

20 questions about learning networks

A guide for school leaders

Edited by Caireen Goddard

This guide is for school leaders interested in creating, developing or sustaining a learning network.

It is a simple tool which aims to give short answers to key questions and to point you towards further resources (research, practical tools and examples of practice). Much of the material is taken from the work of the National College for School Leadership's Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme and you can access more resources by searching the Learning Exchange Online (LEO), the online library of all NLC materials, or the A-Z.

As you read on, you will probably come across terms and phrases which are unfamiliar. This is because, through the Networked Learning Communities programme and other networking initiatives, a language has been developed to describe what learning networks do. When it involves unusual vocabulary ('jargon') that is because it is trying to describe something different. Please look at the 'jargon buster' on the following page for definitions of some of the key terms.

If you are completely new to the concept of a learning network, or want to know why they are a good thing, you might like to look at one or more of the following publications:

New to learning networks?

Read one thing

- [Lieberman, A, 2005, *Networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2006, *Learning about learning networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2006, *Understanding learning networks* \(pp14-15\), Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Why are networks a good thing?

Read one thing

- [Desforges, C, 2005, *On learning and teaching*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [Chapman, J & Aspin, D, 2005, *Why networks and why now?* In *International perspectives on networked learning*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [Bentley, T, Hopkins, D & Jackson, D, 2005, *Developing a network perspective*. In *What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Jargon buster

Artefacts – eg practical tools, written materials, video, web pages. Tangible outcomes from a network project which can be used by others,

Collaborative enquiry - Involves individual practitioners from a group of schools coming together to systematically investigate, through use of evidence, an aspect of practice in order to enhance the learning of children across a network. See ‘enquiry’.

Critical friend – Someone from outside a network who can bring new ideas and challenge by giving objective guidance and asking difficult questions.

Enquiry – A systematic process for answering questions and solving problems based on gathering evidence through observation, analysis and reflection.

Facilitator - Someone skilled in group dynamics and learning processes and with access to key sources of expertise and knowledge. He or she encourages people to participate in network activity, and makes it easier for groups of people to work and learn together and for the learning to be shared.

Formal leaders – In networks leadership is often ‘bestowed’ by colleagues. It tends not to be positional. The term ‘formal leaders’ is used here to signify individuals with specific, hierarchical leadership roles in a network school, eg headteachers, deputy or assistant headteachers etc.

Learning network – Where a group of schools, probably with other partners, join together to plan, implement and monitor a range of activities that will enhance learning and teaching within and across schools and make a positive difference to pupil achievement.

Network activities - Where people from across the schools in the network intentionally come together over a sustained period of time to do work based on the network learning focus. Examples include; planning together, working as project teams or enquiry teams.

Network learning focus – When a learning network targets activity around a specific topic which is relevant to the needs of pupils across the schools. Examples include; developing learning and teaching skills, eg thinking skills, interactive teaching, and involving pupils in teaching and learning, eg incorporating pupil feedback into lesson design.

The questions and answers are grouped as follows:

Focus

1. Why do effective learning networks need a network learning focus, and how do you identify one which all the schools own?
2. Can/should the network learning focus change over time?

Structures

3. Is there an 'ideal' size for a learning network and do schools need to be geographically close? Should they be cross or single phase?
4. What partners can best support a learning network and what roles can they play?
5. What resources do you need to establish and run an effective learning network? What role does funding play?

Collaborative learning and network activities

6. What are powerful joint activities for getting staff across a network working and learning together?
7. How can network projects and activities be effectively structured, co-ordinated and led?
8. In what ways can pupils become involved in network projects?

Leadership and facilitation

9. What are the most effective models of network leadership?
10. What is the role of facilitation in a network? Why is it important?
11. How can networks enable/encourage leadership responsibility to be shared?

Communications and sharing learning

12. How can the vision for a network be effectively communicated to all staff in network schools?
13. What kinds of communication most effectively share network learning and outcomes?

Using evidence and self-evaluation

14. How can networks ensure that adult learning really impacts on pupil learning?
15. What are the best ways of measuring impacts of network activity at both network and school levels?
16. What tools can we use for cross-network data analysis and evaluation?
17. In what ways can research be best utilised in learning networks?
18. How can being part of a network have a positive impact on other school resources?

Sustainability

19. How can we ensure that the network continues over time and doesn't lose momentum?
20. How does a learning network deal effectively with key changes in leadership?

Focus

1 Why do effective learning networks need a network learning focus, and how do you identify one which all the schools own?

Successful learning networks have an underpinning moral purpose - all schools in the network need to believe they can achieve more for children if they work together. This underlying belief is the drive for **network activities**.

As well as having this underlying belief, an effective learning network identifies a specific **network learning focus** to ensure network activity takes place around an agreed topic. The network learning focus must respond to the needs of the network and be something which all adults, parents and pupils in the network can understand. A good network learning focus will motivate and encourage people to participate in network activities. Through the focus, networks should be seeking to add value to pupils' learning in ways which would not be possible if schools were working separately.

- Draw your network learning focus from school-level data or contextual evidence that all members of the network can identify with.
- Be clear about the topic for your network learning focus.
- Identify a powerful, evidence-informed pupil learning process to underpin your work (eg Assessment for Learning, critical thinking skills).
- Use data to help you define a core target group for your network learning focus.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2005, Developing a network learning focus. In *What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2005, The first 200 days in a school network. In *What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2005, A key ingredient: dialogic learning. In *Nexus Summer 2005 – PNSLN Special Edition*, pp14-15, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: Data, data, data – base your network learning focus on evidence from research and practice and make it easily understandable.

2 Can/should the network learning focus change over time?

It is inevitable that, over time and as a network develops, it will need to re-focus what it does and how it does it. It is crucial that network members believe that the focus is relevant to current challenges and reviewing the focus can inject fresh life. The role of the network leaders and headteachers at this point is really important – although they may find that they are no longer the sole decision-makers. Principles for identifying an appropriate focus remain the same and reviewing data should always play a key part.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2005, Network growth. In *What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2004, *What are we learning about? Sharpening your network's pupil learning focus?*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Structures

3 Is there an 'ideal' size for a learning network and do schools need to be geographically close? Should they be cross or single phase?

There is no blueprint for an effective learning network. Their structure should be one that makes sense to the schools involved and the needs of their pupils. There are things that learning networks are not. They are not exclusive; in fact they thrive on diversity, and are not about headteacher mates getting together once in a while. Most learning networks are made up of schools in a locality, eg all secondary schools in a town, because local needs and challenges encourage schools to work together to benefit children in an area. Obviously, being able to easily travel between sites makes it simpler for staff and pupils to work in other schools. A desire to draw in expertise from other schools or to learn from others facing similar challenges (eg high pupil mobility) may be reasons for a network to look further for school partners, but local context, network aspirations and focus are most relevant when considering an appropriate structure.

Learning networks can be any size but most commonly involve between six and eleven schools. The type of schools most often depends on the reasons drawing them together. To tackle transition issues, a secondary school may work with its feeder primaries. To overcome isolation, a group of small rural schools may collaborate and pool their resources. Networks with a diverse group of schools as members (eg schools which are not similar and don't know each other well) will benefit from a higher level of internal challenge.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2005, Establishing a network of schools. In *What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2005, *The Network-o-gram task*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [Church, M, 2006, *Knots and Threads: the power of networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: In traditional organizations structure often comes first. In networks, purpose comes first – the network 'architecture' is shaped to enable the purpose to be achieved by the people in the network.

4 What partners can best support a learning network and what roles can they play?

There are lots of reasons why a learning network should look beyond network schools for partnership support. In particular, learning networks should learn from and share knowledge with other local networks. Local Authorities can help with this communication flow. A network can also usefully draw on local authority understandings of local needs and priorities. Where relationships are good, local authorities can provide a capacity for external challenge and support to a network's activities, offer access to specialised expertise and help build partnerships with other local agencies, like health, social services and the police.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can also provide additional useful expertise. Perhaps to support research and **enquiry** projects, help with evaluation, provide customised CPD or mentor/act as a **critical friend**.

Having a 'critical friend' from outside the network can support the network by:

- Offering advice and support to network leaders
- Providing challenge and helping to avoid 'group think'
- Bringing discipline to research or enquiry projects in a network (especially partnerships with Higher Education Institutions)
- Helping access to new ideas and knowledge from beyond the network

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2006, What does a critical friend do? In *Network leadership in action: Network Leadership Roles*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2006, What does a Local Authority broker do? In *Network leadership in action: Network Leadership Roles*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [Campbell, A & Keating, I, 2005, *Shotgun weddings, arranged marriages or love matches? An investigation of NLCs and HEI partnerships in England*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: Find a trusted but challenging 'critical friend' to work with the network who will bring new ideas and perspectives to your thinking.

5 What resources do you need to establish and run an effective learning network? What role does funding play?

Resources learning networks need most are the energy and expertise of enthusiastic people. Teachers and other adults in network schools will only get involved if they know about, understand and believe in the focus of the learning network and the planned activities schools will do together. Ensuring key people (teachers, support staff and leaders) understand what the network is trying to achieve, getting them doing interesting work together, and acting as advocates for others will help a network develop quickly. These key people will need dedicated time to work together on network activities, including accessing research and sharing outcomes across the network. All this must happen at the network level, not that of individual schools. Making time for practitioner enquiry groups to meet won't work if only three of six schools agree. The re-orientation of resource around key network activities has to be a priority for all.

There is no doubt that funding can help when you are trying to bring about change. When you're establishing and running a learning network, some early 'pump-priming' money can be particularly useful in paying people to lead the network but, more significantly, can help to show that it is a priority for senior leaders and governors. Early money can also be used to help engage all schools, perhaps through a launch event or external consultancy. Funding can also support the co-ordination of network activities and projects. However, the key is to find ways of aligning existing funding streams to support the network. This might include pooling resources for certain services or provision across all schools in the network. Critically, all members of a network need to invest commitment (including time and money) if it is to survive long-term. Using funds from outside can make it very hard to sustain the network when cash runs out.

Top Tip: Good networks align time, financial and human resources across their network schools in order to do work on behalf of the whole.

Collaborative learning and network activities

6 What are powerful joint activities for getting staff across a network working and learning together?

Learning networks create opportunities for rigorous and challenging adult learning to take place through sustained joint work and **collaborative enquiry**. They allow practice to cross boundaries of individual schools, for teachers and other school staff to learn and work together, to innovate and to enquire into practice. The most effective activities are structured interactions between staff from different schools that centre on the network learning focus and which take place over many weeks or months. Early on in the development of a network, a launch event which brings together staff from all the schools can help to establish the relationships required for joint-work and, over time, it is work which the schools do together which will build trust and help the network develop and grow.

Powerful collaborative activities include:

- Collaborative enquiry groups
- Shared professional development activities (eg joint staff days)
- Structured school-to-school visits (eg network 'study visits')
- Collaborative coaching and mentoring (eg lesson study groups)
- Joint work groups (eg project teams, planning groups)

All learning which takes place in networks should be 'on behalf of' all the schools involved. That is, when one group of adults is developing new skills or knowledge, it is with the aim of sharing these outcomes across all the schools so that others can benefit.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2005, *Network leadership in action: Getting started with Networked Research Lesson Study*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2006, *Network leadership in action: Getting started with Networked Collaborative Enquiry*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2006, *Network leadership in action: Getting started with Networked Learning Study-visits*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: The External Evaluation found that the best networked learning activities are 'rigorous and challenging joint work' and 'collaborative enquiry' involving people from different schools.

7 How can network projects and activities be effectively structured, co-ordinated and led?

The organisation of collaborative learning in a network needs to be well thought through. Gathering together people from multiple schools can be difficult to arrange, but a network will only be effective if these activities take place and they should really be viewed as an investment. Network projects and activities should be **facilitated** to maximise their impact and to help keep them focussed on the network's priorities. Establishing ground rules for effective

joint work and using tried and tested approaches (Networked Research Lesson Study, study-visits, coaching and mentoring) can provide a framework for activity.

Effective networks are clear and creative about which people take on responsibility for leading network projects and activity and how much time they will spend doing so. They enable a wide range of people to take on these roles whilst also identifying the right people to lead on any particular activity. Managing these sometimes complex projects can involve timetabling, arrangements for travel and room bookings, sharing of materials, and, crucially, wide communication of outcomes. The External Evaluation found there to be a direct correlation between the number of staff from a school involved in network activities and improved outcomes for pupils.

Formal leaders (such as headteachers) in a network need to model collaborative learning – undertaking to establish their own joint work groups, visit other schools or undertake shared professional development. The External Evaluation found that there was a direct relationship between active involvement of headteachers in network activity and gains for pupils. In effective learning networks, this kind of joint activity takes place at all levels and involves many members of staff and pupils.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2006, *Leading continuing professional development in school networks: adding value, securing impact*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2006, *Leading collaborative enquiry in school networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2005, *Network facilitation: the power of protocols*. In *What are we learning about...? Facilitation within school networks*, Nottingham, NCSL \(think piece\)](#)

Top Tip: Use protocols (established and clear ground rules) to give agreed discipline and purpose to collaborative activity between adults in the network.

8 In what ways can pupils become involved in network projects?

Good learning networks involve and impact on both adults and pupils within their network schools. The work that the adults in the network do should always directly relate to and affect pupils, but learning networks recognise that it is hard to achieve anything significant unless pupils are *active* members of the network – leading and contributing to network activities with teachers, other adults and network leaders. There are four key dimensions to the involvement of pupils which networks should consider:

- Pupil involvement in school development
- Students as researchers
- Pupil feedback on teaching and learning
- Pupils as peer-tutors

Key activities to involve pupils include; pupil perception questionnaires, conferences for young people, developing communities of enquiry through Philosophy for Children and pupil visits to other schools. To make more than a superficial impact, pupil involvement activities must take place for sustained periods of time with the same pupils and focus on key issues which are

relevant to adults and pupils alike. Above all, they are the learner, so their views on the effectiveness of learning activities are particularly well informed.

Read one thing

- [Pupil involvement in networked learning](#)

Find out more

- [McGregor, J. 2004, *Students as Researchers*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [Martin, N, Worral, N & Seinfeld-Dutson, A, 2005, *Student voice: Pandora's box or philosopher's stone?*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: Work on creating a network culture which emphasises partnership with pupils about what really matters – their learning.

9

Leadership and facilitation

What are the most effective models of network leadership?

Effective networks need dedicated leadership that isn't deferential to any individual school. The success of a network (particularly in its early stages) is almost uniquely dependent on the vision, energy and effort of those who take on this leadership role. As network structures are fluid and complex, the leadership task is not always a simple one, and requires strategic input to the design of activity, processing and communicating outcomes, and maintaining clarity of purpose and focus. Sharing leadership responsibility between two (or more) people has been shown to be beneficial in learning networks. It enables workloads to be distributed, supports succession planning and, by having leaders in more than one school, signals the importance of collaborative working at all levels.

One of the most powerful outcomes of learning networks is that they offer opportunities for non-hierarchical leadership roles. Teachers, support staff and students can take leadership responsibility for network projects and work beyond their own school in ways which are not often possible. In effective networks, capacity for leadership is grown and expanded in this way. This doesn't mean that there isn't a role for senior leaders in networks. In fact, their involvement is crucial to the development of the network in terms of both the priority and the profile they can give to network activity. Most importantly, it has been shown that networks only make a positive difference to pupil attainment when the headteachers from network schools are actively involved.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2006, *What does a network leader do? In Network leadership in action: Network Leadership Roles*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2006, *Leading networks leading the system*. In *System leadership in action*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2005, *Community leadership in networks*. In *What are we learning about...? Community leadership in networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: Effective networks require a different style of leadership that is shared, collaborative and facilitative. Networks do not have hierarchy.

10 What is the role of facilitation in a network? Why is it important?

A key feature of successful networks is dedicated facilitation. A facilitator is someone skilled in group dynamics and learning processes and with access to key sources of expertise and knowledge. He or she ensures that as many people as possible are involved in network activity, makes it easier for groups of people to work and learn together, and for learning to be shared. Facilitators provide both support and challenge and, in networks, this role is usually undertaken by more than one person. Facilitation represents a set of skills which a range of people, from within and from outside the network, should practice and which should be modelled by network leaders. In successful learning networks, the facilitation role is applied in the following areas:

- Developing the network
- Collaborative learning processes and enquiry
- Network knowledge creation and communication

Facilitation of a network should be central to the work of network leader/s, school leaders and those leading work or enquiry groups. People external to a network can bring a different kind of support; perhaps offering critical friendship to network leaders and bringing challenge from other contexts, or providing access to the wider knowledge-base..

Top Tip: Facilitation is a key leadership role and should be undertaken by a wide range of individuals in the network. Good networks support people to acquire facilitation skills.

11 How can networks enable/encourage leadership responsibility to be shared?

Sharing leadership beyond those with formal leadership roles in the school or network builds leadership capacity and is a strategy for growing future leaders. The range of projects initiated through a network can provide teachers, middle leaders, support staff and pupils opportunities to develop leadership skills as leaders of small teams working on an identified network activity. It is impossible for the work of a network to be undertaken by a few, and so network leaders and headteachers have to hand over co-ordination and responsibility to a range of other individuals from across network schools and, critically, recognise the value they bring. In a network, formal leaders need to also provide time and space for others to lead effectively, supporting them in the co-ordination of resources and being on hand to offer support. These new leaders may also benefit from being involved in coaching activity.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2005, Facilitation within school networks. In *What are we learning about...? Facilitation within school networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2005, Developing a central network facilitation team. In *What are we learning about...? Facilitation within school networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2005, Facilitation in action. In *What are we learning about...? Facilitation within school networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2006, Sharing leadership tools and templates. In *Network leadership in action: Sharing leadership*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2005, What does a network activist do? In *Network leadership in action: Network Leadership Roles*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2005, Ice-cream Innovation! Leading from the inside out. In *Nexus Summer 2005 – PNSLN Special Edition*, pp26-27, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: The work of an effective network cannot be undertaken by a few. Formal leaders need to support others to lead and recognise the value others can bring.

Communications and sharing learning

12 How can the vision for a network be effectively communicated to all staff in network schools?

Early on, enthusiasm for a network may exist mainly with senior leaders in network schools. It is important to engage as wide a group of staff as possible in this initial phase if network activity is going to be widely owned. Evidence shows that networks which involve the most people in activity are most likely to have a positive impact on pupil outcomes.

Once the network learning focus has been agreed, it should be defined so that it is clearly understandable at a classroom level and then communicated to the staff in all schools. It should also be made visible in all network schools, perhaps via posters in the staffroom and in hallways.

The following strategies can be used to develop wide ownership of a networks' priorities:

- Holding a launch event involving all staff and perhaps governors, pupils and parents.
- Setting up smaller school-to-school enquiry groups with sessions at different schools.
- Organising school-to-school study-visits for school staff and leaders.
- Ensuring network structures don't exclude some schools because of their timing or locations.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2005, The first 200 days in a school network. In *What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2004, Establishing a network of schools. In *What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: Getting people to contribute views about network work priorities and designing network activity is the best way to engage them.

13 What kinds of communication most effectively share network learning and outcomes?

Communication within effective learning networks is a priority activity for network leaders and those leading specific network projects or teams. Appointing a dedicated Communications Manager (often an existing adult seeking a new creative challenge) can bring discipline and expertise to an often complex set of tasks. At the very least, some administrative capacity will help with simple information dissemination. Strategies for sharing information and learning might include; information briefings in staff meetings in all schools (using a range of voices), newsletters, website and e-communications, cascading information through group meetings of project leaders. Good interpersonal skills (talking with people, and listening to them) helps, too!

Information sharing will help keep a network operational. Sharing *learning* requires enquiry groups and project teams to record and make available what they are learning in ways which are accessible to others inside and outside the network. The creation of network **artefacts**

helps to celebrate and share outcomes. Networks can use a range of media to represent their learning, but should always make it usable by others.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2005, The first 200 days in a school network. In *What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL & CUREE, 2004, *Writing research and enquiry summaries*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2005, Leading networked communications...how do you do it? In *Nexus, Network leadership in action* \(Autumn 2005\), pp30-31, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: Generating wide awareness and ownership from the outset of a work group's activity is the best way to create a receptive environment for the outcomes of network activity.

Using evidence and self-evaluation

14 How can networks ensure that adult learning really impacts on pupil learning?

The adult learning activities within a network should add value to that which happens in an individual school. These activities (enquiry groups, shared professional development, study-visits) need active co-ordination across the schools and require participating staff to be open to a broader range of views and starting points than if they were working with close colleagues. With all this extra effort, a network will want to be sure that its CPD activity has a clear impact on pupils. Network leaders should consider the following:

- Link adult learning activity in the network directly to real problems which need solving.
- Make activity rigorous and challenging, and put frameworks in place for evaluating success.
- Make sure activity is appropriately resourced.
- Draw in support and external expertise for specialist input and challenge, and utilise research findings and other outside knowledge sources.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2006, *Leading continuing professional development in school networks: adding value, securing impact*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2006, *Evidence from learning networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2006, *Leading collaborative enquiry in school networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: Practitioners should be able to relate intended outcomes of CPD activity directly to their concerns about the learning of specific groups of students.

15 What are the best ways of measuring impacts of network activity at both network and school levels?

Monitoring and evaluation need to be considered in the very early stages of a network. It is much easier to measure impact if specific 'indicators' of success are agreed up front and some early 'baseline' data is collected. The indicators chosen should directly relate to the network learning focus and what it is that you are trying to achieve by working together. Network leaders should spend time working across the schools to define the strategy for evaluation. As the network develops, being clear about what is making a difference will enable them to make informed decisions about future activity.

Analysing school-level data and performance measures can give indications of increases in attainment of individual schools and help to assess whether the gap in achievement between schools is narrowing. Ensuring that the network can identify specific strategies which have been used successfully in one school will mean that effective practice can be adapted and implemented more widely. Individual schools may also identify their own contextually specific targets which they hope to attain through the network.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2004, Evaluating the work of networks. In *What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2006, What does network practice tell us about the impact of networking and collaboration?, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2006, The impact of networks on pupils, practitioners, organisations and the communities they serve, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: Letting people know ways in which the network is making a difference will help recruit new participants to network activity.

16 What tools can be used for cross-network data analysis and evaluation?

A number of network evaluation tools have been developed through the Networked Learning Communities programme. They include:

[Evaluating Learning in Networks – self-evaluation matrix](#) – designed to support leaders of school networks to review and develop the effectiveness of their approaches to pupil and adult learning

[Evaluating Network Leadership – self-evaluation matrix](#) – designed to support leaders of school networks to review and strengthen the leadership and management of their network

[Levels of learning activity](#) – designed to generate discussion and data about teaching and learning in every school in the network

[The Traffic Light Task](#) – designed to help networks evaluate where they are in relation to their original objectives

[Network data analyzer](#)

[The Network-o-gram task](#) – development tool to help map out, build an overview of the network and map progress

17 In what ways can research be best utilised in learning networks?

Effective learning networks look beyond their own institutions for new knowledge and understandings and then use this knowledge to inform and improve practice. A key principle to learning networks is **enquiry**-based practice – learning that is driven by data and evidence. In networks, the adults need to learn through **collaborative enquiry**, which involves them finding out about current theory and research and gathering information about an area of practice so that they can analyse it and identify how practice needs to develop in the future. In networks of schools, collaborative enquiry takes place between staff in different schools and is undertaken on behalf of the whole network. There are a number of different forms of collaborative enquiry which networks can undertake, and which can usefully be supported by a partnership with a Higher Education Institution (HEI). They include: headteacher learning sets, action research, and students as researchers.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2006, *Leading collaborative enquiry in school networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [Dadds, M, 2004, *Perspectives on Practitioner Research*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [Leat, D, 2004, *Partnerships and participation in Teacher Research*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: Networks should focus on ‘three fields of knowledge’: knowledge from theory and research, what practitioners know and the new knowledge generated through collaborative and enquiry-based practice.

18

How can being part of a network have a positive impact on other school resources?

Being part of a network can give participating schools access to a greater professional knowledge pool. In particular, schools in a network can draw on expertise and effective practice of staff in other network schools and gain access to new ideas generated through collaborative activities. Put simply, networks increase access to good ideas. When new practices have been developed and tested at a network level, each school will be able to quickly implement what works, knowing it is based on evidence and knowledge about their own context. When individual schools in the network face a specific resourcing issue (eg the Head of Maths leaves) or are dealing with a particular challenge (facing Special Measures), an effective network will rally round and offer targeted capacity. Belonging to a network means that no single school need deal with problems on their own.

Top Tip: Learning from the work of other network schools is a good way to honour each other’s practice and to build collective trust.

Sustainability

19 How can we ensure that the network continues over time and doesn't lose momentum?

An effective network can sustain the test of time, but this takes continuous work and commitment from the leaders and network schools. The success of a network over time is largely dependent upon its perceived relevance and value to network members and the extent to which it remains active, adaptive and forward-looking. A 'sustainable' network is always involved in doing work in one of these three areas:

- Getting things started – growing and embedding network activity.
- Reflecting – maintaining and developing what is working well, changing or stopping what is not effective.
- Adapting – taking on new possibilities as a response to internal and external change.

Lots of factors may mean that a network needs to re-focus its efforts over time. Funding may dry-up, new partners may join and new challenges may emerge. Revisiting objectives and purposes, and re-defining the learning focus can inject new life into the network. Networks shouldn't be kept going for the sake of it. Sometimes it makes sense for them to end, or evolve into something different.

Read one thing

- [NCSL, 2006, *What are we learning about...? Sustaining a network of schools?*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [NCSL, 2005, *Network growth. In What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)
- [NCSL, 2005, *Learning conversations in learning networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Top Tip: It is hard to give a 'tip' about sustainability, but networks that have a capacity to make decisions across all the schools – in the best interests of all pupils – and which spread leadership widely, are most likely to have sustained success.

20 How does a learning network deal effectively with key changes in leadership?

Network leaders play a crucial role in the early stages of network development in establishing shared values and modelling collaborative practice. Changes in leadership at this time can slow a network's progress, but support from leaders in governance structures such as a steering group and from people in coordinating and senior administrative roles helps networks to overcome such difficulties. A co-leadership model and strategies for shared leadership help networks to adapt to change because they prevent responsibility from being concentrated in one person or small group of individuals.

Read one thing

- [Jopling, M & Crandall, D, 2006, *Leadership in networks: patterns and practices*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)

Find out more

- [Anderson, M, Hadfield, M & O'Leary, D, 2005, *Developing adaptive leaders: the 'co' in the co-leadership of school-to-school networks*, Nottingham, NCSL](#)