NCSL National College for School Leadership

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What are we
learning about...?

Community leadership in networks

Building community leadership

Winsford Networked Learning Community

An illustrative example of
what community leadership in
networks looks like in practice.

Community Leadership Strategy

Networked Learning Communities

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

Building community leadership

The accounts of practice presented within this series aim to provide concrete examples of community leadership in networks. In particular, they provide a practical illustration of the significant elements we have found to be evident when developing community leadership within a networked context.

❝ *Doing business as we have always done it is unlikely to have any effect in creating a more inclusive, holistic approach to the delivery of public services. At every level, we need to re-think our approach: how we consult, how we engage others, how we meet together, how we celebrate and how we lead.* ❞

There are now many schools, both in the UK and internationally, that are benefiting from working together as a network. By drawing upon their experience and that of others who are actively involved in community leadership through networking and collaborative activity beyond the education sector, it is possible to identify the factors that characterise effective community leadership in networks.

Four characteristics of effective community leadership in networks

1　*Sharing leadership with a focus on 'bridging' rather than 'bonding' relationships, processes and actions.*

2　*Collaborative working which builds social capital and coheres around a shared focus which is child-centred.*

3　*Joint planning and dialogue which promotes active participation in decision-making-for-action by all.*

4　*Designing local strategies for long term system-wide change.*

The accounts of practice in this series explore in different ways and with different emphases, these key characteristics of effective community leadership and in so doing they help to explain what developing community leadership in networks looks like in practice. Considering some of these factors in the process of developing community leadership within a networked context will help to ensure that future development is built from the best of what is known from current thinking and practice. We hope that these accounts of practice will, therefore, be of practical use to you – if you are considering developing community leadership activities within networks, schools or other organisations, or if you are simply interested in finding out more about community leadership in networks and its potential benefits for all. □

Acknowledgements

**Kate Bond and Maggie Farrar,
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Building community leadership

This account of practice provides an illustrative example of what community leadership looks like from a school-led networked perspective which is initiated, driven and sustained through headteacher involvement.
In particular, this account provides some practical examples of building community leadership within a networked learning community. It looks at the experiences of Winsford Networked Learning Community as they engage the community in a process of dialogue aimed at exploring and realising the concept of community leadership. This account will be of interest to those who are already engaged with, or want to connect with, their wider community in working towards the idea of shared leadership.

Participation in the network community

Winsford NLC is in a small rural Cheshire town, containing pockets of deprivation. The network involves 17 schools: 13 primary, 2 secondary and 2 special schools and can be described as being driven from the 'bottom-up', in that it sprang from the needs of schools, teachers and pupils. The key characteristics of the network and the community in which it sits are as follows:

- a lack of job prospects in area
- low aspirations amongst families – poor post-16 retention rate
- few links between school governing bodies and local businesses
- an egalitarian leadership structure within the network – no one person or interest dominating
- a focus on leadership that facilitates school improvement within the network
- a steering group which is seen to be innovative in its involvement of community members

The network is facilitated by three co-leaders supported by a steering group. Winsford is innovative in having borough and county councillors on its panel, one of whom chairs the steering group, as well as one co-leader who is currently the chair of the local Sure Start scheme and the local Play-scheme Association. The network set out with the intention of bringing together all the agencies whose actions impact on the lives of children and families in their local area. The community leadership project currently involves representation from the following groups and organisations:

- local parents and families
- parent governors
- pupils
- local residents
- elected members
- local businesses and the Business Support Agency
- Local Authority support agencies
- religious communities
- social services
- Sure Start
- Job Centre Plus
- Connexions service
- Primary Healthcare Trust
- Weaver Vale Housing Trust
- leisure services
- local employers group
- Winsford Town Council
- voluntary and community groups, such as three resident groups, Mind, Youth Forum, Wincap, Churches Together, sports clubs
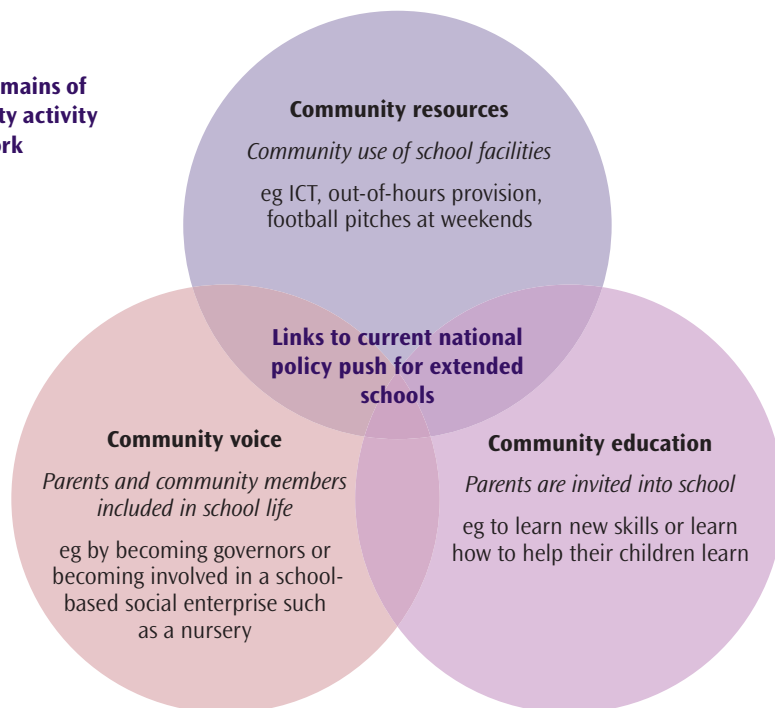- parent teacher associations

Building community leadership

What does community leadership mean in Winsford NLC?

The initial objective set by the network was to explore and realise the concept of community leadership in practice. The network shares a clear vision of how we want to shape our leadership. Positioning education at the heart of the community is a clear aim, as is engaging those not normally involved in education. Throughout our explorations of community leadership in action within the network, our intention was to create new ways of thinking and acting, underpinned by the development of new structures and processes.

Ultimately, the improvement of life chances, learning experiences and standards of achievement for all children and their families are the expressed goals of the network. In the context of these aims, nurturing community leadership and involvement is seen to be *"not about imposing the form that community engagement takes, but about creating the context for an equal dialogue between the community and the education sector"*. There is a perception that within the network this is starting to happen through the following domains of school-community activity *(see figure 1)*.

Figure 1 : The domains of school-community activity within the network

Community resources

Community use of school facilities

eg ICT, out-of-hours provision, football pitches at weekends

Links to current national policy push for extended schools

Community voice

Parents and community members included in school life

eg by becoming governors or becoming involved in a school-based social enterprise such as a nursery

Community education

Parents are invited into school

eg to learn new skills or learn how to help their children learn

Community leadership in action

The network has initiated community engagement through a variety of means, including: interviews, focus group work, and active consultation with agencies, community groups, headteachers, governors, school leaders and the leaders of the leadership groups within the network. We also extended this work to include interviews with local business leaders and small groups of pupils. These connecting activities aimed to enable a wide group of network community members to explore their understanding of the concept of community leadership from within their own context, with a view to developing a shared understanding of what possible models of community leadership might be implemented within and across the networked community.

Connecting activities used to explore understandings about community leadership

- **Children** – Jigsaws were developed to enable small groups of children in each school to explore the themes of community leadership. The types of questions asked were: Who do they listen to? Who listens to them? Who do they see as leaders? and What do leaders do?

- **Local residents** – A group of local residents trained in focus group techniques and hosted focus groups on each of the main estates in the area to discuss who they saw as leaders within their communities, which communities they identified with, what roles they saw for schools, and what their aspirations were for their communities. This group then carried out focus group work with parents, governors and representatives from agencies and organisations within the town.

- **Governors and parents** – Parents and parent governors were brought together in small focus groups to discuss issues around community leadership.

- **Agencies and organisations** – Representatives from a range of agencies and organisations took part in focus groups led by local residents, and subsequently met together with the co-leaders of the network to discuss what connections exist to assess the potential for collaborative working and share the best approaches to take in developing leadership within the community.

In addition, the following strategies have also been employed within the network to promote community involvement and leadership activity amongst a diverse range of network stakeholders and participants.

- **Business Afterhours:** This is a local not-for-profit organisation which facilitates small business networks. There are over 600 companies involved. Business Afterhours joined with the networked learning community in developing a new project funded under a programme called *Passport to Success.* One of the main aims is to counter low expectations about jobs amongst school children. The first step was to interview teachers and a key finding of these interviews was the lack of business representation amongst local governors, widening the disconnection between schools and the business sector. The next stage involved the Afterhours club representative interviewing 150 businesses to build a database of their activities and services in order to match them up with the needs of schools. The aim of this project is to build sustained relationships between local businesses and schools.

- **Neighbourhood nursery:** Over Hall Community School has created a not-for-profit organisation led and managed by representatives from the local community. The neighbourhood nursery will be designed to be a portal organisation, bringing together child-care, health and family support services so that families have one point of access. In line with Sure Start objectives, this integrated approach will provide holistic support for children's development, support for families and will facilitate the return to work of those parents who are currently unemployed.

- **Multi-agency leadership learning:** A Cambridge-based leadership consultant worked in two network schools for two terms. His work focused on leadership models in the schools. This has developed in the current year into a multi-agency programme involving community representatives and staff from the agencies and organisations whose work plays a role in the life of our children. If this new programme is a success those involved will facilitate its roll-out across the whole network.

- **Extended School development:** The Winsford schools have developed a model that will enable all network members to benefit from working together instead of in competition. The model will see them working as one extended school community by sharing resources, and in collaboration, offering different services in each school to enable them to meet the diverse needs of the community.

- **Local governors' group:** A local governors' group has been successfully established. Each school or locality was asked to nominate a governor to represent local interests. The aims of the group are to raise awareness of what is happening in the wider network and area. It is hoped that this will quicken the process of getting governors on board, engaging different local communities or opening up schools for local use.

Building community leadership

What we have learned: the impact of action

The network has seen a big shift in attitude away from isolated schools to schools working in partnership. The NLC has looked more widely than previous initiatives in the area, and was built on the solid foundation of previous network activity. There has also been a growth in awareness about the benefits of community leadership and working together, through the provision of opportunities to work with other schools in the pursuit of one vision.

❝ *We've got a single vision reality which is about using all our resources as effectively as possible – and not for the community, but with the community.* ❞

Flexibility is seen as a key to the network's success, and people are seen as more important than structures. The aim is for control to be in the hands of the many not the few. In this way, schools in the network are moving away from assuming what the community needs, to actively consulting and involving them as stakeholders in education. We are creating definitions of what community leadership means to each stakeholder group, and community stakeholders are engaged in active dialogue with each other.

❝ *I think what's happened with the NLC is we've all woken up together to realise there's a lot of key issues that need solving, that we're just one player among other people and that we really do need to do our best to engage with our locality very fully.* ❞

The network has started to act together to respond more effectively to local needs and circumstances. Examples include teaching assistants leading behaviour management training sessions together and holding community events. Sharing and collaborating around local issues have also brought benefits to children with special needs within the network – as one headteacher of a special school described it, involvement in the NLC has resulted in bringing his school closer to the mainstream system.

❝ *The community links within the NLC are better than other networks I have previously been involved in, which tend to be more educational links.* ❞

The network is now considering becoming a federation of schools, with the potential to co-ordinate funding for family support services, out-of-hours learning and educational improvements. The next phase of shared community leadership is to further develop distributed leadership across the network and to extend community involvement in developing school policies, allocating funds and planning for provision in the light of current public sector reform initiatives. ☐

End note

There is a perceived need to change in-school perceptions of 'community' before schools can become the hubs of services within their neighbourhoods. There is also a need to continue to challenge community perceptions and move beyond the idea of 'my community' and 'your community'. Our experience in the Winsford network has shown us that if we are to bring community leadership alive in a truly inclusive way, it is necessary to move away from the kind of territoriality which, in the past, has often obstructed the effective delivery of public services.

❝ *Local people don't care about who's delivering – just about good services. Territoriality is over with.* ❞

Within Winsford NLC our success in engaging the local community has come from the practice of active dialogue involving network stakeholders and participants on an inclusive basis. This has been used effectively as a means of overcoming a past history of competition between schools and a sense of protectiveness regarding the territory of the different contributing partners within the network. As a result, there has been a shift in attitudes between the schools, who now see themselves as partners in education. Through shared dialogue, the building blocks of community leadership have been laid. There is a sense of excited anticipation amongst those involved from the education sector, as they are passionately engaged in the act of leading together to build social capital across the network community and its members.

❝ *We feel that we're pioneers, we're taking a leap in the dark.* ❞ □

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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 nine titles in the series will focus on:
What are we learning about…?

- LEA involvement in school networks

- Establishing a network of schools

- **Community leadership in networks**

- *'Making mathematics count'* in school networks

- The impact of school networks

- Sustaining a network of schools

- Facilitation within school networks

- Professional development in school networks

- Leadership of school networks

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