National College for School Leadership

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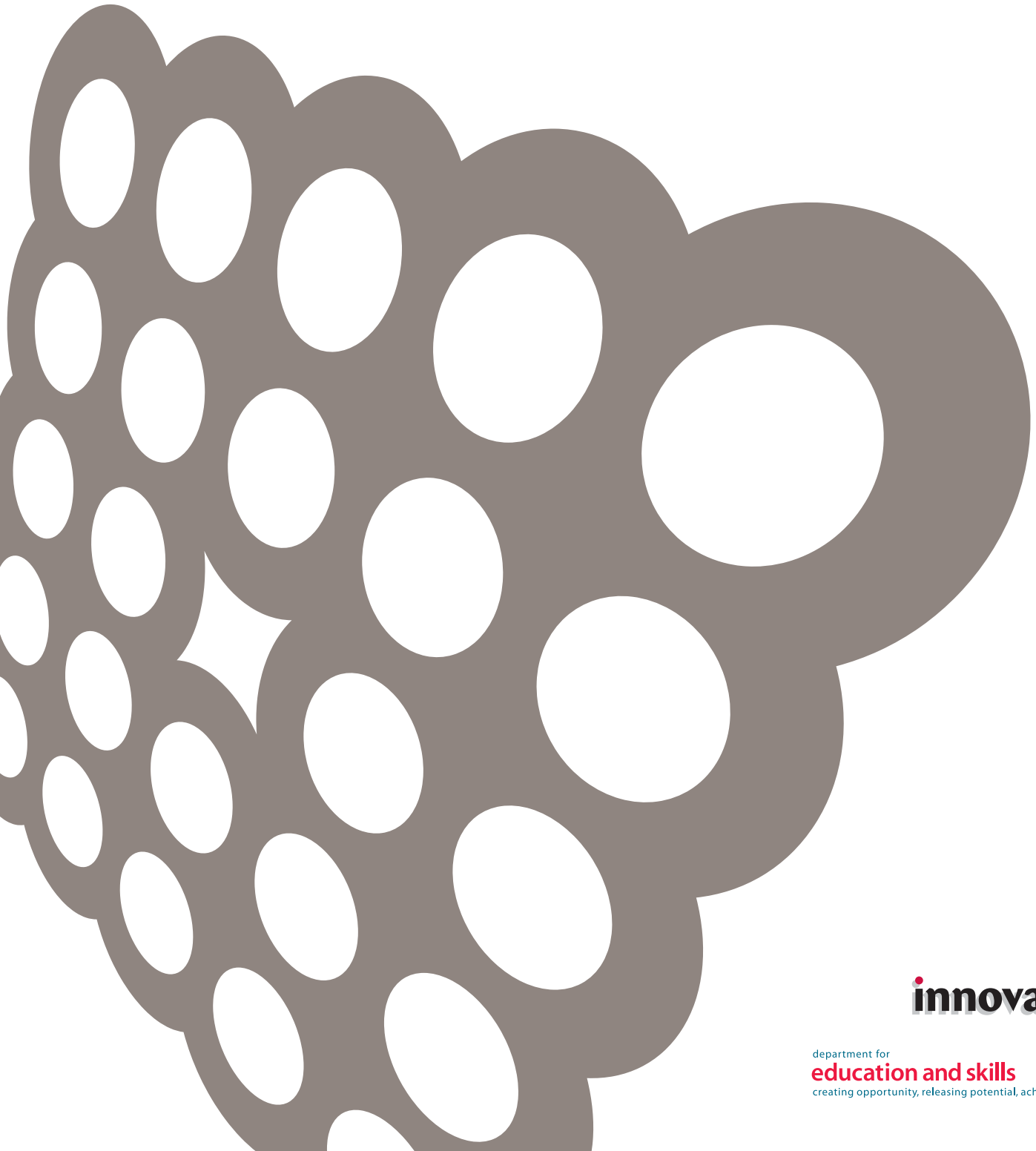
Network Research

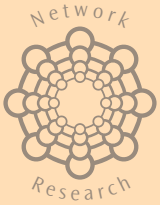
Spreading innovation across local authorities:

Testing systemic solutions



innovation

department for education and skills
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence



Testing systemic solutions

The key messages identified by Michael Fullan from his work with the Learning Project, a partnership between a group of local authorities in England, the National College for School Leadership and the Department for Education and Skills Innovation Unit.

Michael Fullan

Acknowledgements
The LEArning Project depended on the work of colleagues from the participating local authorities, not least the students and staff in too many schools and other locations to describe as well as they deserve. It drew deeply on the experience of Michael Fullan and his colleagues, especially Nancy Watson. Thanks are also due to Valerie Hannon at the Department for Education and Skills Innovation Unit, David Jackson at the National College for School Leadership and Paul Roberts at the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). Tracey Allen, Chris Chapman, Maggie Farrar, Michael Jopling and Denis Mongon led the writing team; Bob Clarke, Jo Bester and Natalie Collins made it happen.

Introduction

The LEArning Project

The LEArning Project is a partnership between a group of local authorities in England, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Innovation Unit.

Professor Michael Fullan and his team at the University of Toronto, pioneers in researching new collaborative ways of working, acted as a 'critical friend' to the project. In addition, the think tank, Demos, placed the learning experience of the project in a wider international context. The enquiry process undertaken by the participating local authorities was supported by Dr Christopher Chapman and a team from Warwick University.

The project aimed to enhance the learning and well-being of young people, adults, organisations and communities through learning networks that promote personal development and system-wide change. It drew on the wealth of experience of local authorities at the leading edge of practice in networked learning. Agreed objectives were to:

- help local authorities develop their capacity for facilitating and supporting networks of schools and multi-agency partnerships
- research and share knowledge about the most effective ways in which local authorities can support networking and collaboration
- develop models and new practices within local authorities which will influence and shape policy

As part of their involvement, the participating local authorities drew up a series of questions that would help them identify, implement and enquire into practices which add value to learning networks. The emerging answers show a significant shift in their perceptions and approach, resulting in a focus on *why* and *how* rather than *who* and *what*. The rationale and manner of change, with all that can mean for building capacity and invigorating communities, is now more valued than micro-management of plans and services.

The local authorities

Blackburn with Darwen, Bexley, Bolton, Cambridgeshire, Cheshire, Cornwall, Cumbria, Dorset, Essex, Gateshead, Kirklees, Knowsley, Lancashire, Hammersmith and Fulham, Hampshire, Kingston, Sandwell, Wandsworth and West Sussex.

This think piece

Michael Fullan's think piece places the LEArning Project within the context of the systemic changes required by *Every Child Matters* and the development of children's services.

This think piece will give a sense of how the use of a mechanism such as the local authority network, developed through the LEArning Project, can contribute towards the achievement of ownership, coherence, capacity building and impact across the local authority landscape. It can be used as a stand alone piece or read in conjunction with the other booklets in the toolkit. Together, these booklets offer a comprehensive insight into the role of local authorities in developing networks and collaborative partnerships.

'For us, this project is about enabling system-wide reform through networking, collaboration and co-operation, and we have to start by modelling this ourselves.'

Testing systemic solutions

When potentially powerful new strategies begin to proliferate widely, they typically represent a solution in search of a problem or, more often, many solutions in search of many problems. Networked learning communities is one such phenomenon, producing so many potential solutions of which the LEArning Project is just one.

When problems are multi-faceted and intractable it is necessary to go through an exploratory or divergent phase when many different approaches are spawned and allowed to happen and unfold. At some point, however, divergence itself becomes a problem. When complexity ends up creating clutter, it is time then to rein in the phenomenon. In my view, this is where we are with networked learning. It is time to stand back, take stock, and re-examine purpose, strategies and impact. The LEArning Project is a bold experiment in just that context – networking some 21 large, diverse local authorities at the very time the agenda is radically, ambitiously and ambiguously changing with *Every Child Matters* and the emergence of children's services.

Ever-increasing complexity is a given, so what we need now are the strategies that can achieve the best out of society's diverse problems and richness; in a word, solutions that are systemic. In this regard the main challenges are:

- **ownership** with respect to core values and vision
- **coherence** amidst complexity
- **capacity** for continuous and sustained progress
- **impact** which is evidence-driven

All four components are enormously difficult to achieve on a small scale, but because we need systemic solutions we need to think of a net outcome as a collective enterprise. And collective, of course, needs to include personalisation – every person matters.

In the accompanying collation of initial learning from the project, it is fascinating to note just how consistently the themes identified in the project match the four big challenges I have proposed above. We read here about each local authority's need to define focus, create ownership, promote structures, grow capacity and test effectiveness.

We see here identified five key components of effectiveness – shared purpose, enquiry, trust, facilitation and impact. We see the LEArning Project network finding its own sense of purpose by struggling with these issues and we also see it deal with them in a further series of local engagements with schools and other partners.

For my money, from here on in the crucial question is not what are the characteristics of effective networks, but rather how can networked strategies effectively address these four big challenges – ownership, coherence, capacity and impact – by partnering them with systemic solutions?

Above all, networked learning strategies should be aimed at transcending the ceiling or plateau problem: the problem that occurs when systems tighten the focus from above, thereby increasing performance, but soon reaching the limit of a top-down strategy (Fullan, 2004). The need, then, is to seek new strategies which capture the hearts and minds of all participants: to seek, in other words, to galvanise the commitment and ingenuity of large swathes of the system.

Incidentally, all reform can be conceived as aspects of the too-tight or too-loose problem. Finding the dynamic balance between tight-loose is the perennial dilemma. In this respect, networked learning communities represent powerful strategies for simultaneously incorporating tightness-looseness. They offer the potential to incorporate tight-loose within an organic system in which the very processes serve to provide built-in checks and balances to prevent straying too far toward limiting tightness or its opposite, diffuse looseness.

For this to be politically acceptable, the emerging system cannot become too diffuse. The public now demands transparency, accountability and performance. I would say that networked strategies, however, have a bias towards diffuseness. This means that we must pay extra attention to integrating or coherence-making levers. We must continually attend to focus and consolidation. I name four such levers here, all of which can be found in the LEArning Project.

1 **Having a national agenda as a rallying point**
In the LEArning Project, *Every Child Matters* is the agenda and the fact that this agenda is complex and ambiguous is the point. Networked strategies must continually engage in and be judged by their ability to clarify and move the national agenda forward by working it through local and national lenses.

2 **Evidence-based decision-making**
This, if you like, means data-driven action in relation to the national agenda (again including local lenses). Focusing on self-evaluation and external assessments in this regard serves as a steering and sorting mechanism relative to progress.

3 **Capacity-building**
This needs to consist of collective increases in the power of groups to accomplish greater achievement through new knowledge, skills and dispositions, enhanced resources, and increased motivation and commitment. Increasing collective capacity we must realise is a coherence-maker. When people become better at something they become clearer and more committed.

4 **Enlarging one's sphere of engagement**
Networks get you out of your own narrow world. And when you enlarge your world laterally within your own level of the system, and vertically across levels, you gain ideas and perspective. When many people do this, you literally change the very context – for the better – within which you work.

These four levers are synergistic. They feed on each other in a virtuous cycle. A rallying agenda, data-driven deliberations, capacity-building and enlarging one's world in concert are systemic solutions.

In sum, I believe we should push ahead with networked learning communities like the LEArning Project. In so doing we will strengthen what I called the integrating levers. At the same time, we should recognise that no strategy will achieve stable coherence – nor would that be a good thing. We should appreciate that even within a diffuse system, practitioners in clustered combinations can carve out powerful niches of effectiveness as some individual local authorities do. Peter Drucker said, "*entrepreneurs exploit innovation*". One route to strengthening networked learning communities is to have a growing number of leaders exploiting the strategy for the greater public good.

The LEArning Project illustrates some potentially powerful explorations led by local authorities using networked communities in a variety of partnerships and collaboratives to strengthen their own internal systems, while contributing to and learning from other authorities pursuing the same complex agendas. The project throws an interesting light on some of the related challenges. The question it leaves us with is how can we now build on these early initiatives to accomplish the greater ownership, coherence, capacity and impact which systemic change beyond the plateau demands of us all?

Reference

Fullan, M, 2004, *System thinkers in action*, London, Department for Education and Skills

To order a copy of this publication please email **nlc@ncsl.org.uk** quoting the reference NR/LEArningProject, or download directly from **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

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Networked Learning Communities

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