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What are we
learning about...?
Sustaining a network of schools

Features of sustainability: 1

Frome Community Learning Partnership

An illustrative account of what sustaining
a network looks like in practice.

Features of sustainability: 1

The accounts of practice presented within this series aim to provide concrete examples of sustaining a network of schools. In particular, they provide a practical illustration of the significant elements we have found to be evident when developing effective and, therefore, sustainable networks.

❝ *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 the network's design. Sustaining a network is not about maintaining the status quo, it is about building the capacity to respond to change.* ❞

NCSL, 2006

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 creating sustainable school networks, it is possible to identify what sustainability within networks looks like in practice and look at how it involves three key dimensions of capacity building for sustaining collaborative activity.

Three dimensions of capacity building for sustaining collaborative activity:

1 Network development

2 Adaptive change

3 Network leadership

The accounts of practice explore, in different ways and with differing emphases, these key characteristics of sustaining a network of schools. In so doing they help to explain what sustainability looks like in practice. Considering these dimensions of activity in the process of developing sustainable networks will help to ensure that future development is built from the best of what is know from current thinking and practice. We hope that they will be of practical use to you if you are considering setting up a network, are part of a newly formed or more established network, or are simply interested in finding out more about sustainability within networks. □

Acknowledgements

A network case study: background

All 17 schools in the town of Frome are involved in the network which covers both rural and urban areas. There is 1 special school, 1 primary, 12 first schools, 2 middle schools and a community college. This networked learning community is called the **Frome Community Learning Partnership** (CLP) and has a long history. The group of head teachers originally met for their own individual ends and interests; in the early days this group provided mutual support for the head teachers but made little direct wider impact on the schools involved.

The main impetus for the group of head teachers forming as a group in the first instance was their feeling of isolation from the rest of the local authority, a sense that the grouping was a 'natural' one, as it included all the schools in the town. This natural grouping of schools has then evolved into something very much more, now including the local authority.

❝ *The federation was originally just a group of head teachers who felt geographically adrift from the LA.* ❞

Headteacher

The CLP now works mainly through three long-standing strands of collaboration. The first is the Frome Area Schools Federation (FASF), which encompasses all of the schools in Frome. These schools have worked together for more than ten years on issues such as teaching for effective learning, social inclusion, and centralisation of data: under this last heading, they produce a 'Frome PANDA', which includes data from all the schools in the area. The second pre-existing strand is the Frome Education and Training Enterprise, which deals with education post-16. This is a multi-agency group, including the community college, the chamber of commerce, training groups and a local FE college. The third strand is the Frome Inclusion Partnership, which is again multi-agency. This partnership works toward coherent answers to issues of inclusion.

These strands work together under the banner of the Community Learning Partnership, using cross membership rather than an overarching committee.

❝ *We are talking about rewriting education architecture over a period of time, aren't we?* ❞

Headteacher

This account of practice addresses the three identified characteristics for sustaining collaborative activity through illustrative descriptions of network practice as follows:

Network development
- developing a shared vision and using data to inform the vision

- the identification of resources for network development

Adaptive change
- the development of trusting relationships

Network leadership
- the development of network leadership

Network Development

Developing a shared vision

When individual members are asked to identify what has made the Frome network sustainable for so long, the most common initial answer is trust. Trust, co-operation and a lack of negative competitiveness between the schools and their staff is cited repeatedly as the foundation to the work of the network. This level of trust is seen as the outcome of many years of working together and of the consciously collaborative way of working on the part of the headteachers involved. However, trust is not of itself sufficient to sustain a learning network. Trust needs to be built up around a shared vision.

❝ *It's very much a network that's moving on together, rather than a lot of individual schools all going their own way.* ❞

Headteacher

This vision for Frome is one of a coherent and holistic education for all of its children; an education that takes place 'in Frome' not within individual schools. The clarity of shared vision accounts for the range of out of school work that takes place across the area (including working on the Frome Festival), as well as for the cross-phase curriculum work which ensures coherence for children when they move schools.

❝ *I feel very much that we're moving in the same direction – which is great because when you pass children on to the next school you feel that they are going to have very much the same ideas, the same ethos we have.* ❞

Teacher

Using data to inform the vision

The 'Frome PANDA' is one of the more innovative developments of the network, growing from the trust established between schools and headteachers.

❝ *…we have our own data analysis and have our own Frome PANDA – the data analysis started in a very simple way with just each school having a set format and from that we employed a data co-ordinator. She started looking at the information that was there and then saying, well we could have – if we have this bit more information it would give us a better picture.* ❞

Headteacher

The data tool allows the network to track pupils, to highlight areas of need and/or good practice, and to get an over-arching sense of what education is like in Frome, rather than just in individual schools.

❝ *We've invested time in a data co-ordinator. What are our results telling us? What are we doing with individual groups of students?* ❞

Headteacher

This development of the joint PANDA is still in its early stages, and the network is working out how best to maximise the use of this collaborative data.

❝ *I think as a partnership one of the difficult things has been to get the priorities right… There are so many things we could do, we could embrace. That's why we took on the Frome PANDA so we could identify the real issues… All our project groups are driven by the data that comes out of that presentation.* ❞

Headteacher

Resources for network development

The Frome NLC is one of the cohort of networks which received support from the National College for School Leadership, but no direct funding. The network, however, has accessed various other streams of funding to support its work. Among these have been funding from the local authority, funding which previously would have gone directly to the individual schools. There is also a pupil levy paid by each of the schools which helps to fund the work of the network.

For any network to sustain itself the capacity to develop is a fundamental issue. A vibrant network will demand a great deal of work to be done, but there are rarely any dedicated staff to carry this out. One danger for a learning network, therefore, is that it attempts to do too much, to take on too much.

❝ *The approach we've taken is that rather than trying to set up 'our own LEA', we wanted to, in collaboration with Somerset, have greater local control over what was being spent in Frome.* ❞

Headteacher

The Frome NLC considered the danger of taking on too much as a group of schools and decided that working in partnership with other agencies was the best way forward. The network has also worked closely with the local authority to ensure that existing resources were made available to the group as a whole, rather than to individual schools. For example, there is dedicated ICT support which the first schools in the area can buy into – the technician is employed by the local authority but works solely in the Frome area, reducing response times and allowing schools much greater access to her skills. Much the same arrangement has been set up for the teaching of music, with a music teacher dedicated to the area rather than working county-wide.

❝ *I think the biggest difference it has made is a fundamental understanding at the LEA that we are working together – because anything that had happened before had happened in spite of the LEA, not because of the LEA. In turn, that greater recognition at the LEA leads to a greater confidence in individual officers to work with us.* ❞

Headteacher

In terms of development capacity, one of the most significant events was the devolution to the network of significant funds (over £70,000) by the local authority. This money has been used partly for an inclusion project, supporting a dedicated, centre as well as a two-year behaviour project post. This use of resources has, in the view of the headteachers, changed the way the local authority relates to the schools in Frome. Working in close partnership increases capacity when that partnership is well managed.

❝ *I'd like us all to stop duplicating things, or if we do all duplicate them it's because we can all train each other to do it – things like our nurture unit.* ❞

Headteacher

Adaptive change

The development of trusting relationships

The trust built up over the years of working together in Frome has allowed headteachers to challenge each other much more, and to look at education as a whole, rather than as disparate actions taking place in different schools.

❝ *If you are in a situation where each school is protective of its own, you don't ask those questions. I think that has come because we are more mature as a federation and we are more confident about asking those questions of each other.* ❞

Headteacher

The Frome headteachers are well aware that their way of working is different from the norm and certainly from what had prevailed in Frome before the network began. There is certainly a changed relationship between the local authority and the network. Headteachers now feel that the local authority sees them as a cohesive group rather than as disparate and competing entities.

❝ *I think the old system was divisive – and now with the comprehensiveness of the system, I don't see us stopping even if they change the system. Previously schools worked, not in competition exactly, but they didn't work collaboratively together. And here, in Frome, I'm just amazed at how much support they give – how much good practice is shared and how much it's a network that's moving on together, rather than a lot of individual schools all going their own way.* ❞

Headteacher

The network is so well established and embedded that it is now accessed by many other groups and agencies including Forest Schools, the Phoenix centre (a behaviour and SEN centre), SEN/behaviour work, music tuition, ICT support and building support. It is not seen as a bolt-on extra but as an integral part of what it means to be a school in Frome. The integration of the network into other services and initiatives has two implications. Firstly it goes

a long way to guaranteeing sustainability. The existence of the network in some form or another, under whatever name it happens to be using at a given time, is taken for granted not only by the schools but by the community as a whole. The structures and the ways of working of the network are embedded in the area.

❝ *Everybody wants to be part of it basically because you get so much back.* ❞

Headteacher

The second result of integration is potentially a threat. The network and its structures have been a part of the life of schools in Frome for so long there is a danger of them being taken for granted. Continuing existence does not equate automatically to usefulness. The threat is that the network could continue to exist without adding real value to the work of the schools. It might provide mutual support and sharing for those who attend, a place to let off steam and garner ideas. This is valuable but it is not the purpose of a learning network.

Sustainability for a network does not mean merely continuing to exist. If a network is not acting as an agent of positive change for the learning of its young people, then it is not being sustained as a networked learning community

What Frome arrived at, more or less by osmosis over the years, is not a structure that defines what the network does, but a set of relationships that enable change and flexibility as it is needed. Again and again, the issue of trust, resulting in a lack of competition between schools, is identified by members as their strength. These supportive relationships are the result of an iterative process. It is possible to set out deliberately to build trust. But in Frome this has been achieved as a by-product of working together, very much echoing the thinking of Senge (1990)[1].

❝ *If you're a systems thinker in school planning, then you focus not on particular practices but on building collaborative relationships and structures for change. You need mechanisms that allow people to talk, across grade levels, departments and schools within a system.* ❞

Fullan, 2004[2]

[1] Senge, P, 1990, *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organisation*, New York, Doubleday
[2] Fullan, M, 2004, *Systems thinkers in action: moving beyond the standards plateau*, DfES ref DfES/1060/2004

Developing leadership capacity

The NLC is headed by two co-leaders, both headteachers in local schools. Previously there had been one chair (again a headteacher). The decision to move to co-leadership was taken both to demonstrate and support the concept of collaborative leadership and to spread the work more widely. Co-leadership is itself a model which supports the likely future sustainability of the network. The co-leaders have some part-time administrative support.

In this long-standing partnership of schools, the majority of the leadership work has taken place at the level of headteachers and governors. Indeed, governors are involved in the steering committee for the network.

❝ *I think it would have been easy to have set up a separate governors' committee – this is a far better way of bringing them in, rather than setting up a parallel body. We did have one – frankly it didn't work and wasn't really sure what it was supposed to do.* ❞

Governor

The thread of integration is woven throughout the network. Rather than have an overarching committee dealing with issues of life long learning in Frome, there is instead common membership of different groups. This cross membership of the different leadership groups facilitates the transfer of information and expertise without multiplying meetings and levels of contact.

❝ *Rather that have a superstructure [for the NLC] now there is common membership of those groups [other learning agencies in Frome] and rather than having an overarching Community Learning Partnership we have those four working in tandem.* ❞

Headteacher ☐

End Note

It is worth considering the transferability of the features and lessons from Frome. As Tobin points out, it is not always possible or desirable simply to transplant practice from one place and context to another.[3] The detailed combinations of features which make up the context of any network are of course unique. For Frome these included an initial feeling of geographic isolation from the local authority, a bedrock of historical trust between headteachers and strong support from particular agencies in the community. The Frome NLC is, above all, a local solution to local problems.

❝ *What is needed is an approach that would turn the franchising/colonist model on its head, and that would begin and end with practitioners, who would have the major say about the innovations that they want to see tried and evaluated and about the kinds of data they will find most convincing.* ❞

Tobin, 2005

An authentic application of the learning from the Frome NLC would certainly not begin with a transfer of 'things to do', 'meetings to instigate' or 'structures to put in place'. Rather, it would begin and continue as the CLP itself did, with an organic examination of the needs of each member, with a consideration of the vision for the group, with the building of trust and relationship between practitioners. This happens through action and following an honest appraisal about the capacity and resources at ones disposal. Working through these stages has proved to be a route to sustainability.

❝ *I can't really envisage this school existing in Frome, without being a member of the CLP, it just wouldn't work – it's got to that stage I think. Membership is not optional for schools in Frome I think it's necessary – I think a school would be so isolated if it chose to withdraw, it's not an option. In terms of its own sustainability and viability as a school and in terms of the progression thing for the children. They would be so remote that they would not dovetail into what's available for the others.* ❞

Headteacher ☐

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[3] Tobin, J, 2005, "Scaling up as catachresis." *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 28(1): 23-32

What are we
learning about...?

The six titles in the series focus on:
What are we learning about…?

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- *'Making mathematics count'* in school networks
- Facilitation within school networks
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