



**Optimism of the will: the development of local
area-based education partnerships.
A think-piece**

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FOREWORD

Over the past few years, my interest in local education partnerships has grown. In London, I have chaired two of them and supported a third. Beyond London, I have looked in detail at the work of several established and new partnerships, some of which meet regularly to share knowledge and experience as they develop. This think-piece looks at the emerging picture and the way practice is evolving locally in the hope that it will generate reflection and debate. It reflects my impressions about the potential of such partnerships to strengthen our current system and is, consequently, optimistic.

The majority of these partnerships are voluntarily taking responsibility for the collective performance of schools in an area. This is not top-down accountability with a statutory base in individual schools, trusts or local authorities. It is lateral, shared responsibility rooted in ambitious local vision and professional networks.

These partnerships are generating energy and commitment because they are making connections across schools and communities to improve schools and outcomes for young people. Many have captured local hearts and minds but they could have an impact at a national level, too. Partnerships have the potential to reduce the risk of fragmentation and dangers of isolationism in an increasingly diverse system. They can enhance the professional and social capital of teachers, and they can deepen motivation, learning and achievement.

The question is, how can we make a bigger difference by creating a more connected system locally and indeed, nationally? This think piece is an attempt to look at the emerging picture and kick start that debate. It considers practice across partnerships, identifies some of the opportunities and draws out the characteristics of successful ones. It also identifies some of the key challenges.

The power of these partnerships to improve education in their locality has yet to be fully realised or, indeed, evidenced. Yet they have sufficient early promise to merit practical support and encouragement. Certainly, evaluation of some partnerships over several years could help assess their added value and their contribution to the quality of education locally. Ultimately, what we can learn from them might help us create the stronger, more effective and equitable system that we all want.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few years, initiatives have been developed to create local education partnerships that support schools and help to drive improvements in outcomes for children and young people. Sometimes led by local authorities, sometimes by schools, these area-based partnerships want to minimise the dangers of fragmentation and isolation, not by gathering together for comfort but by generating energy and purpose to create a better local education system. At their best, they assume responsibility for strategic oversight of education in the local area and can act as an engine of improvement, brokering connections and initiatives across schools.

Interest in these partnerships was stimulated by the indication in the White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016), that local authorities were to lose their statutory responsibilities for school improvement. Although this could have produced a negative and defensive base for planning, the proposal in the White Paper generated widespread interest and positive engagement in developing new models for area improvement, often led by local authorities themselves. Schools are not being forced to join these local partnerships but are willingly choosing to do so and, indeed, in many cases, paying to do so. They see themselves as not only contributing to the partnership but gaining from it too, particularly in terms of school improvement. In almost all instances, the partnerships are open to all schools in an area, be they maintained, voluntary aided or controlled schools, academies and free schools, or groups of schools such as federations or multi-academy trusts (MATs).

Given their importance in developing a self-sustaining system of improvement, teaching schools are key members of the partnership in most places. In others, unfortunately, they are in competition.

Involvement in an area-based education partnership is frequently likened, by those involved, to family or club membership. The focus for the activity of the family or the club is simply the place or local area. Many schools describe their commitment to their local partnership as stemming from pride in and a sense of belonging to a place, as well as shared moral purpose to do the best for all the children and young people in the local community.

Membership of an area-based partnership is not exclusive. Members can belong to one partnership and will move in and out of others for a range of different purposes, but there is invariably an overriding commitment to place and community in the larger network.

This think-piece looks at the emerging picture. It considers practice across partnerships, identifies some of the opportunities and draws out the characteristics of successful ones. It also identifies some of the key challenges.

Supporting a self-improving system

A schools-led, local partnership for improvement means that schools themselves take on responsibility, and even accountability, for ensuring that every school has the support it needs to improve and achieve well. Partnership working and collaboration across schools are key elements of this system. However, as Greany (ASCL, 2015) points out, the trust needed for deep partnerships is hard to develop in a quasi-market system, with competition so deeply embedded. Schleicher (2012), too, emphasises that competition does not necessarily lead to improvement. It is easier for collaboration and competition not just to coexist but to work positively and supportively for schools within a voluntary, lateral partnership which has no formal hierarchy and has built openness and trust into the way it works.

With the growth of academies and the changing role of the local authority, much has been written about the need for a middle tier that acts between the centre and schools. A major report from Mourshed et al (2010) observed that a mediating layer was important in developing:

- targeted hands-on support to the schools
- a buffer between the schools and the centre
- a channel to share and integrate improvements across schools.

Area-based partnerships can do this – and more. They can inject energy locally that builds professional and community capital to support learning and achievement.

Recent governments have taken the view that MATs offer the strongest base for a self-improving system, even suggesting in 2016 that all schools would need to join a MAT by 2022 (DfE, 2016a). At the same time, concerns about the performance and accountability of MATs continue to be raised (House of Commons Education Committee, 2017). Evidence considered by the Education Committee, for example from the Education Policy Institute (Andrews, 2016) and UCL Institute of Education (Greany and Ehren, 2016), indicated that there was no substantial evidence that MATs secure consistent or sustained impact.

Important though MATs are in terms of partnership working, the risk of fragmentation at both local and whole-system level remains huge. The establishment of Sub-Regional Improvement Boards (SRIBs) is some acknowledgement of the need to think more broadly both in terms of local issues and support. However, their focus is relatively narrow and variability within and across schools remains a significant problem. More needs to be done to create coherence in a diverse system in order to realise its benefits rather than live with its disadvantages. Engaging schools beyond their MAT promises not only greater local and national coherence, but also levels of support, including challenge, that could prove motivating and productive.

At the annual ASCL Conference in 2017, David Carter, National Schools' Commissioner, highlighted the importance of MATs working with other trusts and teaching schools. He warned that, unless this sort of collaboration happened, 'we're going to have an isolated system on a

different scale in 10 years' time' (Carter, 2017). Carter emphasised that MATs need to see their job as part of a broader education system; they should work beyond their organisation by:

- 'taking decisions that do not disadvantage other schools in their community
- growing capacity for communities beyond their own
- supporting the wider educational strategy for their region.'

Local area partnerships offer a productive way for MATs to work as part of their locality; some already work in that way.

Given their focus on place, local area partnerships are well positioned to shape an inclusive vision that is inspiring and ambitious. Most of them have a focus on collective improvement in quality and, indeed, equity that was previously the domain of local authorities.

Building professional capital

Local area partnerships provide the opportunity to lessen the grip of the current public accountability framework and create a different culture. They can shape a different model of professional accountability that motivates and inspires teachers, as well as incentivising system-wide collaboration.

Area partnerships do not operate within the top-down, hierarchical accountability framework of individual schools and MATs. Schools choose to belong to them and their work is rooted in a collaborative drive for improvement across the area. They have no formal intervention powers. Nevertheless, unless partnerships help schools and groups of schools to perform well within the external accountability regime, and the quasi-market this supports, they know they are unlikely to survive. They also need to demonstrate success in the school improvement commissions they have received from local authorities; almost all of these include a range of performance outputs that partnerships are expected to deliver.

If the processes underpinning a more professional approach to accountability work well within area partnerships, better practice in schools will be reflected in stronger performance in the external accountability framework – and without much of the current pressure.

In a self-improving school system, the focus should be on embedding a culture of professional reflection, enquiry and learning within and across schools, focused on teaching and students' learning. All the partnerships I looked at stressed the importance of building teachers' professional capital to deepen students' learning and achievement. Indeed, a major emphasis of the work of many partnerships is to develop local system leadership by using the expertise of practitioners in their schools. They saw this as a key way of sharing knowledge and developing expertise.

This is a feature of the continuing professional development (CPD) programmes provided by many partnerships and of their more intensive support for some schools. Some partnerships are using collaboration not just for the strong to support the weak but also for professional

development opportunities that challenge thinking as a crucial part of changing practice. They are building various opportunities, for example, for two teachers to work together to improve practice across one or two of their classes. It is this sort of collaboration that is likely to build individual and collective capacity to sustain a self-improving system and push the boundaries of good and excellent. It leads not only to better teaching and learning but also to extending the professional expertise of the teachers involved.

Partnerships recognise the value of a more formative model of shared professional accountability, rooted in self-evaluation and often in supportive but challenging peer review. The Director of Tower Hamlets Education Partnership described this as harnessing collective power and using it to plan creatively for greater local improvement.

Partnerships are using a range of models for this peer review and accountability, such as the Education Development Trust's *School Partnership Programme*, the London Centre for Leadership in Learning's *Research Informed Peer Review*, the NAHT's *Instead*, the SSAT's *Peer Review Programme* or *Challenge Partners' QA Review*. Done right, these can open up practice to professional scrutiny from peers. Many partnerships report not only the positive impact these models have had on improvement within schools but also the development of opportunities for collaborative practice across schools.

Some partnerships talk about the potential value of such approaches as a base for self-regulation or, at least, even more light-touch inspection from Ofsted. Now that 90 per cent of primary schools and 78 per cent of secondary schools (Ofsted, 2016) are judged to be good or outstanding, this may well be something Ofsted might consider. Janssens and Ehren (2016) highlight the need for more thought to be given to networked evaluation in a 'polycentric system'. They point to the value of a 'bottom-up model' in a lateral network which includes evaluation of the partnership itself. This can build on self-evaluation and peer review to assess the effectiveness of collaboration.

A greater focus on professional accountability has the potential to offer more leverage for change; it offers schools something that supports them in their work. There is emerging evidence (Janssens and Ehren, 2016; Matthews and Headon, 2015) that it can improve teachers' knowledge, skills and practice so that children and young people are supported better in their learning. As such, it deserves championing as an essential element of a school-led system for improvement, one that can be well supported through area partnerships.

Shifting the emphasis to a model of accountability that is more supportive of teachers has immediate and obvious appeal. However, the profession has to be sufficiently courageous in discussing difficult issues and confident enough to challenge itself to do better. As Hobby (2016) advises, a self-improving system should not become either a self-regarding one or a self-protecting one.

Linked closely to professional accountability within successful partnerships is the personal responsibility that staff in schools start to feel for all children in the area. Many partnerships describe this as moral accountability. Teachers become focused on the interests, progress and achievements of children in schools other than their own. Partnerships tell me that, by involving staff in peer reviews and in various practice initiatives, including delivering CPD, their approach

has made teachers, in particular, feel accountable to each other and accountable for all children beyond their own schools. They believe they have achieved this by involving teachers in planning and driving the partnership's work and by nurturing continuing review and dialogue about learning and achievement. Certainly, several headteachers talked to me with pride about collective improvements locally as a result of the work of their partnership. Elmore (2008) makes the point that a system perspective encourages teachers to treat their skills as a collective good that can be shared.

Teachers must be at the centre of these area partnerships. They have to own the partnership and help drive it. The experience of many national leaders of education (NLEs), who used the staff in their schools to support the work they were doing with other schools, is that this direct interaction extended the range of their personal and professional accountabilities. Staff began to feel accountable for the achievements of the pupils in the other schools with whom they had worked. Some teachers (Gilbert, 2012) believed this came from getting to know particular children, classes, or groups, from personal collaboration with the teachers in the supported school and from professional pride in what they were doing. It is a mark of their professionalism that these teachers moved comfortably between formative and summative accountability; they saw the need for each, and several teachers described both approaches as 'feeding each other'. A major challenge for many partnerships is to create similarly strong professional communities, ones where peer learning is central and focused on the detail of practice and pedagogy, while also managing in a more commercial and business-like way.

Developing the role of the local authority

Over the last few years, spurred on by policy developments and financial pressures, local authorities have been reviewing their roles in relation to providing school improvement services and, indeed, education more generally. No single or uniform strategic model has emerged, although most authorities see themselves continuing to play an important role in supporting education locally. This includes articulating concerns about the quality of all local school provision.

Some local authorities have scaled back their involvement in provision to an absolute minimum, with many pursuing academisation as a strategy to help them do this. Others have worked to establish a framework and partnership for school improvement that builds a stronger role for schools themselves to take the lead. In almost all the examples I looked at, the local authority had either driven the setting up of the partnership or given considerable support, right up to the partnership's inception – and often beyond. Kershaw, the Director of Education in Essex, captures this well (2016):

'... there is a clear role for the local authority to not only support the formation of partnerships but to use its current powers and influence to ensure sustainability for the future – to act as the midwife and to prevent schools being left as isolated islands.'

Although the government has stepped back from the proposal to remove the statutory responsibility for school improvement from local authorities, there is very little money to pay for supporting it. As their overheads are generally very low, school-led area partnerships offer local authorities a more cost-effective model for delivering such services. Local authorities,

therefore, increasingly commission these partnerships to provide services on their behalf, often with a focus on schools where there are current or emerging concerns, and hold the partnerships accountable. These partnerships therefore now provide a range of services that local authorities themselves would previously have provided. As a consequence, there is, increasingly, a sharper focus on this role of the local authority as commissioner of education services with differences emerging in both policy and practice across councils.

Whatever the statutory definition of its role, the local authority's democratic base still gives it leverage locally and, in most areas, people will continue to look to their local councillors to ensure education is of good quality. This goes some way to explaining the interest in many councils for developing area-based education partnerships.

Many councils continue to see themselves having a role in stimulating and articulating a local and ambitious vision for education, often tied perhaps to a borough or community plan. In many areas, this plan provides the base for decisions about what the council commissions from its local partnership. This plan should certainly give active support to partnerships in their drive for improvement.

Many local authorities have supported, or are supporting, the development of local partnerships with seed funding or with seconded staff and support in kind. Where the partnerships have become legal entities, most local authorities have taken up places (up to 20%) on the board of directors.

Where partnerships involving maintained schools have become companies, legally they have had to be established as school companies with the permission of the local authority. The DfE guidance indicates that 'the policy is designed to give companies the greatest degree of flexibility while providing a secure framework in which to operate' (DES, 2003). Local authorities have a role as 'a supervising authority' which means that, although they have direction-making powers over the company, these should be exercised only if the school company looks as if it might be in financial trouble. Local authorities have no powers to intervene in the day-to-day running of the company. As companies have become established, however, there has invariably been some tension between partnerships and local authorities, with some authorities interpreting their powers more vigorously than the DfE guidance suggests they should.

Growing effective networks in education

Networks of different sorts play a significant role in education. What we see in area partnerships are individuals and groups choosing to engage and work together voluntarily with a common purpose. Within these broad networks, smaller networks operate, sometimes centred on a time-limited task or project and sometimes more permanently. These are all lateral networks, focused on improving the quality of education locally but also focused on improving individual groups and individual schools.

Suggett (2014) reports that:

‘greater freedom for more diverse collaborations and more flexible governance can be powerful mutual learning and peer accountability, both of which make a major contribution to system strengthening.’

However, Suggett also cautions about the hard work that is entailed and highlights that engagement can be uneven.

Rincon-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) identify eight essential features of effective networks:

- focusing on ambitious student learning outcomes linked to effective pedagogy
- developing strong relationships of trust and internal accountability
- continuously improving practice and systems through cycles of collaborative inquiry
- using deliberate leadership and skilled facilitation within flat power structures
- frequently interacting and learning inwards
- connecting outwards to learn from others
- forming new partnership among students, teachers, families and communities
- securing adequate resources to sustain the work.

Although partnerships are still at an early stage of development, these features are emerging in the way many of them are working, as this think-piece indicates. Within the constraints of the contracts and commissions they take on, some are also defining their own accountability frameworks. The energy and power in these partnerships reflect those Suggett (2014) identified more generally in lateral networks. The latter offer the potential to add value not only to the work of individual and groups of schools locally but also to our national system.

2. Local Area Partnerships: the opportunities

This section outlines the potential of local area partnerships to generate change both locally and nationally. It highlights five major opportunities.

The Opportunities



Figure 1: The opportunities provided by local area partnerships

Providing the glue in a diverse and potentially fragmented system

The scale and pace of change in the education system in England since 2010 have been dramatic. In May 2010, there were just 203 academies but, by January 2017, that figure stood at 6399, with 68.8 per cent of secondary pupils and 24.3 per cent of primary pupils attending academies (DfE, 2017). In March 2011, there were 391 MATs and, by November 2016, this had increased to 1,121. In November 2016, of the 21,525 state-funded schools in England, 4,140 were in these MATs but 1,618 were stand-alone academies ((House of Commons Education Committee, 2017). The picture is therefore a diverse one and, with the diminished role of local authorities in school improvement, also fragmented. In addition, as highlighted by the House of Commons Education Committee (2017) on multi-academy trusts, the changes to academy policy have caused ‘instability and uncertainty in the sector’.

Area-based improvement partnerships have the potential to bring greater coherence to the education landscape, lessening considerably the dangers already mentioned of fragmentation and isolation. Most partnerships are inclusive and geographically bound. Birmingham Education

Partnership, for example, invited all local schools to 'be part of a unified voice for the city's schools in a time of change and upheaval'.

The government's vision of a school system continues to be rooted in MATs. Although MATs offer considerable potential for focused collaboration between schools, they do not all work in this way and nor do they guarantee improvement. As the Education Committee Report (2017) observed, evidence of their ability to improve pupil performance is limited and varied. The Education Policy Institute's study (Andrews, 2016) indicated little difference in the improvement seen in schools within local authorities and within MATs.

It is clear that MATs are not a panacea for improvement. Hill (2016) reports that, between 2012 and 2016, more than 160 academies received warning, pre-warning, or termination notices, with 50 of these issued in the academic year 2015/16. He reports 119 academies as having to be re-brokered from one sponsor to another. It is the quality of school improvement work that leads to sustainable change not simply designation as an academy or placement within a MAT. If they focus rigorously on quality, local partnerships can add improvement capacity to the whole education system. They can be used to support the development of all schools or groups of schools, including MATs.

Such partnerships can bring coherence, too, and offer the building blocks for collaboration within regions, including economic sub-regions, and across the country. Most partnerships see the value of collaborating with other partnerships to share knowledge and develop thinking.

During 2016/17, the number of schools with judgements of 'inadequate' from Ofsted which have failed to find sponsors has grown. Described by the Times Educational Supplement in November 2016 as 'untouchables', these schools, for a variety of reasons, have not been picked up by a sponsor and, while they wait, student numbers have fallen, staff have left or are demoralised, and the quality of education remains poor. The focus on securing a MAT as a sponsor has diverted attention from addressing the schools' serious weaknesses and the pupils in them continue to have a poor educational experience. It would be quicker and more effective for the government, through Regional School Commissioners, to look to local partnerships to secure greater support for such schools.

Acting as a force to drive improvement and innovation by energising teachers, leaders and schools to build expertise

Partnerships offer a range of opportunities for all involved in schools to learn from each other. They support knowledge sharing and in doing so can build skills and expertise across the system. Many school leaders already see system leadership as an essential part of their role, central to their professionalism and bringing reciprocal benefits for their school. Over the last few years, we have seen increasing numbers of system leaders work with other schools, some in MATs but many across other schools, too. It is a measure of how seriously headteachers take system leadership that the numbers of designated National Leaders of Education (NLEs) and National

Support Schools (NSS) continue to rise. As at September 2017, there were 1,330 NLEs and even more LLEs, 496 National Leaders of Governance (NLGs) and 820 teaching schools.

Area partnerships, working laterally rather than hierarchically, provide an opportunity to extend system leadership even further, particularly to practitioners in schools, and this has the obvious benefit of increasing collective capacity. It also has the benefit of enhancing the quality of teachers' own learning. Many local partnerships appear to be accelerating the role of teachers and, to a lesser extent, support staff, in system leadership. Teachers in many areas have spoken with enthusiasm about the opportunities for co-design of improvement initiatives created by their partnerships. They are enjoying the creativity of working collaboratively to create better or even innovative practice. Nevertheless, operational pressures mean that establishing focused, co-operative work remains a challenge and it will be important to ensure it is sustained beyond the outset.

Collaborative practice requires organisational investment. Partnerships are finding ways of resourcing opportunities for teachers to work together. One has found resources, with the schools involved supplying matched funding, to enable teachers to work in twos and threes, to review the detail of their teaching and its impact on pupils' learning. Teachers report that this has begun to shift deeply embedded practice. Another has resourced individual schools to lead on key priorities on behalf of the partnership; this resourcing enables them to employ additional staff rather than use the money for supply cover, with all the potential problems.

Giving a focus for engaging the local community and business in education

A sense of place characterises most area-based partnerships and offers a lever for greater engagement in education and dialogue across local communities.

Some partnerships already use this to raise awareness among their local communities about local or national developments in education or to engage them in discussion about potential local changes. They also use this to develop vision and strategy. Several see accounting to local people for the quality of education in the area as a key part of their role. They engage with young people themselves, with families and communities and try to listen hard to their voices. Certainly, partnerships could offer support to local parents who sometimes criticise academies and multi-academy trusts for their lack of local engagement and outreach.

Many partnerships are forging links with local education business partnerships and businesses to increase schools' and young people's access to the world of work. Employers are aware of the importance of having good education locally and are often willing to invest time and resources in supporting schools. Partnerships can give employers information about the current key pressures and issues for schools, but they can also use their intelligence and brokerage to make links for employers.

Many partnerships offer associate membership to groups with either a general or specialist interest in education. These range from arts groups to universities.

Securing efficiencies of scale

Through a range of collaborative activities, resource sharing and procurement, partnerships are able to secure efficiency savings. Recent research (Greany and Higham, in press) indicate that schools are responding to the changing market for school improvement services by strengthening their peer partnerships and networking rather than turning to the market for solutions. Area partnerships give them a good base for doing this further.

Most partnerships are big enough to be able to obtain cost advantages through a range of procurement activities. As the pressures on school budgets tighten, partnerships can offer welcome procurement and contract reductions. Many partnerships can give examples of having secured reduced rates for individual schools for a range of information and management tools such as TheSchoolBus, Link21ICT, Leadership Matters and the Bristol Document Summary Service. Some are thinking more substantially. For example, Camden Learning has negotiated a contract for supply teacher cover which promises a potential reduction of between 5 and 20 per cent in supply for each of its schools.

Some are also using their networks to broker opportunities for greater sharing of resources and expertise across schools. These include finding time and space for local schools to discuss variations in spend and to explore more effective processes to achieve efficiency savings. Some partnerships are also setting up business management services for schools who see buying-in such services on a contractual basis as less costly than employing their own business manager.

Providing a space to build children's social, emotional and cultural capital

The links between health, well-being and attainment are well-documented, with children's mental health currently a major concern for schools. Partnerships can ensure effective linkage so there is greater support across an area for the well-being of individuals and groups. Learn Sheffield, for example, has an explicit focus on health as part of the Readiness strand of its School Improvement Strategy. Some partnerships gave examples of how they were able to spot emerging good practice and support it. Others explained how they built upon a local solution in one area by extending it to another.

Many partnerships have reported that they are used increasingly not only by local authorities, in particular children's services, but also by health, as a conduit to headteachers and schools. The networking capacity of the partnership is used to raise awareness of key issues and to promote health and well-being as part of school effectiveness. One partnership, describing itself as the 'go-to' point, sees the links with health and well-being as being important and valuable though hugely time-consuming.

Funded by the NHS, Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP) is running a programme to help schools identify earlier those pupils who might be vulnerable to poor mental health and build resilience so academic, social and emotional outcomes might improve. A number of

partnerships, such as Camden Learning, are also being funded by local authorities to discharge some of their public health duties for the local area. Given the current pressure on resources, collaboration between education, social care and health offers opportunities for both improvement and greater efficiency.

Area partnerships can do much to support the broader aspects of children and young people's social, emotional and cultural development. A number have begun to use their reach to organise activities involving children and young people, such as debating competitions or large musical events that might previously have been set in train or facilitated by local authorities. Such activities have the potential for engaging students from across all schools or groups of schools in an area in a range of creative or sporting activities. This can only be positive for the children and young people involved and for community cohesion more generally.

3. Local area partnerships: scope and functions

This chapter describes the ways in which area-based partnerships are developing. It considers:

- their purpose and scope
- the different models of legal entity
- structure and governance
- how they are resourced.

Purpose and scope

Across the country, partnerships are developing in very different ways and taking different forms. Each has been shaped not only by the factors behind its own particular genesis but also by the size and context of its area. They are therefore emerging with many similarities but also distinct characteristics that stem from the local context.

Nevertheless, every partnership that I reviewed in preparing this think-piece has school improvement as its core purpose. This focus has two closely related strands. The first is to promote school improvement in the area and even, in some instances, to take responsibility for it, and the second is to ensure the sustainable delivery of a range of school improvement activities. Figure 2 outlines the range across four key models with Model 1 being both the most comprehensive and invariably, the most commercial.

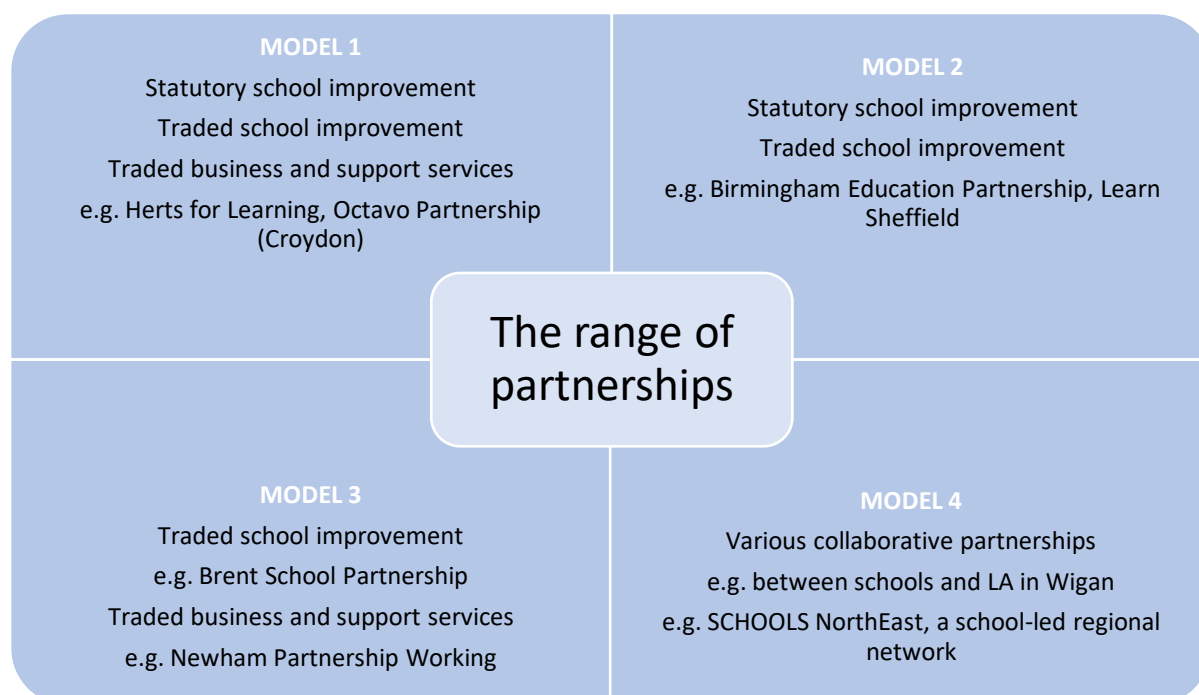


Figure 2: The four key models of partnership

Some partnerships, as **Model 1** indicates, provide not only the full range of school improvement services, including some statutory services commissioned by the local authority but also the full range of business support services.

These commissioned services are paid for by the local authority and, although in most cases that funding represents an essential and significant contribution to the partnership's budget, most partnerships also depend on schools in the area buying back services. Some partnerships also sell their services and products to schools beyond the area, but invariably their main customers are local schools.

To exemplify, Herts for Learning (HfL), one of the most established and successful partnerships, describes itself as a provider of school improvement services, with its main business coming through trading a range of school improvement and business support services to 'schools, academies and educational settings'. During 2016/17, HfL presented its traded school improvement as offered through:

'Consultancy; Advice; Training courses; Conferences; Training packages; Bespoke training; Curriculum materials; and, Parent2ParentR'.

Traded business services offered comprise:

'Schools' ICT services; Connectivity; Schools' HR; Finance; Governance; Business Management Services; Teacher recruitment services'.

The company also has a large contract with Hertfordshire County Council to deliver some of its education functions, including its statutory ones. HfL trades both within and beyond Hertfordshire, including outside the United Kingdom.

Other partnerships, as in **Model 2**, have a focus only on school improvement. They have a trading arm and, again, through a commission from the council, provide statutory improvement services that would previously have been delivered by local authority school improvement teams. Some of these partnerships might also provide closely related services, such as governor services. Again, the local authority might commission some of these services, but partnerships would also rely for their existence on a trading relationship with schools. Birmingham Education Partnerships, Harrow School Improvement Partnership and Learn Sheffield are typical of this model.

A few partnerships, as shown in **Model 3**, provide either traded school improvement services to local schools, such as Brent School Partnership, or traded business and support services, such as Newham Partnership Working (NWC), with the local authority continuing to provide or broker statutory improvement services.

Increasingly, partnerships are being given school improvement commissions to ensure schools causing concern are supported and improve, although local authorities still retain the core statutory responsibility. The White Paper announcement in 2016 (DfE, 2016a) about the potential removal of the local authority's school improvement function led a number of local authorities to reconsider their approach to schools causing concern. Although statutory

responsibility does not now look likely to change, the withdrawal of government grants and the tight financial position within local authorities have caused many to look to local partnerships to provide school improvement services at a reduced cost.

Other partnerships, as shown in **Model 4**, have no significant trading arrangements and no formal commission from the local authority but seek to generate school improvement through an agreed collaborative approach to facilitating schools working together across a locality. Wigan, for example, has organised itself by phase and locality into nine Education Improvement Consortia (EIC), each led by a headteacher elected by peers. The leads for the EIC form two borough-wide Education Improvement Boards and the local authority is also represented on these. The partnership takes responsibility for the whole process of school improvement from intelligence gathering through to support, challenge and delivery of school improvement activities.

The Leicester Primary Partnership (LPP) is another collaborative model that supports improvement by ensuring that primary headteachers have a stronger role in decision-making. Its aim is to support the provision of 'effective and dynamic education' in Leicester City by working closely with other partners. It explicitly takes collective responsibility for all primary-aged children in the city. Partly funded by subscription from schools, it pays for a full-time Strategic Primary Lead Headteacher who takes responsibility for representing primary headteachers and also ensures good communication across schools.

SCHOOLS NorthEast is a school-led regional network, set up by headteachers in 2007, to collaborate and give mutual support to ensure the 'best possible outcomes for all of our region's young people'. It connects schools to each other by facilitation of projects, events or activities and to other external organisations. In addition, it promotes a wider understanding of the issues facing education in the North East and that includes providing a strategic voice for its members.

Although now a department within the council, Hackney Learning Trust presents a particularly unusual model. Following a direction from the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, in 2002 the 'responsibilities, duties and authority' for education in Hackney transferred to the Learning Trust, a company limited by guarantee which had a contract with the council. A 10-year contract gave the Learning Trust financial stability and any surplus generated was reinvested in the company. Achievement in Hackney improved dramatically during that time. At the end of the 10 years, education was returned to the Council. The Learning Trust has been established as what is described as a 'delegated department of the council', operating with greater autonomy, flexibility and operational freedom in finance, policy and organisational management than any other council department. The Director of Children, Adults and Community Health explained the service has been designed to be 'a hybrid public/commercial service delivery model, with the objective of staying focused on improving school performance based on the evidence of what works'.

The partnership entity

Increasingly, partnerships are opting to establish themselves as a legal entity, although some continue to operate informal collaborative arrangements with no legal standing. However, even when they operate without any legal base, most have formal governance arrangements and many have binding contracts.

The key perceived benefit of establishing a legal entity is that this signals a new venture, different from the past. This symbolism indicates a shift in strategic leadership, away from the council towards schools themselves taking greater ownership. A legal entity also promises greater stability since the range of legally defined responsibilities cannot rely on just one or two keen individuals who may move on. However, all partnerships seem clear that their longevity will depend ultimately on the quality and value of their work to schools.



Figure 3: Different models of legal entity

Partnerships that have opted to become legal entities have generally become either a company limited by shares or a company limited by guarantee. Both are registered and regulated by Companies House. Such companies are relatively simple to establish and provide risk protection for members and directors. By becoming members of a company, schools are signalling their longer-term commitment to its development.

The purpose of a company limited by shares is to trade for profit for the benefit of the shareholders and to distribute profits according to the shareholding or to reinvest them in the company. Shares have a nominal value and membership is determined according to shares.

A company limited by guarantee is limited to the extent of the guarantee provided by members; generally, this seems to be between £5 and £25, rather than the nominal value of the shares. Should the company be wound up and there are outstanding debts, the liability of the members of the company is limited to this amount. Unlike a company limited by shares, it is not usual for profits to be distributed and they are usually reinvested in the business. Most companies have

opted for this model. However, they have taken slightly different approaches to what constitutes membership. For example, some have given every school a single membership vote, whereas others have allocated voting according to phases or size of school.

Some companies have also decided to become a cooperative or, more often, a charity. Both send out powerful messages about the type of organisation the company wants to be, most particularly about its mission and social purpose. Some partnerships are actively considering becoming a charity as an opportunity to attract more grant funding. So, for example, Tower Hamlets' company is limited by guarantee and has also registered as a charity.

Newham Partnership Working (NPW), 'Services for schools, owned by schools', is a company limited by guarantee but is also a 'not for profit mutual run in partnership with Newham schools'. Its focus is on traded services in 'Education ICT; HR; Governor Support; and School Management'.

Octavo, Croydon's partnership, is also a company limited by guarantee. It describes itself as a mutual trading company owned by Croydon Headteachers' Association, Croydon Council and Octavo employees.

When partnerships have become companies, they automatically become school companies (DfES, 2002). The requirements relating to school companies are not onerous, although as indicated in the Introduction, some partnerships report that local authorities have interpreted their role as 'a supervising authority' too intrusively. The DfE's consultation on school funding (DfE, 2016b) suggested that the role of local authorities and school companies might change:

'We are currently reviewing whether local authorities should continue to have a role in the oversight of school companies.' (P58)

However, this has not been taken forward.

Structure and governance

All area partnerships, whether a legal entity or not, have some form of overarching board which leads and oversees the work of the partnership. Most boards are a mixture of headteacher, local authority and, more rarely, governor representatives. Board members generally represent different types of schools and some of the other key players, such as teaching school alliances. Less frequently, as with Basildon Education Partnership, all the trustees of the board are local headteachers.

Some partnerships have decided to establish boards of directors on the non-executive director model. These are people who are not necessarily involved in education locally but who have an interest, expertise or reputation that will be of use to the company. A number of partnerships have chosen to have an independent chair to give an additional layer of challenge.

Both a company limited by guarantee and a charity, North Tyneside Learning Trust, is a collaboration of schools working in partnership with employers, colleges and universities to

improve education and life chances for all children and young people. It has ‘representatives’ of schools, chairs of governors, further and higher education, employers and the local authority on its board.

Although local partnerships have many similarities, governance models differ. The main variation reflects whether the partnership is a legal entity, in which case it will have a board of directors with legal responsibilities.

In the majority of legal companies, the formal membership (or shareholders) is the schools in the area. Sometimes partnerships count each school as an individual member of the company with an individual vote; in others, voting is constructed around phases or size of school. However organised, members select the directors of the partnership, usually at the Annual General Meeting (AGM). At the AGM, partnerships generally report on the year that has just finished and outline plans for the year ahead. Partnerships usually report on their annual accounts at the AGM and present the auditor’s report.

In terms of operational leadership and management, some partnerships started by seconding someone for one or two days a week but soon found that a more dedicated resource was necessary to run the partnership. Most partnerships have created a full-time, paid post, usually described as managing director, executive director, or CEO, with a small team of school improvement advisers employed full-time and others used part-time. Many partnerships decided that the person running the partnership needed to have strategic school improvement expertise. However, they also recognised the need for commercial expertise and decided to buy that in additionally, often on a fixed term or consultancy basis.

Given the volume and complexity of work, administrative, business and financial support has also been required, although not necessarily full-time. In most cases, partnerships have slim central teams and the partnership managers are expected not only to be strategic but also to be very operational.

Resourcing local area partnerships

Raising enough income to operate and grow was raised as a key concern by many partnerships, particularly those that see themselves as independent organisations. Some felt they were too dependent on either the commission or goodwill of the local council. This often meant they were subject to late decision-making, so business planning was difficult. For instance, one partnership had its three-year contract for school improvement cut by a third at the end of its second year.

Partnerships draw their funds from five major areas (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Sources of partnership funding

In the vast majority of cases, partnerships depend heavily on income from schools for their funding. This might be in the form of subscriptions, often at different levels for a different range of services, or of schools buying an individual service or a package of services, perhaps through a service-level agreement. Apart from providing a range of services, many partnerships also sell products such as online materials. Some partnerships report these generate more income than core services such as training.

As indicated earlier, in many cases the local council is also commissioning the partnership to provide services to schools on its behalf, in particular for statutory school improvement services, although in some places arguments continue about what this entails. The range of commissions is wide and varied. For example, in addition to school improvement services, some councils are contracting partnerships to manage their SEND and Inclusion Services or deliver part of their statutory responsibilities for the Prevent strategy or, as mentioned in the previous section, for public health.

Some partnerships have secured commissions from other organisations to deliver services, including trading beyond the local area to generate income. Herts for Learning exported its successful Parent2Parent programme to Wales through a partnership with Kestrel Education. Buckinghamshire Learning Trust provides support to British International Schools for their school improvement.

A few partnerships, such as BEP, Learn Sheffield and Herts for Learning, have managed to attract grant funding or awards. However, until there is greater understanding of the role and potential of partnerships, this is likely to be difficult. A number of partnerships express concern about being excluded from applying for major grants such as the Strategic School Improvement Fund as applications are restricted to teaching schools, MATs and local authorities.

Creating a sustainable funding model is a major task for most partnerships, particularly for those established without any form of subscription or service level agreement charging schools for their services.

4. School improvement: practice on the ground within area partnerships

This section considers the four key elements of the school improvement process and looks at how local area partnerships are tackling these. At their best, these partnerships are able to diagnose need quickly and to respond quickly and flexibly by brokering support for improvement

The core of the work of each area-based partnership is school improvement. There are many ways in which partnerships are tackling this. Some have adopted fairly traditional approaches but other more innovative models of school-led improvement are also developing around the country. As explained in the previous section, most partnerships rely heavily for their funding on schools buying a range of school improvement services from them.

Within the different approaches to school improvement, it is possible to identify four common elements:

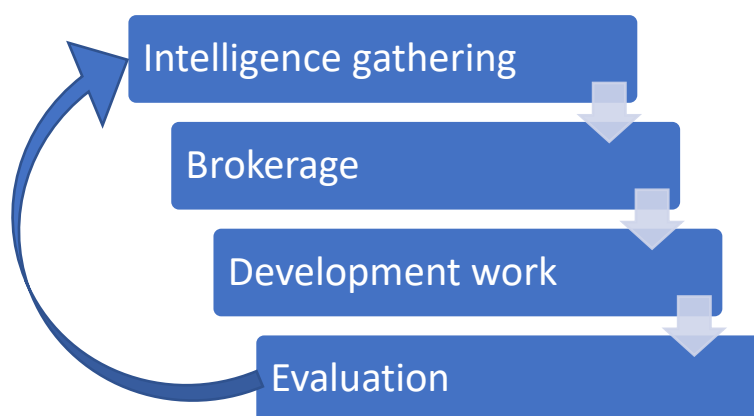


Figure 5: Key elements of the school improvement process

Most schools would recognise these four elements as central to their own school improvement planning. Although at both school and partnership level, formal planning is generally sequential, the different elements inevitably interact at all stages of the process and feed into each other. Evaluation, for example, operates both formatively and summatively, so if the development work is generating insufficient progress, it might be re-brokered.

Intelligence gathering



Figure 6: Intelligence gathering

A good grasp of data, both soft and hard, is crucial to effective school improvement, both at individual school and partnership levels. Most partnerships recognise that a mature and considered approach to managing data is important if partnerships are to move beyond cosy relationships.

Partnerships use data to help them understand, at both individual school and local area level, the specific improvement challenges and what needs to be done. They also need to know what expertise and capacity exist locally, particularly within schools, to support improvement and development.

Partnerships which gather and analyse information well use a range of quantitative indicators relating to attainment, attendance and behaviour. They are on top of comparisons with the national picture, they might benchmark with data from the DfE's 'similar schools' measure or with the broader region and, of course, with other local schools. Most also use other quantitative data, such as moves in term time or applications for school places or exclusions. Some even identify a set of risk factors such as building works in a school or the volume of referrals from local councillors.

In some partnerships, schools are encouraged to refer themselves if they have a specific or emerging need. So, for example, an outstanding primary school which had lost its only, and long-serving, deputy headteacher and two phase leaders at the same time considered itself to be a cause for concern and was seeking additional support from its partnership.

Partnerships reported that anecdotal information – what the school looked and felt like on a recent visit, or reported via gossip at the school gate - was considered part of the information gathering to establish need and risk and forestall problems.

The growing importance of peer review in partnerships also proves a rich resource in building local intelligence, most particularly in identifying expertise and opportunity.

Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP) combines its analysis of intelligence with its brokerage of support. Its School Improvement Advisory Board consists of successful, recently serving headteachers with an independent chair and the director of continuous school improvement, which is a full-time post within BEP. The board's role is to use its analysis to commission and broker support for schools requiring improvement and to intervene where more challenge is required, while also maintaining good links with Ofsted and the Regional Schools Commissioner.

In a few areas, the local authority continues to oversee the analysis of performance, progress and risk and passes a summary analysis to the partnership. Indeed, some partnerships are required to pay the local authority for such data. Some local authorities continue to analyse data much as they have always done but with far fewer staff. They use their analysis as the base not only for reporting to councillors on standards and performance in the local area but also for commissioning support for school improvement from their local partnership.

Although schools in area-based partnerships emphasise the importance of openness and trust, an open approach to the analysis of information sometimes seems to test that belief. Some schools, particularly secondary schools, were not keen to share their data, most particularly progress and qualitative data, with schools which were near enough geographically to be considered competitors. Some partnerships, such as the Cumbria Alliance of System Leaders (CASL) and the Local Alliances of System Leaders (LASLs) have agreed a data-sharing protocol. Buckinghamshire Learning Trust is developing a common framework for use by all schools in Buckinghamshire to support self-evaluation by helping leaders analyse performance in detail.

If they are to work effectively, partnerships must build up sufficient trust and confidence for sharing data to be normal practice between schools. Partnerships report that, as relationships are established over time, especially by schools working together on particular tasks or projects, difficulties are lessening.

A key difference between local authorities' and partnerships' analysis of information is the systematic attention paid to where expertise, skills and capacity sit in the local system. This had rarely been a feature of the analysis of information previously undertaken by local authorities. Generally, local authorities relied on support for schools coming from the expertise in their own advisory team and, more rarely, individual school leaders or schools. Local authorities did hold soft intelligence, built up over time, so when a pressing need arose for school to school support, such as when a headteacher or a school was in particular difficulty, the director could contact another headteacher to ask for help. However, in the past, local authorities' anecdotal knowledge of strengths in the system was often perceived by schools as partial and partisan.

Several partnerships told me they wanted to avoid this criticism and to be more systematic not only about identification but also about moving knowledge and expertise around the system.

Many partnerships are seeking to identify expertise, skills and capacity more systematically. For instance, some of them invite all schools to identify the areas of expertise or strength in which they might be able to support others and ask them to identify their evidence for this. The idea is that this is then tested out through a process agreed by the partnership. Brent Schools Partnership, for example, identified a set of needs in the borough and invited applications from schools to run a range of specialist centres run, by schools themselves, to address specific local needs.

Through its management of both hard and soft intelligence, a local partnership can consider where the strengths and weaknesses lie both in individual schools and also in the MATs that operate locally. This is important in spotting risk and brokering support to pre-empt failure, not just for maintained schools but for groups of schools, such as MATs, for which it has no statutory responsibility.

Several partnerships see horizon scanning as a key part of their intelligence gathering and a valuable service they can provide for schools. They feel it is important, for example, to help schools keep abreast of government thinking, key pieces of research or the likely changes coming from the next Ofsted framework. As is evident from their websites, with Buckinghamshire Learning Trust doing this particularly well, many partnerships do this in short blogs, customised information bulletins and news releases. Some use organisations to help them do this and, as indicated earlier, offer a discounted price for commercial information and management packages. These are the sorts of services previously provided by good local authorities and are particularly helpful for single schools or smaller MATs within a partnership.

Brokerage

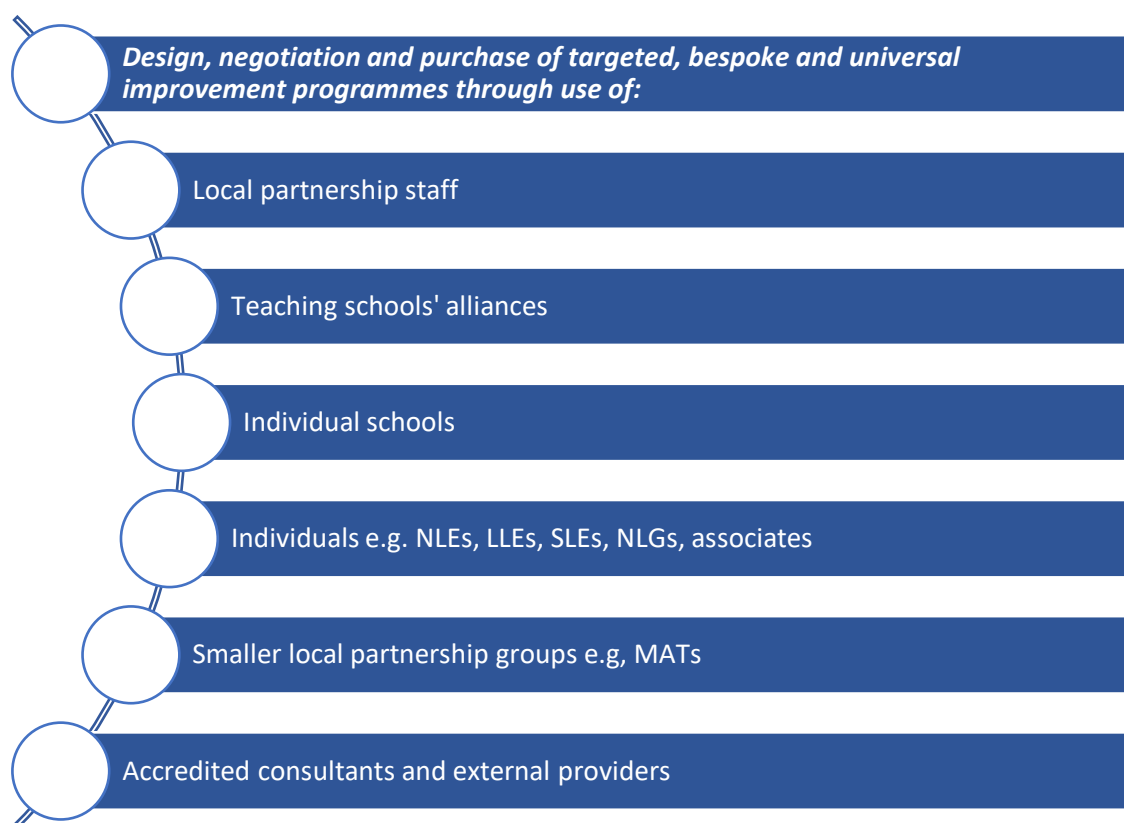


Figure 7: Brokerage

Successful intelligence gathering provides a secure base of professional knowledge which is crucial for good brokerage. By brokerage, I mean the stage of designing and ‘buying’ improvement programmes on behalf of particular groups within the partnership or on behalf of individual schools or groups of schools. One partnership described this process as ‘writing the prescription’.

Having analysed the data, partnerships write ‘prescriptions’ for a range of improvement programmes: some very specifically targeted at particular groups or schools; some bespoke programmes requested by individual schools or MATs; and some universal programmes, designed to meet identified local needs and open to all. Most do not do this in isolation but use the good relationships within the partnership to make brokerage as good as possible.

Very few partnerships, and then only the very large ones, are setting up the permanent teams of advisers or improvement partners that existed previously in local authorities. Most do not have the money to do this but, more importantly, they feel that support for improvement should come, where the capacity can be generated, from schools themselves. This reinforces the need for good knowledge of what is available locally. A partnership’s design of programmes might therefore entail negotiation with providers of local resources, for example, a teaching school, a support school or a school considered to be a centre of excellence locally, perhaps for

a subject or a primary phase, or individuals such as NLEs or NLGs. Generally, brokerage entails identifying the duration of the programme, how its progress will be monitored and the costs.

If the local authority has commissioned the partnership to provide for the needs of schools causing concern, a carefully targeted programme, with clear timelines, might be designed and negotiations undertaken. The support might be provided, for example, through other schools, a local teaching school alliance, particular individuals locally or external consultants. Many partnerships are able to give examples of these targeted programmes of support for individual schools and evidence of their effectiveness.

Partnerships that have confidence in their responsibility for improving overall school performance in the area expect to identify, through their intelligence gathering, particular needs which individual schools have not recognised themselves. Several partnerships could give examples of where they had experienced hard discussion and negotiation with a headteacher or chair of governors. Some referred to difficult conversations with local MATs, with one citing discussions that led to serious tensions with the chief executive of a MAT who had not initially accepted the partnership's analysis of need, or emerging need, in schools within the Trust.

Good partnerships are not letting the absence of statutory and hierarchical accountability, as owned by a local authority or a MAT, stop them doing an important part of their job. Most see themselves as having moral and professional responsibility for all local children and their job as one of influence, persuasion and negotiation to ensure schools in the area improve.

It is common for a partnership to describe itself as a school improvement network or as giving access to a professional learning partnership. Increasingly, partnerships see the active engagement of practitioners as integral to the way that they want, and need, to work. Many see brokering opportunities for people to work across schools, for instance, negotiating the sort of opportunities for practice development mentioned earlier, or brokering partnerships for peer review, as key to developing a new and more vigorous model of school improvement across the area.

Development and improvement work



Figure 8: Development and improvement

Some of the development and improvement work undertaken by partnerships is similar to that formerly provided by good local authorities though most report use of a much more diverse range of school improvement providers than would have been used previously. However, schools do not have to take what is provided. Another key difference is the extent to which schools and practitioners are involved in both design and delivery. The latter strengthens their ownership of collective improvement for children and young people in the area.

Several partnerships use clusters of schools as the foundation for school improvement and development activities. In the case of Essex, for example, when smaller partnerships were being established in 2015, they were given the freedom to define what they needed to do, and how, within a broader accountability framework. Buckinghamshire Learning Trust's LINK strategy signposts schools to existing and emerging MATs and clusters in the area.

Some partnerships are seeking to establish a climate where risk-taking is supported, in the knowledge that failure might be necessary if progress is to be made. They want to stimulate lively ideas or to see if they can extend to others an initiative that works well in one school.

Most partnerships offer or signpost a broad CPD programme. Typically, this comprises a range of courses and programmes based on the analysis of need and interests. These look similar across partnerships, for example, courses on assessment or on managing inspection. Many partnerships report that training on RAISEonline was always popular and they were anticipating even more interest in its replacement, Analyse School Performance. The size of most area partnerships means they are large enough to pick up minority needs far better than most MATs and to organise either school-based or centrally based development or training to meet them.

They also offer networking opportunities across schools in the partnership. Again, there are similarities across partnerships: many run conferences for headteachers and often for senior leaders across all schools and MATs in the area. There are usually conferences and meetings for governors across schools and standalone academies.

Generally, partnerships organise subject or phase networks as a way of sharing practice and encouraging teachers to discuss common issues relating to the curriculum, teaching approaches and assessment. The geographical areas covered by the partnerships mean that far more teachers are involved than in a MAT alone. In the best examples, teachers find these meetings relevant and practical: colleagues sometimes provide compelling evidence of what works well and external experts, such as subject examiners, also contribute. Partnerships generally evaluated these meetings through attendance data and satisfaction questionnaires but in-depth evaluation rarely seems to have been undertaken.

Many partnerships are making determined efforts to reach classroom teachers. Some, for example, Learn Sheffield (*TeachMeet Sheffield*), are using Teachmeets to energise and bring teachers together, particularly primary teachers, to share practice and discuss ideas to enhance their day-to-day work. Teachmeets promote engagement between teachers and this can lead to deeper cooperation between individuals in different schools. According to partnerships, Teachmeets not only lead to establishing virtual communities of interest but also stimulate opportunities for interesting joint-practice development between individual teachers in different schools. Partnerships report that Teachmeets are proving popular, and teachers tell me they find them stimulating because of the pace and energy generated by other teachers. The essence of Teachmeets is that they are organised by teachers for teachers but partnerships facilitate them through advertising, support for the venue, refreshments and so on. Partnerships also connect practitioners to Teachmeets run by MATs, Teaching Schools or other groups of schools in the area.

Partnerships regard their CPD offer as important – there is demand and it is often an income generator. However, many see their targeted programmes for schools with particular needs, or the bespoke school-based programmes designed with individual schools or MATs, as offering the most potential for impact. Many of these programmes involve school to school support. The vast majority of partnerships see themselves as having a key role in organising that support and in finding ways of funding it. Certainly, this is what feels different about the approach of many partnerships to school improvement. Several partnerships see the involvement of practitioners from local schools as crucial to the success of these programmes.

Even when they do not have a clearly articulated model for change, partnerships talk of their key role in transferring knowledge, skills and practice across schools in the local area. Some spoke with pride of having brokered school-to-school collaborations where teachers themselves had constructed development projects that lead to more creative thinking about problems and possibilities. These were generally strong teachers, ambitious to do even better

with their teaching and enhance its impact on learning. One headteacher spoke with feeling about the way such an initiative had challenged teachers' assumptions about what students in a particular class could achieve.

The vast majority of partnerships provide a list of accredited school improvement partners or education consultants with specific expertise. Schools value them and many willingly buy them in. Headteachers say they appreciate that negotiations about daily rates have been undertaken by the partnerships.

Many partnerships see a key part of their role in a school-led system as building the expertise and skills needed locally to make the system sustainable. As Hargreaves (2012) indicates, system leaders need different sorts of skill sets to support them in developing school-led improvement. Some train staff in the skills needed to support another school or to embark on joint practice development. Several partnerships mention training staff in undertaking peer reviews as a crucial part of creating a sustainable system and this is considered important in almost all partnerships. As indicated earlier, those who have been involved in peer review see it as a powerful tool for broadening their horizons and sharpening their skills.

Good information-gathering and analysis, linked with successful brokerage, should result in development programmes that improve practice. Nevertheless, partnerships are aware that 'prescriptions' do not always deliver what was hoped or promised. Consequently, many stress the need to keep programmes under review, even if this is light touch, to ensure they are making a difference to practice and, if they are not, there must be some flexibility to make changes. Some partnerships emphasise the importance of their whole approach having to be 'evidence-led'. This includes signposting the Education Endowment Foundation's *Teaching and Learning Toolkit* (EEF, 2017) and making focused use of particular programmes based on their Evidence Strength.

Evidencing progress and impact



Figure 9: Evidencing progress and impact

All partnerships undertake routine monitoring and evaluation of:

- individual programmes
- student outcomes and progress
- Ofsted judgements of local schools.

This means most partnerships routinely collect data which seeks to show:

- evidence of impact from individual programmes
- individual case studies of impact
- improved student outcomes and progress
- improved Ofsted judgements
- benchmarked comparison (both for Ofsted judgements and results at key stages) with the DfE's 'similar areas' measure, their region and the national context.

Hounslow Learning Partnership, for example, makes clear that the impact of its improvement framework is measured by:

- pupil attainment and progress against national expectations and London-wide benchmarks
- the attainment and progress of pupils eligible for the pupil premium, and the most able
- the proportion of Hounslow schools assessed as good or outstanding.

Various partnerships are able to cite regular evidence of impact from a number of Ofsted school reports. For example, the Ofsted report of a school in Buckinghamshire, moving from 'Requires improvement' to 'Good' in October 2016, stated that:

‘Buckingham Learning Trust, on behalf of the local authority, has provided effective support to help leaders to bring about improvements. They have arranged training for subject leaders and for class teachers, and this has led to improvements in leadership as well as in teaching.’

When local authorities have commissioned services from local partnerships, they have usually agreed a monitoring and reporting regime. This almost always includes a range of indicators and targets or goals in relation to improved performance that need to be achieved by a certain date. Most local authorities and partnerships have established a pattern of regular reporting on progress and performance, including reporting to councillors in public meetings, such as scrutiny committee meetings. In addition to assessing progress in terms of its school improvement work, some partnerships are seeking to assess the impact of the partnership itself more generally. They recognise that the performance of their partnership is not simply an aggregate of the performance of all schools in the area.

Some relate evaluation very specifically to the partnership’s strategic plan for improvement. As part of its improvement strategy, for example, Sheffield Learning has identified four priorities to address what it describes as the wider barriers to school improvement within the city: Inclusion; Workforce; Readiness; Enrichment. Using a mixture of process and outcome indicators, it sets out in detail how it will know if it has been successful in each of those areas.

Some partnerships, such as Camden Learning, anticipate that their approach will attract and retain teachers in the locality, since their motivation will be higher as a result of their professional engagement. They therefore intend to monitor recruitment and retention to see if improving trends are discernible. Some newly qualified teachers in Camden did, indeed, tell me that the networks offered by the local partnership were part of the reason for choosing the area over another in which to work. The same partnership also linked professional satisfaction with innovation and excellence; they were intending to collate published reports of their practice and monitor the number of invitations received to speak at conferences and seminars.

In terms of the quality of partnership work itself, most places are using proxy measures such as the number of schools signing up to the partnership or their take-up of the subscription or trading offer. Some also use annual satisfaction surveys to evaluate a number of things, including the quality of relationships across the partnership.

Janssens and Ehren (2016) stress the importance of designing evaluations that build in ways of assessing how the structure of the network supports the collaboration of members of the network. They refer to the analysis undertaken by Popp et al (2013) which identifies four different levels of analysis which may prove helpful in evaluating partnerships:

- **Individual:** assessment of the impact the network has on individuals who interact in the network on behalf of their respective organisations (eg increased job satisfaction; increased capacity) and on individual clients (eg increased satisfaction or outcomes)
- **Organisation:** assessment of the impact the network has on the member organisations (eg improvement; more resources)

- **Network:** Assessment of network-level outcomes and network properties (eg structure; relationships; internal evaluation mechanisms) contributing to outcomes
- **Community:** assessment of the contributions that the network makes to the community it was established to serve (eg. less duplication and fewer gaps in services; improved population-level outcomes).

Cumbria Alliance of System Leaders (CASL) is taking just this sort of holistic approach to the evaluation of its partnership. Working with the Education Development Trust, CASL has adopted a distinctive and innovative approach to monitoring the performance of its partnership, which is organised in clusters. A cluster performance dashboard aggregates data which is discussed at a cluster workshop. CASL has also introduced innovative benchmarking, the Cluster Maturity Tool, which sits above the dashboard. Its four-point scale is used to stimulate and develop discussion, both within schools and across the cluster, about maturity across four key elements of its strategy:

- strategy and vision
- statement of priorities
- achieving sustainability
- culture of improvement

To exemplify, Figure 10 presents the four descriptors linked to the fourth element, the culture of improvement, of its strategy.

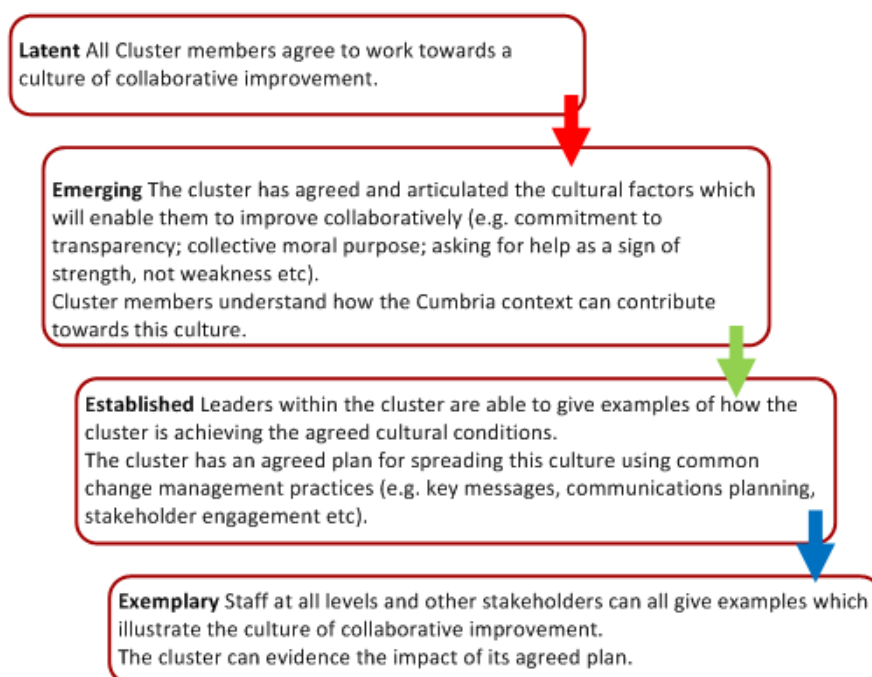


Figure 10: CASL's maturity scale for Culture of Improvement (one part of its strategy)

The tool also offers an overall evaluation for the partnerships themselves (Figure 11).

Latent	Partnerships exist but on a relatively informal basis. Much of the detail of both strategy and practice has not yet been specified.
Emerging	The partnership has been formalised and key aspects of strategy and practice are well specified. Headteachers are firmly in favour of cluster working. Quality assurance is effective within the cluster.
Establishing	Significant additional value is delivered through collective operational planning and practices. Headteachers and senior leaders work actively for the cluster. A clear sense of the benefits delivered by being in partnership is understood by all senior members.
Exemplary	Professionals at all levels of the cluster work collectively to improve outcomes for all children. The benefits and impact of collaboration are clearly established and understood by all members and stakeholders.

Figure 11: Cumbria cluster maturity tool: descriptors for the overall evaluation of the cluster

To summarise, most partnerships report positively on the impact of their work. All that I spoke to were able to provide qualitative examples of improvement, often captured in case studies. Some claim better results at Key Stages 2 and 4 and improved Ofsted judgements for schools in the area. Nevertheless, even in those instances, it is difficult to discern the impact of the partnership itself as the single most important factor. This must be tested over time and through evaluation and research about the impact of partnerships, perhaps through an EEF randomised trial. Understandably, given the short lives of most partnerships, evaluation is currently very limited though most identify it as an area for development and innovative models, such as CASL's, deserve more attention.

5. Characteristics of successful area partnerships

In reviewing the success of partnerships, many of which have emerged fairly recently, I have considered:

- the extent of school buy-in as reflected in membership of a partnership
- the degree of brokerage for development and improvement between a partnership and local schools
- the volume of sales
- a partnership's own assessment of its progress
- a partnership's own evidence of impact.

Successful partnerships that last beyond the excitement of the initial idea share a number of common features (Figure 12):

Characteristics of successful area partnerships



Figure 12: Characteristics of successful area partnerships

Collective moral purpose and vision linked to place and community

First, the establishment of most of these partnerships is rooted in a shared moral purpose that is well articulated. Generally, this is expressed in terms of making a difference, often an ambitious difference, to the lives of children and young people in the area. It is linked to the

emphasis on place and community that characterises area partnerships and can convey a compelling vision.

Birmingham Education Partnership exemplifies this and presents clearly what it is seeking to achieve:

‘You will be part of a mission to support a deeply good academic, social and civic education for every child and young person living in Birmingham, ensuring that no school is left isolated and sharing the responsibility for all our children.’

Often partnerships have used this emphasis on place and community as the base for articulating their vision, aims and values. The latter have often been devised in collaboration with local stakeholders. It is common for them to be presented in documentation such as the partnership’s prospectus, its strategic or business plans, and bids for funding. It is rare for headteachers, or even those involved daily in the partnership, to remember exactly what these aims and values are without checking the documents, but they are able to convey the spirit of them. Several partnerships described the process of defining and articulating them as an important one and they are used to underpin decisions and activities.

Some partnerships make less use of the locality in articulating their vision and aims and focus on support for improvement against traditional indicators. For example, Buckinghamshire Learning Trust states clearly:

‘To increase the number of schools and settings giving good and better provision to children and young people and to reduce the number...falling into Ofsted categories. Every child should make at least good progress and should benefit from being part of a community of schools and partners which is committed to providing outstanding care and support to the child.’

As part of their vision, a number of partnerships emphasise the importance of articulating what Kershaw (2016) describes as ‘the mutual gain’ from engagement. Clare Kershaw, Director of Education, in Essex links this to vision, outcomes and moral purpose. She stresses the importance of schools not only fully committing to aims and benefits of the partnership but also to the contribution they will make in defining and meeting its success.

Lincolnshire Learning Partnership’s vision sets out very effectively the expectations placed on all schools in its partnership:

Commit and contribute	Share
<i>to supporting each other’s improvement</i>	<i>and act upon evidence to improve learning</i>
Build networks	Welcome challenge
<i>and work together to serve children and their communities</i>	<i>from each other to ensure no school fails</i>

Moral purpose, a strong local dimension and the partnership's priorities are well embedded and clear in discussions with most strong partnerships. Many see this strong sense of place and community as what distinguishes area partnerships from MATs.

A clear model of change, using professional power and skills, and aligned to evidence

As indicated earlier, all partnerships report their primary focus as that of school improvement. Those that are working well translate this into specific, often ambitious outcomes for local children and young people. Partnerships frequently outlined other social and economic benefits but they defined their moral purpose largely by reference to those outcomes.

Almost all partnerships had spent time working out their vision, values and priorities; initially, very few spent time explicitly devising and articulating a model for collective improvement, most particularly how knowledge and skills would be transferred and developed across the system. So, although most referred to the importance of a self-improving system or a school-led system, few had initially thought through exactly what that meant for the way they worked as a partnership and even fewer about how it might align to evidence. They had not really thought through their theory of change. Many partnerships continue to work out what their 'offer' would be, based on what they thought schools would want and buy, and although this is important, this is not always the same as what might generate the most improvement.

As time has gone on, it has become more common for successful partnerships to analyse the key elements of their approach to improvement and, in particular, how it is different from the approach adopted in the past by many local authorities. As indicated earlier, for many, this entails using leaders, teachers and schools across the partnership in ways that they would not have been used by local authorities or, at least, not so extensively. This has meant a focus on developing system leadership at all levels and finding creative ways of releasing that capacity to support improvement across the partnership.

Camden Learning, for example, has established an approach to improvement whereby individual schools are funded to lead hubs of schools to effect change. The partnership has a three-year strategic plan for improvement, reviewed annually, and activities refreshed for the forthcoming year. It identifies a number of priorities and then considers what initiatives and activities are needed to bring about the improvement the partnership is looking for. For 2017/18, hubs are operating in the areas of:

- Early Years
- Primary Maths
- Primary SEND
- Assessment
- Oracy
- Mental Health
- Higher Learning Potential
- Secondary Maths
- Post 16 Pedagogy

A school or group of schools can apply to lead a hub, which involves engaging and training other schools to improve practice across the area. They might bid for a one-, two- or three-year contract, with clear review points built in. Decisions about which schools are engaged to run the initiative are made by a group of headteachers against a list of criteria. The lead school is paid approximately £1,000 a month for this work but, to secure all the funding, it must demonstrate not only successful completion of outputs but also the achievement of outcomes.

Peer review is increasingly seen as a key element in partnerships' approaches to change, and features in the school improvement work or work plans of most successful partnerships. Certainly, where practitioner engagement is well established, including peer review and opportunities for peer collaboration and development, local ownership and investment in the partnership are generally strong. Tower Hamlets' Education Partnership invited all its schools to consider a range of peer review models and then part-funded groups of schools to trial these, with a review process built in. They chose models with a strong focus on development rather than those modelled on inspection with a written report using Ofsted judgements and with grades as the key output.

Hargreaves' (2010; 2011) developmental model of clusters of schools working in partnership to improve teaching and learning for them all has been highly influential. He emphasises a practice model of professional development where the focus is on mutual observation, coaching and professional learning-by-doing. This is different from the more usual model of school-to-school support where strong schools support weaker schools. His model of joint practice development is grounded in the routines of what teachers do and moves them on from that, essentially through mutual observation and incremental coaching.

Cluster working, generally less tight than Hargreaves' model, has been seen as a support for collaboration and improvement for some time. Recent research (Greany and Higham, in press) on the self-improving school-led system found local clusters, often based around feeder primary schools with one or more secondary schools, continues to be a common pattern.

As indicated earlier, many partnerships identify cluster working in one form or another as a crucial part of their improvement model. For example, partnerships in Cumbria and Essex, both working with the Education Development Trust, established collaboration in school clusters as the basis for creating a sustainable, self-improving system.

Cluster working is used as a basis for working collaboratively on improvement in many other areas but often with a specific focus, such as mathematics or SEND.

An inclusive culture of openness, trust and mutual accountability

Most partnerships emphasise the importance of building their culture and, when pushed, linked this culture to values of openness, honesty and trust as well as a focus on driving improvement in all schools in the area. They recognise that the competitive, market-driven environment within which schools operate is hard to shift but they are finding that schools of all types are keen to work and learn together. Partnerships stress that it takes time to establish an open culture and collective responsibility but working over time together builds relationships and progress towards both. Popp et al (2013) in their review of networks refer to trust as ‘the lubricant that makes cooperation possible’ and they report that ‘higher levels of trust are believed to lead to increasing network effectiveness’. Certainly, a number of trusts refer to the growth of trust as important if partnerships are to develop and mature.

However, some staff in partnerships spoke to me about the difficulties of having hard conversations about quality with headteachers and governors who could not see any problem in their schools.

Partnerships that have a strong moral purpose and a clearly articulated model for collective improvement have found it easier to establish a culture of openness and trust. This is because discussions about problems feel less personal, can be linked to specific goals and can focus on what is needed to effect improvement.

Peer review is again identified by several partnerships as a constructive and positive way of providing hard-edged feedback, within the context of a collaborative culture. The emphasis is not intended to be on a summative judgement of performance but on ways of improving practice. However, one partnership spoke of the dangers of these reviews slipping into ‘mock Ofsted’s’.

Most area partnerships are determined to become as inclusive as possible, not just by being open to all types of schools, or groups of schools, within the locality but by involving a broad range of people from schools. This is different from many MATs, where the external accountability framework has such a hold that they do not want to put their performance at risk by bringing schools in need into their group.

Headteachers have been the key players in engaging with local authorities to set up the area partnerships, but they know that if the model is really to work across the area, others must be involved. Many partnerships are working hard to extend ownership way beyond headteachers. All partnerships engage teachers, from NQTs through to those aspiring to headship, and most see it as vital to work with support staff, too.

Partnerships often place a premium on engaging governors, understanding their fundamental importance to school improvement but also their key role as community representatives. One partnership expressed frustration that the local authority’s commission for school improvement continued to exclude work with governors, describing managing improvement without governors as the partnership ‘managing with one hand behind its back’. Governing bodies can

make a distinct contribution to strengthening their school's approach to formative accountability. They can, for example, ensure the effective review of the experiences of students, of parents and the school's local community.

Governors have generally been more cautious about taking responsibility for the quality of education beyond their individual schools, federations or trusts. However, some partnerships are managing to engage them effectively. Collaboration across schools has been slower to get off the ground but partnerships are now able to point to examples where governing bodies have set up opportunities to scrutinise each other's data or to discuss a shared local problem. Governors working across area partnerships offer huge potential for strengthening a school-led system. Concluding a major review of governance, James et al. (2014) recommended that core capabilities for governors should include:

'Commitment to the school, which we would argue needs to be tempered by a wider commitment to the success of other schools and high-quality education for all young people.'

As mentioned above, Essex has pioneered a drive to establish a model of school to school support for improvement by ensuring every school is in a formal partnership. This is underpinned by a broader document setting out what accountable partnerships mean in practice (Kershaw, 2016). This document has been agreed between Essex County Council, Essex Primary Heads Association, the Association of Secondary Heads in Essex, Essex Special Schools Education Trust and Essex School Governors. Interestingly, it includes an expectation by governors that schools will support each other and headteachers will participate within the partnership.

Good planning, quality assurance and business development

Detailed planning, based on good information gathering and analysis, is common across successful partnerships, although some of the smaller ones struggle with this. Almost all partnerships have plans, but these range in scope from one year to five years and vary in style and quality. Some plans are long and detailed whereas others are no more than the planned CPD offer. Some produce a traditional school improvement plan for the area but support it with a business plan for the partnership. Longer-term partnership plans are generally underpinned well with more detailed plans of between a year and 18 months. It is rare for partnerships to align service planning and financial planning for a timeframe longer than 18 months, although some of the more established partnerships have done this well, as reflected in business plans approved by their boards.

Where planning is well embedded, partnerships have spoken of the compromise and negotiation necessary to arrive at priorities and then to agree the way these are to be delivered. However, they see this process of negotiation as healthy, leading to priorities being owned and known well by all partners. Many partnerships are keen to ensure that responsibility for

implementation is shared between the individuals and groups involved in the partnership. Most partnerships with good planning also have effective monitoring processes and a focus on evidencing progress and impact.

Most partnerships produce an annual report or review which is published locally and often considered by the relevant local authority. Some of these present a review of standards and performance in the area while others produce a review of the work of the partnership. Learn Sheffield, for example, publishes what it describes as an Annual Report to Shareholders. It is short but gives a high-level overview of the year's performance in relation to board effectiveness, key developments, school improvement outcomes and financial outcomes.

Planning is more embedded when those leading and managing the partnerships day to day have to report formally to an overarching board, be that part of an informal arrangement or a legal entity.

Herts for Learning captures the range and complexity of its planning in the diagram below (Figure 13). Although a large, successful and very independent company, it is clear that its contractual relationship with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) is a major influence on its planning cycle.

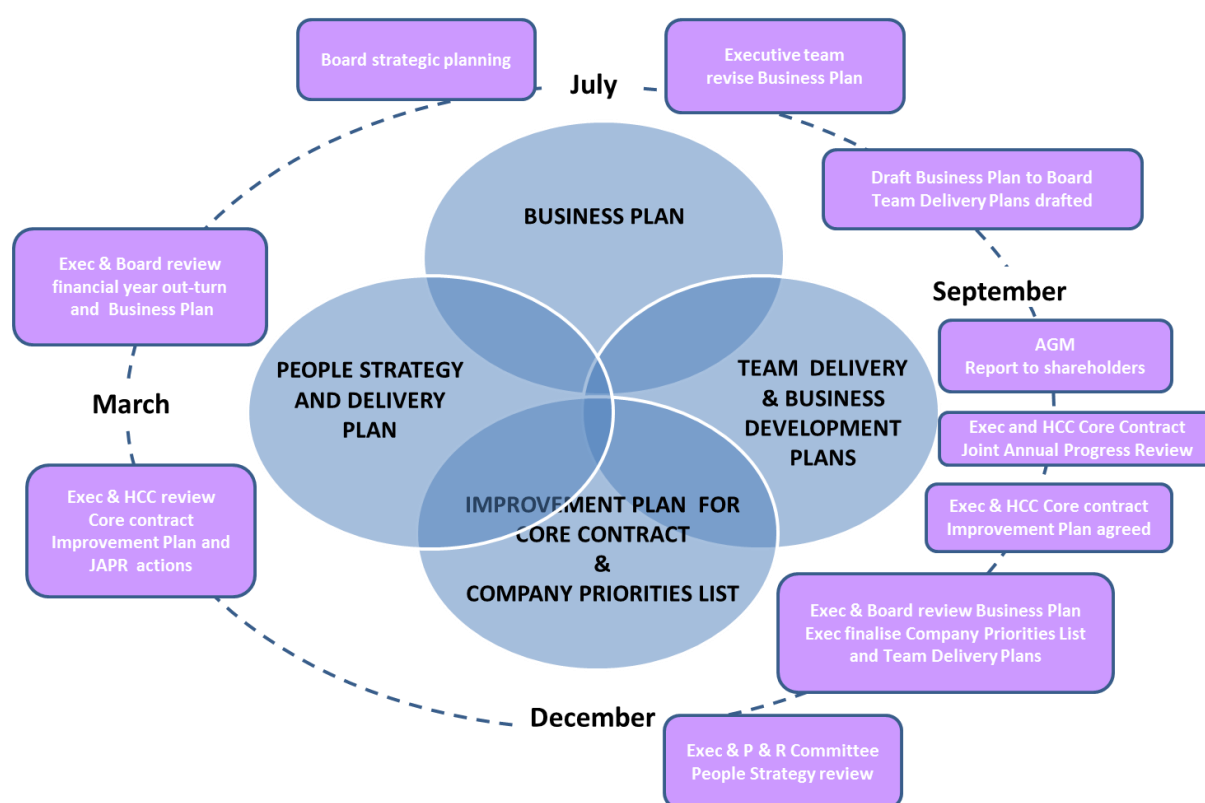


Figure 13: Herts for Learning planning cycle

Several partnerships emphasise the importance of good financial planning, including planning for growth. They make the point that ‘not for profit’ does not mean ‘no profit’ and they signal the importance of improving services and current products and of investing in new ones. Many stress the importance of building reserves to mitigate risks, particularly in the early days. They also emphasise the importance of investing in staff development, not only to deliver current services well but to develop the business and ensure growth.

Although successful partnerships all consider planning to be vital, they do not see it as a straitjacket. They stress the importance of ensuring sufficient capacity to respond to immediate and unexpected need. They all place a high premium on monitoring the quality of what they provide and making rapid adjustments as necessary. The CEO of one partnership said the most important planning skill his company had had to develop was how to listen hard to members and find ways of showing them the action that followed the listening.

Capacity building for a self-improving system

As reported earlier, most partnerships stress the need for schools to be led and supported over time to develop the skills and the capacity needed to support a self-improving system. In many areas, the skills needed to work in different ways have had to be developed at the same time as establishing the partnership.

Successful partnerships are providing a range of programmes to support system leadership. A common focus is on developing networking skills and behaviours. A range of programmes – mainly a mixture of courses and shadowing activities – is being run in many areas for those interested in executive headship or becoming a CEO of a MAT. Training is provided within most partnerships for those who wish to become involved in peer review, as it is seen as such a powerful but relatively easy way of securing the benefits of professional capital. Support is given to practitioners embarking on a range of different collaborative activities across schools. As indicated earlier, CEOs see effective lateral collaboration, both within schools and across them, as the key not only to better learning for staff and students but also to building the capacity of partnerships to sustain a self-improving system.

Strong partnerships emphasise that, if a culture of school-led improvement is to become deeply embedded, it has to be driven by the best knowledge and understanding. They are therefore keen to extend their knowledge and thinking to improve practice. So, not only do these partnerships look beyond individual schools and groups of schools across the area, but some, such as Herts for Learning and Buckinghamshire Learning Trust, also look beyond the region. Learn Sheffield and Camden Learning will be undertaking joint peer reviews in 2017/18 to increase their learning.

Successful partnerships pay attention to the development of the people who are involved with it, either as employees or board members. They know they are trying to break new ground and need support to do that. Jan Paine, the first Managing Director of Herts for Learning,

emphasises the importance she placed, in establishing the new company, on developing a new culture and how crucial it was to the organisation's success.

Some area partnerships meet with groups from other partnerships for mutual support and development. For instance, *Beyond MATs*, a group of about 15 local partnerships, meets quarterly. Generally, this has been to share information and discuss issues; however, members of the group are now beginning to talk of peer review of each other's partnerships, or peer scrutiny, as support for tackling a specific problem or issue. Some are even beginning to work together on particular initiatives or activities. The group is now establishing itself on a more formal footing by setting up a national association for education partnerships.

6. The key challenges

The commitment and energy behind the development of these area partnerships, as well as the business of survival, sometimes mask the very real challenges they have to manage. Each of the successful partnerships identified a series of risks they have to take into account in their planning, their work and their evaluation. This final section of the think-piece highlights the five most mentioned by partnerships and points to ways in which they might be managed.

The key challenges



Figure 14: The challenges

Danger of distraction from core purpose

As the concept of a self-improving system has developed, so has the emphasis on collaboration across schools. While this has many attractions and many benefits, some partnerships stressed the importance of collaboration not diverting attention from what happens inside classrooms and within individual schools. Hattie (2015a) reminds us that within-school differences remain much larger than between-school differences. He points to the variance between schools indicated by the 2009 PISA results for reading across all OECD countries where the UK figures show a 24% variance between schools, but a 76% variance within schools. Hattie believes that one of the most important causes of this variance within schools is the varied effectiveness of teachers in classrooms and argues that this should be the focus for improvement.

Few would argue with the need to improve teacher effectiveness and Hattie's own model is a collaborative one but it emphasises collaboration within schools rather than across them. He argues that school leaders need to maximise success by harnessing the power of collaborative expertise within their own schools, evidencing progress and then taking action in the light of that evidence. With this approach, teachers learn the skills of collaboration within their own school.

Collaboration across schools can be unfocused and time-consuming. However, most headteachers I spoke to in the course of this study did not see collaborating with other schools as an inevitable distraction. If undertaken with focus and rigour, collaboration can bring benefits, not least as a resource for stimulating thinking, talking and supporting better practice.

It is right, however, that headteachers keep a tight focus on the needs of their own school. One headteacher I spoke to voiced her resentment that, because she was careful and very discriminating about time spent in external collaboration, she was not seen as a team-player within the partnership. She referred to the criticism she attracted from local colleagues when she chose to work with another school outside the partnership, even though she knew that that school could offer her school something she could not source locally. She still felt very committed to the partnership as an area club and had found value in participating in local conferences which brought in national figures.

The best partnerships are aware of the danger of distraction. They stress the importance of monitoring the impact of collaboration on learning and on outcomes, ensuring change happens both within individual schools and across them. If the intelligence gathering supporting a partnership is working effectively, it should pick up the warning signs of distraction and find ways of addressing that.

Developing new skills and finding capacity

The challenge of developing the skills and capacity needed to build a new sort of system is significant. As indicated earlier, many partnerships have recognised the need for skills development and have built this into their training programmes, but that alone will not generate sufficient capacity. It is difficult to pull practitioners out of classrooms to provide support or co-design better practice. Headteachers or governors worry that collaborative work across schools could stretch their capacity and damage their results or Ofsted judgement or both.

Even as committed and enthusiastic members of local partnerships, schools retain their first loyalty to their individual school or, more rarely, to a group of schools, such as a MAT. Understandably, their primary focus is staffing their schools with the best teachers and building skills and capacity within their own school or group of schools. If a school-led improvement system is to thrive, partnerships will have to find more ways of generating capacity within local schools to support development and, in particular, collaboration across schools. There are

examples of partnerships resourcing schools to support other schools on a longer-term basis so classes are not disrupted. There are examples, too, of schools inviting others in to see practice rather than going out to deliver training centrally.

However, for collaboration at system level to really work, headteachers, rightly, need to see evidence that shows the benefit that might accrue for their own school. Certainly, research into the role of NLEs (Hill and Matthews, 2008) found national support schools continued to improve, albeit at a slower rate than the school being supported.

Some partnerships have reported considerable difficulties in appointing people to lead and manage their organisation, with some having to advertise several times. Those that did not need to do so invariably had someone in post who had previously worked as part of the local authority or been a headteacher at a local school. However, some indications are now emerging to suggest that the potential of these partnerships to improve the current system is beginning to attract successful and inspirational leaders.

It is clear too that many of the more commercial partnerships are being cushioned for a few years, as many people who were either made redundant or took early retirement from local authority improvement teams are still keen to undertake part-time work. At the same time, local authorities are giving support through a range of secondments to these partnerships. In some instances, to attract good leaders, councils have agreed to employ the managing director or CEO, thereby protecting individual pension arrangements, and they then immediately second them to the partnership. In the longer term, it is hard to see how some of the smaller areas in particular will be able to afford the sorts of salary and pension benefits associated either with local government, MAT or headteacher pay and conditions.

Maintaining rigour in ‘the land of nice’

The difficulty of holding hard conversations within a voluntary club, the educational land of nice (City et al, 2009), presents an obvious challenge.

In a traditional, top-down accountability system, conversations are couched within the hierarchy of various performance management systems, with the ultimate sanction of dismissal. In a voluntary, often subscription-paying club, this is not an option, even if it were thought to be desirable.

This means routine systems have to be established which use each partnership’s intelligence-gathering as part of what Munby and Fullan (2016) call a ‘feedback-rich culture’. It can be the route into asking questions and holding an open discussion about progress and performance as well as systems and practice. This enables honest, candid and sometimes problem-solving conversations to take place, with the emphasis on what is happening and what is needed to support improvement. Keeping the focus on the description and analysis of practice and on the nature of the support for improvement remains helpful, since this approach can constructively challenge thinking and stimulate discussion. It is essentially action-based. This focus on

practice, current goals and the next level of work can also enable progress to be monitored and assessment to be used formatively.

The role of quantitative data as a tool for school improvement is well rehearsed and widely accepted. However, if a different improvement model is to be established through partnerships, this focus needs to be wider than just hard data. It needs to relate to the relationship between teaching and learning, and should focus very practically on the sort of professional development that makes that link more effective. This sort of data can emerge from a range of activities, such as observation, incremental coaching, joint practice, analysis of problems and case studies, or feedback from students. The focus is on how to improve rather than on proving what has been achieved. This sort of data is owned by participants and supports professional accountability within and across schools. It is also best placed in a longer-term relationship, focused on continuous improvement, where there is trust in both process and people.

Shifting the current accountability mindset

The issues around accountability have been mentioned earlier in this think-piece. However, a major challenge may be that the public accountability framework is so deeply embedded in the school system that it deters collaboration. Recent research (Greany and Higham, in print) reflects how strongly this accountability model has been internalised in schools and in MATs.

Partnerships that have set out ambitious outcomes for schools in the area are, in effect, signalling schools' collective responsibility for their achievements. As I have argued throughout, this is not top-down accountability with a statutory base but voluntary and shared professional accountability. If area partnerships are to have any permanence, it is crucial they assume collective responsibility for the outcomes for the children and young people in schools in the area. Given how deeply public accountability is embedded, this challenge needs a radical shift in mind-set and culture.

It is relatively easy to sign up for ambitious outcomes but harder for schools to move beyond the individual accountability for quality and performance they have always known. As indicated earlier, partnerships find it easier to do this if the emphasis is on a moral obligation to do the best for all children in the area and a professional obligation to other colleagues with whom they are working on initiatives and programmes. They also find it easier to do this if there is practical investment in school capacity, even at very small scale. This sort of approach to accountability is motivating.

Teachers told me how much they enjoy working together on planning or on developing practice and how keen they are to keep it going. They believe the experience is making them better teachers so this will also support their own work within individual schools. Partnerships report, however, that competition is much more marked among headteachers than among teachers or governors. The risk therefore remains that competition between schools, led by some headteachers, may prevent deeper collaboration.

Resourcing partnerships

For many partnerships, resource pressures and the need to generate income risk causing them to lose sight of their core purpose.

Although many partnerships received, or are receiving, initial support to establish themselves in money or kind from local authorities, most expect to have become self-sufficient over time. They know that creating a sustainable business model is crucial if the partnership for improvement is to survive. Consequently, in some areas, trading and generating income from activities, services and products have become all-important. Most partnerships recognise the risks that these activities could distract them from a sharper focus on increasing aspiration and achievement locally. It can also divert attention from developing a more innovative, school-led approach to improvement; the emphasis becomes, instead, on more traditional CPD, including courses, conferences and activities that generate income.

It is in the interests of both local and central government to use, or at least test out, the potential of these partnerships to deliver some of their strategic goals and priorities. Adding them to the list of organisations that can bid for government grants, such as the DfE's Strategic School Improvement Fund, would be a small but helpful step forward.

As mentioned earlier in the think- piece, evaluation of these partnerships is scant. Forming partnerships is easy but sustaining them is hard. Investment in evaluation of their work, or aspects of it, would build learning both locally and nationally. The establishment of a long-term evaluation, perhaps a randomised controlled trial (RCT) through the Education Endowment Foundation, would be useful but so too would smaller pieces of formative evaluation that would feed into their development and school improvement.

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I have considered the work of several current partnerships, most particularly those listed below. This entailed studying a range of information, including documentation about design, scope and functions, current strategies, plans, programmes and contracts, together with a range of data and information collected by the partnerships themselves. I have also had a number of discussions with those involved in running many of these partnerships and others involved locally. I should like to record my thanks to them all for sharing their time, knowledge and experience.

Partnerships

Basildon Education Partnership	www.basildonbep.org.uk
Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP)	www.bep.education
Brent Schools Partnership	www.bsp.london
Buckinghamshire Learning Trust	www.learningtrust.com
Camden Learning	www.camdenlearning.org.uk
Cumbria Alliance of System Leaders	www.cumbriaalliance.org.uk
Essex	www.schools-secure.essex.gov.uk
Hackney Learning Trust	www.learningtrust.co.uk
Harrow School Improvement Partnership	www.hsipharrow.co.uk
Herts for Learning	www.hertsforlearning.co.uk
Hounslow Learning Partnership	www.hounslowlearningpartnership.co.uk
Kent Association of Headteachers	www.kelsi.org.uk
The Leicestershire Primary Partnership	www.leicesterpp.org.uk
Lincolnshire Learning Partnership	www.lincolnshirelearningpartnership.org
Liverpool Learning Partnership	www.liverpoollearningpartnerships.com
Learn Sheffield	www.learnsheffield.co.uk

Newham Partnership Working	www.npw.uk.com
North Tyneside Learning Trust	www.ntlearningtrust.org.uk
Octavo Partnership (<i>Hounslow</i>)	www.octavopartnership.org
Oldham Education Partnership	www.oesc.org.uk
SCHOOLS NorthEast	www.schoolsnortheast.com
Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP)	www.the-partnership.org.uk
Wigan System Led Alliance/Partnership	www.wigan.gov.uk

Peer review programmes in common use by partnerships

Challenge Partners: the QA Review	www.challengepartners.org
EDT: Schools Partnership Programme	www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com
London Centre for Leadership in Learning	www.lcll.org.uk
NAHT: Instead	www.naht.org.uk
SSAT: Peer Review Programme	www.ssatuk.co.uk

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