

www.ncsl.org.uk

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

Community leadership in networks

Working towards community leadership

Rotherham

An illustrative example of
what development towards
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

Working towards 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.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the generation and publication of these accounts of practice: Enid Bell, Hilary Berry, Julia Duffy, Steve Edwards, Mark Fowler, Val Godfrey, Drummond Johnstone, Steve Keable, David Ling, Melissa Murphy, Simon Patton, Jean De Rijke, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and their voluntary sector partners, Sue Shelley and Rob Thomas.

Kate Bond and Maggie Farrar,
Lead Developers

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. □

Working towards community leadership

This account of practice outlines the story of Rotherham Local Authority's journey towards building community leadership. Its story highlights many of the issues and challenges that face education leaders and leaders from the voluntary sector in establishing community leadership across a broad and diverse area. This account will be of particular interest to leaders within Local Authorities and those involved in building social capital within and between organisations and agencies.

Participation in the community leadership network

Rotherham is a former major industrial town with a rich and diverse community. It has experienced recent regeneration following a long period of decline. However, it remains a deprived area with pockets of deep poverty which contrast with new areas of growth and investment. The community leadership network has involved Local Authority professionals, headteachers, council leaders and voluntary sector leaders. The overall objective that drives the network is a desire to transform public services for children and families, combat deprivation and bring alive *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004)¹ within the community. A stated purpose is to build capacity to be different within the system and leave a legacy of change.

The rationale for developing community leadership within Rotherham was underpinned by a shared belief that the social networks of pupils built through their peer relationships, home life and membership of the local community have an influence upon their learning in school. In the light of this, it was felt that schools and other services for children and families would be more effective if they both recognised and responded to the potentially significant impact of these factors upon the development and achievements of children. This outcome was seen to be achievable across whole communities if schools worked in partnership rather than in isolation.

Engaging the community

Much of our early work revolved around engaging the providers of services from the many different sectors in a process of consultation. The process was designed to challenge beliefs and find integrated ways to meet the needs of children in Rotherham. One immediate outcome of this process was increased awareness of the initiatives that were already taking place within the borough. This enhanced knowledge of the system helped to lay a more effective foundation for change.

An influential group of secondary headteachers formed a collaborative group and developed an emergent view of their role in leading the community. This emerging model placed the child at the centre of its thinking. They functioned as an action and pressure group by raising questions, modelling different ways for headteachers to work and beginning to solve problems in partnerships.

A major conference was held entitled 'The Power of Collaboration'. It was designed to engage professionals from diverse backgrounds and access their views on services for children. A public commitment to further this process was made and followed up by further initiatives. A wider strategy to engage the community also emerged. It involved consulting a wide group of bodies from the voluntary, public and not-for-profit sectors and included drawing upon the views of young people through a Young People's Forum and Youth Cabinet.

After this initial consultation process, the network created a steering group made up of a small team of key leaders across the network. It became known as 'the engine room'. The group established a limited range of priorities and work programmes designed to further the network's vision. In order to generate both changing practices and provision, a range of professionals were engaged in personal, group and whole organisation activities designed to stimulate new thinking and action. Activities took place simultaneously in schools, education departments and health services. As the capacity for change was developed, individuals and teams undertook initiatives designed to bring about further change. As part of this, a range of senior leaders created a forum specifically to address the question of community leadership. □

¹ Department for Education and Skills, 2004, *Every Child Matters – next steps*, London, DfES

Facing challenges through community leadership

The creation of the community leadership group prompted much discussion on the concept of community leadership. This was seen as a fundamental dilemma – does the community lead itself? Or does an organisation lead the community?

1 Defining community leadership

Members' differing views reflected the underlying contradiction in the concept. Early discussion revolved around defining what is meant by community and community leadership. Other discussions explored community leadership with a purpose – how does learning relate to community leadership? How do schools relate to the community? How well do schools and their communities know each other? Do school leaders have any role in leading a community? The network also explored connectivity within the network and how to ensure local initiatives linked up with larger community strategies.

2 Choosing a model of community leadership

There was much discussion about what the network wanted to gain and the right type of model to use to achieve its objectives and to develop shared leadership. The distributed leadership model gained much attention. Several of the group strongly believed in this model and it seemed the clear solution. However, the discussion brought to light the debate of how to share community leadership. The network comprised a range of leaders from different sectors who were committed and experienced in leadership in professional contexts. In many cases, the views of members embraced the idea of leadership as being distributed and shared by many.

A 'nodal' view of leadership was eventually proposed in which the model used by the network could move beyond the limitations of distributed leadership models. Leadership in this model lies in the interconnectedness of leadership influence. This systemic view of leadership chimed with the thinking and experience of the group, giving it the confidence to approach local action that connected to broader strategy. This model remains a strong factor in the thinking of the group which wishes to focus on learning.

3 Engaging a disconnected community

Accepting the concept of community leadership led to the network realising that engaging the community would pose a challenge. It raised questions about how a profession is viewed and whether it can break out of a community's perception of it. The previous experience of education for some of the community would make re-engagement with educators a difficult step. One of the purposes of the network was to develop a network voice and engage in dialogue that would improve the opportunities for the community and its children. Yet such a clarity of purpose assumed a good understanding of the community's needs.

Whilst those in the group dealing with the project had not undertaken any specific action to gain the community advocates, they were confident in their decision-making. Firstly, many of the professionals were in regular face-to-face contact with the community through their daily work. Additionally, they could connect with others in the network to access the initial consultations and dialogues. Despite some reservations, the group believed they had a good understanding of the context.

4 Speaking the same language

In the early experience of the group it was apparent that the issue of communication and dialogue between professionals and the community would need to be addressed. This led to debate about the capacity of leaders from organisations like schools to lead in the community. The concern was, that leaders within educational contexts eg headteachers have a clear and unambiguous mandate, whereas community leadership would have no hierarchical system or defined accountabilities.

5 Sustaining the network

As a result of complex organisational demands some members of the network found it difficult to sustain consistent attendance and input. This raised questions about the nature of community leadership in practice. The demands of statutory responsibilities on some key leaders meant that non-statutory priorities, however significant for the future vision, took second place. The network found that the key to sustaining member involvement was to engage individual personal interest.

“ The issue is hooking the individual and engaging this to strategy. ”

The composition of the network changed over the months, reflecting the changing priorities of key leaders and the direction of the group. This raised issues of sustaining the work and objectives of the network despite member changes, and using these changes to enhance the network's impact.

Facing challenges through community leadership

Community leadership in action

The community leadership network led to the creation of new networks, in some cases re-engaging public sector workers. It also established new connections between public and voluntary sector colleagues. As capacity for change was developed, individuals and teams undertook initiatives designed to create change. Some of these were limited to individual small-scale impact, while others undertook change across their own institution such as a school or Sure Start. In the Clifton Partnership, the creation of a new school provided an opportunity to engage the community actively around a new full-service school offering a range of public services on the one site.

Another key action was an initiative to recruit and develop 'Community Learning Champions' from the community, to bridge the gap between the community and educational opportunities. The focus of the community champions was to engage a specific geographical community, in the Rawmarsh area. Recruiting Community Learning Champions from the community was established as an essential factor to overcome any negative perceptions of a profession. This was confirmed by one local resident: *"We want some gutsy locals, not a bunch of professionals"*.

The network decided to host a community event to attract potential community champions. A process to develop community champions was created and provided opportunities for them to undertake this role. Advertising was initiated through the local press, mailings and personal contact. The mailing and personal contact took place in the form of a flyer distributed personally. However, after this distribution, not one form of interest was returned by anyone in the community. A member of the network involved in community work invited one of the key stakeholders in to help. This member had daily contact in community activity and used her own connections to recruit 16 people from the community to join the event. □

What we have learned: dos and don'ts of community leadership

Do...

- bring community representatives to initial discussion to avoid 'doing to'
- initiate action based on real rather than perceived need
- use word of mouth – it is more effective than written communications such as flyers
- engage in small-scale pilot activities which allow for reflection and risk-taking
- use local people to resource the development eg caterers for events, transport etc
- develop and employ local role-models as community learning champions

Don't...

- Be hasty in building and establishing relationships – this will lead to superficial change only. The speed of the process needs to be dictated by ensuring firm relationships of trust are established between partners.

End note

“You don’t need to create community activists, they’re already out there. You need to identify them and work with them.”

From our experience of working towards the development of community leadership within the Rotherham network, a key message has been that ownership of the vision is critical. There is no room for conflicting agendas. However, it is also important to recognise that new networks need time to develop connectivity.

An underlying commitment to key principles may initially be masked by differing organisational cultures and language. Unearthing this commitment by breaking down the barriers imposed by individualistic organisational cultures, and by opening up dialogue in ways which avoid an exclusive use of language, can be helpful strategies in developing connectivity between network community members and evolving shared understandings about key principles.

Another issue brought to light by our experience in Rotherham, is that there can be differences in what key agencies say and what people in the community perceive. Multi-layered approaches have proved beneficial in providing concrete examples of effective community leadership models to inform and validate strategic decisions. □

Contact details:

Contact: Sue Shelley, Community Learning,
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

Email: sue.shelley@rotherham.gov.uk

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

To order a copy of this series, please email
nlc@ncsl.org.uk quoting the reference
WAWLA/Community leadership

**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
W: www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

**National College for
School Leadership**
Community Leadership
Triumph Road
Nottingham
NG8 1DH

E: communityleadership@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk/communityleadership



National College for
School Leadership