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Local Authority-Wide Support for School Networks

Adaptive change practices at a system level

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Adaptive change practices at a system level

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This paper arises from a policy context in the United Kingdom in which there is large-scale governmental commitment to school-to-school networks. It draws upon recent writing and research on local authority system-wide change programmes in both North America and the UK, setting this alongside recent writing on 'tri-level change' – the interdependence of policy, local authority (or school district) and school levels. Four frameworks are identified and subsequently used to inform the later analysis – a conceptual framework related to reform 'scale'; one exploring different implementation approaches; a third drawn from successful school district research studies; and the final one focusing upon ten components for successful authority-wide change. These conceptual and practical frames are then used to inform an analytical account of the LEArning Project in the UK – a large-scale programme involving 19 Local Authorities (School Districts) committed to network solutions, to lateral learning and to modelling within and across Authorities the values and practices that they are seeking to develop across their school systems.

The context – creating capacity for a network-based system in the UK[1]

The UK government is currently seeking to effect a transition from one reform paradigm to another. The reform agenda of the last decade was characterised by the application of uniform 'national strategies' (ones based upon informed understandings from past change efforts); by sequenced and delivered 'outside-in' solutions; and by the application of external accountabilities to measure pupil and school performance. This approach, essentially a research informed and highly sophisticated 'delivery' strategy, served well to raise attainment levels in the short-term.

The by-products were a system in which achievement, which initially rose sharply, leveled off. It was a system also characterised by competitive practices and by dependency upon external solutions – one that also exhibited unacceptable diversity between the highest and lowest achieving schools. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that attainment trajectories in the UK, having risen sharply initially, hit a brick wall after the first few years, or that professional morale was low, or that schools felt little sense of ownership over the direction the agenda had taken. The strategies proved good for systemic remediation (driving up attainment levels), but they were not a capacity building

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[1] This opening paragraphs of this section are adapted from Jackson D. Hannon V. and Cordingley P. 2004 (see references).

model – a key issue identified in the external evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (Earl et al, 2003):

> *"Continuing improvement will require not only greater individual capacity in headteachers and teachers, but also greater organisational capacity in schools and LEAs. In the long run, we believe that the commitment to collective capacity building is the most promising direction for addressing the challenges of the future."*

Capacity building as described here is a systemic issue. It calls for synergy, alignment and crucial interdependencies between the key partners. The achievement of system change of the type and scale desired in the UK and elsewhere, has implications for all levels of the system. As described by researchers in the field, this involves a 'tri-level' response (Fullan 2003), 'nested' arrangements (Fink & Resnick, 2001) and 'lateral capacity building through networks' (Fullan, 2005). Translated, a tri-level, nested and networked system incorporates:

- a facilitative policy environment
- reconfiguration of 'middle tier' strategies and relationships
- changes to the ways that schools work, singly and collectively in networks
- strong 'lateral' orientations - school interdependencies and 'system leadership'
- learning orientations at LA, leader and teacher levels
- the conscious utilisation of distributed leadership capacities
- interdependent vertical and lateral working and learning relationships.

At the policy level, for some years now, the UK government has viewed the incentivisation of school-to-school networks as one way of responding to these challenges. Successive policy strands, particularly those focusing upon the most intractable schools and upon the most successful (the two ends of the achievement spectrum), have promoted networking and collaboration – through Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, Leadership Incentive Grant funding and Leading Edge Partnerships.

The Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme was both similar and different. It was similar in that it was another incentivised national network-based initiative, but different in four key ways:

- it was not targeted towards any particular type of school, but rather was designed to attract diverse groups of schools – groupings that made sense in terms of local geography – so as to be a systemically replicable model;
- it was a development and enquiry programme, specifically designed to provide a source of policy and practice learning in such areas as network size and type, facilitation and leadership, formation processes and growth states, brokerage, system support, incentivisation – and evidence about how and under what conditions networks can make a contribution, both to system learning and to the raising of student achievement [Anderson (2004); Dudley (2004); Hadfield (2004)];
- it was developed and supported by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL, 2003, 2005);

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- the programme learning strategy was connected directly with the DfES Innovation Unit in order to ensure that emergent knowledge could be utilized to inform evolving policy strands.

The Networked Learning Communities programme involved 137 networks – 1530 schools – and was at the time of its inception in 2002 the largest network-based school reform initiative in the world (Fullan, 2005).

More recently, two new policy developments have built from these foundations and offer the promise of reaching a 'tipping point' in the systemic adoption of learning networks. The first of these, Primary Strategy Learning Networks (PSLN), commits funding and support through the national strategies for 1,500 learning networks - between 8,000 and 10,000 schools – by April 2006 (DfES, 2005). Secondly, in March 2005 the Education Minister also announced the launch of Education Improvement Partnerships, stating:

> *School networks can take many forms and serve many purposes. Focused and good quality collaboration between schools, FE colleges and other educational providers, and with other statutory and voluntary sector organisations, has proved an effective way to improve the delivery of services and raise standards of education within communities….The Government attaches great importance to learning from effective partnership working.*

Such a rapidly evolving policy commitment to school-to-school networks will require robust and readily available knowledge about what works and what doesn't in areas such as network purposes, content focus, structure, process, leadership and governance. That is the subject of a different paper. What is relevant to this paper, though, is the view that as we move away from a traditional delivery and accountability emphasis and towards a more collaborative and learning oriented system, it will no longer be either efficient or appropriate to use hierarchical models of control or dissemination to try to achieve the new task of continuous adaptation and diversification. Contemporary change needs are too rapid and contexts of knowledge application are too diverse. New forms of team-based collaboration, employing lateral transfer strategies, offer a more effective method of integration and adaptation – as has been shown in many different organisational settings. They also offer potential for being better able to utilse and deploy practitioner knowledge and innovation (adapted from Bentley, 2003).

The significance of this is profound. The UK is not seeking to move to 1,500 'school clusters', but to 'learning networks[2]. They are the foundation architecture for a more adaptive and self-regenerative education system characterized by both networked and nested learning.

Of course, the refashioning and re-culturing required for such a significant shift (from delivery and accountability approaches to adaptive learning and capacity building

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[2] There is, of course, no definitive distinction, but 'school clusters' tend to be groups of schools that co-operate, meet together, share resources, transfer information and exploit economies of scale; in 'learning networks' schools seek to become interdependent, they take collective responsibility for all children in the network, they view each other's schools and classrooms as sites of learning, they exchange professional knowledge and personnel, they agree common foci and aspirations, they can speak with one voice. Learning networks are a unit of organisational meaning and professional learning; they take collective responsibility for the success of all schools in the network (and the children and adults who work in them).

models) will not happen by accident. It will clearly require appropriate brokerage and facilitation at local level – and the position of this paper is that Local Authorities, working in new kind of ways with networks of schools and 'system leaders', are best placed to adapt their functions to perform this role. The transition will involve skills, strategies, relationships and purposes very different from historical models (Rogers, 2000). For example, LAs will have "a fundamental role in planning the context within which schools work…such as local partnership work …and in disseminating good practice" (Ofsted, 2002) and knowledge management, capacity building, system brokerage and network facilitation are examples of emerging new practice (Woods, 2000; Fletcher-Campbell, 2003, Evans et al, 2005).

This paper looks particularly at this new role for Local Authorities as key agents of change within a networked system. What follows this introduction is a selective review of literature on Local Authorities and School Districts. This leads to the establishment of a series of frameworks or models which appear to hold promising possibilities for thinking about the key change issues involved in LA brokerage. The paper then sets out an analytical account of the LEArning Project, a network-based Local Authority programme in which 19 LAs seek to problem-solve together the complex adaptive challenges faced in system brokerage.

It concludes with some propositions, drawn from this work and from the knowledge-base, about characteristics of the new role for Local Authorities within an adaptive and networked system.
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What does Local Authority/School District research have to offer?

Prior to establishing the LEArning Project in 2002, the National College for School Leadership commissioned a review of research in the field of LA support for networks (Lownsbrough, 2003). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there was little specifically in this field:

> *There are few, if any, well chronicled examples in the academic, anecdotal or political literature, nationally or internationally, of sustained networking at strategic levels which can provide convincing case studies.*

Despite this general paucity of evidence, from in excess of fifty studies visited some interesting characteristics emerged of a general direction of travel:

- local context is a critical variable
- ownership and voluntarism appear to be significant determinants of success
- leadership (external to and internal to) partnerships is critical to success
- real work purposes are crucial, so are trust and social capital - the sequencing of these appears less clear
- an inclusive communication strategy is important to achieving 'ownership' and 'reach' in partnership working
- multi-agency partnerships pose particular problems.

With regard to the work dynamics of the Authorities specifically, the literature was less revealing. In the UK the role of LAs had been ambiguous for the previous decade. Changes could be categorised more in terms of successive organizational restructuring in response to challenging central policy expectations and fiscal directives, rather than progressive redesign in response to new local purposes and aspirations. However, at the time of the research three trends were apparent in relation to emerging network structures within local authorities:

- a move towards reciprocal 'partnership' working and new relationships with schools and other services - Knowsley was the most advanced example (Munby, 2003)
- a 'facilitation' capacity to support networks of schools – what we have come to understand as the early examples of 'brokerage' (NCSL, 2005) and 'system leadership' (most evident in Leicester and within London)
- a more negotiated fulfillment of the accountability function expected of LAs by central government.

There was virtually no evidence of lateral learning or problem-solving relationships *between* Local Authorities (Landsbrough, 2003). There was little more evidence of effective internal networking *within* Local Authorities (Fletcher-Campbell, 2003). Nor was there much evidence of effective co-design or co-development[3] working between schools/networks and LEA personnel – although three years later there is now much more. Multi-agency partnership working was also proving universally problematic.

It was in part this lack of research evidence about Local Authorities, and in particular their roles in supporting networks of schools, that led to the establishment of the LEArning project (Fullan, Watson, Torrance and Levin, 2005).

The United States has far less of a widespread commitment to network-based practices – although it can readily be argued that many of the principles are enshrined within related developments. Programmes as wide-ranging as the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (e.g. Mclaughlin and Talbert, 2003), New American Schools (e.g. Bodily, 1998 or Datnow, 2003), the work in New York District 2 - and subsequently other Districts adopting complementary models - (e.g. Elmore 1999), some of the Annenberg funded network programmes (e.g. Wohlstetter 2003) or the many professional learning communities programmes (e.g. Cowan, 2000) are informed by network principles. More directly, one of the five international networks studied in the OECD *Schooling for Tomorrow* programme (OECD, 2003) provides specific insight into network-district-policy relationships in Ontario, as does the work in British Columbia with the Network of Performance Based Schools (Halbert and Kaser, 2000).

Two features of the North American research are both interesting and illuminating:

1) a preoccupation with the centrality of the School District as a key part of the solution to district-wide reform and to the delivery of equity and excellence –

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[3] One widely cited examples of co-development working is the case of New York District 2. Richard Elmore has written extensively about, for example, the introduction of Walkthroughs which he describes as being co-developed by the District, its schools and HEI personnel, including himself and Loren Resnick.

research which often focuses upon districts that have raised literacy and numeracy test scores across all schools;

2) a related attempt to wrestle with the theoretical, conceptual and practical challenges of taking reform to scale.

The second of these, the challenges of scale, offers an interesting place to start.

Tom Vander Ark, (Executive Director, Education, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) in *Towards Success at Scale* (2002) suggests that:

> *The Annenburg Institute for School Reform at Brown University and the Centre for Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington house some of the only people in the USA studying the issue of success at scale. The most important question in American Education deserves more attention than it is getting. (It is) tailor-made for meta analysis of various districts' efforts.*

No more than one year later, Wendy Togneri and Stephen Anderson published *Beyond Islands of Excellence* (2003) for the Learning First Alliance and Cynthia Coburn a synthesis of learning themes from 44 studies of district-wide or systemic reform (Coburn, 2003) in order to wrestle with the conceptual and practical challenges of 'scale'. Coburn's argument – drawn almost exclusively from the North American experience, but equally applicable to the UK context – is that the paucity of rigour in accepted concepts of scale have limited the capacity of the system to 'scale up' promising innovations. She argues that:

> *To date, most educational research that focuses on scale has tended to define it in unidimensional ways, involving solely or predominantly the expansion of numbers of schools reached by a given reform. But taking an external reform initiative to scale is a complex endeavour. It not only involves spreading reform to multiple teachers, schools and districts as highlighted by conventional definitions, it also involves all the challenges of implanting reform documented by decades of implementation research (Elmore, 1996), and of sustaining change in a multilevel system characterized by multiple and shifting priorities* (Mclaughlin and Mitra, 2001).

Of course, this matters. How we define scale impacts upon how we design reform strategies; oversimplifying the definition has tended to result in insufficiently robust, or even paradigmatically inappropriate implementation strategies. Even if we accept, for example, the straightforward formulation of 'scaling up', that it involves "the deliberate expansion to many settings of an externally developed school restructuring design that previously has been used successfully in a small number of settings" (Springfield and Datnow, 1998), we are still left with the well documented tension about whether this primarily involves *replication* or whether it is more a matter of *mutual adaptation*. Even the 'size' issue itself is less than simple. Is 'scaling up' just a matter of total number of schools, or does it also include concerns for *geographic proximity* – defined in terms of an increase in the number of schools involved in a reform effort to achieve a critical mass in a bounded area such as a school district or local authority (Bodilly, 1998)?

Coburn goes on to generate a four dimensional definition of scale as a framework against which to measure the robustness of reform designs:

- **Depth**
    - The reform achieves consequential change in classroom practices
- **Sustainability**
    - The reform is adopted at depth over time
- **Transfer of reform ownership**
    - The above two are achieved through transfer, from external drive or support to internal ownership (at the network, school and classroom level)
- **Spread**
    - Not only is the number of schools increased in an authority or district, but also the values and principles of the reform are adopted and produce consequent change within Local Authority or School District policies, procedures, and professional development.

Each is important. However, in terms of significance for this paper, the role of Local Authorities in supporting, to scale, the implementation of a more adaptive and network-based system, the issues of 'transfer of ownership' and 'spread' have particular resonance. The focus of learning networks is pedagogy – a sharp pupil learning focus – so they are designed for depth. Equally, the network is an organic structure designed to offer optimum potential for sustainability – interdependent learning relationships characterized by challenge, support and critical friendship. It would be glib to imagine that neither pose their own distinctive challenges, but 'spread' and 'transfer of ownership' have special interest in this discussion of Local Authority relationships to network reform.
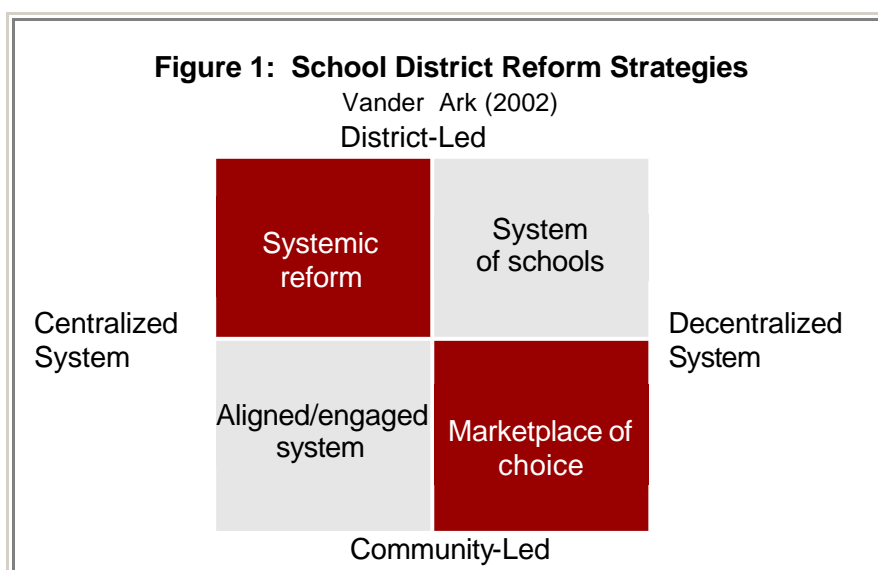
It is early days in the implementation of learning networks in the UK. However, as a national reform strategy it has its precedents in the articulation of previous large-scale reform through the National Strategies. It has target figures, 1500 to be delivered by 2006. The channels and personnel responsible for implementation have for some years worked within a culture and kinaesthetics of 'delivery', so habits of mind and practice are established. One critical issue will be whether 'transfer of ownership' can effectively be achieved, and early indications are that it will be difficult for some Authorities. The establishment of learning networks is not about Local Authorities 'delivering' to a target. It is about groups of schools within an area taking collective responsibility for all the children in their patch and renegotiating a set of relationships with their Local Authority to challenge and support them in doing this. The shift is crucially important. It is about the LA asking good questions rather than providing good answers; about facilitation rather than direction. It is not about 'buy-in', but about ownership. It means transferring substantive and strategic decision-making from the authority to school and network leaders, ensuring that those leaders have appropriate knowledge on an ongoing basis and that they have the scope to be able to use it to sustain the reform in work with peers (McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001).

The second issue, 'spread', is linked in its nature and significance for learning network implementation. Coburn defines spread not just in terms of expanding *outward* to more schools and networks, but also the spread of knowledge, norms and behaviours of the policy *within* networks and districts. Spread requires a consequent and compatible reconfiguration of Local Authority policies, procedures, practices and professional development models if the Authority is to remain relevant to its networks (Comer et al, 1996). Put simply, it is not about how the authority wishes to support learning networks, but about negotiating ('co-designing') reconfiguration and transfer of resources such that there is a synergy (a 'nestedness') between the learning and development needs of networks and Local Authority support - a shared learning agenda. It is too early to say whether this change can be effected to scale in the UK, but some of the LAs within the LEArning project described below are well along this journey.

Much, of course, depends on the model of implementation. The so-called 'middle tier' is strategically positioned, partly a conduit for reform implementation and accountability on behalf of government, partly a support capacity for schools, and partly a policy-maker in its own right. The balance and mediation of these relationships and the style in which they are achieved significantly contribute to local culture and to the success of reform efforts. This interface between policy and local authority implementation – the nature and style of the local authority role in reform is explored by Tom Vander Ark, Executive Director, Education, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, (Vander Ark, 2002). In arguing, sensibly, for coherence and alignment, he debates the relative merits of two apparent dichotomies:

- whether centralization or decentralization is the best way of achieving them
- whether district-led or community-involved strategies are more effective.

These axes are ideo-typical, of course; 'community involved', for example, might include community-led (at one extreme) or community-informed (at the other). However, the construct offers a matrix upon which a Local Authority's reform effort can be plotted. Vander Ark suggests that many districts "muddle around in the middle, with an inherited systemic reform agenda that they are unable to clearly articulate."

Figure 1: School District Reform Strategies
Vander Ark (2002)
District-Led

Centralized System	Systemic reform	System of schools
	Aligned/engaged system	Marketplace of choice

Community-Led

The challenge for Local Authorities implementing network-based reform in the UK is to negotiate the place or places on the matrix that will offer the opportunities for a 'system of schools' (an Authority-wide networked system) together with community involved alignment and engagement (transfer of ownership). What perhaps is suggested in this is that the perpetuation of the very dichotomies of the axis may be a false construct in itself; that, instead of 'muddling around in the middle', the negotiation of jointly owned territories and strategies (local authorities with networks of schools, and networks with their communities) might be a more appropriate model for a network-based system. The world of networks is a world of relationships, of 'both…ands' rather than 'either…ors'.

These, then, represent two inter-related conceptual frames – one dealing specifically with the dimensions of 'scale', and the other with the Local Authority strategy for reform implementation 'to scale'.

There are two more frames or models, each drawn from the research on school districts, that are informing our work with local authorities in the UK. The first is a model drawn (and adapted) from the study of successful school districts – what they do, and how this can be characterized (Rorrer, Skrla et al, 2004). The second is a framework of ten components for large-scale change drawn from Michael Fullan's writing on tri-level change. They are designed to inform school district practice; to influence reconfiguration in support of a system more geared towards sustainability, capacity building, distributed leadership, knowledge management and lateral agency – the world of a networked-based system (Fullan et al, 2004).
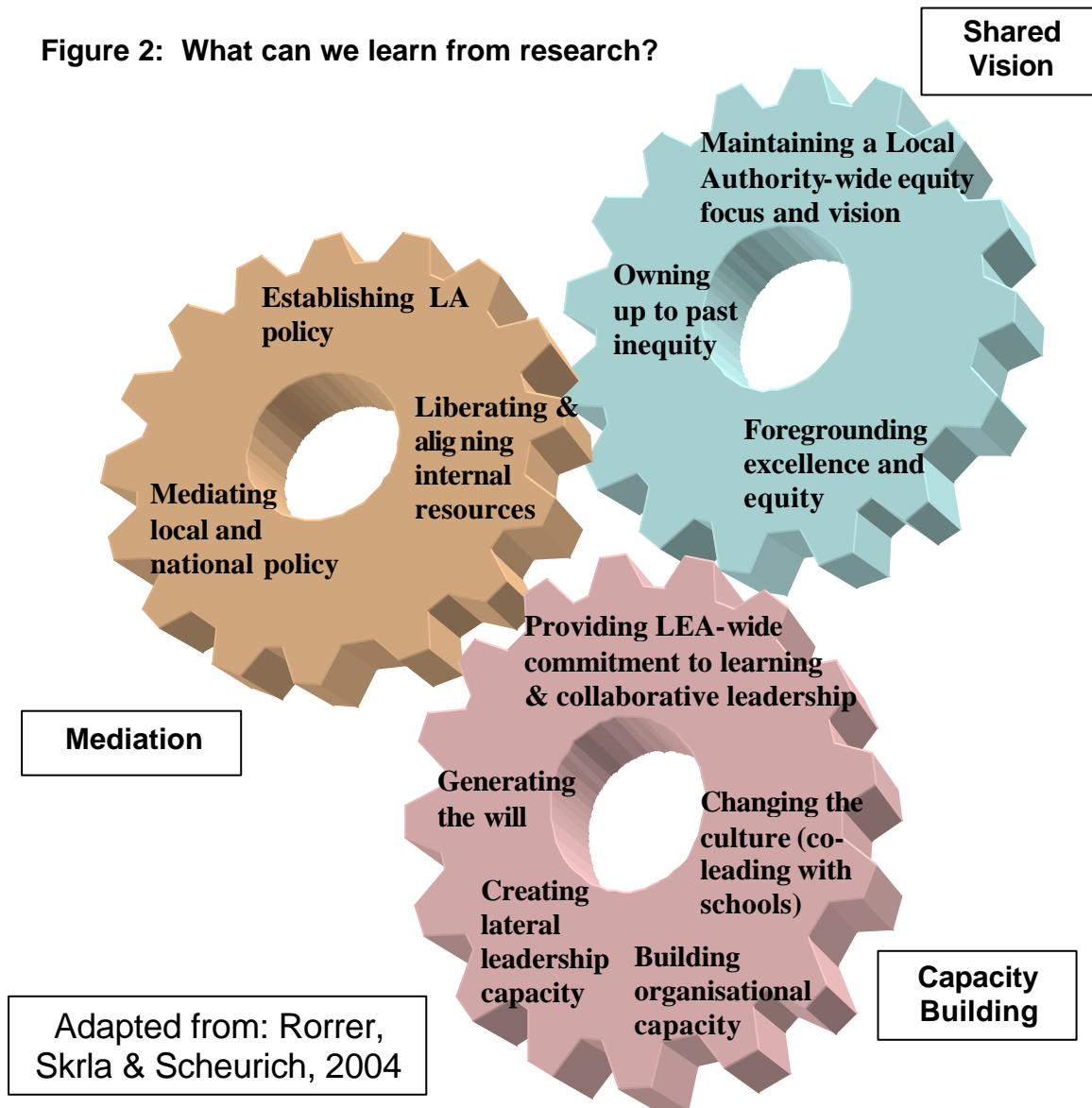
In *School Districts' Roles as Institutional Actors in Improving Achievement and Advancing Equity,* Rorrer et al (2004) attempt a synthesis of the available body of research on system-wide improvement, founding their work on a theoretical and empirical base that aligns with Cuban's (1984) contention that "long-term, sustainable, district-wide improvement is possible". They conclude that three core or essential roles characterize successful district reform efforts that both improve performance and narrow the achievement gap. These are: 'maintaining the district equity focus'; 'district instructional leadership'; and 'establishing district policy coherence'. Each of these primary roles contains, of course, a number of secondary roles.

This is theory and research quite specific to the North American context, and particular to high challenge school districts at that. Its roots lie in a model of system-wide reform under the control of the district. The culture in the UK is fundamentally different following more than a decade in which delegation, autonomy and site level accountabilities have been fostered within a framework of national policies and accountabilities. However, there is also much in the research that holds true for Local Authorities in the UK. If the three domains are adjusted slightly, to become:

- establishing a shared vision for equity and excellence;
- capacity-building through co-leadership of learning; and
- establishing local and national policy coherence

then we have a comparable formulation that takes account of the cultural and political context in the UK, but which stays true to the original.

Figure 2, below, presents a model with three inter-related cogs, in an attempt to represent diagrammatically what Vander Ark called 'alignment and coherence'. Each cog contains some of the sub-roles.

Figure 2: What can we learn from research?

Shared Vision

Maintaining a Local Authority-wide equity focus and vision

Owning up to past inequity

Establishing LA policy

Liberating & aligning internal resources

Foregrounding excellence and equity

Mediating local and national policy

Mediation

Providing LEA-wide commitment to learning & collaborative leadership

Generating the will

Changing the culture (co-leading with schools)

Creating lateral leadership capacity

Building organisational capacity

Capacity Building

Adapted from: Rorrer, Skrla & Scheurich, 2004

Finally, in their work on 'tri-level change' (the school level, the Local Authority or School District level, and the system or policy level) Michael Fullan, Al Bertani and Joanne Quinn (2004), identify ten interdependent dimensions or characteristics of Local Authority activity that, when taken together, can match similar capacity-building characteristics at school and system level. These ten dimensions are:

- **A coherent driving conceptualization**
  - sufficient to build a coalition of leaders who pursue the vision

- o   high engagement and two-way communication
- **Collective moral purpose**
  - o   as a systemic rather than an individual quality
  - o   applying to adults as well as to students
  - o   involving care about other schools as well as one's own
- **Ensuring the LEA has the right bus**
  - o   that all are traveling on the same bus
  - o   that the LEA is aligned around the same purposes and directions
  - o   that all work is coherent – on the same journey
- **Capacity building**
  - o   that learning takes place in context – people learn by doing together
  - o   that learning is based on sound adult learning models
  - o   that leaders develop future leaders
- **Lateral capacity building**
  - o   connecting schools
  - o   using collaboration to increase access to good ideas
  - o   expand leaders' worlds; let them expand the worlds of others
- **Ongoing learning**
  - o   get the strategy right, then refine it using data
  - o   foster disciplined collaborative enquiry
- **Productive conflict**
  - o   value difference
  - o   exploit diversity for learning purposes
  - o   collaboration but not congeniality
- **A demanding culture**
  - o   mutual high expectations
  - o   high trust
  - o   intolerance of incompetence – because it threatens the other two
- **External partners**
  - o   foster critical friends
  - o   build in pressure and support
- **Focused financial (and other) resources**
  - o   Ruthless redeployment
  - o   Entrepreneurial use of resources to drive the bus

There are self-evident links with Rorrer and Skrla's model – the emphasis on vision, will and moral purpose; the components of capacity-building, learning, expanded leadership and lateral agency; the mediation of external expertise and resources. To do justice to this framework would require fuller exposition (and the perspective of the other two 'levels'). However, it has sufficient which is evidently compatible with the logic of the argument so far to serve as an introduction to the next section, which is an analytical account of the LEArning Project.

The drift of the argument is that these four frames:
- a conceptual grasp of the complexities and dimensions of scale
- understanding about the nature of system-wide implementation options
- a integrated, aligned model for equitable vision, capacity-building and coherence
- a conceptual framework (connected to the other two 'levels') that can inform daily actions across a number of domains and functions

offer a strong basis for understanding the purposes, theoretical underpinnings and analytical frames that we brought to this development and enquiry programme involving 19 Local Authorities across the UK.

The LEArning Project – creating operational images of practice

As has been set out earlier, the school system in the UK is fast arriving at a point where a critical mass of schools – certainly more than half – will be in learning networks. NCSL committed, through the Networked Learning Communities programme, to generating a reservoir of learning about the implementation and support of networks. Consistent with the principles if 'tri-level' change, working also at the policy level and working to develop the local capacity and strategies for adaptation and implementation was always on the agenda for NCSL's Networked Learning Group. Since the advent of the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) policy, however, creating programmes of work with Local Authorities became an even more urgent and strategically significant priority for NCSL. There is growing agreement that, in order successfully to deliver ECM, Local Authorities will need :

- a collaborative culture;
- an appropriate infrastructural architecture (networks of schools);
- the will to use that structure for coherent implementation of policy;
- expanded leadership capacity (in all its forms); and
- a reconfiguration of children's services in order to form new relationships with networks as new 'units of meaning' and 'units of engagement'.

This section presents details of the LEArning project - which complements NCSL's Networked Learning Communities programme. The project was designed to explore some of the above challenges and, despite its scale, (19 large Local Authorities are in the project) it was established as a development and enquiry programme – the purpose being both to develop models of interesting practice and to draw learning from them that are of value both to the project LAs and to the wider system[4].

How does the LEArning project work?

The LEArning project was set up late in 2003 with support and funding from the DfES Innovation Unit. It is a component of a wider collaboration between the Networked Learning Group and the Innovation Unit - the 'Networking and Collaboration Project', which is designed to use learning from key programmes of activity to inform evolving policy - to work on three strategic areas of support for a network-based system:

- Policy development
- Knowledge management
- Capacity-building.

The initiative engaged 19 Local Authorities (LAs), the majority identified by the DfES as representing the most advanced Authorities, all of whom accepted an invitation to participate in this 'learning network'. The intent is not only to help local authorities develop their capacity to support networks of schools and other agencies, but also to increase and share knowledge about effective ways of building such collaborative capacity – in other words to build networks *internal* to the LAs and to foster learning networks *between* the LAs.

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[4] This section draws heavily on the interim evaluation report completed by Michael Fullan, Nancy Watson and Ben Levin (2005) on behalf of the DfES Innovation Unit, who sponsor the project.

Participating LEAs are:

Bexley	Dorset	Kirklees
Blackburn with Darwen	Essex	Knowsley
Bolton	Gateshead	Lancashire
Cambridgeshire	Hammersmith & Fulham	Sandwell
Cheshire	Hampshire	Wandsworth
Cornwall	Kingston	West Sussex
Cumbria		

The project operates at both the national and the local level. It is focused on creating capacity and spreading learning across authorities nationally, but has at its heart a close study of local collaborative work - learning from the experience of working closely with networks, with an emphasis on multi-agency working. Whilst it began with an overall general design it also honours LA knowledge by having the project 'co-constructed' with participants as it evolves. In other words, the project was to be developed collaboratively, in an adaptive manner, as programme learning unfolded[5].

At the national level, LA representatives meet regularly. CEOs/Directors of Children's Services come together for a 24 hour 'Think Tank' once a term. The Think Tank met first in February 2004, in a format that combined inputs from DfES policymakers, LA personnel and NCSL leaders, followed by discussion about the focus and direction of the project. At the end of that session, CEOs committed to the project, signing up to an agenda focused on *Every Child Matters* or "bringing together the standards agenda and the well-being agenda".

This same Think Tank included a presentation by Steve Munby (then CEO of Knowsley, now Chief Executive of NCSL) which shared what was then an LA-wide 'outlier' agenda, but one in many ways consistent with the frameworks discussed in the previous section (Munby, 2003; also cited in Fullan 2005). Knowsley's reform strategy (*Broad and Deep: a whole authority approach*) is:

> *…founded upon common moral purpose and shared principles; combining boldness with attention to an implementation strategy and a commitment to partnership – managing change together.*

Five "Priorities for Sustainability" were set out:

- Establishing an innovative, coherent and comprehensive policy framework
- The training of Lead Learners
- Key Lead Learners supporting clusters of schools to embed practice
- Sustained cluster-based networks – action learning, analyzing, describing and sharing practice

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[5] There was no evidence that a comparable programme of this scale internationally had been attempted. The programme leaders were therefore committed to learning as they went, both adaptively with programme participants, and through the critical friendship and critique of international partners.

- Embedding a culture of co-planning, co-teaching, co-review and co-coaching within and between schools – everyone a leader of learning.

In turn, Knowsley's authority-wide policy was to use collaborative working to drive system-wide reform and to change the role and function of the Local Authority itself, based around a shared (co-led) commitment to the children's agenda. Key underpinning elements were:

- Moral purpose
- Leadership in the big picture
- The LA as facilitator and relationship builder
- Frequent sampling of the environment ' "crafted gossip" – constantly 'checking out', reflecting and moving the dialogue forward
- Incentivising inclusion and reform
- Investing time and resources (Munby, 2003).

The agenda was clear for the project. In order to go 'beyond the plateau', authorities have to commit to a capacity-building, networked and sustainability agenda around standards and well-being, and one good way to do that was to commit to adaptive strategies, to problem-solving and learning together.

Each CEO appointed a Core Contact, whose responsibility was to lead, manage and study a local project and to act as the LA liaison with the national project. The Core Contact group meets twice a term. Following the initial Core Contact meeting, a few LAs added a second representative, often from social services or health. Such cross-agency teaming could facilitate the multi-agency operations required to successfully deliver ECM service at the local level. Core Contact meetings follow the same pattern as the Think Tank but focus more directly upon the 'real work' of the local projects. At the local level, each authority's 'project' was one that would support and strengthen what LAs were already committed to doing, and which could also serve as the 'evidence focus' for the LEArning project. The local projects cover some core territories:

- Engaging groups of schools (networks) in responsibility for school improvement
- Enabling team working across professions at area level
- Viewing networks as a 'unit of meaning' and 'unit of engagement'
- Exploring the complexities and tensions of children's service integration; removing barriers to multi-agency working.

Each has both an action and an enquiry component. Agreeing the projects was relatively straightforward; the enquiry questions took longer. Defining an enquiry that would address the project priorities, generate usable and publicly robust evidence and be manageable with available resources has been a challenge for many LAs. Core Contacts have appreciated and benefited from NCSL-provided research support in the form of one-to-one coaching as well as broad-based input.

The Local projects

Most of the individual projects explore different facets of networks and how they are best used and supported, typically addressing the particular contribution the LA can make to effective collaboration across schools and, increasingly, other agencies. The projects build on previous LA experience with networks, extending previous practice or

expanding smaller pilots to better provide children's services. There is a sense of urgency and commitment in addressing the ECM challenge.

The local projects present a range of innovative approaches to the challenges. To give a flavour of the work, a few examples, chosen at random, from a recent statement of local projects and enquiry questions (November, 2004) are cited below. The enquiry questions are not included – in general they focus on what can be learned from the project about various network and leadership approaches, particularly with regard to the contribution of the local authority.

> **Bolton** is building on their successful experience with networked learning to develop "emotionally intelligent schools" and build partnerships across all agencies dealing with young people. Bolton aspires to build a "network of good practice" to promote effective approaches to the delivery of ECM reforms.

> With a specific focus on vulnerable children, **Cornwall** is supporting the further development of several established networks to enable them to meet the needs of such vulnerable children.

> **Essex** is supporting eight clusters of schools to engage with and make progress on the ECM strategy for Essex and to use this to influence the Essex approach to clusters and networks.

> **Lancashire**, already strongly committed to strong support of cross-school collaboration, is working to develop new models of network facilitation to help them effectively address their specific learning focus and the broader ECM agenda.

> **Wandsworth**, with a focus on students, is establishing a new network to explore and share approaches based on listening to students to develop effective leadership of learning. Wandsworth is drawing on Bolton's experience in encouraging student voice.

CEO Think Tank

The CEO Think Tank is an integral component of LEArning. Not only does it give CEOs a forum for interaction with colleagues around current policy and implementation issues, but the participation of the senior leaders also provides a visible sign of their commitment and support of the project and its learning norms. CEOs met in February 2004, June 2004 (where they were joined by Core Contact colleagues), November 2004 and February 2005. For many of the CEOs the value of their personal participation, in particular these termly meetings, was the opportunity to engage in dialogue and discussion with senior policymakers from the DfES and elsewhere, and thus have some input into emerging policy and into refining or modifying how policies were actually implemented. (This connection between CEOs and policymakers is one enactment of 'tri-level change' principles.)

In the autumn of 2004, the focus and role of the Think Tank shifted in response to rapid developments in national policy (around ECM and the *Five-Year Strategy*, for instance) and a desire on the part of CEOs to have more ownership of their once-a-term meetings, and to ensure that the national policy focus remains grounded in what is being learned within LAs and through the local projects. NCSL commissioned a former Local Education Authority CEO to work with the Think Tank, to undertake an enquiry and to establish a

CEO 'executive group' which would design future events and programmes of activity. The February 2005 Think Tank was the first designed and facilitated by the CEOs and it represented a significant shift of ownership and a palpable move towards modeling collaborative learning principles.

Local Authority-to-Local Authority networking

The opportunity to work and share with other LAs has been much welcomed, both by CEOs and Core Contacts. Such networking was not entirely new; most LAs had already established mutually beneficial connections with other authorities through a wide range of other professional networks. LEArning, however, has systematically fostered such links through regular face-to-face sessions, the explicit focus on networks, and the encouragement to find common ground and the learning orientation. Within a few months, most LAs had established productive working relationships with other authorities; Core Contacts continued the connections between meetings, through telephone, e-mail and site visits. These connections developed from facing common challenges, or having projects with similar objectives, or around similar themes. In some cases, one LA is seen as having moved further in a direction that other LAs are now interested in pursuing – learning from the experience of pioneers has been beneficial. In other cases, cross-LA groups are learning together, bringing together different perspectives to reach better decisions and designs. Dorset and Kingston, for instance, found their local projects and enquiry questions similar enough that they were able to combine forces and work together, supporting each other with design, implementation and enquiry.

Another level of LA-to-LA networking has developed in the project. A cadre of Core Contacts now serve a facilitation role with Core Contact colleagues in other LAs. NCSL has supported their training for this role, in partnership with the University of Lancaster and Ashridge College. The immediate take-up of this service was slow, but more recently the take-up and the benefits are becoming increasingly clear. In developing such innovative professional relationships, ones that hold promise for sustainability and transfer of ownership, initial efforts can feel awkward or contrived until participants attain a certain level of comfort or familiarity with the process and with each other.

Implications for policy
This project, and the national emphasis on networks and networked learning, represents a significant departure from the more common approach of central policy directives. As pointed out by Ben Levin (2004) in an NCSL commissioned piece:

> *The idea of networked learning communities……sits uneasily alongside a strong recent history, in Britain and elsewhere, of education reform through top-down central policy mandates.*

The LEArning project can be seen as a laboratory for investigating the potential contribution of LAs to the national policy agenda which is promoting networks. The project asks: are networks a way of achieving system change towards a more sustainable, more equitable and more capacity-building system? It begins to address the challenge of "how to combine a strong sense of common direction and priority with strategies that can bring about the local commitment and action that is necessary for real and lasting educational change." (Levin, 2004).

The initiative is taking place in a complex and rapidly changing education policy arena, crowded by policy initiatives that do not always appear aligned or mutually supportive. Central policy, as articulated in the Five-Year Strategy, is characterised by what have been variously described as "creative tensions" or "serious inconsistencies and contradictions". For example, secondary schools can move to independent foundation status should they choose to go that route, a possibility that will greatly lessen the capacity of local authorities to broker a network-based system.

The LEArning project is wresting with the complexities of achieving coherence and alignment locally through mediation and customization of these potentially competing policy expectations. That it is doing so visibly on behalf of the system makes its contribution particularly useful. Achieving the long-term objectives of the ECM agenda will depend on local authorities being able to broker schools and other agencies to create local networks of delivery, and in so doing maintaining a sense of the 'system of schools' (Vander Ark, 2002). This brokerage role features in the College's *What Are We Learning About: Local Authority support for school networks?* where it is characterised as:
- Brokering network membership that is inclusive and diverse
- Brokering internal relationships between network schools
- Brokering partnerships beyond the network
- Brokering the network's access to resources
- Brokering the transfer of knowledge between networks (NCSL, 2004).

With ECM, the role of LAs, for much of the past decade ambiguous, is shifting once again. With the implementation of the Children Bill, and the subsequent integration of all children's services at the local level, Local Education Authorities will no longer exist as separate entities but will be superseded by Local Authorities with responsibility for education as well as social and health services.

For all these reasons, the LEArning project has great potential to inform national policy concerning the role and contribution of LAs. Emergent themes and applications from the work so far include:
- Creating a shared framework for change management
- Embedding relationships that could underpin developing structures
- Fostering trust and communication across professional groups
- Making sense of dispersed, uneven and highly localised activity.

The participant LAs are already committed to and experienced with networks and networked learning, and are supportive of the ECM agenda. What is learned from their experience in LEArning may or may not be applicable to all LAs. The substantial infrastructure of this project, as well as the high profile with DfES and NCSL, means that both local and cross-LA efforts are in the spotlight. They receive ongoing support, interventions and questioning/facilitation – more so than would be the case when LAs might work together. In other words, what is happening with these LAs, individually and collectively, may or may not represent the learning that would apply to other efforts, less generously supported, to encourage LAs to collaborate around helping their schools network or around implementing the *Every Child Matters* agenda

On the other hand, NCSL's LEArning project probably represents the most ambitious and sustained attempt to facilitate networked learning at the system level – both within

the programme and on behalf of the wider system. The various levels of research – internal enquiry, commissioned research from the University of Warwick and a substantive chronicling and evaluation project (Fullan, et al, 2005) – have the potential to offer rich learning to the project, policy-makers and the wider system as LEAs migrate to LAs and as networks of schools become a foundation architecture for the implementation of *Every Child Matters* aspirations.

Conclusions

It is evident that such a rapidly evolving policy commitment to school-to-school networks might simultaneously have the potential to release school level energy or to reinforce the existing, unhelpful patterns of 'victimhood' - based on concerns about initiative overload coupled with unremitting public accountability measures. Ensuring that networking efforts are not just more 'noise in the system', but are instead a critical part of the solution, bringing coherence, purpose and local ownership to reform efforts, will require effective brokerage and facilitation of network partnerships together with informed support for implementation.   It also calls out for robust and rapidly acquired knowledge about what works and what doesn't for what purposes.

The focus of learning networks and clarity about purpose, structure, process and governance all need to be designed early in the life of a network. These formulation, design and early development phases require sensitive partnership. Local Authorities are well placed to reconfigure their patterns of working in order to facilitate this system change process - to co-develop solutions and to support lateral leadership and learning.

A self-evident challenge is to design a capacity building and sustainable local strategy that puts together into a coherent whole within each LA the best of what we have learned from the knowledge foundations about effective networks. As a metaphor, schools are enthusiastic to be part of an integrated learning system, rather than being subject to a plethora of unconnected policy strands. Achieving this would be to capitalise on the state of readiness that past policies has created. It would be in tune with the desire of the profession to take hold of the improvement agenda – at a time when it is also the expressed wish of the government for an era characterised by 'informed professionalism' and 'personalised learning'. A central finding emerging from NCSL's work with Local Authorities (NCSL, 2005) is the widespread belief that a network architecture is necessary for successful delivery on the promise of *Every Child Matters*. Without a shift to the school network as a dominant organisational 'unit of meaning' and 'unit of engagement' it is unlikely to happen.

Drawing from the research about scale and tri-level change explored earlier in this paper, and National College for School Leadership's practical work with networks and with LAs, it seems appropriate to propose a number of sub-challenges for the UK system as network-based reform expands:

1. The first is for the policy development and design process to interface more comfortably and consistently with practice – at network and Local Authority level. What this implies is more than the occasional use of practitioners as advisers. It suggests the co-development of policy with informed practitioners and the adaptation of implementation components and incentives through interface with

those who are working at the sharp end of implementation. Such a strategy would begin to model a 'practice-led' and evolutionary policy formation process.

2. A second is for policy to evolve in new ways – to be facilitative (but not directive), capacity-building and highly sensitive to sustainability factors. Such characteristics are required to support a systemic approach to 'networked learning', school-to-school learning, innovation, lateral leadership and knowledge-sharing.

3. A third is to apply similar new thinking to innovation in the field of policy implementation – to move away from hierarchical delivery models and towards co-responsibility and the utilisation of laterally deployed expertise. Implementation that reflects good learning models and design principles will be facilitative of new system relationships.

4. A fourth is to generate similar lateral links and synergies between national agencies (DfES and NDPBs). By themselves becoming increasingly networked, they will be modeling collaborative ways of working and new modes of accountability appropriate to 'tri-level change' and sustainability principles. Accountabilities in a learning system will be both reciprocal (down <u>and</u> up the system) and lateral (the mutual accountabilities of networked learning).

5. A fifth is for policymakers and networked national agencies to support progressive reconfiguration of Local Authorities in ways consistent with those described in the body of this paper. Local Authorities will need to function as brokers in a network-based and capacity building system. As such, they can add value to school and network operations, can connect them and facilitate the transfer of innovation. They can exploit diversity for inclusion and equity purposes, and can manage knowledge exchange on behalf of local and national sites of learning.

To achieve this, Local Authorities will need to establish new frameworks and models of practice from which others might learn. The final contribution to this paper is to set out below a very early example of such a framework emerging, one that arises from the work of the Networked Learning Group with networks of schools and with Local Authorities:

Local Authority roles in a network-based system will:

- **Embrace an inclusive vision** - *all* included, co-developed and lived out
- **Feature an explicit statement of clarifying moral and practical purpose**
- **Model the vision** in LA practices – bridging across the LA as a network
- **Foreground equity and excellence** – act for all young people
- **Use unique context knowledge** to create a strategy for collaborative solutions
- **Reconfigure the LA** around networks as a 'unit of engagement' and local solutions
- **Move the LA from expert to learner**; from provider to facilitator

- **Build leadership capacity** – enlarge leaders' worlds, find it in new places, exploit it laterally
- **Model new relationships** – problem-solving conversations and joint accountability - learning together through joint enquiry, joint problem-solving
- **Reconfigure policy and resources** to build collaborative capacity.

Designing a process by which such a framework might become owned and refined by Local Authorities and the communities they serve is the continuing work of the projects outlined in this paper.

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