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## What are we **learning about...?**

LEA involvement in school networks

# LEAs brokering school networks

Sandwell LEA

An illustrative example of what  
LEA brokerage of school networks  
looks like in practice.

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

# LEAs brokering school networks

The case studies and accounts of practice presented within this series aim to provide concrete examples of the ways in which LEAs are contributing to networking and collaboration between schools and within learning networks. In particular, they provide a practical illustration of how LEAs are going about the practice of 'brokerage' within their work, in bringing together, supporting and sustaining networks of schools.

**“ Brokerage describes the act of arranging or negotiating relationships and partnerships. A broker is an intermediary or matchmaker engaged in the ‘acquisition of obligations’ from different parties in a purposeful relationship. ”**

LEAs perform many roles and functions in relation to schools. However, we have identified five distinct brokerage roles through which LEAs appear to be able to add greatest value to networks of schools. We have characterised these five roles as 'brokerage' in order to distinguish these functions from traditional LEA roles and ways of working.

## Acknowledgements

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**Matthew Horne, Demos and  
Bill Rogers, Networked Learning Group, Editors**

### Brokerage roles for LEAs

- 1 Brokering network membership.**
- 2 Brokering network relationships.**
- 3 Brokering partnerships beyond the network.**
- 4 Brokering the network's access to resources.**
- 5 Brokering knowledge-exchange within and beyond networks.**

The case studies and accounts of practice in this series explore, in different ways, and with differing emphases, a range of brokerage roles and help to explain what LEA brokerage of school networks looks like in practice. □

## Sandwell brokering school networks

**Sandwell is a Metropolitan Borough** characterised by a falling population and worsening levels of deprivation that are already the highest in the West Midlands. There are no pockets of affluence within the borough and 24 per cent of the population – double the national average – are from ethnic minority communities. In 2001, a new education management team was appointed by the council, following two poor Ofsted inspection reports.

Education is at the heart of the corporate vision for the regeneration of Sandwell and an innovative approach to school improvement has been developed with an emphasis on leadership for learning, partnership and networking. A key aspect of this approach is the Sandwell Local Enquiry and Research Network (LEARN).

### The following activities are making a significant impact to improving teaching, learning and raising achievement in Sandwell:

- the Sandwell Professional Guarantee
- the primary school Sandwell Triads
- the secondary school LIG collaboratives
- other networked learning communities

Sandwell LEARN provides a school improvement framework through the promotion of action-based research focused on pupils' learning, leadership development and the raising of pupils' achievement. Sandwell's school improvement strategy is underpinned by classroom-based teacher research which is being developed at leadership levels and integrated into school improvement.

The Sandwell Professional Guarantee aspires to provide career progression and professional development opportunities together with quality induction, well-being and work/life balance programmes. Its key strap line states: 'Every teacher a learner, connected to a network of learners'.

Although there is every confidence, and some early evidence, that the first two strands will help to transform learning, cultures and attainment over time, there are schools with cohorts of pupils who cannot afford to wait for the longer term. The Sandwell Triads programme, together with the Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG) collaboratives, are part of a third strand of the networked approach to school improvement in the borough at the primary and secondary phases of statutory education.

Here, Sandwell primary schools in partnership with the LEA have introduced the Primary Leadership programme through an innovative school improvement programme known as the Sandwell Triads, while all of Sandwell secondary schools are in one of the three Sandwell LIG collaboratives.

### Structures and processes

#### Sandwell LEARN represents three separate tiers of learning network:

- within-school learning networks
- between-school learning networks across Sandwell LEA and beyond
- the overarching network framework which encompasses the others

LEARN is managed by a Partnership Reference Group composed of headteachers, other school staff, representatives from higher education, the LEA and the wider community including school governors. This group provides leadership and direction and has a monitoring and accountability role to support the work of the learning networks. All schools (99 primary schools, 18 secondary schools and five special schools) in Sandwell LEA have access to the Local Enquiry and Research Network.

#### The development programme has three strands:

- 1** teacher enquiry and research skills
- 2** learning about learning
- 3** leadership and project management

Each strand has three integrated themes: ICT and use of new technologies, business links, and community learning.

Key to the LEARN initiative are the Leading Learning Links (LLLs): teachers from participating schools who have undertaken an LEA-funded staff development programme accredited by the University of Wolverhampton. The role of the LLLs is to become school-based change agents or school improvement champions that influence leadership and management and school improvement from a classroom level. Their role includes leading the development of both the school-based and between-school learning networks.

## Sandwell brokering school networks

Each school sets out to build its own learning networks internally, steered by a school improvement group, co-led by the LLL and headteacher or senior manager. Additionally, the school improvement group includes a class teacher, a member of support staff, a parent governor and a representative of the wider community.

### Each school has voluntarily chosen to join one of three learning networks of schools:

- 1 Understanding How Children Learn
- 2 Citizenship for Learning
- 3 Creativity in the Curriculum

All three networks promote reflection, discussion and the dissemination of good practice. They enable teachers to learn from each other and provide support for improving learning.

**Sandwell Professional Guarantee:** the LEA, using the NCSL Leadership Development Framework<sup>1</sup> as a guideline, produced its own comprehensive and coherent framework for professional development within a 'Leaders for Learning' leadership development continuum. This sets out the ways in which each of the development stages would be supported in Sandwell and how they would be connected with the regional and national programmes. The framework proposes action-based research, collaborative learning, networking, e-learning and accreditation for all levels, from teaching assistants and learning mentors, to headteachers.

**Sandwell Triads:** the Triads consist of 54 schools in two annual cohorts. Each triad consists of a co-ordinating school which supports two partner schools over a three-year period. The aim is to use a collaborative leadership learning focus to raise the standards of pupils' achievements. The Triads are grouped by the mutual benefit of working collaboratively, with geographical location being incidental.

The 18 headteachers of the co-ordinating schools have taken on the role of Primary Strategy Consultant Leaders (PSCs) and are working with colleagues in their partner schools to support improvements. They have established focus groups, each with a mandate to explore, manage and develop an aspect of Triad involvement. One of these is charged with the responsibility for continuing

professional development. The group has been in discussion with several local HEIs to investigate levels of support and to ascertain how partnerships could be developed. Headteachers across the Triads meet with colleagues from Newman College, an HE partner, to explore the processes of change management.

**LIG collaboratives:** all the 18 secondary schools in Sandwell LEA are members of one of the three LIG collaboratives: North, West and South. Sandwell has initiated a radical structure for the LEA's new relationship with schools by employing four experienced secondary heads as headteacher consultants, to work in the collaboratives. The main focus of the LIGs is to raise attainment through collaboration, concentrating on leadership at all levels.

**Other networked communities:** Sandwell has other, cross-phase, networked communities, such as professional learning networks to support subject co-ordinators in both primary and secondary schools.

### What does the LEA do to broker membership?

Membership is assisted from the start by the framework of the Sandwell Professional Guarantee and Sandwell LEARN which propose action-based research, collaborative learning, networking, e-learning and accreditation for all levels, from teaching assistants and learning mentors, to headteachers.

Membership of all the Sandwell learning networks – including the Triads and LIGs – is voluntary and via open and transparent access. Each network has a particular criterion for involvement against which heads make decisions to join. The only restriction is whether the school matches the clearly defined and transparent criteria for membership.

In the Triads, for example, there are different and distinctive features identifying the school as suitable to be either a partner school or a co-ordinating one. If there is a divergence of opinion as to which category a school should be in, they ask the LEA to make the ultimate decision openly.

### What does the LEA do to broker relationships?

The Sandwell Professional Guarantee offers, among other things, a strong underpinning for the development of networked learning communities and will enable a more rapid growth of research collaboratives across the LEA.

The leadership, direction, monitoring and accountability roles for Sandwell LEARN are carried out by a partnership reference group. This group brings together headteachers, deputy headteachers, teachers, higher education personnel, LEA personnel and representatives of the wider community including governors – modelling a partnership approach.

The LEA has also made a successful bid to NCSL to form a headteacher collaborative leadership learning group. This group will be led by headteachers. It focuses on developing leadership skills in the context of school improvement and will directly support the LEARN programme.

### What does the LEA do to broker resources?

Within Sandwell LEARN, the LEA funds the Leading Learning Links training.

Within the LIG consortia, resources are brokered through partnership with the headteacher consultants attached to each LIG.

Within the Triad programme, each co-ordinating school is given an additional £50,000 per year to implement the collective Triad Improvement Plan for each year of the three-year programme.

### The LEA also provides an interdisciplinary support team consisting of:

- link adviser
- administration officer
- a group of primary strategy consultant leaders (headteachers of the co-ordinating schools), who act as a reference group
- dedicated support website linked through the LEA site
- strategy team support contact

### This team offers support in:

- locating trainers
- co-ordinating training events
- location and appointment of ICT technicians where appropriate
- examples of good practice – local and national
- placement on courses
- location and placement of advanced skills teachers
- advice on the process of dissemination and collaboration across networks of units
- assistance in effective use of data to inform the school improvement agenda

### What the LEA has learned – dos and don'ts in brokerage

#### Do...

- **Have transparency** concerning everything in the partnership arrangements eg organisation, commitment, partnership criteria etc.
- **Ensure flexibility** in the school improvement journey – flexibility to amend, renegotiate and take on different ways of working. It is no good having a rigid framework, LEAs must interpret and respond to each individual school's needs.
- **Support heads and schools** in making sense of the raft of school improvement initiatives – the LEA must have a joined-up approach in its support to schools. Where possible, different support streams should be connected and work through a multi-disciplinary approach.

#### Don't...

- Engage schools who are unwilling to participate.
- Confuse direct intervention strategies with school improvement. Schools in special categories (eg with serious weaknesses, or in special measures) need and value an intervention strategy. LEAs need to make explicit the difference between such intervention and the school's engagement in other improvement strategies.

<sup>1</sup> NCSL Leadership Development Framework, for details, visit [www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)

## Sandwell brokering school networks

### What the LEA has learned – impact

The most recent Ofsted report shows significant gains with faster rates of improvement in pupil attainment than the national rate, or those of Sandwell's statistical neighbours.

**Triads:** extensive measures for tracking impact and progress have been agreed and although these are early days in the life of the project, a number of qualitative and quantitative benefits have already been observed. Leadership teams are working collaboratively across schools. Motivation and confidence among staff is reported to be high. The common identification of continuous professional development needs is resulting in economies of scale in delivery, and significant sharing of good practice and of the principles of learning.

**Within the LEA:** 2004 Key Stage 2 results show that pupils tripled the national rate of improvement in English, while Key Stage 3 pupils doubled the national progress rate in maths. After only one year of the programme, 75 per cent of Triad schools have made improvements compared to their 2003 results. Some have made a significant improvement. 42 per cent of Triad schools have made more than a 15 per cent improvement on their 2003 results. This has been sufficient to justify the decision to support a second cohort of Triads.

### What next?

Sandwell LEARN is being developed in the context of other successful networked learning community submissions across the Black Country. It is anticipated that all Sandwell schools will engage with the initiative during the four-year period, 2002 to 2006.

#### School-based learning networks have developed to include representation from:

- leading LEARNing link and headteacher/SMT member (co-leadership)
- class teachers
- members of support staff
- parents
- governors
- the wider community

Because of its potential for collaborative school improvement between schools the project is attracting attention across the education system. The improvements on the SATS results are clearly encouraging. But for the Triads, more than any other network configuration in the borough, the challenge is to be able to track a close connection between their work and the effect it is having on pupil learning and attainment. □

#### Contact details:

**LEA:** Sandwell Local Enquiry and Research Network (LEARN)

**Contact:** Louise Hughes  
Deputy Director School Improvement

**Address:** Sandwell Education and Lifelong Learning  
PO Box 41  
Shaftesbury House  
402 High Street  
West Bromwich B70 9LT

**Tel:** 0121 569 2200  
**Fax:** 0121 553 1528  
**Minicom:** 0121 553 5933  
**Email:** [louise\\_hughes@sandwell.gov.uk](mailto:louise_hughes@sandwell.gov.uk)  
**Website:** [www.lea.sandwell.gov.uk/learn](http://www.lea.sandwell.gov.uk/learn)

# What are we learning about...?

The 'What are we learning about...?' series is designed to make public the learning that has emerged from NLCs in the last two years.

The first six titles in the series will focus on:

## **What are we learning about...?**

- **LEA involvement in school networks**
- Establishing a network of schools
- The impact of school networks
- Professional development within school networks
- Leadership within school networks
- Sustaining a network of schools

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**National College for School Leadership**  
Networked Learning Group  
Derwent House  
Cranfield University Technology Park  
University Way, Cranfield  
Bedfordshire  
MK43 0AZ

T: 08707 870 370  
F: 0115 872 2401  
E: [nlc@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:nlc@ncsl.org.uk)  
W: [www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc)



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