**
- **Innovate** to meet the evolving needs of pupils and schools

At the mid-point of our strategy we are well on track:

- 420,000 pupils reached by December 2024 (**50,000 more** than in 2022)
- Almost **40% of schools** in high-deprivation target regions (up from 31%)
- Average **31% of pupils eligible for Free School Meals** in our schools vs 24% nationally
- Public examinations data show that disadvantaged pupils in our schools continue to **progress faster and achieve more** than similar pupils elsewhere

These headline achievements are underpinned by delivery of strategic initiatives which have enabled us to extend our reach and impact sustainably, readying us for further growth:

- We have **innovated and simplified our suite of programmes and networks** to respond to shifting student and sector needs. This includes introducing:
  - **SEND Developmental Peer Review** – our pioneering programme to improve special educational needs provision in mainstream schools
  - **Middle Leaders' Quality Assurance Review** – builds subject leadership capacity and professional practice across the sector
  - Strengthened support for school trusts, which now educate almost 40% of state pupils
- We have **embedded 'everyday excellence'** to ensure a high-quality experience for our schools and trusts, resulting in:
  - Our highest-ever feedback scores in 2024/25 (4.8+/5 average)
  - Strong renewal and returner rates (74% renewals for school programmes, 80% renewals for Trust Leaders' Network in 2025/26)
  - Long-term school engagement (average 4.5 years tenure in 2024)

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- We have **improved our approach to reaching and retaining schools and trusts**:
  - Strengthened sales, marketing and account management practices - informed by commercial approaches, aligned to our sector and values
  - Piloted different approaches to regional growth in the North West and North East, providing insights to inform replicable regional growth models
- We have **enhanced capacity, harnessed technology and strengthened our business systems**:
  - Revolutionised Quality Assurance Review programme delivery - automation and new digital tools contributed significantly to 92% of 409 QA Reviews in 2024/25 being completed with full teams (up 11% in 2 years) improving quality, impact and efficiency
  - Trialled AI-enabled approaches to extract unique data on school effectiveness with findings published in the 2025 pilot State of the Nation Report and 10 pilot Hub-level analyses to support area-based collaboration. Learning from the Hub-level analysis pilot has been implemented for 2025/26 and a report has been issued to every Hub to inform their action plan
  - Investment in finance, HR, IT, and fundraising to improve efficiency and impact
  - Investment in people: new Diversity, Equity and Inclusion strategy, launch of a career framework, and systems to capture and respond to staff feedback

We are in a strong position to build on these achievements to scale our impact further.

## Refining and extending our strategy to 2030

### Our ambition to reach even more deprived pupils and shape the system

We are refining our strategy now to build on the strong foundations laid since we launched our *Grow for Good* plan in 2023, so that by 2030 we deliver renewed ambitions to:

1. Benefit at least **half a million pupils each year**
2. Reach and benefit more **disadvantaged pupils** and learners with SEND, particularly in high-need areas
3. Strengthen **policy and system influence**, using our unique data and insight to benefit all schools
4. Sustain **innovation and excellence** in our programmes and networks
5. Secure ongoing organisational **sustainability**, operational efficiency, and resilience

The actions we will take to achieve this are set out in the annex.

## Conclusion: A future where every child thrives

Challenge Partners exists to make **excellent education a reality for all children**, with the greatest gains for those facing disadvantage or with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). By connecting schools, sharing proven practice, and fostering hard-edged collaboration, we ensure that **no leader or teacher faces challenges alone** and all pupils can thrive.

Our independently-evaluated approach consistently delivers results: our schools **improve faster and more sustainably**, while disadvantaged pupils in our schools make better progress and achieve more than similar pupils elsewhere. By growing performance at the top end and helping to raise standards across the system, we enable excellence to spread and sustain, **creating a culture of continuous improvement** and upwards convergence.

Building on strong progress against our 2023 *Grow for Good* plan, our refined strategy to 2030 sharpens our focus on **disadvantaged pupils and high-need areas**, strengthens **influence across the education system**, and ensures programmes remain **innovative, responsive, and impactful**.

Together with schools, trusts, and our supporters and partners, we are shaping **a future where every child has a truly equal chance to flourish, learn, and thrive, building vibrant communities, stronger life chances, and a better society for all**.



## With thanks to our supporters and partners

Confederation of School Trusts

Education Endowment Foundation

EvaluateMySchool

Fair Education Alliance

ImpactEd Group

Permira Foundation

Social Business Trust

Steplab

Chris Davison

Our other donors who wish to remain anonymous

**“Our partnership with Challenge Partners, representing more than a decade of funding and collaboration, is one of our strongest and deepest non-profit relationships. Our partnership has been highly impactful, beyond the value of grant funding provided - we've supported with fundraising, digital transformation and leadership development. This has been made possible by CP's openness to collaboration; a relentless focus on delivering quality provision and continuous ambition to close the attainment gap for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. We're thrilled to play our part in CP's mission and to continue our partnership in 2025.”**

**Lionel Hill, Group CTO, Permira**



## Annex: Strategic imperatives

### The actions we will take to deliver our 2030 ambitions

Goal	Purpose	Key actions	What it will take
Further sharpen our focus and impact on disadvantage and children with additional needs	So that by 2030 an even greater proportion of pupils benefiting come from schools or areas with above-average proportions of disadvantaged and/or SEND pupils, and they outperform national averages	<p>Target our growth efforts in areas and schools with above-average levels of disadvantaged and/or SEND pupils</p> <p>Do this without compromising our commitments to building Hubs and programmes around proven excellent practice, and improving life chances for all children</p>	<p>Upgrading our CRM and securing data analytics support or capabilities so we can identify and engage schools and trusts in greatest need</p> <p>Better leveraging the intelligence, networks and capacity in our local Hubs to identify and engage schools in greatest need</p> <p>Evaluating our pilot approaches to growth in deprived regions to develop and implement replicable models</p> <p>Securing donors and partners to boost our growth efforts in deprived regions, with sensitivity to local context and understanding of regional variation in how deprivation manifests</p> <p>Building our central team presence in the regions we are targeting</p>
		<p>Ensure our suite of programmes continues to prioritise improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and learners with SEND, and better life chances for all</p>	<p>Implementing changes to the QA Review to tighten evaluation of how well schools serve their disadvantaged pupils and foster engagement and inclusion</p> <p>Refining and scaling our SEND Developmental Peer Review programme</p> <p>Gaining a more nuanced understanding of disadvantage and how it manifests for different groups of pupils and in different areas so we can support schools and Hubs to deliver a more nuanced and impactful response</p>

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Goal	Purpose	Key actions	What it will take
Strengthen our policy and system influence	So that the unique data, insight and expertise we hold about school effectiveness and improvement can benefit all schools and pupils across England	Build our policy, analysis, and public affairs capacity to strengthen our ability to shape education policy and practice	<p>Securing expertise to help us devise and execute a public affairs strategy, which will include activating our capacity to influence through school and trust leaders in Challenge Partners, as well as more strategic deployment of our executive team</p> <p>Boosting our policy and analysis capability and capacity, which currently depends substantially on our executive team</p>
Sustain 'everyday excellence' and innovation within our programmes and networks	So that they remain at the cutting-edge and respond to the evolving needs of pupils and the sector	Continuously improve and embed robust systems, processes, and 'best in class' delivery for our programmes and networks	<p>Strengthening our network of local Hubs as drivers of area-based collaboration and improvement through Hub improvement project</p> <p>Further strengthening our approach to accrediting and sharing Areas of Excellence</p> <p>Fostering ongoing innovation to respond to sector shifts and priorities, and the changing needs of teachers, leaders, and communities</p> <p>Upgrading our CRM, which will provide the platform for smooth operations and school- and trust-facing innovations</p>
Ensure organisational sustainability and operational efficiency	So that we can maximise our resources and impact in a harsh operating environment	Ongoing digitally-enabled transformation	<p>Upgrading our CRM</p> <p>Harnessing AI</p>
		Further diversifying our income to increase fundraised income towards a goal of 20% of our total income	<p>Growing our fundraising capability</p> <p>Executing the fundraising strategy developed with Thomson Philanthropy</p> <p>Exploring other opportunities to generate revenue</p>

## CHALLENGE PARTNERS



Challenge Partners  
1st Floor, Oxford House  
49a Oxford Road  
London N4 3EY

[www.challengepartners.org](http://www.challengepartners.org)  
[partnershipsteam@challengepartners.org](mailto:partnershipsteam@challengepartners.org)  
020 7803 4970

Registered charity number: 1149266  
Company number: 8048330

