

## The LEARNING Initiative: An enquiry and development approach to generating multi-layered change in England

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**Graham Handscomb**  
Principal Adviser  
Essex County Council  
Second Floor; E Block,  
County Hall,  
Chelmsford,  
ESSEX.  
CM2 6WN  
ENGLAND

[graham.handscomb@essexcc.gov.uk](mailto:graham.handscomb@essexcc.gov.uk)

**Dr Chris Chapman**  
Institute of Education  
University of Warwick  
ENGLAND

[chris.chapman@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:chris.chapman@warwick.ac.uk)

# The LEArning Initiative: an enquiry and development approach to generating multi-layered change in England

Graham Handscomb, Dr. Christopher Chapman

## ***Abstract***

This paper draws on emerging evidence from the LEArning Initiative supported by the Department for Education and Skills Innovations Unit and the National College for School Leadership. The initiative aims to foster an enquiry and development approach to the brokering and facilitation of relationships within and between local authorities (LEAs) in England. The early experiences of one LEA provide an insight into the extent that the enquiry and developmental approach has become incorporated into their practice. In conclusion a number of key themes emerging from the initiative are discussed within the context of generating multi-level complex change.

*'You will remember how puzzled you were as a child to discover that an event is more like itself when anticipated or recalled than when it is happening'*

(James Hamilton- Paterson, 1998)

*'We change what we remember, then it changes us, and so on, until we both fade together, our memories and ourselves'*

(Salman Rushdie, 2000)

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## Introduction

*Partnership and collaboration have been placed at the centre of government policy in an attempt to deliver system-wide improvement within the education system and other public services. Emerging evidence would suggest that local level support for the generation of partnerships and networks is essential if this approach is to succeed (Ainscow and Chapman, 2005; Chapman and Allen, 2004). It is within this context that this paper reflects on the early stages of the LEarning Initiative which aims to develop capacity at the local level to broker and facilitate the generation and evolution of networks located within and between local authorities.*

*The Innovations Unit (IU) within the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) to develop the LEarning Initiative. The project is underpinned by an enquiry and development approach to brokering and facilitation and involves twenty-one local education authorities (LEAs) and a number of other external agencies including Demos and the University of Warwick. All Local Education Authorities (LEAs) involved with the project have identified, planned and implemented an internal 'developmental project' and constructed associated 'enquiry questions' aimed at capturing knowledge and guiding the developmental process. In addition to brokering and facilitating 'within LEA' collaboration and networking between agencies, officers and schools the wider project also provides opportunities for 'LEA to LEA' collaboration and networking.*

*Chief Education Officer (CEO) 'think tanks' are held on a regular basis. At these events CEOs have the opportunity to engage with and influence high-level policy makers. In addition to the CEO events regular 'core contact meetings' of project leaders within each LEA are held. These meetings focus on developing the projects and enquiries and sharing experiences and learning between the LEAs.*

*While the initiative is in its early stages there are a number of interesting issues and themes emerging. This paper draws on the experience of one LEA involved in the initiative to provide illustration of the nature of activity LEAs are undertaking and to provide an early insight into the potential for developing systemic capacity through an enquiry and development approach.*

This paper is structured in three sections. This first section sets the context for the paper. The second section explores the early stages of the project from one LEA's perspective. The third section highlights a number of emerging key themes from within the initiative. Fourth, and in conclusion, the paper draws on these themes to outline the possibilities, issues and tensions LEAs may expect to encounter in using a development and enquiry approach to broker and facilitate collaboration between organisations within their remit.

## *The Learning Initiative: an LEA Perspective*

In writing this account of the early developments in the Essex LEArning project, we are conscious just how difficult it is to convey not just what has occurred but, perhaps more importantly, what has been learned and gained. So from the outset we need to say how aware we are that this case study report draws mainly upon recollections, reflections, and written notes of Local Authority (LA) colleagues, who themselves are active participants in the project. We attempt to take account of the responses and thoughts of school colleagues, and hope to do justice to the emerging developments in the clusters of which they are a part. Although some detail is given of “events” and developments as we have remembered them, the main emphasis of this record is on issues arising, some early insights, and useful questions posed for further development.

We begin by giving a picture of how the Essex Local Authority project and enquiry foci developed. Related to this, an account is then given of the Essex approach to the project. This is followed by a portrayal of the clusters involved in the initiative, their initial engagement and planning, and issues emerging from this. Finally there is a summary reflection on the scope and complexity of this project and consideration of any early implications of developments so far.

### **The focus of the Essex project**

The focus of the project - that is, the view about what area of activity it might involve from the Local Authority perspective - was identified at an early stage, and has changed little since. It was ***to enable eight clusters of schools to engage with, and see what progress could be made, on specific Every Child Matters development***. This would be done with a view to ***using this experience to influence: 1. Essex’s Every Child Matters development strategy and practice, and 2. Essex cluster strategy and practice***. The value of using this project to explore how schools working together can positively engage with a range of development related to the DfES Every Child Matters Green Paper (and the subsequent Children’s Bill) was identified by Essex colleagues at the first CEO Think Tank and Core Contact meetings\* that were organised by NCSL in February 2004.

By contrast the research enquiry focus for the Essex project has undergone a number of revisions. At the time of writing it is currently: ***What is effective, and what are the barriers to progress on Every Child Matters through aspects of networking involving groups of schools, local authority and other agencies/organisations?*** The shaping of this enquiry question has involved Essex local authority officers, a headteacher consultant, school colleagues in each participating cluster, and a range of colleagues in the NCSL. A particularly interesting and positive exchange took place prompted by NCSL colleagues, exploring whether networking was sufficiently emphasised in an early draft of the question: ***How can the local authority and project schools develop responses and services to children through effective and efficient cluster working?*** In reforming the research question to the current version, the Essex Authority co-leaders sought to strike a balance between two sets of tensions:

- Between the networking and Every Child Matters agendas

- Between the need to engage with the complexity of the range of features to be explored in order to ensure the project is worthwhile, whilst also ensuring the research question is clear and manageable.

We strongly believe that it is very important to devote time and energy to the crafting of the enquiry question as this will be pivotal in shaping the scope and direction of the research investigation, and influence the quality of outcomes. We now consider the question to be sufficiently robust, but will continue to keep it under review as the investigation proceeds.

### *The role of the Local Authority?*

Initially the project was led by an Essex LEA Principal Adviser. At a relatively early stage it was decided that he should be joined by a colleague from the Essex Strategic Core team, so that the initiative was co-led and had a Local Authority, rather than just an LEA remit. It was also decided to employ a consultant to the project who was previously a secondary headteacher. Together they formed a co-ordinating group, later to be joined by representatives from the school clusters.

One key feature of the Essex project was an early consideration of what is the local authority's leadership role in a partnership project? From the outset the co-ordinating group felt that the local authority should be regarded as a partner in the project, and that the development and direction of the project should be responsive to colleagues in participating schools. Nevertheless, clearly the co-leaders had a role in shaping early thinking and the framework with which schools could engage. In the first contacts with clusters there was often a sensitive balance to be struck, and at times school colleagues were pressing for greater detail to be determined at the outset by the local authority. Despite such expectations the co-leaders concentrated on gaining cluster ownership and influence through meetings with individual clusters, whole project conferences and paired cluster *surgeries*. They also spent time in briefings and consultations to secure ownership and champions for the project amongst executive managers and groups in the local authority.

### *Project planning*

The co-leaders and the Head of the Essex Schools Service led the process of refining the overall Essex research question. This was done through *a funnelling exercise* guided by NCSL colleagues and involved a funnelling down of a number of ingredients, including the range of perspectives and expectations of the project at national and local level, to arrive at an investigation focus and an action plan. A characteristic feature of the Essex approach has been a continued process of patterning the project in terms of variety of perspective, issues and common threads. This is reflected in an initial timeline document, divided into *activity, outcomes and processes* sections, and this proved valuable in the development of a Project Plan and an Enquiry Plan.

In all of this, there was an early appreciation by co-leaders that the project existed and was understood within a number of arenas. We characterised this as *the macro*: the national/international project, including LEA to LEA networking; the *mini-macro*: the Essex project; the *micro*: the clusters; and the *mini micro*: the schools, teacher, and pupils. This was helpful because it was clear that people's comprehension, commitment and participation would be dependant on their particular context.

## *Enquiry and the research archive*

It was made clear to all participants within the local authority and school clusters that this was a research and development project. The importance of investing time and thought to honing both the overall Essex research question and the enquiry question of each cluster was emphasised from the outset and regularly reinforced. Allied with this was stressing the need for all participants to keep a research or reflective log. It was a challenge to ensure that this was in fact happening, when we had limited contact with each cluster. We regularly re-emphasised its importance and the need for each person to find a manageable way of keeping this log in a way that worked for them. Above all we wanted to demonstrate this process of reflection by example, and indeed aimed to embody this spirit in the tone and approach of this early case study report.

Plans were made from the outset for the compilation of a research archive, with categories thought through and arrangements made for clusters to send in their planning documents and agreement to draw appropriately on their reflective records. We also arranged with Essex County Council media department to produce a multi-media record of the project, drawing on the audio-visual logs that each cluster compiled. Storage of the archive would be done via the secretary to the Principal Adviser. It was helpful to be clear that the enquiry would formatively inform the development, and staged feedback loops would be built into the Enquiry Plan.

A range of participants were identified to take part in the project. This included the criteria for the selection of the 8 clusters, which is described below. Given the Every Child Matters focus of the project it was important that one of the co-leaders came from the strategic management core of Essex Learning and Social Care. We also wanted to involve a consultant with headteacher experience to connect with the school dimension of the project, and were keen that the respective clusters would help determine how this person would be used to support their work. Additional support would also be provided through allocation of link adviser time to each cluster.

## **The Clusters**

Four clusters comprised groups of schools that had made unsuccessful applications to become Networked Learning Communities and indicated that they wished now to participate in the LEARNING project. The Local Authority was also keen that other clusters were also involved to provide a range of type and experience. The eight clusters eventually emerged through a process of consultation with schools, and reflected the following elements:

- Varying size, ranging from a small rural clusters of eight primary schools to a loose federation of schools
- Varying in experience, ranging from well established to recently formed
- Varying connection to the ECM agenda; for some it was not a main priority, for one it was the reason for the formation of the cluster
- Mixture of cross and single phase
- Including a number of clusters in an area the LA wished to provide more intensive support

Once identified, it was important that the clusters became familiar with the basic elements of the initiative, began to develop some ownership, and shared in its direction. This was done through the co-leaders attending the meetings of clusters in some cases, a number of extended phone conversations

with lead contacts for each cluster, and an initial conference in June 2004 attended by a number of colleagues from each cluster. At the conference the Essex co-leaders and Mark Hadfield from the NCSL explored the nature of the project and facilitated activity on cluster development and Every Child Matters issues.

Following the conference each cluster confirmed their involvement, and sent in a completed form outlining their first thoughts about ECM and enquiry focus, after meetings within their respective clusters. Then in the Autumn *surgeries* took place in which representatives of clusters met with the three LA colleagues to examine and take forward their thinking and planning. In most cases clusters attended these meetings in pairs so that cluster colleagues used each other as well as the Essex officers. These proved to be very interesting sessions in which there was mutual learning and development between cluster and LA colleagues. They particularly explored the kind of ECM focus the cluster might centre upon, the kinds of networking that might be involved, and identification of the cluster's own specific enquiry question. A variety of enquiries emerged ranging from barriers to achieving successful transition for vulnerable children, to the contribution of arts education in the development of the "intelligent citizen"; and from improving partnership working with parents, to provision for children with mental health problems.

It was clear that the nature and quality of cluster discussion and planning also varied, signalling an issue for the project co-ordinators to be able to respond to a range of need, experience and expertise. Notes of each session were compiled by the headteacher consultant, sent to respective clusters for checking and then all notes were circulated to every cluster.

### **Emerging issues, learning, and implications**

The style of this account has attempted to weave reflections and issues raised, throughout the report. This concluding section will serve to highlight some summary issues and make a few overall observations.

One significant feature of this project is that it will operate in a number of different contexts, and this will have implications in terms of securing ownership and engagement. On the national and inter-LEA level the project had been "running" for some time (from February to May) before clusters of schools began to be involved. A balance had to be struck between leading and giving clarity on the nature of the project, and ensuring that things were not pre-determined, leaving scope for clusters of schools to influence the nature and direction of the initiative in Essex.

Other aspects of this multi-layering included finding ways in which developments within the national dimension (particularly insights gained from LEA to LEA networking) could be distilled into the Essex cluster context, and addressing the implications of the diversity between the clusters themselves. The latter was anticipated in key co-leader messages at the inaugural conference. These stressed that the project would be about finding varied solutions in a variety of different cluster contexts, focusing on what works, and seeking to gain new knowledge and understanding.

Clearly this would have a number of implications. Given the varied nature of the clusters there was much potential in what they might learn from each other, but at first they were not convinced of this and set it as a low priority. Nevertheless co-leaders took the decision that this should continue to be fostered through activities like the *surgery* sessions. Thought also needed to be given to the provision of support, particularly via the headteacher consultant and link advisers, to meet the range of need posed by the different clusters.

Thus, facets of networking characterised one set of issues, whilst another set related to the emphasis on Every Child Matters development. This was a definite Essex project priority, and in the honing of the overall enquiry question a good deal of work was devoted to striking an appropriate balance which incorporated the ingredients of networking, support and barriers to ECM, and the dynamic of multi-agency working, including the role of the local authority.

Indeed, the enquiry nature of the project was the other important feature emphasised at all levels of the Essex development. As well as the time invested in refining the overall enquiry question, each cluster was also guided to fashion its own question in order to give investigative bite to its activity. A commitment was given that insights gained from this project would be used to influence Essex wide development. It was explained that this meant not the roll out of the project to all schools, but communication of the learning gained and using the evidence base to develop policy and practice.

This in turn raises issues of impact measures. Many of the exciting ECM cluster developments do not lend themselves to quantitative measures of impact. So it is anticipated that there will need to be consideration of how more qualitative evidence can be used to influence policy in an environment that has traditionally emphasised data like attainment measures. Interestingly one insight shared in discussion with the Chief Education Officer of another participating LEA led to a visionary ambition of the Essex project. Throughout the various dimensions of enquiry in Essex it is hoped that what might emerge would be four or five key drivers that would be influential regarding the effectiveness of cluster working on Every Child Matters development. If this could be achieved then it is felt that the LEarning project will have made a significant contribution in Essex.

Drawing on the Essex account outlined above we now move on to explore first, a number of key themes and second, some possibilities, issues and tensions relating to the wider national initiative.



## ***Key Themes***

### ***1. Managing complexity and chaos***

The wide range of stakeholders involved in the initiative leads to complex arrangements of social interactions. Individuals and groups within the initiative are likely to have competing interests, priorities, ambitions, levels of ownership and involvement with the initiative. The complexity of the initiative makes it imperative for all involved to have developed a shared understanding and language relating to the initiative. It is imperative that these shared understandings transcend hierarchical structures. There are also leadership and management implications for those making the initiative a reality within their authorities. Where the initiative is demonstrating early signs of success individuals tend to prioritise the initiative and actively draw upon resources from other areas within their authority to support the project.

### ***2. Role of relationships and relationship building***

The role of relationships and relationship building is central to the success of this initiative. The 'core contact' events have played a pivotal role in providing the opportunity for colleagues to air concerns, frustrations, ideas and develop collaborative practices. This process has taken time and on occasions has been a challenging experience. However, the high levels of challenge have contributed to the strength and ethos that now exists within the initiative.

### ***3. Investing in structural and cultural change***

This initiative is providing the opportunity for LEAs to build capacity by engaging in structural and cultural change. Some LEAs have focused on putting structures in place to support the enquiry and development process; others have chosen to focus largely on engaging in cultural change. A key question for this initiative is what structures and processes best support brokerage and facilitation? Furthermore, to what extent can these conditions be promoted?

### ***4. Capacity to engage and involve***

The capacity of the local authority to engage in such a complex project and maximise involvement within and between authorities is paramount to success of the individual authority's project and the initiative as a whole. LEAs involved with the initiative are characterised by a range of improvement trajectories and are at differing phases of development. Those authorities that have a tradition of working within an enquiry-driven approach, such as Essex, tend to view enquiry as a culture within which the project is situated. Conversely, those without such a tradition have a more task orientated view of the enquiry process.

### ***5. Validity of outcomes***

The role of evidence within this initiative is key. The initiative has had to develop an understanding regarding what is considered to be useful and valid data within the context of a standards dominated system. Without this unified understanding it is unlikely this project will be considered to have "impact" by leaders at various levels. A second key factor is the pressure to demonstrate early gains within deliverable time-frames. However, the building of 'meaningful' constellations of practice takes time (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, pressure to demonstrate early gains/ indicators of success may be detrimental to the longer-term development of the project. For example, early case study writers can lose their focus by becoming obsessed with the preparation of an outcome rather than the process of developing the project. The writer of the Essex early case study report, upon which this paper draws, made a conscious effort to avoid this,

and to emphasis the learning and issues being generated from the project, rather than citing token early outcomes.

It is important that realistic time-frames and outcome schedules must be built into such a project at the early stages. The Every Child Matters agenda and networking do not easily lend themselves to quantitative measurement. However, this does not necessarily imply lack of rigor. Benchmarking of a qualitative kind, such as giving a detailed description of the nature of multi-agency relationships, can be established at the outset, as indeed is the intention of a number of the participating clusters in the Essex Project. This then will provide a robust basis for measuring any change brought about through the programme of enquiry and development.

**6. *Issues of sustainability***

Finally, within a demanding educational landscape dominated by multiple initiatives and interventions, we must ask ourselves whether such a project or elements of it be translated in to sustainable changes in terms of structures, processes and individual and collective behaviours?

The emerging six themes highlighted above exist within a complex dynamic landscape. The final section aims to provide an overview of the complexity of engaging in such an initiative by briefly exploring the changing face of the LEA role and the importance of aligning enquiry throughout the system.

## *Possibilities, Issues and Tensions*

### *The Local Authority support and development role*

This project explored the contribution that the Local Authority can make to collaborative change. It is clearly set against the dynamic and shifting landscape of relationships and expectations between central Government and the local governance of education. In England during the 1980s and early 1990s Local Education Authorities (LEAs) had a relatively strong relationship with schools, which included an emphasis on support and development. This then changed and the DfES Code of Practice on LEA/School Relations (1998 and revised 2000) prioritised the work of LEAs as being first and foremost about monitoring and challenging schools to raise standards and to *intervene in inverse proportion to success*. Helping to support and develop schools was not seen as a priority role of the LEA, and it was to have minimum contact with schools that were doing well. The only caveat was that, set alongside this emphasis on school autonomy and schools' responsibility for their own performance, there was an advocating of the sharing of good practice between schools (Handscomb 2002/3).

In more recent times LEAs have again been exhorted by Government to help support and develop schools. This has particularly involved encouraging reflection, enquiry and research, and promoting the sharing of what works among schools. Emerging from an era of stark competitiveness between schools it was now *cool to collaborate* (Handscomb, 2002). LEAs were not only permitted, but expected to engage in school development and facilitation of collaborative working. Essex LEA contributed to this through promoting enquiry and research in schools and pioneering the concept of *The Research Engaged School* (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003). Alongside this new mood of reflection, collaboration and development, there was a continuity of Government commitment to the raising standards agenda, and the requirement of LEAs to robustly challenge schools. So the present environment in which this project is situated poses real tensions for the role of the Local Authority – to support and facilitate collaborative development on the one hand, and to challenge and, if needed, intervene on the other. In all of this central Government is watching closely to see how well LEAs perform, with an open mind as to whether they are the best solution to fulfilling the middle tier role between Government and schools.

### *Levels of enquiry and alignment*

Enquiry featured at all levels of the LEarning Initiative. Nationally there were clear enquiry questions posed, particularly about the nature of LEA to LEA networking and learning. Within the Essex project the Local Authority fashioned its research question, which it spent some time honing with colleagues from the National College for School Leadership, Warwick University, other senior colleagues within the Local Authority, and with the school clusters themselves. Essex also made the decision that it would enhance the overall culture of enquiry in the project for each cluster to be clear on what new knowledge and understanding it would get from the project through setting its own research question. Local Authority colleagues spent some time in surgery sessions and in other one to one contact to help support clusters in this process.

Having levels of enquiry in this way was powerful but also posed issues of inter-connection and coherence. In particular, it was important to help ensure that the respective enquiries aligned, and this in turn depended on issues relating to the clarity of relationship between the various dimensions of the project posed elsewhere in this paper – i.e. between the national, local, cluster and school dimensions.

The use of surgery sessions between pairs of clusters and Local Authority personnel helped to both critique the Local Authority research question and to align the emerging cluster enquiries with the enquiry of the Local Authority and of each other.

Clearly, significant resource has been invested in this initiative and if it only manages to scratch the surface, then disappointingly, another opportunity for educational change and improvement will have passed us by. However, the early signs emerging from LEAs around the country are encouraging. It may be that the LEArning Initiative does have the power to change what people *think and do* (Fullan, 1991).

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## **Correspondence:**

Graham Handscomb  
Principal Adviser  
Essex County Council  
Second Floor; E Block,  
County Hall,  
Chelmsford,  
ESSEX.  
CM2 6WN  
ENGLAND  
graham.handscomb@essexcc.gov.uk

Dr Chris Chapman  
Institute of Education  
University of Warwick  
ENGLAND  
Chris.chapman@warwick.ac.uk