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NCSL National College for School Leadership

What are we **learning about…?**

Sustaining a network of schools

❝ *We need to sustain the things that help us to evolve, modify and adapt to changing needs, and the things that help us to develop skills and capacity.* ❞

School leader

Acknowledgements

Sustaining a network of schools

The question of how to create the capacity to sustain worthwhile collaborative activity within and between schools should be a key consideration for school leaders from the very earliest days of establishing a network. Sometimes the concept of sustainability becomes confused with issues of ring-fenced funding. But sustaining a network of schools is about much more than simply how to survive without funding. And it's more than just a matter of longevity too. In fact, sustainability has been identified as one of the major indicators of effectiveness within learning communities. We know, for example, that successful networks will develop the ability:

● to impact on pupil learning and social development

● to impact on staff practice and morale, and to build leadership capacity

● to sustain activity – when all characteristics are in place and the processes are operating smoothly as a matter of course

NCSL 2006 [1]

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has supported and researched networking and collaboration within the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme and much has been learned about sustaining networks of schools, partnerships and collaboratives. In this think piece we outline what sustaining a network of schools looks like in practice and how it involves three dimensions of capacity building.

Three dimensions of capacity building for sustaining collaborative activity

1 Network development and growth – embedding participation, ownership and reach of evaluated network ideas and activity by building capacity for ongoing self-evaluation and joint accountability.

2 Adaptive change – developing fresh objectives, and the flexible structures and processes to support their realisation, by building capacity to adapt to innovation and changing context.

3 Network leadership – supporting the autonomy of the network by building capacity for distributed leadership and facilitation at all levels.

We hope that this think piece will be useful to you if you are considering setting up a network, are part of a formed or more established network, or are simply interested in finding out more about sustaining a network of schools.

Sustaining a network of schools

Building capacity for continuous change

When experienced leaders of established school networks are asked how the sustainability of their network might be ensured, a number of common themes come to light. They consider that sustaining network activity is dependent upon the current level of development and the strength of involvement within the network, its future plans, and the opportunities and challenges that surround it.

Some of the key principles for sustainable practice which have emerged include:

● ensuring that the network has built a critical mass of participants

● embedding leadership and facilitation of network activity at all levels

● agreeing the aspects of network activity or practice that are worth sustaining in the longer term – this can only be done following rigorous, planned and on-going self-evaluation

● committing to a refined focus for network activity, one that is adaptable to the network's current and future needs and priorities for learning.

Networks are complex structures, and it is not always possible to address these factors one at a time. The interconnected nature of networked relationships and joint work makes it necessary to consider these principles simultaneously. A strategy that would support network leaders to do this might seem dauntingly complicated. But sustaining collaborative activity depends on developing the ability, or, more precisely, the capacity, to do so.

Network leaders will, from the very beginning, find themselves thinking ahead about how projects, and even the network itself, will survive over time and through changes of personnel and policy. More importantly, however, they must develop an enhanced perspective, asking how they will ensure that a constant and productive state of renewal is sustained within the learning community.

Sustaining effective activity

Put simply, sustaining effective activity means being able to build specific kinds of capacities in order to understand what it is you have achieved, what you want to build on and what you want to change. The diagram below shows how these three aspects of adaptive development form a continuous cycle.
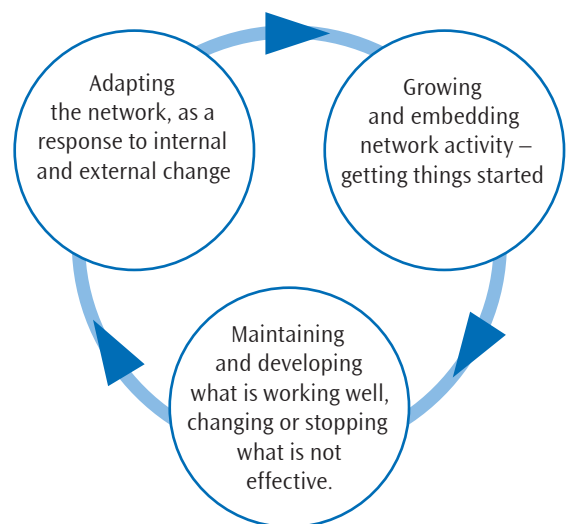
Collaborative activity will not be sustained through efforts to maintain stability or a status quo. Sustaining collaborative activity is dependent upon ensuring development and evolution over time. The educational landscapes are forever shifting. Turn-over of school staff is a constant, as is the fact that political imperatives for schools, both locally and nationally, change regularly. Moreover, renewal itself is positive, bringing as it does, fresh ideas and new commitment. Part of developing a perspective on sustainability is to do with expecting and preparing to respond to such internal and external challenges and instability, as a natural process of growth. □

1 Network development and growth – embedding participation, ownership and reach of evaluated network ideas and activity, by building capacity for ongoing self-evaluation and joint accountability.

Participation: reach, depth and ownership

Once a network is established, its future life and growth depend on the extent of **reach**, **depth** and **ownership** within it. These aspects of participation reflect the fact that creating a 'critical mass' of network activity and support is key to ensuring the long-term sustainability of a network.

Reach is concerned with the lateral spread of activity across a network. The engagement of individual schools with the wider network will inevitably ebb and flow over time but it is important that no single school, or major part of a school, becomes disengaged from network activity for too long. This will not only be an issue for the individual school but also for the network as a whole.

> *If you are going to leave a legacy, something sustainable, you have got to change classroom practice – a lot of schools pay lip-service to innovations. In secondary, where schools are big, you have key people who are doing things, networking, and in reality that is where it stops … how much it feeds into teaching is negligible. It is getting it into the fabric of what happens in the classroom and changing their approaches [which is important].*
>
> Network Co-leader

Depth is concerned with the extent to which networking is not just for those who are involved in leading the network but also has an impact at other levels including in the classroom, making a positive difference to pupils' learning and their lives. It is not possible to be prescriptive about the required reach and depth of activity for a network to sustain. It is important to bear in mind, however, high quality activity in a couple of classrooms will not sustain a network, neither will marginal and ineffective activity which is spread across all classrooms. The NLC External Evaluation found a direct relationship between extent of involvement in the network and increased achievement for children.

Increasing the **ownership** of network activity means reaching a point where headteachers, teachers and pupils no longer see the network as someone else's creation or something that happens 'out there'. It becomes something which they see as their own and which they feel both protective of and responsible for. American academic Cynthia Coburn suggests that a reform cannot be 'at scale', nor have reached a critical mass, until it is owned by those whom it affects:

> *… to be considered 'at scale', ownership over the reform must shift so that it is no longer an 'external' reform, controlled by a reformer, but rather becomes an 'internal' reform with authority for the reform held by districts, schools and teachers who have the capacity to sustain, spread and deepen reform principles themselves.*
>
> Coburn, 2003[2]

The key to establishing such a critical mass, or the tipping point beyond which the network will sustain, is to embed the network activity which dovetails with the needs and focus of each member school rather than it being seen as additional and unconnected:

> *Network activity needs to complement or replace what is happening, not be put on top, it needs to become a part of things, be bolted in not bolted on.*
>
> Network Co-leader

You would see a critical mass of sustainable practice, therefore, operating where networking is not an additional task, but enhances existing, less effective forms of learning, CPD, or school improvement activity. Some examples of what sustainable participation looks like in practice have been given as:

● where collaborative planning of learning and teaching activity is taken for granted,

● where the sharing of ideas and strategies and joint problem-solving are widespread, and

● where team work involving teachers and support or care staff is widespread.

NCSL 2006[3]

Sustaining a network of schools

Self-evaluation and joint accountability

If a network knows its efforts are reaping rewards then increased participation, ownership, depth and reach will follow. In addition, practice will develop and spread when it is accompanied by evidence of its effectiveness and value.

Successful early stage establishment of learning networks has been shown to be reliant on four key features:

1   Design around a compelling idea or aspirational purpose and an appropriate form and structure

2   Focus on pupil learning

3   Create new opportunities for adult learning

4   Plan and have dedicated leadership and management
NCSL, 2005[4]

It has been an additional key finding of the Networked Learning Communities programme that networks which are able to sustain their initial achievements have built accountability systems into their work. They do this by establishing ongoing evaluation processes and methodologies which support the long-term effectiveness of their collaboration.

Planned and systematic evaluation can provide unequivocal justification for the focus, the activity and the very existence of a network, and is often a catalyst for increasing participation and growth. For this reason, establishing a structure for monitoring and evaluating network progress, from the outset, is as important as establishing the network itself. Being able to draw on, and refer to, different sets of (qualitative and quantitative) data means that networks can:

● continue to grow and develop by learning from their own successes and failures

● demonstrate and transfer the effective practices it has developed

● maintain focus on the facts that ultimately drive the learning forward
NCSL, 2005[5]

❝ *Successful networks from the outset plan a collective network evaluation strategy – identifying key milestones, success criteria and impact measures. They develop a collective accountability for the impact of network activity on the learning of children and other learners in the network.* ❞
Earl and Katz, 2006[6]

It is important for network leaders to be able to recognise and utilise a variety of accountability systems that can support the sustainability of their network. Louise Stoll's recent work on sustaining professional learning communities suggests that reflective professional enquiry is crucial. She suggests that in learning networks that are likely to sustain[7] a 'questioning orientation to practice and a need to know how we are doing and how we can improve is pervasive'. It is this culture of collectively striving for improvement that Lorna Earl and Stephen Katz identify as the motivation behind 'active self-monitoring to support and challenge the work of the group'.[8]

There are three predominant forms of evaluation which occur in networks.

● **Evaluation of network activities and events** – the vast majority of networks carry out evaluations of major events, such as conferences and continuing professional development (CPD) activities. These help draw out elements to be repeated and developed on future occasions.

● **Network-wide evaluations** – for example measuring shifts in staff perceptions through the Levels of Learning survey provided to NLCs by NCSL (NCSL, 2006).[9] This conditions survey provides a year on year indicator of staff perceptions of a range of indices, from staff views of the quality of dialogue in their school to the nature of the leadership in a network.

● *Network-led evaluations of school-based innovations* – increasingly networks are using techniques such as study-visits to assess the fidelity of network innovations and to identify good practice at school level worth transferring across the network.[10]

A sustainable network will base its progress on good quality evaluations conducted at different levels and points within the network. Staff will confidently use a wide range of methods to investigate learning and teaching, using findings to inform and develop their practice. Data will be collected, analysed and used to support this process.[11] In addition, the communication of evaluations throughout the network via 'transparent and informative statements of account' to others will be a priority.[12]

2 Adaptive change – developing fresh objectives, and the flexible structures and processes to support their realisation, by building capacity to adapt to innovation and changing context.

❝ *Any number of factors may require a network to re-focus its efforts: funding may dry up, new partners may be acquired, new challenges may emerge or old ones may be dealt with. In order to inject fresh life into collaboration between schools, the network may need to revisit its original purposes and objectives.* ❞

NCSL, 2005[13]

A high functioning network will have the capacity to adapt, its fluidity and flexibility being the result of its diverse membership, and will build individual and collective capacity to be adaptable and innovative.

Different skills and aptitudes of individuals will come to the fore, depending on needs and priorities of the network at any one time. There will always be a mixture of weak and strong ties that inevitably form between individuals in a network. If this mixture is right then there will be ample opportunities for members to identify new possibilities, pick up on different needs and draw appropriate groups of people together to address these. Too many very strong links and a network becomes a clique, too many weak ones and it can become more of a social club.

These are important considerations. There are many examples of networks failing to build sufficient capacity to allow their work to continue. This can happen, for example, when there is over reliance upon a single individual in a school who then moves on, or when too much effort is focused on low capacity areas and a critical mass of activity is not developed. In order to be able to adapt and innovate, it is vital to establish and maintain a culture which encourages and enables change, rather than encourages stagnation.

Adapting network objectives

In a world of multiple networks and multiple and conflicting demands on schools and their staff, clarity of purpose is vital. A network often requires a degree of compromise to agree a shared purpose. However, in order to achieve the capacity for adaptive change this shared purpose must be allowed to change and alter over time.

In order to do this, networks will need to develop capacity to

● Reflect on and evaluate the previous work of the network – using data

● Draw on the knowledge of those who were involved in this

● Expand or alter the leadership teams to reflect new circumstances

● Address fragmentation in the network and working towards establishing a new set of priorities

NCSL, 2005[14]

A high proportion of networks tend either to make their first decisions those concerning structure (eg 'who should be on the strategic leadership group?' 'What other working groups and committees do we need?'), or they simply use an existing structure of committees and groups which was originally designed for a very different purpose.

❝ *Creating extensive purposeful and interdependent collaboration is a … strategy to promote ongoing development of the network. Interdependent working and learning arrangements bring about internal pressure and mutual accountability for assessing success and continued development* ❞

NCSL, 2005[15]

Sustaining a network of schools

Purpose, process, structures

Making a habit of starting from purposes ensures that a network is regularly reviewing the effectiveness of its processes and its underpinning structures. A structure which suits, for example, the planning and delivery of network-wide CPD may not be a suitable structure for establishing pupil voice activity in a network. Different purposes need different processes and structures to deliver them.

Re-shaping objectives in a network needs to follow this purpose – process – structures pattern:

> **Purpose**
> The first stage should always be an agreement of purpose and objective (whether this be the broad purpose of the network as a whole or of a particular element or proposed project).
>
> **Process**
> A decision about the processes which best fit the purpose should then follow. A question to ask might be: "What processes for learning can we implement in order to fulfil our purposes?"
>
> **Structures**
> Finally, the structures best suited to deliver these processes should be identified. This principle has been found to be fundamental to making a network adaptable and innovative and responsive to need.

Adapting the network objectives in this order avoids there being any pre-ordained processes or structures 'built in'. A network should therefore be able to respond to changing and unexpected priorities and needs.

Continuous innovation

❝ *One of the biggest challenges that comes with re-focusing a network is to avoid losing momentum. Establishing fresh objectives that will resonate with those already involved in the network is important.* ❞

NCSL 2005[16]

The leadership of a network needs always to have an eye on how its activities build capacities as part of their on-going work. Put simply, for example, a group of schools might run a one-off joint curriculum event for a number of its pupils which is beneficial in the short-term. However a *sustainable* learning network will have the capacity to evaluate such an event and run a more successful one in the future, even when some staff have moved on, and when local authority and national priorities have changed and are possibly in conflict with those of the network.

3 *Network leadership – supporting the autonomy of the network by building capacity for distributed leadership and facilitation at all levels*

What kind of leadership is needed to create a sustainable network? It should be fluid enough to respond to renewed focuses, or naturally occurring changes in personnel. It should draw on capacity-building functions such as collaborative enquiry, and comprise internal, external and multilevel or system leadership capacities.

Internal leadership capacity

Central amongst the opportunities which a network presents is the opportunity to spread or distribute leadership[17]. Networks require individuals to take on new network roles, creating new leaders in the process. New or relatively inexperienced staff can be encouraged to take a lead, both within and beyond their school. Experienced staff can be given new opportunities to engage with new ideas and approaches. Support staff can be presented with particular leadership roles in a way which schools often do not allow, for example, leading practical workshops, or project groups or communication strategies across the network. In this way, a network often becomes a seed-bed for leadership growth within and across schools.

> **Leaders begin to see through participation in processes that leadership is not purely dependent on people in formal positions of authority. They start to recognise that individual teachers are leaders of learning and indeed that teaching assistants and pupils can take the lead in learning as well.**
>
> NCSL 2006[18]

This new leadership capacity is key to maintaining and developing the reach and depth of network activity. This has taken multiple forms within the NLC programme. We have generically used the term *internal facilitators*, to indicate the role of all of those involved in sustaining their network. Networks have used a range of other titles: 'lead learners' became common in some networks involved in curriculum development; 'school improvement group co-ordinators', in school improvement networks; leaders of change such as 'theme champions' also appeared. Other roles grew out of pre-existing internal school roles which already had a degree of outreach work in other schools.

These include Advanced Skills Teachers and Gifted and Talented co-ordinators, Where NLCs grew from pre-existing networks such as EAZs and EiCs, further adaptations of existing leadership roles occurred.

Another common feature of the work of internal facilitators is that they are often the drivers of the extension of the reach of network activity, both vertically and horizontally. Increasing the reach vertically means both communicating upwards to the strategic leadership group, and also increasingly drawing in other staff and pupils to participate in the activities of the network.

Working vertically involves opening up spaces for closer professional dialogues between middle leaders and headteachers. Working horizontally is often facilitated by breaking the network down into small sub-networks based on shared developmental focuses. A teacher or teachers given leadership roles in a particular subject area are often very effective in encouraging participation by peers from other schools. Teachers can respond to the enthusiasm of other teachers. The creation of this additional leadership capacity is, though, only part of an overall approach to capacity building in which network leaders have become involved, to sustain their networks.

External leadership capacity

> **To be sustainable, networks need to build internal capacity and remain permeable to external knowledge and expertise.**
>
> NCSL, 2006[19]

A network of schools will often have within it a very wide range of skills, knowledge and expertise which can be used to develop other people. Nonetheless, it is the experience of most networks that at some times it is beneficial to introduce external expertise in the form of facilitation / training / development / critical friendship to assist in a particular area of pedagogy or leadership development. External expertise (even for a short time) can be an efficient way of providing a spark, re-energising a group or simply adding to the knowledge base. It is not surprising that networks often choose to bring in an external facilitator or trainer to stimulate the development of new practice. With appropriate follow-up this kind of intervention will enhance the ability of a network to sustain.

Sustaining a network of schools

Network leaders need to identify and harness professional skills for CPD purposes and invite critical friendship input for challenge and support. They should locate and co-ordinate existing experts such as Advanced Skills Teachers, experienced practitioner enquirers or coaches. They should also identify others, for example, local authority advisers, HEI mentors or specialists from subject association who can bring an external, critical perspective to the network.[20]

Collaborative enquiry

Collaborative enquiry generates knowledge that is based in evidence from research and from practice. This knowledge is also relatable and adaptable to context and values both individual contribution and team work. In other words, networked collaborative enquiry is a capacity building leadership strategy for developing and sustaining a learning network.[21]

❝ *Enquiry based leadership develops the capacity not only to cope with a rapidly moving knowledge base, but the capability to create, shape and move it forward and in doing so develop the kind of transformative learning organisations and communities needed in the future* ❞

Carter and Ireson 2003[22]

System Leadership

Those running or leading a sustainable network are, by definition, setting out to change their local education system. When a school leader develops an interest in, and some influence over the life of another school, then this is the beginning of system leadership, a prerequisite of a sustainable network.

❝ *To change organisations and systems will require leaders to get experience in linking to other parts of the system. These leaders in turn must help develop other leaders with similar characteristics.* ❞

Fullan 2004[23]

Fullan's notion of 'Systems thinkers in action' describes a form of leadership capable of changing the education system by working at multiple levels within it simultaneously.

For a network to be sustained it also needs to develop leadership at different levels. These levels range from planning for eventual succession at network leadership level through to developing leadership at the school, project and classroom levels. Michael Fullan's concept of 'tri-level reform' is also a useful construct to apply here in terms of building a sustainable network. Fullan's three levels are those of school, local authority and state and he argues that new capacities are needed at each level. For a network, the levels to consider are classroom/teacher, school and network. New leadership capacities are needed at each of these levels.

In many of the networks within the NLC programme there is evidence of fulfilling needs of tri-level reform and the adoption of adaptive leadership styles. Both of these elements emphasise the importance of leadership development and have resulted in a massive expansion of *new leadership roles for* individuals within networks.

❝ *The autonomy which encourages innovation also has to be supported. Network leaders have spoken of brokering connections and building leadership capacity by strategies such as moving people into collaborative decision–making. This fosters the collective and collaborative responsibility which is key to sustaining learning communities.* ❞

NCSL 2006[24]

A fourth dimension

Aligning capacities – Multiple levels and dimensions of capacity building in a networked setting

There are, of course, many similarities between capacity building approaches within schools and within networks, though networks present a number of added complexities and additional layers. Capacity building *per se* is fundamentally about developing people, structures and organisations so that they can positively plan for and respond to change. Capacity building in a school network therefore will always need to work at multiple layers and levels – from the classroom level to the local authority level and beyond. With limited time and resources available, the strategic leadership of network capacity building activity is always going to be about prioritising and juggling finite time and resources.

For example a network might typically put much of its time and energy into developing a small cadre group of teachers who work together to develop collaborative approaches to one area of the curriculum. Teachers and pupils in this curriculum area are likely to benefit greatly from such an investment. However, a sustainable network relies on network growth – practice and knowledge need to spread to other areas. So in this example, the network will need at some point to decide to develop the capacity to share and spread knowledge.

This group of teachers may need to be given the skills to share their learning across the network, or someone else may be best placed to facilitate this knowledge transfer. Meanwhile, in order to ensure a critical mass of network participation and ownership, the network leadership may decide to develop a separate group, perhaps one of middle leaders to undertake leadership learning together. The network may also want to develop its capacity to work externally, by supporting a group of teachers to attend and make a presentation at a conference. The decisions about how, when and why people are invited and encouraged to become involved in network opportunities are important to sustainability and so is a communication strategy that makes such involvement widely known.

These internal and external capacities are never static. They are highly dynamic over time. Different parts of a network will experience changes in capacity at different rates. Smaller schools for example can lose and gain capacity relatively quickly – staff turn-over has greater impact in a small school, but conversely whole-staff development is easier and quicker to achieve in a small school than in a large secondary school.

Network leaders need to be aware of and adapt to these potentially rapid changes in organisational and team capacity. Experience has shown that the successful strategic leadership of capacity building within a network means linking and aligning the different levels and layers of capacity which are hinted at above. This ensures that there is coherence within the network and an ability to respond seamlessly to changing priorities and issues.

A practice model

The figure on page 12 is an attempt to illustrate the multi-layered and multi-dimensional nature inherent in building the capacities of a network.[25] It exemplifies some of the basic leadership practices, cultural and attitudinal changes, and structures and processes that underpin a sustainable network.

As was mentioned earlier, in a network of schools these basic practices and structures occur at three different levels – individual, organisational / team (this might be whole school level or whole department in a large school) and at the network level. Further, at each of these three levels, all of the practice, structure and process can be viewed as being impactful or focussed either on the network (left hand side of the figure) or focussed on the individual school (right hand side of the figure).

Building the capacity of a network is therefore achieved by linking and aligning the capacities within the three levels and two dimensions. ☐
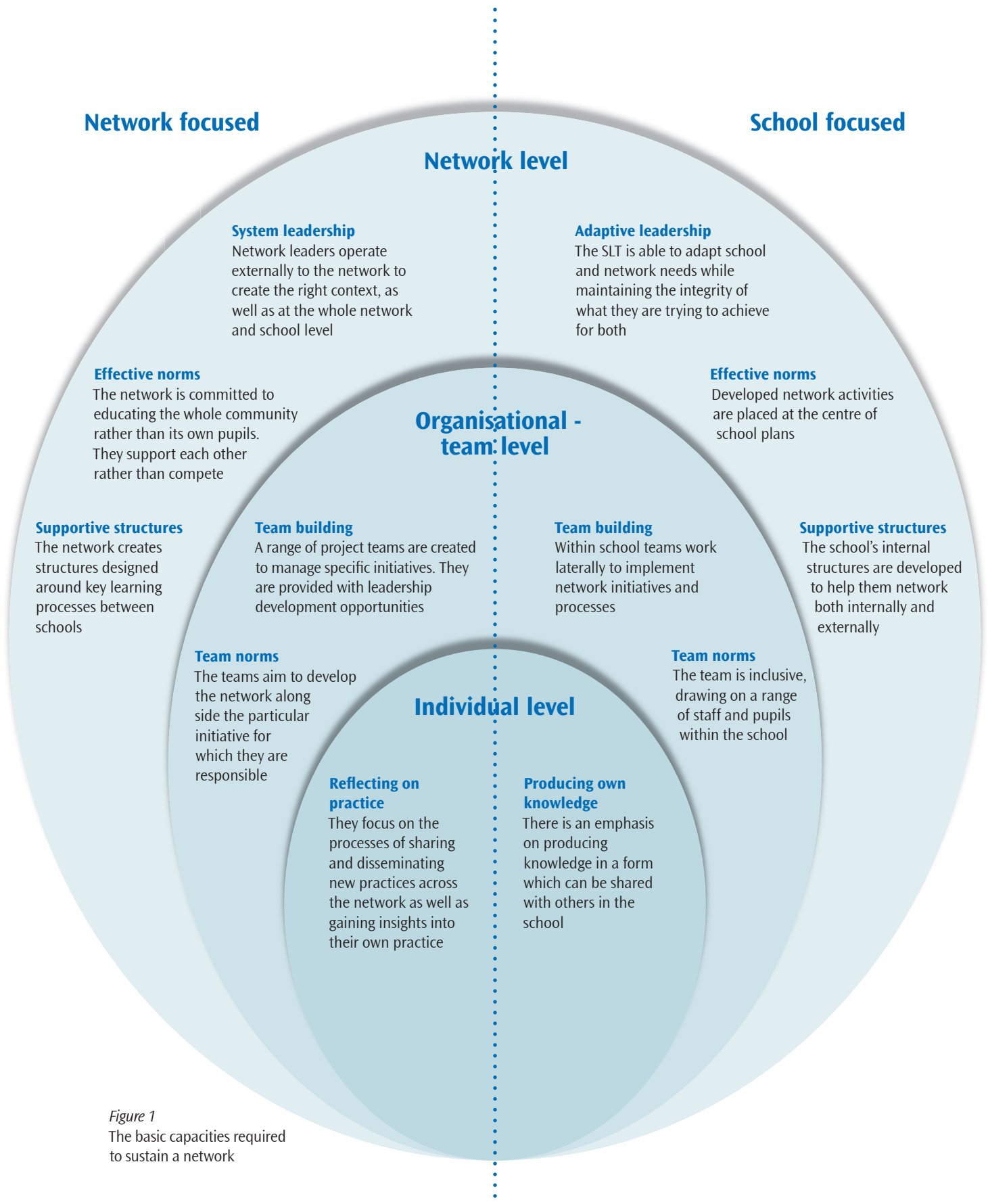
Network focused

School focused

Network level

System leadership
Network leaders operate externally to the network to create the right context, as well as at the whole network and school level

Adaptive leadership
The SLT is able to adapt school and network needs while maintaining the integrity of what they are trying to achieve for both

Effective norms
The network is committed to educating the whole community rather than its own pupils. They support each other rather than compete

Effective norms
Developed network activities are placed at the centre of school plans

Organisational - team level

Supportive structures
The network creates structures designed around key learning processes between schools

Team building
A range of project teams are created to manage specific initiatives. They are provided with leadership development opportunities

Team building
Within school teams work laterally to implement network initiatives and processes

Supportive structures
The school's internal structures are developed to help them network both internally and externally

Team norms
The teams aim to develop the network along side the particular initiative for which they are responsible

Team norms
The team is inclusive, drawing on a range of staff and pupils within the school

Individual level

Reflecting on practice
They focus on the processes of sharing and disseminating new practices across the network as well as gaining insights into their own practice

Producing own knowledge
There is an emphasis on producing knowledge in a form which can be shared with others in the school

Figure 1
The basic capacities required to sustain a network

End piece

Constant change, both at the school level and the system level, is a given in our education system. Sustainability of a network of schools is, therefore, best and most usefully understood as being dependent upon a number of capacity building functions within a network's design. Sustaining a network is not about maintaining the status quo, it is about building the capacity to respond to change.

❝ *Networks are likely to be most effective if enhancing pupil learning is the unwavering goal and the work of network and the schools within them is creating the conditions for educators to engage in the kind of rigorous and challenging joint work and collaborative enquiry that constantly pushed them to routinely examine and alter what they do in a spiral of continuous rethinking refinement and transformation that results in fundamental changes in the way that they think and act in schools in order to provide the best for the pupils that they serve.* ❞

Earl & Katz 2006[26]

The dynamic and interacting layers of internal and external capacities require network leaders to think strategically about where they place their capacity building efforts and which sets of different capacities they should link together. The leadership of a network needs to have an overview of these levels at all times, an awareness of its current strength and weakness and therefore an ability to make effective strategic decisions.

A network with highly developed strategic leadership but with classroom teachers who are either ignorant of or disengaged from the network will not be sustained. Neither, on the other hand, will a network of classroom teachers enthusiastic to learn together but whose school leaders are not genuinely signed up to the value of school-to-school collaboration.

This think piece has addressed the necessity for network leaders to link and align their capacity building efforts, in order that they can respond to and survive the ever changing nature of their internal and external environments. The three most important capacities – network growth and development, adaptive change and network leadership – in combination, will put any network in a position of strength, able to thrive despite changes at individual school level and despite the ebbs and flows of the wider system. □

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What are we
learning about...?

The six titles in the series 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
- Facilitation within school networks
- **Sustaining a network of schools**