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Network Research

Spreading innovation across local authorities:

Creating a national network

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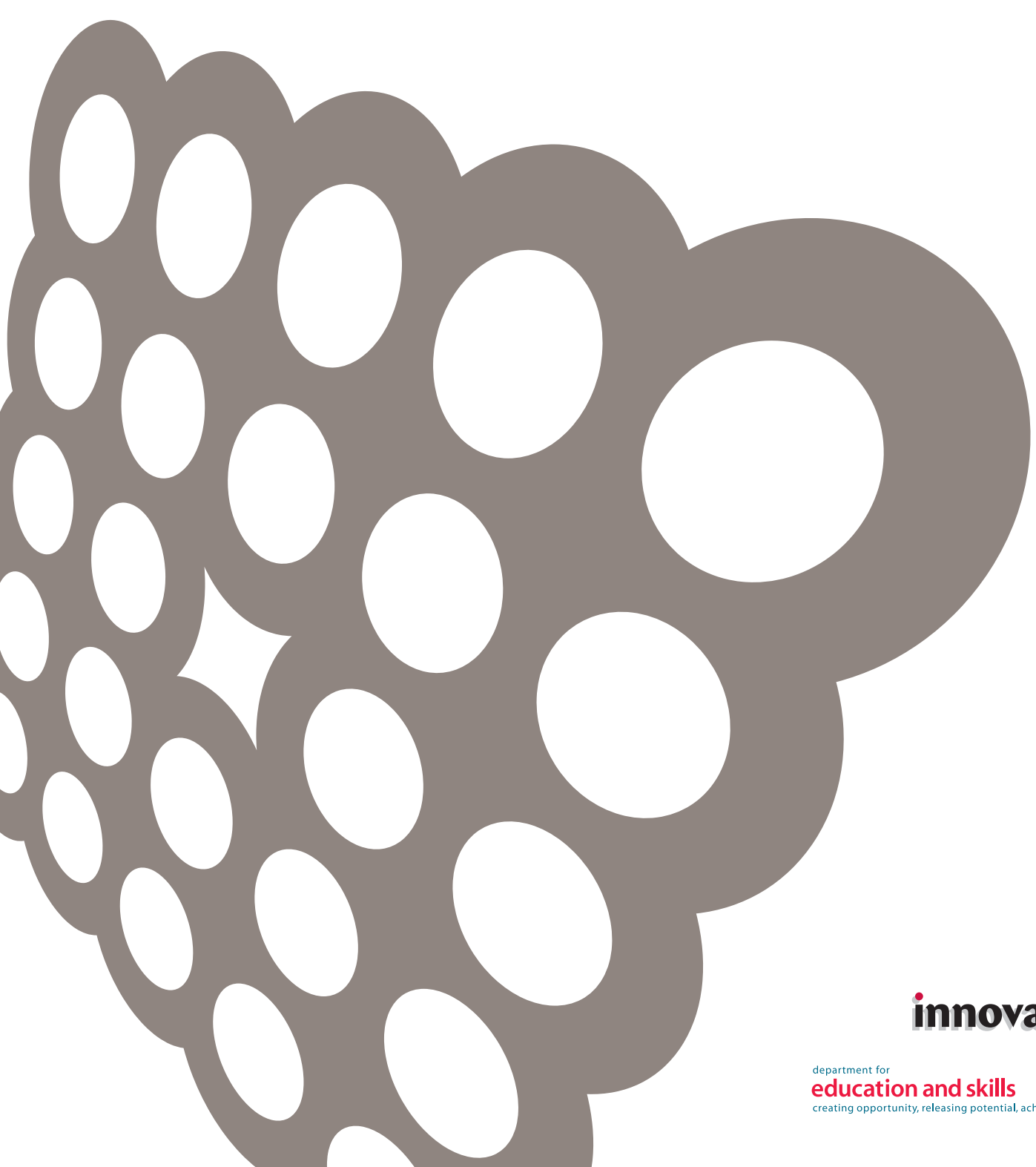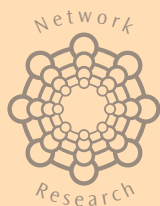
Creating a national network

Some key messages for local authorities emerging from 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.

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How to use this booklet

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.

Using this booklet

This booklet 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.

More details of the case studies drawn upon as illustrations throughout this booklet can be found at **www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk** by using the key word box to search for the LEArning Project.

Significant findings summarised in this booklet focus around five key features.

Key features

1 the importance of shared purpose
2 the contribution of an enquiry approach
3 the value of trust
4 the effect of facilitation
5 the impact of power and authority

The booklet covers:

- The background to the project in more detail – this will inform understanding of the material presented in each of the booklets in the toolkit.
- An introduction to the key features – each of the key features is explored in relation to the two local authority groupings convened by the project; chief officers and other participating officers.
- Questions to challenge you to 'pause for thought'.
- A summary of learning points and implications for local authority practice.

Background

It is very easy to forget what a difference *Every Child Matters* has made to our way of thinking and working. It was only a few years ago that multi-disciplinary networks were on the horizon for many senior policy-makers and strategists but for few practitioners. Policy-makers were only just beginning to talk about Primary National Strategy Learning Networks as well as Education Improvement Partnerships.

Yet for some time a network approach has been emerging across our educational system. It has underpinned a number of educational initiatives in recent years including Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities and 'LIG' – leadership incentive grants. Many of these initiatives assumed that when it comes to partnership working, schools are best left to get on with it themselves. As a result, a number of these projects were directly funded from central government and in some cases there was little direct involvement from the local authority. However, in other cases the projects were seen as an opportunity to develop the role of the local authority in the service of networks and collaborative partnerships.

It is against this backdrop that in 2002, NCSL and the DfES Innovation Unit decided to sponsor a project that looked at networked learning from the perspective of local authorities. They wanted to explore the role local authorities could play in developing partnerships and if, and how, this could enhance both learning and the well-being of young people. Such a project would be at the heart of the children's achievement and well-being agenda.

Getting the basics right

From the outset, NCSL and the Innovation Unit decided that if they were serious about understanding the dynamics of partnerships they needed to take the lead in brokering a network.

To model a collaborative way of working they had to face a number of fundamental questions:

• How do you initiate a network before you have any members?
• Who do you invite to join the network?
• What should its purpose and principles be?

First, they identified a number of local authorities that had a history of innovative local approaches to collaboration. These authorities were interested in both school-to-school learning networks and the development of children's services. This seemed a good place to start developing a learning network.

Secondly, they invited the chief officers from the authorities to form a think tank that would meet three times a year. The group needed to be prepared to share learning between themselves as well as influence policy development at a national and local level. A separate group of officers from the participating authorities was also formed to lead on implementation and enquiry. The group, known as participating officers, was to meet every couple of months and be given support and training to help them share learning within the group and within their local authorities.

Finally, the LEArning Project was created from this fledging network with a set of guiding principles and three key questions:

1 What would a local authority that functioned as a learning system look like and what models of leadership learning would characterise it?

2 What can we learn from the best practice in those local authorities which are encouraging networked, multi-agency working across services?

3 What strategies should we be adopting to raise the achievement, attainment and aspirations of young people in some of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities?

Where are we now?

Two years on and answers to the first two, and to some unexpected questions, have emerged and form the backbone to this toolkit. How this research translates into specific strategies for young people is still unfolding within the individual local authority projects running across the country.

What are the key features of the LEArning Network?

A critical finding from the two-year LEArning Project was that the local authority, through its emergent children's services, has an important part to play in developing collaborative and networked solutions for service delivery. At the same time, the LEArning Project became, in effect, a networked field study in its own right. It became evident that five key features of the project, summarised below and described on the following pages, provide lessons both for similar and for other kinds of networks.
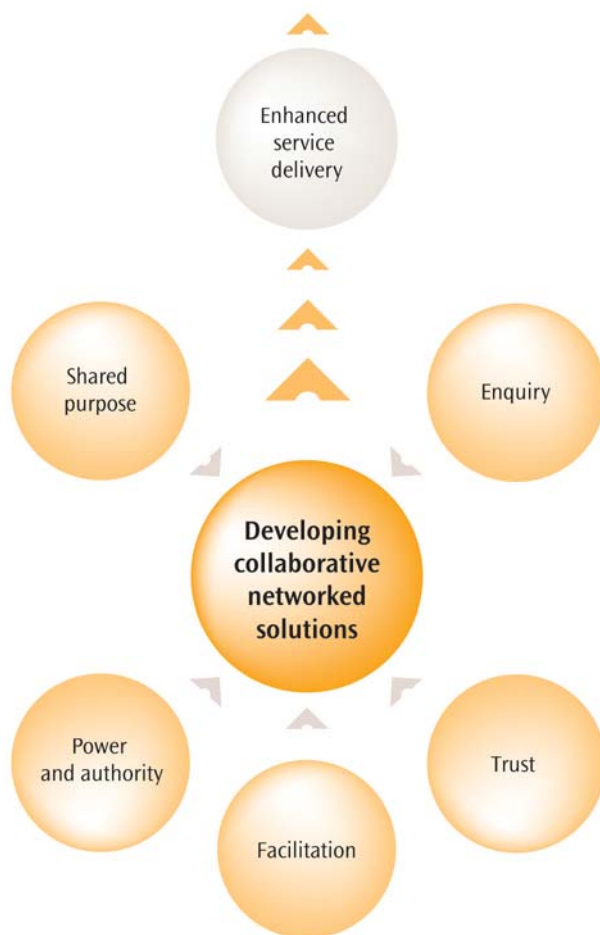

figure 1: Developing collaborative network solutions

1. The importance of shared purpose

Shared purpose has been a vital element in the LEArning Project. However, when national policy encounters local strategic planning, shared rhetoric can disguise profound disagreement about the processes to adopt and the outcomes to be achieved. When local service activity provides the focus for enquiry and learning in a 'safe' context, shared purpose can emerge even from insecure origins.

2. The contribution of an enquiry approach

Shared enquiry is a powerful tool for network coherence and cohesion. The think tank had to find an approach to enquiry and networked learning which corresponded best to its emerging role as a forum for exploring and learning about the emotional intelligence of leadership in upheaval.

The participants' group had to find the best approach to enquiry and networked learning which corresponded to its role as a forum exploring the practicalities of local operational issues.

3. The value of trust

Trust cannot be taken for granted in high-level professional networks, nor can it be imported. The absence of trust is inhibiting: trust must be nurtured.

4. The effect of facilitation

External facilitation is enormously influential in partnership and network development.

5. The impact of power and authority

Power and authority are strong undercurrents even in apparently calm waters. Their eddies are neither obvious nor predictable.

Key feature 1: The importance of shared purpose

Chief officers

The think tank members were, in effect, volunteers interested in networks as a vehicle for developing service delivery. Their reasons for being involved can be summarised as:

- To help make sense of the different networking initiatives and provide personal development.

- To develop shared perspectives on partnership and collaboration for their own organisations.

- To be able to quickly share learning between local authorities and influence policy-makers.

- To enhance the status of their authority by being part of a leading edge project.

- To promote the developing role of local authorities as the broker in network development and *Every Child Matters* delivery.

At the beginning, many of the chief officers disagreed about the processes which the project should employ. At a time of radical change, with the Children Act unfolding, many of them began to doubt the value of local projects as a vehicle for shared learning. The purpose of the chief officer network was challenged by the group several times and also reconfigured. Increasingly, the think tank turned into a leadership learning network focused on emotional needs and strengths as well as learning. Ownership moved away from the original brokers of the group to the think tank members.

Messages from practice

*Participating officer: diary record
Core Contact meeting, Cranfield – September 2004:*

"My initial confusion between the 'project' and the 'enquiry' was at last clarified for me and I could see more clearly what I had to do to advance the work 'on the ground' and gather information and evidence to support the enquiry. The two strands of our enquiry became much clearer… Our enquiry question was developed further and we arrived at a final version."

Participating officers

The participating officers did not volunteer. Their start was as distant from the principles of good networking and collaboration as it is possible to get. They were largely a collection of people told, at short notice, to be in a certain place on a certain day. Some were uncertain why they had been told to come and some resentful of the time lost from what they perceived as more important work. There was no shared purpose, limited awareness of potential processes and some profound insecurities about power and authority in the group.

This group survived and prospered by vigorously examining its sense of purpose and by mining for the shared elements. From that tentative start and despite the varied locations hundreds of miles apart, a tight, purposeful focus on important local work and shared purpose provided the architecture for the group.

Pause for thought…?

If officers in your own local authority were to set up a LEArning-type network with colleagues from other authorities, what would be the most powerful common ground between you?

If you were to go ahead, what might be your shared purpose?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

Key feature 2: The contribution of an enquiry approach

Chief officers

Using the local projects as a source of new learning did not match the pressing needs of chief officers. Increasingly, national policy developments required them to operate in areas for which their previous experience had not prepared them. They felt that more time should be given to 'experiential learning' – sharing and learning from their personal knowledge base. In addition, they wanted to explore the emotional pressures in their new roles of leading radical strategic developments.

The solution for the think tank was to use a combination of presentations by its own members on agreed themes and action learning style groups that would both enquire into and problem-solve their most pressing issues. The activities helped chief officers move from 'this is what we are doing' to a less comfortable exploration of 'this is how it feels to be doing it'. Members of the think tank now describe it as the only place where they can get together with chief officers from across the country to explore this type of empathetic enquiry and learning.

Participating officers

It is a significant piece of systemic learning that an enquiry-based approach proved to be a challenge for many of the local authority officers and their school colleagues. Familiar with the question 'what do we want to do?' and accomplished at reporting 'what we have done', they were less comfortable with asking 'what do we want to learn?' They were even less certain about describing 'what we have learned'. A system sincerely interested in learning about and understanding the effects of policy cannot presume an intuitive capacity for reflection in its members.

A series of workshops and local support activities around the nature and organisation of enquiry have been a central feature of the work of the participants' group. Some of these local authorities now report that the value of enquiry is so well regarded in their organisation that any new initiative is not started until enquiry questions for it have been defined.

Pause for thought…?

How well is the practice of enquiry understood and used in your own authority?

What would you want to learn?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

Messages from practice

Examples of project enquiry questions:

How do learning networks support the development of inclusive services for young people in support of 'Every Child Matters' and inclusive neighbourhood schools?

How do professional networks within and across schools and public service boundaries identify successful practice and how do they share that practice to the benefit of young people's learning and well-being?

What approaches used by a local authority co-ordinator are effective in supporting the building of collaboration between co-ordinators of existing networks and communities?

What types of external facilitation and consultation from the local authority contribute to the effective networking of schools? In what ways can networks of schools use their collaborative work to address ECM outcomes?

Key feature 3: The value of trust

Chief officers

Many of the chief officers knew each other before the project. Their previous experience of meeting together was characterised by information sharing during which each was required to appear in his or her 'best light'.

At the start, internal personal censorship permeated. Trust was far from guaranteed and its emergence took time and therefore commitment. The approach adopted by the think tank of reflective enquiry and sharing problems, rather than proclaiming solutions, became a powerful medium for building trust.

Participating officers

Trust grew in the participants' group more quickly that it did in the think tank although it faced the same hurdles of insecurity between local authorities. There was the nagging worry amongst some members that saying the wrong thing would impact on the standing of their local authority.

The development of the group was helped by similar enquiry and sharing processes to those in the think tank. It also benefited from more frequent meetings and a quicker sense of shared purpose around the 'real' network-based projects being undertaken in individual authorities. These were subject to peer reviews as well as being written up as LEArning Project case studies.

Messages from practice

Reflections on the value of trust:

Chief officer
"At first, no-one seemed at all certain what 'rules' applied to the Think Tank's work but the Chief Officers and the national team had enough shared purpose to make it work. Between us we made it into a group where we could all share achievements and worries without thinking that we were boasting or whining or being damned."

Two participating officers
"Talking about real issues to people from other authorities was an empowering and trusting process that will encourage our 'network of learners' to extend beyond the life of the LEArning Project. We might have missed some opportunities along the way due to the focus and pace of the 'outcomes led' agenda, but trusting relationships will mean that some aspects of the collaboration will continue. The core contact days were as much about our personal needs as our local authority learning needs. Networks start with relationships – not necessarily common tasks."

"Talking about real issues to people in other authorities on my facilitation visits felt a cautious business at first. This was partly because of the initial feeling of not being clued into the particular context and way of doing things in this different setting. But actually this also emerged as the very strength of the facilitation experience - being able to ask the 'crude' question and bring a different perspective to bear. And the quality of this benefit increased over time. So staying with the facilitation over a sustained period was crucial."

Pause for thought…?

From your own experience, what approaches can help build trust?

How might you introduce these into a group?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

Key feature 4: The effect of facilitation

Chief officers

A highly regarded, former chief officer was employed to work with the think tank members to help them define and facilitate a sense of purpose and approach to the project. Part of this process confirmed that healthy networks take on a life of their own. Another powerful piece of learning was that at times of complex and demanding change there is little, if any, opportunity for senior public servants to explore their emerging practice in professionally secure and emotionally safe circumstances.

Most of the places where chief officers talk about their work require them to appear as efficient managers and charismatic leaders. The think tank, which included members from local authorities, NCSL and the Innovation Unit, had become a place where people could engage in mutual enquiry and joint learning about the complex and at times overwhelming demands of their roles.

Participating officers

Perhaps the most significant learning from the project was that facilitation skills were not well developed in local authority staff. Facilitation has been cited as one of the most important parts of the learning experience. All members of the group had high level facilitation training and a number of them then offered to facilitate a cluster of local authorities. Participants described a demonstrable change in the style of working between the local authority and its schools being modelled through the facilitation process.

In the words of one facilitator: *"This has changed how I work with my own schools. The questions I ask have changed – they are more 'forensic'. I persist until I get to some of the underlying tensions and issues."*

Messages from practice

Using external facilitation as part of the enquiry project:

Some of the local authorities invited a colleague from a different local authority to work with them as a facilitator.

"The perspective of an outsider drew out the value of particular developments, and in particular the role of the local authority in devolving responsibility and accountability to networks...

The initial experience of local authority-to-local authority facilitation highlights the contribution it makes to learning within this project. The following are important elements of the process:

- Facilitation plays an important part in foregrounding the key issues in the development and research within the project.

- Facilitation gives clearer perspectives on what has been achieved and key issues for development.

- Facilitation validates what has been achieved beyond the individual local authority.

- Sharing knowledge and developments between local authorities improves their understanding."

Pause for thought…?

What benefits have you observed or experienced as a result of acting as a facilitator or from being a member of a facilitated group?

Where and how might more use be made of this approach?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

Key feature 5: The impact of power and authority

Chief officers

The challenge of being involved in a networked learning setting creates a significant learning experience for organisations that have previously been based on traditional hierarchies. The idea of networked learning communities also sits uneasily alongside a strong recent history around the world of education reform through top-down central policy mandates.

These issues were thrashed out within the think tank. Despite everything that had been said on all sides about co-ownership and co-construction of the LEArning Project, some members of the group still wanted the project sponsors to take on the ownership and 'tell us what this is all about'.

Yet ownership came when the think tank had a real problem to solve. Did it have a future and should it carry on? Was the think tank a new kind of experience or should it be approached through previous roles, culture and expectations? In many co-constructed learning networks change would need to be authorised and managed – in this one it only needs to be facilitated.

Participating officers

Networks cannot operate through power, control and hierarchical relationships. So it was essential that the people involved in the project had the authority to make decisions and support their local projects according to their best judgements.

In effect, the participants' group faced the question which so many networks encounter: 'Are the right people in the room to start this network?' In part, the inevitable answer is that the people in the room are the right people at that moment. It does not mean that membership of the network has to be fixed and impervious for all time. Some participants were challenged by the process. They had to move from a culture where permission needed to be sought and 'playing within the rules laid down' was applauded, to a much more independent role. They had to experience the experimentation and the boundary breaking that comes with networking in order that they could promote it within their own local networks. This was, and is, a painful transition for some participants, although a positive experience for most.

Pause for thought…?

How does power and authority operate within the groupings to which you belong?

If you wish to sound out other local authorities about setting up a LEArning-type network, how might you initially manage the power and authority issues as the champion of the idea?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

Messages from practice

Negotiating expectations with the powerful:

"Networked learning being diverse, non-linear, non-incremental did cause some tension, as learning in networks is not the same as attending a structured course knowing what the expectations and outcomes may be. (It) meant it was not always easy to report to senior officers of our local authority a direct and tangible impact from the core group network sessions... the local authority has clear and tight time frames to work to and the slow and messy nature of networked learning did not sit easily with the pressure to respond to a central government agenda in relation to the ECM agenda, the focus of our enquiry."

Conclusions

As a leading project about learning, there were many lessons that emerged from the research. However, the four key learning points can be summed up as follows:

1 If you want to use partnerships and networks for effective service delivery, this approach needs to be experienced and modelled throughout the educational system.

2 Collaborative partnerships cannot be taken for granted, in or between national and local government agencies any more than between schools. The models of brokerage, facilitation and skill development which are proving useful to school partnerships are equally necessary at other levels in the system.

3 Unless the emotional needs of senior local authority officers at times of major upheaval can be beneficially acknowledged and supported, those needs will inhibit creativity and progress.

4 The willingness to reflect on practice through enquiry is important in a system that is complex and rapidly changing – yet this is not fully valued in current practice.

From the outset the chief officers were willing to help shape national policy, but only if it was linked to what was happening on the ground in their local authority projects. The most common issue for the chief officers was that the DfES does not understand the complexity of life on the ground. The challenge that was thrown to the DfES from the think tank is to make sure that national policy focus remains grounded in what is learned through local work. This is also a challenge to the system – how does it build and promote a strong evidence base with which to influence and shape policy? This will require policy-makers to model the principles of enquiry-based networked learning. It will also require a change in the relationship between policy-makers and practitioners at all levels in the system.

If a system is to support and encourage networks as part of its drive to achieve better outcomes, then the system itself needs to adopt collaborative and networked approaches in its own work. This is what the LEArning Project has encouraged local authorities to do, and in so doing has defined key features of such an approach as well as identifying specific learning points.

The project has not been without its tensions, nor its challenges. However, after two years of hard work, 19 of the 21 original local authorities were still involved. The case studies coming out of the project are beginning to show that a large number of these have begun to observe significant shifts in their approach as they move to a more user-focused, networked, collaborative style.

Full case studies can be found on **www.ncsl.org.uk/ communityleadership/communityleadership- learningproject.cfm** and **www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk**

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Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other   learning with each other   learning on behalf of each other