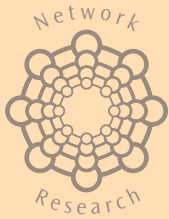
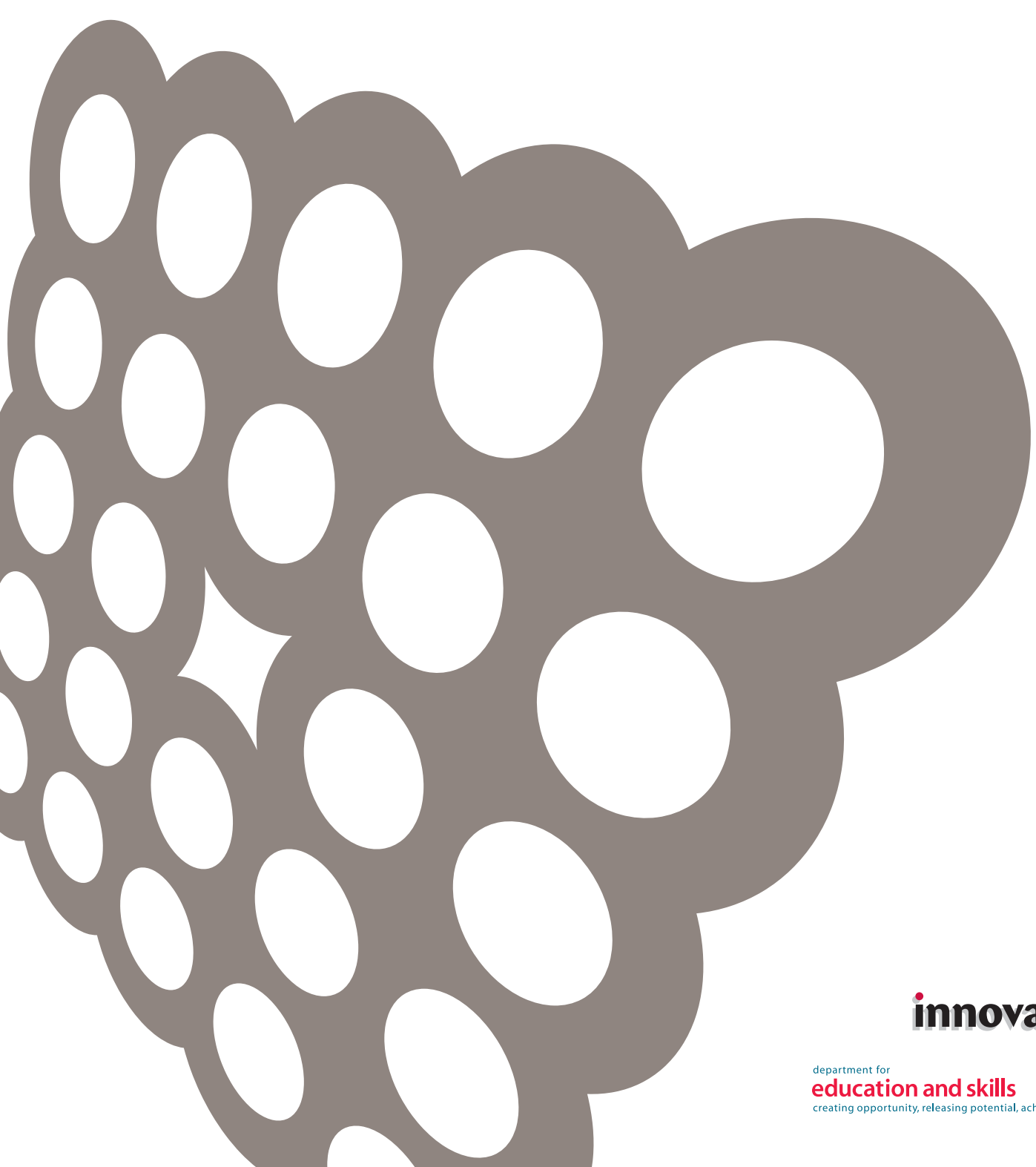


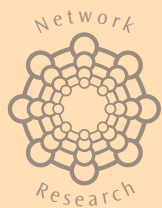
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Spreading innovation across local authorities: Tools of the trade



innovation



Tools of the trade

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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Edited by Karen Carter and Tricia Sharpe

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.

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.

This booklet presents six key approaches used by local authorities in the LEarning Network to initiate and support networks of schools.

Key approaches

- | | |
|---------------|---------------|
| 1 consulting | 4 directing |
| 2 enquiring | 5 responding |
| 3 replicating | 6 landscaping |

The booklet covers:

- An introduction to the approaches and how a local authority might identify which is most appropriate.
- Each approach described in more detail with associated necessary conditions and strategies.
- Boxed reflections related to each approach – drawn from interviews, group discussions and video recordings with senior local authority officers and network participants involved with the LEarning Project.
- Questions to challenge you to 'pause for thought'.

"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."

What are the key approaches for local authorities to initiate and support networks?

Six approaches

During the two-year LEArning Project, local authorities employed a series of strategies to initiate and support networks of schools. Six different approaches, often used in varying combinations, emerged:

- 1 **Consulting** – the local authority working collaboratively with a range of stakeholders to develop a coherent networked-based approach aligned with the authority's overall aims and vision.
- 2 **Enquiring** – the local authority wanting to use enquiry to define issues and enhance understanding through an evidence-based approach.
- 3 **Replicating** – the local authority demonstrating and spreading practice through scaling-up a specific process or issue within new or established networks.
- 4 **Directing** – the local authority determining and driving the agenda or network delivery structures to achieve rapid change.
- 5 **Responding** – the local authority engaging and regenerating established, diverse networks and using negotiation and incentives to cohere them with the authority's vision.
- 6 **Landscaping** – the local authority wanting to achieve coherence around complex and diverse networks through promoting an overarching network superstructure.

Shifting approaches

While the different networking approaches have a number of overlapping components, local authorities in the project tend to identify with one of them that encapsulates their current way of working. The approaches are seen as dynamic and shifting over time, and this is considered key to development and progress.

Most officers gravitate towards approaches that are working towards developing autonomous structures and do not require intense levels of local authority input. A period of structural change is seen as a key factor in a local authority changing from one approach to another.

However, there is a recurring tension between growing a culture of autonomy in networks and developing alignment and coherence. Local authorities often have a view of what structures would be most effective but find it difficult to implement this at the same time as encouraging an autonomous culture. The local authority has to find ways of encouraging its preferred structure, for example by appointing credible leaders from schools to help in this process. A further tension for the local authority is the pressure to provide buy-back services whilst enabling resources for network brokerage, facilitation and support.

Scaling-up

Taking networked approaches to scale was an issue that exercised the participants in the LEArning Project. The enquiry approach is viewed as having the greatest potential in terms of achieving depth. However, depth is often achieved at the expense of spread. For example, within the LEArning Project where local authorities adopted an enquiry approach, a number of enthusiasts demonstrated high levels of commitment to the process and began to make changes, but they often struggled to widen engagement. Ownership can be limited because only a few individuals are involved with the process. However, when an enquiry approach shifts from the local authority to the network itself, progress can be rapid. This is partly due to the fact that the focus of each enquiry is, in general, linked to the setting up of new structures and ways of working.

Local authorities also exhibit different capacities for the brokerage and facilitation of networks. This is defined by a number of elements, including the local history of partnership working, local levels of knowledge and experience in this area and ultimately differential structures and processes in place to support networks.

Choosing an approach

The LEarning Project has developed a framework that can help local authorities identify the best approach to networking at any given time. For example, a local authority interested in developing a sound knowledge base would benefit from adopting an enquiry-based approach, while one already operating with high levels of knowledge creation may want to focus on a replication-focused approach. Authorities with less influence over schools and networks should consider adopting a predominantly consultative-focused approach, while those with higher levels of influence are more likely to be successful at adopting a directive approach. Interestingly, in practice it tends to be local authorities with lower influence that attempt to adopt a directive approach and, perhaps not surprisingly, experience high levels of resistance and low levels of engagement. Local authorities that are seeking cultural change within current networks might usefully focus on responsive approaches to re-energise and re-focus the networks. Those interested in developing coherent structures might focus on the landscaping approach.

These approaches and their associated strategies are empirically grounded and capture some important aspects of emerging local authority practice. However, local authorities recognise that the approaches employed need to change over time. Evidence suggests that the approaches do not operate in isolation from one another. Indeed, they often interact to form a broader strategy concerning the brokerage and development of school-based networks. Approaches

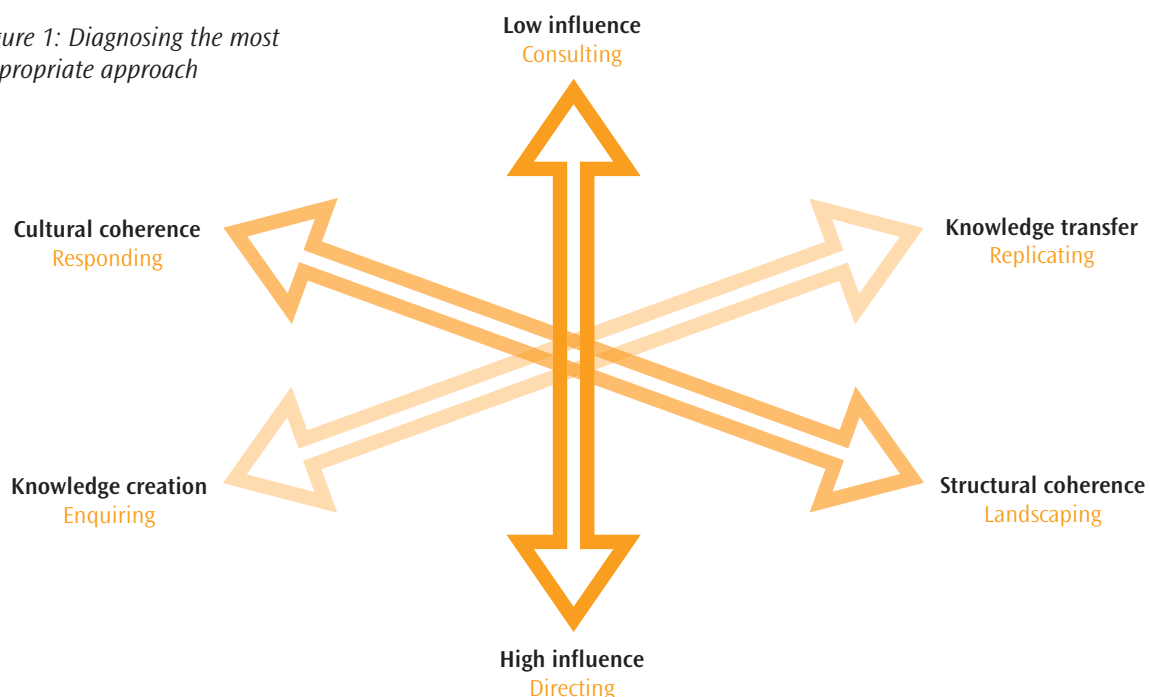
adopted are also related to context. Findings suggest that the local authority capacity for change, development phase, history, traditions and wider culture play an important role in determining the operational mix of approaches adopted. This results in a context-specific, strategic approach to the brokerage and development of school-based networks.

Networks or networking are not new phenomena within national, regional and local contexts. Networks have always existed at both formal and informal levels in both local authorities and schools. However, to date, a key message from the LEarning Project is the danger of ignoring the history, context and conditions that underpin networks.

Local authorities which successfully broker, facilitate and support networks operate with a high degree of sensitivity within their given context. They are able to draw upon a deep understanding of the relationships, aspirations and capacity of all stakeholders involved at multiple levels within the system. Perhaps most importantly, local authorities need to assess accurately their own capability, capacity and commitment to developing networked solutions for educational change through modelling this themselves.

In conclusion, the LEarning Project has confirmed that, for local authorities, fostering system creativity is a more profitable exercise than simply creating systems.

Figure 1: Diagnosing the most appropriate approach



Approach 1: Consulting

A local authority might adopt this approach if:

- **Its knowledge about networking** is considerably less than that held by the networks in their area.
- **Existing networking structures** are multiple and overlapping but built around different visions and purposes. The core purpose of this approach is to achieve buy-in and a common purpose.
- **Capacity to mobilise and sustain networks** resides mainly within the networks themselves and is consequently fragmented.

Strategies employed

Local authorities adopting this approach tend to draw on a number of strategies:

- **Creating a network strategy group** by co-opting key leaders from existing networks.
- **Consultation meetings** with both existing networks and those headteachers who appear reluctant to become involved.
- **One-to-one working** between officers and networks to promote benefits and share ideas.
- **Temporary secondment** of network staff to the local authority to promote outcomes from the consultation process.

Necessary conditions

This approach requires strong relationships between all stakeholders. High levels of trust need to be engendered by the way the consultation takes place. There must be a range of opportunities for individuals, irrespective of position or experience, to become involved with the process. Co-ordinated and effective channels of communication are important to success, particularly for conveying the outcomes of the process at each stage.

For many local authorities this approach is viewed as aspirational, a preferred *modus operandi* to move towards in the future. Paradoxically, many strengths of the consultative approach can be interpreted as limitations. It is sometimes very time-consuming to negotiate and achieve agreement between stakeholders, especially if they have conflicting interests and agendas. The approach may give the impression of a talking shop mentality where much is discussed but little action taken. Consensus-building requires skilled individuals who can link often disparate agendas and recognise the various stages in the process.

Messages from practice

One participating local authority devoted time and resources to consultation, selling its vision for Family Learning Centres through a series of meetings with key stakeholders, deliverers, learning co-ordinators and lead learning mentors from the local authority, as well as through discussions with the headteachers of the pilot schools. This has also provided a vital role in creating local capacity for the project.

Another local authority sought to spread ownership by instigating a 'Great Debate' involving its education communities, including parents and young people, on issues such as collaboration and linking schools with communities.

Messages from practice

"When we set up our project we ran a series of focus groups with all the networks we have so we could check out our ideas. We have assigned local authority officers to each network with a role in disseminating knowledge around the networks... Having developed strong relationships with the networks the authority is now in the position to shape the agendas of the networks to cohere with its vision and goals."

Pause for thought...?

In what ways would this be an effective approach to developing networking and collaboration in your situation?



Please use this space to record your thoughts

Approach 2: Enquiring

A local authority might adopt this approach if:

- **Its knowledge about networking** is variable and knowledge generation remains a core purpose.
- **Existing networking structures** are well established, but may lack strong inter-connections. External support or links with higher education institutions or other research support are mature.
- **Capacity to mobilise and sustain networks** is high but fragile, as capacity resides in a few committed enthusiasts in both the networks and the local authority.

Strategies employed

Local authorities adopting this approach tend to draw on a number of strategies:

- **Planning** involves setting up protocols and procedures for the network. Key issues for consideration at this stage include deciding a focus of interest and generating questions for exploration, as well as organising the network's management.
- **Gathering** information and deciding who should be involved and the schedule are important. Instruments for data collection are developed and management archive systems set up.
- **Synthesis** involves searching for recurrent themes, patterns and trends within the dataset. Key to this phase is beginning to understand and make sense of the information that has been collected.
- **Confronting** is about assessing how confident we are that our interpretations are valid as well as creating meaning and establishing a viewpoint.
- **Reconstructing** uses the insights and understandings gained from the process to redefine the area of focus. In light of these findings new strategies for change are implemented and tested.

Necessary conditions

One of the major strengths of this approach is that information is often collected from a range of sources which gives it a sound empirical base. Such findings often give detailed insights into important issues and concerns as well as providing opportunities for distributing leadership within the networks.

However, ownership tends to be the weakest point of this approach. It is often unclear who owns the findings or where the information is archived. Is it within schools, networks, the local authority or a combination of each? Who has access to it? For what purposes is it used? Some staff within schools find it difficult to perceive the longer-term benefit of being involved in an enquiry process. Therefore, it is important that stakeholder interests should be reflected in the nature of the enquiry. Communication channels and the broader management of the process should also be treated as integral to the design of an enquiry-based approach.

Messages from practice

"The decisions we take as an authority and as networks are grounded on sound evidence because we go out there and collect information to deepen our understanding. Enquiry has been central to the development of individuals, schools and networks... However, on occasions, how or the extent to which we move the knowledge around is less clear."

Capacity for the enquiry approach can be limited by the level of skills within the network. However, those with strong higher education links often draw on external expertise for training and support purposes.

Messages from practice

"We have used this project to develop our approach in seeking networked solutions to the challenges we face. Posing questions and collecting information from a variety of sources and perspectives is central to our approach and we use it to challenge our assumptions and instincts. We have a small team that is responsible for maintaining and developing a central archive of information."

Pause for thought...?

What are the characteristics and needs of your local authority which indicate that this would be an effective approach to developing networking and collaboration in your context?



Please use this space to record your thoughts

Approach 3: Replicating

A local authority might adopt this approach if:

- **Its knowledge about networking** is well developed but resides in a small area, therefore, the core purpose is to move the knowledge throughout a range of networks.
- **Existing networking structures** are well defined in a few cases, with other emergent or less effective networks.
- **Capacity to mobilise and sustain networks** is limited by the voluntary nature of the engagement of schools and pool of expertise within the local authority, but there is a moderate commitment to spread good practice.

Strategies employed

Local authorities adopting this approach tend to draw on a number of strategies:

- **Evidence-based research** to identify best practice and key personnel.
- **Setting up a pilot** or a pathfinder to test ideas and direction.
- **Effective use of existing networks** and groupings, such as improvement partnerships, networked learning communities and Primary Learning Networks, to foster a culture of sharing practice.
- **School-based enquiry** to assess multi-level effectiveness of the strategy.
- **Publication** of manuals and supporting materials.
- **Training materials and advice** given to non-participating networks.
- **Trials of new networks** where strategy and process is replicated.

Necessary conditions

The ability of the local authority to access networks and create new ones is fundamental to this approach. Good communicators and credible activists are necessary to promote pilot networks and transfer the model across other networks. Strong channels of communication are necessary at local authority level to spread processes across different cultures. Senior local authority support is also important for managing expectations of network members operating within this new paradigm.

This approach offers the opportunity of tailoring network agendas to school-based needs and interests, so creating value and ownership for them. The replication approach also encourages consistency and a common language as network members have access to tools and guidance designed and tested in local conditions. One essential is a coherent network theme and a credible menu of expert support to serve as an effective lever for engagement.

The prescriptive nature of this approach can, however, present challenges. The existence of common manuals and tools may discourage diversity or experimentation with future network structures and processes. The local authority has to work hard to create buy-in from schools and networks that are hard pressed.

Messages from practice

"One local authority in the project has focused strongly on establishing a raising boys' achievement network. A consultant facilitator has mobilised schools to undertake enquiry that is relevant to their needs and she has responsibility for related issues across the local authority and to link to a range of other initiatives. 'Our... network is our pathfinder... It's leading the way for that learning to be shared with other networks and the learning about how a network is run.'"

Messages from practice

"This project has enabled us to reflect on the successes within our local authority and build on our early gains by sharing best practice between networks as well as launching new ones. We are developing a toolkit and have identified key experienced network leaders who are being asked to support the development of new networks in the authority."

Pause for thought...?

In what ways would this be an effective approach to developing networking and collaboration in your situation?



Please use this space to record your thoughts

Approach 4: Directing

A local authority might adopt this approach if:

- **Its knowledge about networking** is low but the knowledge of the policy landscape is well developed. The core purpose is to use network arrangements as an urgent delivery mechanism for external policies and initiatives.
- **Existing networking structures** are in place but their organisation will tend to reflect historical or ongoing government initiatives rather than locally generated, bottom-up collaborative approaches to change.
- **Capacity to mobilise and sustain networks** is moderate within the local authority and often relies on incentives, including increased resources from local and national government.

Strategies employed

Local authorities adopting this approach tend to draw on a number of strategies:

- **Identifying a focus and strategic vision** in the context of central government policy and local restructuring.
- **Deciding on a networking structure and infrastructure.** Key decisions on structure centre on geographical boundaries and thematic focuses.
- **Bringing together a range of stakeholders** to update them on recent policy changes and to outline the imperative for new local structures.
- **Providing compelling incentives** for participation.
- **Developing a new local network** to harness its strategic vision and meet key strategic needs.
- **Allocating officers** to each major strand or hub of the network to maintain impetus and direction.

Messages from practice

"We understand the importance of having key structures in place to support networking activity. One of the early things that we did was to use policy mandates and our expertise and knowledge of our schools to identify their key issues and concerns. We then built a network infrastructure around these needs. We provide a meeting place for all the networks and a timetable of meetings for the whole year. We now have all our schools involved in at least one network and many are involved in more than one."

Necessary conditions

The directive approach is effective where the network structure is based around key government policies. Where fund-holders such as the Learning and Skills Council are also involved this is even more persuasive.

The directive approach can take root quickly where there is a group of receptive schools willing to undertake a trial. This provides an early reference point of how a local authority driven structure can be put into practice within schools. Early gains for these schools also act as a positive form of persuasion. Participation is facilitated by having, from the start, a clear agenda for the local structure.

The local authority needs to address different ways of working with schools on a collective rather than an individual basis. This demands a high level of interpersonal communication skills and strong generic abilities to fulfil a monitoring as well as development role at network level.

As well as developing a coherent and aligned local network structure, the directive approach can provide a useful starting point from which to deepen collaborative structures. A diverse range of schools can also be brought together. However, as the directive approach is heavily influenced by changing national and local policy, it is therefore vulnerable to fluctuations. There is also a danger that school agendas come to be marginalised and overpowered by local authority agendas. Furthermore, the superimposed nature of directive structures may constrain flexibility and innovation in local networking.

Pause for thought...?

What are the characteristics and needs of your local authority which indicate that this would be an effective approach to developing networking and collaboration in your context?



Please use this space to record your thoughts

Approach 5: Responding

A local authority might adopt this approach if:

- **Its knowledge about networking** is high and has been developed over many years. The key purpose of this approach is to engage the hard-to-reach or disengaged.
- **Existing networking structures** are complex and mature. There are many structures with different origins and multiple functions. There is a wide variation in the commitment to networks and quality of practice.
- **Capacity to mobilise and sustain networks** is medium. Some networks are self-sustaining. However, others have lost interest or moved on. This will require high levels of differentiated local authority support in negotiation with a range of key network leaders.

Strategies employed

Local authorities adopting this approach tend to draw on a number of strategies:

- **Engagement** with well-established network leaders through a series of meetings and individual visits to networks.
- **Negotiation** of the role of the local authority, contribution to network development.
- **Development of an overview** of activity occurring across a variety of networks and their agendas.
- **Transfer of practice** and knowledge around the networks.
- **Light touch facilitation** offered by the local authority and help in targeting resources.
- **Mediation** with networks to align with the local authority agenda.

Necessary conditions

Mature and autonomous networks are defining characteristics of the responsive approach. This requires the local authority to plan for engagement and to forge effective relationships with network gatekeepers.

The local authority has the capacity to provide officers to facilitate networks. This is supported by its ability to draw on credible external resources such as associate officers or local network leaders. Their strong interpersonal skills are also valuable in managing interfaces between the network and the local authority.

The well-established networks within the responsive approach are underpinned by a strong and often advanced networking culture providing the local authority with a head start on collaborative learning. The existence of mature networks is also characterised by a strong degree of trust among network members and often an embedded culture of collaboration and sharing between them. Ordinarily, these processes require a long period of time to nurture.

The autonomous nature of networks in this model runs counter to a heavy, uniform steer from the local authority. Therefore, it can be a testing process to negotiate access to networks as well as to forge dialogue and a common direction between the authority and network. This is complicated further by the pressure and cultural expectation for local authorities to see measurable results in the short-term. However, the process of establishing trust and negotiating aims between local authority and autonomous networks involves careful and sometimes lengthy deliberation.

Messages from practice

"We have many mature networks within our local authority. Therefore, we tend to let them run themselves. However, we interact with them on a regular basis and are always there to provide support and guidance when necessary. Our key challenge is to improve the level of engagement of a few of our networks and to support the regeneration of some that have lost a bit of momentum. Overall, our local authority is well networked and we enjoy the diversity and creativity generated from within our networks."

Pause for thought...?

In what ways would this be an effective approach to developing networking and collaboration in your situation?



Please use this space to record your thoughts

Approach 6: Landscaping

A local authority might adopt this approach if:

- **Its knowledge about networking** is theoretical and experience in the field is limited.
- **Existing networking structures** are multiple but lacking coherence and often dispersed. Networks may draw on other brokers and facilitators rather than the local authority.
- **Capacity to mobilise and sustain networks** is high, with a strong vision, and the local authority can develop the skills and experience quickly.

Strategies employed

Local authorities adopting this approach tend to draw on a number of strategies:

- **Development of a framework** around which all networks can cohere.
- **Development of internal structures** to promote networking within children's services.
- **A series of meetings** for network leaders to discuss the new structural arrangements and sell the benefits of restructuring to create a coherent superstructure.
- **Identification of thematic clusters** of the superstructure.
- **Promotion of a landscape** by exposing school-based leaders to the benefits of a networked superstructure.

Messages from practice

"One local authority in the project has adopted a landscaping strategy that builds on its existing capacity for networking by shaping a new collaborative structure around thematic teaching and learning issues. This is aligned to existing groupings and concerns. In this way, it has circumvented the tension between autonomy and coherence by creating a reformed relationship between schools and the local authority. The three collaboratives - a networked learning community, a Primary Learning Network and one funded through Neighbourhood Renewal - each now has the same leadership structure and a local authority school improvement officer to facilitate linkage."

Messages from practice

"We have adopted an approach that models the principles that we are trying to get schools to adopt. Therefore, we have begun by creating a networked authority by creating an infrastructure that promotes networking as a *modus operandi*. Now that schools are seeing how we work and the benefits associated with it they are beginning to configure themselves into networks."

Necessary conditions

Landscaping provides the opportunity for the development of integrated multi-agency structures and the streamlining of processes across the local authority. The creation of a superstructure provides the opportunity to disband, reconfigure or merge networks into a refined and more effective system.

Landscaping is also an approach that can directly benefit schools by empowering them to opt into appropriate networks depending on their needs. This can reduce overload on schools and allow for a more responsive use of resources.

However, the landscaping approach can create undue complexity by generating additional layers of accountability, bureaucracy and even additional sub-networks within an authority. In addition, there is risk of fragmentation and loss of sense of purpose for schools because they perceive themselves to be involved in so many different networks if the overall framework is unclear. Ultimately this can have a negative effect on participant motivation and resources. Landscaping is a particularly difficult approach to develop successfully.

Pause for thought...?

What are the characteristics and needs of your local authority which indicate that this would be an effective approach to developing networking and collaboration in your context?



Please use this space to record your thoughts

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Networked Learning Communities

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