2025

AEPA

Area-based Education Partnerships Association

Belonging and Excellence: The Importance of Local Education Partnerships

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Foreword

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Education partnerships have emerged as a response to the radical school reforms that began over three decades ago and which have significantly changed not just individual schools but the school system itself. There has been a major shift from schools having little autonomy and being part of a tightly knit local authority school system to one where schools have far greater freedom and no obligation to be part of any wider local school system.

Greater school autonomy has undoubtedly encouraged innovation and led to higher standards and greater professionalism – few would want to turn back the clock. Yet there have been significant downsides. Autonomous schools often competing with neighbouring schools for pupils and with no accountability beyond their own performance have not always worked to support the wider public good, particularly in terms of access for more disadvantaged children and young people. There have been implications for the profession as well. While welcoming the freedoms that come with having greater autonomy, many teachers regret the isolation that has often accompanied it. Teaching is a collaborative activity and not one where you can hide yourself away from fellow professionals. Schools need both independence and interdependence.

This shift towards greater autonomy has created two further problems. First, it has made collaboration more difficult. Second, the ambition for a nation of independent, autonomous schools ignores the importance of place-based education. With the demise of the local education authority's role in education, there is now no common framework in which schools serving the same geographical community can be brought together.

There is no-one to hold the ring for education as a public good. Other organisations that serve the same community – such as those in health and social care, police authorities, local businesses and voluntary organisations – find themselves having to build relationships with scores of autonomous schools. Local education partnerships are filling that vacuum. They make connections, sometimes acting as a convener, while all the time building relationships and trust. A joined-up, collaborative response, integrating access, support and services for those most in need, supporting children and families to lead better lives. This role is important but the significance of place to local communities goes beyond this.

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Place matters. It gives families a key part of their identity and contributes to their sense of belonging. Schools need to understand place and locality to make meaningful connections with children and families and they themselves are also a central part of their local community. The importance of young people feeling a sense of belonging in school, of being part of an internal and external community where they feel accepted and safe, is now widely recognised. This has a positive impact on both their approach to learning and their outcomes.

Big issues confront local communities. These require schools and the young people within them, not only to feel a sense of belonging in school but also to think holistically in caring for their 'common home' and the communities within and beyond it. We want young people to feel a sense of pride and to act as stewards within both their school and the wider community.

Education policy began to recognise the problem of fragmentation and moved to reconnect schools. Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities were important early policies of the Labour government in the 1990s, but they were not designed to create a school system. Other initiatives have followed: federations, clusters, and multi-academy trusts – but, again, they are not designed to build a school system where place is recognised and valued and where everyone belongs.

As we move to most schools being members of trusts, the risk is that individual schools both lose autonomy as part of a larger group and the trust itself operates within a weak school system because nothing connects them with other schools in the same geographical area.

The framework and incentives by which schools, or groups of schools, relate to each other and to the wider community is in limbo. Over the last decade, various legislative attempts to make all schools academies have failed. However, it increasingly matters less whether a school is an academy or a maintained school than whether there is a structure in which schools in the same place, serving the same community, can work together and learn from each other.

That is the policy vacuum that local leaders and schools are seeking to fill through local education partnerships. As partnerships are born of local circumstances, they are not all the same, but they share some important principles. They are school-led, place-based and open to all schools no matter what their legal structure. They have a relationship with the local authority, although it differs from place to place, and their main focus is school improvement. They respect and value the autonomy of schools but are building local education systems that not only connect schools with each other in purposeful collaboration but also support local communities to solve some of their most pressing problems. As such, local education partnerships are a rich resource for the new government in managing the national agenda for change.

This publication is for those working in local education systems – in schools, trusts and local authorities – both in areas with partnerships and those currently without. It is also for those working nationally who might be interested in learning more and supporting the further development of local education partnerships to tackle some of the most acute challenges in the school system.

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02

Introduction

Local education partnerships are school-led, place-based, not-for profit organisations. They bring together all types of schools and settings, and work collaboratively with their local authorities. Their central purpose is to improve the quality of local education, including the outcomes for children and young people and make it more equitable. This cannot easily be tackled by individual schools working in isolation in a fragmented system. Partnerships are a place for schools to come together and act as a collective voice that advocates for education. Partnerships build professional and social capital by helping teachers and staff to learn and grow and by helping to nurture and grow local leaders.

Acting as the local 'glue' in the system, partnerships work with everyone regardless of status or organisation. They focus on place and locality, developing local solutions that are appropriate to the needs of local schools and trusts. Schools and trusts are invited to join and can choose whether to do so. Partnerships seek to enable and facilitate local school-to-school collaboration. They can be commissioned by local authorities and other parts of the public sector to provide for either core delivery or additional capacity, including leading and co-ordinating local activities. Acting and responding flexibly, they have evolved and grown to respond to the local needs of schools and trusts by maintaining their presence and deepening their local relationships with schools, trusts and local authorities.

The following pages provide examples of the work of partnerships from the steering group of the Area-Based Education Partnerships Association (AEPA). The examples illustrate the range of activities being led by local education partnerships and how they are improving schools and outcomes for children and young people. For example, they can support reading fluency, develop the primary curriculum, or work to solve local recruitment crises.

The following examples also show how partnerships are broadening their activities and developing strong relationships with schools of all types to create the local collaborative capacity to respond to some of the biggest system challenges. For example, they develop local approaches to improve SEND provision and inclusive practice to eliminate economic exclusion, or to support students' mental health.

The final sections explore the potential contribution partnerships and the AEPA could play in the emerging schools landscape, including developing regional school improvement capacity. Local education partnerships, through their ability to focus on locality, have much to offer the new government's mission to improve schools and curriculum, recruitment and retention, inclusion, attendance, and children and young people's mental health.

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Built on collective moral purpose

Partnerships take on a responsibility for improving education in their local area – but not only that. In each area, their design is rooted in their context and locality, but they share a moral purpose to work collaboratively with all types of schools and settings and to do what is best for all the children and young people in the local community.

Schools and settings join by invitation. They are not compelled to sign up; they join voluntarily and maintain their membership due to the quality of the offer and support.

Despite their differences, local education partnerships share many features and exist in all parts of the country. They support local areas regardless of size, from localities with over 500 schools to those with fewer than 100. The principles on which they were founded are shared.

What principles help partnerships to develop?

01
A commitment to improve outcomes for all children and young people locally

02
A clear and compelling vision for the future, rooted in the locality but also able to support the national agenda for change

03
A local context that provides the impetus for the partnership – and evidence that the partnership has the ability to respond to specific local challenges

04
A focus on strengthening the connections between schools to make a difference to the lives of children and young people in the local area

05
A local culture of trust and transparency, with a belief that local collaboration can provide benefits

06
A core collaborative group of key champions and individuals (school leaders and others), with the trust and high social capital to make it happen, working with shared values about the power of collaborative endeavour

07
Wider engagement from a broader group of school leaders

08
The funding and capacity to develop the partnership structures and communications with schools

04

Built on collective moral purpose

These schools-led partnerships recognise and value place and local relationships, schools' pride in and sense of belonging to their local area, and the importance of local system solutions. Where these local relationships are less than effective, schools can become isolated and look inwards, and the school system becomes fragmented. Children and young people can lack access to additional services and support to meet their needs, vulnerable individuals can become lost to the system, and outcomes can decline. Local education partnerships have developed as a bottom-up solution to counter these risks.

Most schools and trusts need to collaborate to improve: to seek access to effective practice, gain external support and challenge, and take advantage of opportunities to learn from other schools and leaders. Many issues, for example, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), admissions and inclusion, require both the involvement of the local authority, with its statutory responsibilities, and the collaboration of local schools.

Local education partnerships are a way to develop local solutions to meet local challenges within the national framework, understanding and respecting the local context and relationships. They hold the ring for education as a 'public good' and connect schools to their wider civic responsibilities, helping them to look broader than their school or trust. In doing so, they help to provide coherence locally, make the links between national priorities or offers and local implementation and can help to develop a local education vision for collaboration and improvement.

While education policy nationally has ebbed and flowed, partnerships have been lodestars for their localities, evolving and flexing their activities and offers to respond to changing national and local priorities. They have remained a constant presence. None of the partnerships featured in this document looks the same as they did when first formed.

Many local education partnerships were established initially by either local authorities or school leaders, to respond to challenges in the system, reduce fragmentation and isolation, and bring local coherence. Because of their strong relationships with and knowledge of local schools, they can use their intelligence and understanding to pool strengths and concerns, respond to local needs, and help to provide support effectively. In many instances, partnerships are in a contractual relationship with their local authority to undertake activities that address a number of the latter's statutory duties.

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Working collaboratively and locally

Strong and trusting relationships between settings, schools and trusts that serve the same geographical area are the cornerstones of the partnership. This trust has enabled partnerships to understand the schools' and trusts' needs and the improvement challenges across the local system. Partnerships act as an honest broker regardless of the school's legal status and the relationships developed and sustained have become critical to the success of both individual school and the local school system.

An enabling and supportive local authority makes an important contribution to the leadership of the partnership. Local authorities are often deeply invested in the development of the partnership and the success of its work. They also commission work from partnerships to tackle local issues of quality and equity. This blend of a council's democratic accountability with the professional and moral accountabilities of schools provides powerful legitimacy for partnerships.

Effective relationships with others in the education system are equally important. Partnerships have become adept at working with local and regional hubs, research schools, and other providers of professional and leadership development; early years providers; initial teacher training providers and local higher education institutions; post-16 education and training providers as well as local businesses and other public sector organisations, including public health and the police.

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Driving standards and excellence

Most local education partnerships have developed their core roles to improve schools and build professional and social capital by helping school leaders, teachers and practitioners to learn and grow. In doing so, some have worked collaboratively across their local system to articulate a local education strategy and explain how the partnership will deliver it.

Many local education partnerships were formed to focus on school improvement and better outcomes for children and young people. For many, driving excellence across the local school system remains their core focus – and they are held responsible for it. They help to improve schools by developing high-quality provision, working with and through their school leaders and practitioners, and ensuring that a range of school improvement activities are delivered. Partnerships are in a position to commission specific development programmes in response to common local needs.

School improvement, leadership retention and wellbeing - Leicester Primary Partnership (LPP)

Leicester Primary Partnership supports primary schools in Leicester city as 'an independent service for city schools and academies' and a not-for-profit organisation. Headteachers are central to three local steering groups:

a) one ("Professional Development Leicester") leads professional development and training for Leicester primary schools using de-delegated funds and traded income;

b) a second ("School Improvement Leicester") leads on school improvement for Leicester primary schools including triads of schools working alongside a school improvement partner, school reviews, appraisals, and support and online improvement masterclasses; and

c) a third leads and steers partnership working across the city, ensuring that schools receive communication and support via website resources, a weekly newsletter, and a telephone helpline. Schools work in smaller area-based development groups that focus on joint areas of development from place planning to student councils.

LPP runs the new-to-headship courses, provides coaching and buddy systems, and offers headteacher supervisions; these have all had a positive effect on the retention of quality headteachers. LPP runs working parties for school leaders on issues such as the future of artificial intelligence in schools and working with the local community. Any headteacher within the city has support via LPP and neighbouring colleagues, a dedicated improvement partner for school improvement, and a development group.

LPP acts as the 'voice of the sector' working with other local partners including health, police, the Local Authority, local charities, local universities and EYFS providers to ensure that schools have a local focus and are well informed of any opportunities to support their children and communities. Through dedicated monitoring and moderation, area-based development groups, triads and school improvement partner support, schools are used to visiting each other, opening their doors, and sharing best practice. Head teachers value this service highly, resulting in a learning-and-sharing educational culture across the city.

Developing a local area education strategy – Camden Learning

Building Back Stronger, Camden's Education Strategy to 2030, sets out a strong local vision and is a comprehensive roadmap designed to transform the educational landscape in Camden. It emphasises the importance of a fair start for every child, ensuring that no one is left behind. It also sets ambitious goals for creating an excellent school experience, which include all children reading by seven and an enrichment pledge. It aims to foster flourishing lives for all students in work, training or education. Led jointly by Camden Learning and Camden Council, but involving active engagement with schools and local communities, the strategy sets out an ambition based on excellence, equity, collaboration and exploration. It emphasises that a system which is better for disadvantaged children is better for everyone. Camden Learning offered the platform for meaningful engagement of all Camden schools and local communities in its inception and development. Building Back Stronger has now secured continued widespread commitment and has resulted in an approach that is widely owned by the schools and the council.

Key elements include building a strong place-based system, fostering collaboration among schools, and integrating support services to create a holistic approach to education. The strategy also highlights the importance of mental health and well-being, recognising the need for a more empathetic and inclusive educational environment. Using its unique position as both a limited company and a schools' company, with all Camden schools as active members, Camden Learning was commissioned as the delivery agent for the majority of the activity set out in the strategy. This has resulted in wide-ranging school-and practitioner-led activities to meet the ambitious goals set out in the strategy, including working together to create guidance for schools and parents on primary to secondary transition, and a comprehensive post-16 prospectus that incorporates the offer from all Camden secondary schools and wider post-16 providers.

Working with a local authority to develop a SEND manifesto – Learn Sheffield

Learn Sheffield has been commissioned by Sheffield City Council to support improvement in the experiences and outcomes of Sheffield children with additional needs. This commission includes both leading the development of the strategic approach and the delivery of some specific activities and reforms. The aim is to increase the number of children who have positive experiences and achieve good outcomes without requiring additional or different provision, at the same time as transforming the arrangements for identifying, assessing and meeting the needs of those who do.

Learn Sheffield sees these goals as connected and interdependent, and as the core ambitions of the strategy. Learn Sheffield is developing a local SEND manifesto in 2024/25. It is a public declaration of policy and aims, which everyone in the system needs to be able to hold each other to account for. Outcomes from this work will inform thinking about the strategic commissioning of universal, targeted and special education, health and care services.

Reading fluency programme – HFL (formerly Herts for Learning)

The HFL Reading Fluency Project in Hertfordshire was only possible because of the local and not-for-profit nature of HFL Education. The project was developed in response to the contracted commission from the local authority to support schools in crisis and traded support requests from schools, trusts and settings. The English team reviewed barriers to progress with reading and worked with local schools to trial an intervention based on international research. Reading was, at that time, a particular concern in primary schools in Hertfordshire. Over time, using focused investment from HFL's surplus, this evolved into an eight-week programme that could be used to improve outcomes yet run in all kinds of schools, whatever their reading scheme or phonics programme.

The programme supports effective fluency instruction through the considered implementation of six core strategies: modelled expert prosody; echo reading; repeated reading; text marking; performance reading; and modelling comprehension.

Pupils who take part in the Key Stage 2 (KS2) Reading Fluency Project make exceptional progress in a short space of time. In just 8 weeks, pupils make on average 1 year and 6 months progress in reading comprehension age and gain an increase in accuracy of 11 months. At KS4, pupils make on average 2 years 8 months progress in an 8-week period.

The impact this had on schools was profound and demonstrable. Given concerns about the 'gap' in attainment in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, the secondary team built on these principles to extend the programme, with similar outcomes. As a result of work with the local authority and other partnerships, a train-the-trainer sustainable model was developed for use beyond Hertfordshire. In total, over 550 schools and 5,000 pupils have taken part.

Partnerships create opportunities for teachers and staff to work together and plan together, both within and between schools. They offer targeted support programmes, networking opportunities, and formal professional development. They enable schools to collaborate and look outwards to learn. They can help to develop a local culture that focuses on learning and professional development, with the aim of developing the capacity of all school staff.

Partnerships co-ordinate capacity and expertise to work with schools to diagnose needs, broker and link schools to appropriate support and help to evaluate progress. Increasingly, this activity might be organised by school-based expertise and capacity accessed through learning clusters or networks.

Developing the primary curriculum – Haringey Education Partnership (HEP)

During consultation on the new Ofsted inspection framework in 2019, HEP invited Christine Counsell to speak to member schools about the deeper thinking that lay behind the changes and the renewed focus on curriculum. HEP formed a partnership with Christine and her co-author Steve Mastin, which led to the production of the Opening Worlds Key Stage 2 humanities curriculum. This has now been taken up by over 250 schools nationally and is growing rapidly. Its popularity has spread solely through word of mouth.

Opening Worlds is a knowledge-rich curriculum, built on careful vocabulary development, academic rigour, and carefully sequenced materials. This ensures it is both highly ambitious and highly inclusive for all students. It is the single biggest contributor to the improvement in reading and writing outcomes in Haringey since 2022, which have improved from the national to London averages for the past four years. Since then, HEP has worked with expert author Brenda Hayles to develop equivalent resources for the Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 science curriculum. These too have been taken up by HEP schools and another 75 schools beyond HEP across the country. HEP is now developing art and design resources with Adele Darlington, starting in Year 1 and developing through to Year 6, as well as guidance on the computing curriculum. HEP schools have access to these resources for free.

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Leadership development – Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP)

Birmingham is a large city with a significant number of school leaders new to headship or new to the city each year. Successful induction and early development training are recognised as critical for both impact and retention. To meet these aims, BEP has established two partnership approaches within an integrated system-led framework.

The first is a New to Headship programme, jointly delivered by BEP and the local authority. It provides a universal induction offer including factual webinars, mentoring, networking, and more in-depth leadership training through short 'thought pieces'. This programme ensures that all new headteachers receive early professional support.

A second tier of development is offered through the Reflective Development Leadership Programme, co-designed with the Trust Leaders' group. This programme, aimed at 20 new and aspiring leaders, comprises seven modules that support leadership development from an individual perspective. It provides tools for resilience and clarity through structured reflection. BEP's role as a neutral body in Birmingham's educational landscape has enabled strong collaboration across trusts and maintained schools, strengthening delivery and participation. A notable consequence of this work has been improved cohesion across the system.

Together, these approaches demonstrate BEP's role in fostering unification, cohesion and the development of a school-to-school support system. Its longevity in the city and position as a trusted neutral organisation enable BEP to create the platform for this crucial connectivity.

Local learning hubs – Camden Learning

Camden Learning funds several school-led learning hubs. Hubs complement the Camden Learning offer by developing a 'Learning Community of Practice' in a specialist area to improve pedagogy and effect change. Learning hubs are led by school staff and attended by schools of all characters. They develop a culture of collaborative working and are a core part of Camden Learning's approach to professional development, developing strong school-led networks of practice in specialist areas.

The school-led nature of hubs, removed from the local authority's statutory duties, ensures a focus on pedagogy, agility in activity and a genuine partnership between different types of schools. With each having around 20 school members, activities include meetings at a range of hub schools, visiting speakers on a range of topics, holding an open week to see practice in hub schools, sharing resources through a Padlet, also disseminating learning and resources to other Camden Learning member schools beyond the hub through sharing of learning and practice. This high level of mutual support and co-operation has led for example to the SEND hub supporting a coherent school offer for pupils with SEND and an environment where the level of achievement of pupils with SEND in Camden is higher than national averages and the level of exclusions is lower. The inclusive nature of Camden schools has been noted in successive Ofsted inspections.

Local education partnerships have been playing an important role in supporting local efforts at teacher development, supporting recruitment and retention and developing the next generation of school leaders. They bring schools together to improvelearning and education across the local area, broker connections and initiatives between schools, and build strong professional communities to create peer learning that focuses on the detail of practice and pedagogy. Their focus on local, place-based solutions enables them to support the development of the next generation of local leaders.

Sustainable leadership – Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP)

There is a rich leadership offer in Tower Hamlets, provided by THEP, which works across all schools and settings. It includes a two-year enhanced New Headteacher Support Programme, supported by local headteachers, who provide mentoring and coaching; peer review; a senior leader internship programme; and executive coaching for all headteachers. The High Performance Leadership Programme is a beacon programme. It provides headteachers with the opportunity to benefit from leadership thinking from a range of non-education contexts, from the London Air Ambulance to Google, from the Royal School of Music to the Football Association. Learning has focused on building high-performing teams, decision-making under pressure, and agile thinking. THEP has seen the direct impact on leadership teams in schools across the borough, where headteachers are embedding a more mature, collaborative and reflective approach to leadership.

THEP's peer review model is also notable for the scale at which it works. Two-thirds (over 65) of the schools in the local authority participate in this school- and peer-led driver of improvement. Leaders at all levels are involved and benefit from the experience within and beyond their own schools.

One of the tests of THEP's work in this field is the sustainability of strong leadership across the schools. While there are significant challenges nationally in appointing to headship positions, Tower Hamlets can rely on its pipeline of leaders, who have been developed through THEP's programmes and are committed to the borough because they already know and value the support they will receive once in post.

07

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Building inclusion

Local education partnerships continue to focus on their core business locally, supporting improvement and standards, and providing system coherence and local 'glue'. At the same time, they are broadening their offers and developing strong relationships with schools of all types to create the local collaborative capacity to respond to the biggest system challenges. Increasingly, they are also being commissioned by other public sector organisations, such as public health, to support health and well-being priorities in the local area or local task forces with funding to address challenges locally.

Local education partnerships have been broadening their work to focus on inclusion and enhance support for vulnerable learners. A number of partnerships have been commissioned by local authorities to provide support on important priorities such as SEND and developing inclusive practice in schools.

Partnership approach to nurture, commissioned by public health – SAfE

Schools Alliance for Excellence (SAfE), working with schools and with funding from the Surrey Mental Health Investment Fund, has partnered with national charity nurtureuk to deliver the Surrey Nurturing Schools Programme in 100 priority Surrey schools.

Nurture is a tried and tested way of relating to children that helps them develop vital social skills, confidence and self-esteem, and become ready to learn. The schools on the programme are a mixture of primary, secondary and specialist, both maintained and academies. There are four multi-academy trusts participating in the programme so that impact can be measured at a trust level.

Of the schools on the programme, 70% are located within three kilometres of what Surrey has identified as a 'key neighbourhood' (areas with the highest levels of deprivation). In addition, a high proportion those that were successful were selected based on the proportion of students with SEND and/or SEMH needs, and those with a high number of students from other groups that may be deemed vulnerable.

As a local education partnership SAfE has ensured that the project has widespread buy-in from schools and enabled the coordination and cohesion with other linked projects and support.

Inclusion and self-evaluation in Surrey – SAfE

Part of SAfE's work has focused on how to support schools in effective self-evaluation encouraging them to improve what they are doing rather than having to prove that what they are doing is effective. As part of a project through LocalED, SAfE developed the Surrey Inclusion Framework to support schools to engage in rich discussions around inclusion that leads to support rigorous and robust self-evaluation. This in turn helps clearly identify key areas for inclusive development based around a holistic understanding of whole school practices.

The Framework is interactive and sits on the Evaluate My School platform providing a clear visual overview on self-evaluation judgements. These can be visited, reviewed and revised across the academic year following discussions involving a range of stakeholders. Over 150 schools, including maintained and academy schools, have worked with the Framework in different ways and SAfE produced a guide to inclusive self-evaluation with associated case-studies explaining how other Surrey schools and trusts are using it. Self-evaluation is an ongoing process, and schools are encouraged not to see the Surrey Inclusion Framework as a project; it is a framework that can support continuous improvement year on year.

Local education partnerships are also broadening their offers to address new challenges for schools, settings and trusts. This includes work to eliminate economic exclusion in schools, and more active support for children and young people's mental health.

Eliminating economic exclusion – HFL Education

In Britain, almost one in three children are living in relative poverty and in 2023 almost a quarter of pupils were eligible for free school meals. Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) has been concerned about gaps in attainment, including between the outcomes of children from affluent families and children from families facing financial challenge. HFL Education has been developing a local authority/partnership response through a combined use of local funding and trading, made possible through the not-for-profit, local area based partnership model. The local authority paid for each maintained school to have two commissioned school visits from HFL advisers across two years, which focused on the school's ability to support families facing economic barriers.

As a result of the programme, the local authority was able to develop a shared, local authority-wide focus in schools based on local need. Schools received their own action plan, based on a specific area that they had chosen to pursue, but within a framework set by the local authority. HFL was able to work with the local authority to overcome generic barriers and share good practice in and between schools. For example, the HFL Closing the Gap Strategic Group reviewed outcomes from the exploratory visits and produced guides for all schools on writing an effective pupil premium strategy with exemplar materials.

This work was supplemented by traded events (a conference; some webinars on 'belonging') for those that wished to extend the theme further. Academies were able to access the visit programme by choice and many decided to do this, because of the local spotlight being drawn to this area. HFL funded a termly Eliminating Economic Exclusions newsletter, which was sent to all schools in Hertfordshire, regardless of status. The main outcomes to date have been a shared conversation between HFL, the local authority and schools about issues relating to disadvantage, and a combination of both high-level and individual school action based on research and practice in other schools.

Supporting mental health – Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP)

Birmingham Education Partnership has a longstanding history of driving improvement in whole-school approaches to mental health over the last 10 years. BEP is a partner in the Birmingham system, which includes working with multi-agency partners on the transformation of child and adult mental health services and the roll-out of the Mental Health Support Team in schools. Funding from the Mental Health Trust allows BEP to represent the voice of the education sector at the strategic table and also to bridge the divide between schools, mental health services and public health.

Work has changed over time, from initially raising awareness of mental health issues for young people and experimenting with the idea of a mental health lead in schools, to co-production with young people and understanding the need for a graduated response, to that now being part of Department for Education and NHS activity. In addition to work with schools on strategic mental health plans, the team emphasises and promotes the value of schools sharing through successful communities of practice. These also offer regular continuing professional development to key staff in schools and allow system partners to present practice. Recent successes have been the embedding of a school well-being census across Birmingham schools working with the University of Warwick, which provides not only reports on individual schools but also data on trends over time.

Measuring impact and improving schools

Local education partnerships review their impact in different ways. As schools-led membership organisations, their key indicators of success include membership levels and take-up of support or engagement in activities by schools and trusts. Membership levels across the partnerships featured in this publication range from 80% to 100% of all schools in a local area, with some also seeing an increase in the number of schools and trusts from outside their immediate local area using their services. Partnerships are looking closely at the views of their members about what is working well and where they could improve further by undertaking annual surveys or longer-term evaluations. The following case study illustrates one partnership's approach.

Annual review and membership survey – Haringey Education Partnership

Haringey Education Partnership (HEP) constantly seeks feedback on its work so that it can review and improve it. The annual feedback survey is a key indicator of HEP's performance with member schools and is scrutinised in detail by the Board of Directors. This is the fifth consecutive year HEP has asked headteachers and chairs of governors these questions about HEP, allowing comparisons over time. The survey asks the seven closed questions shown below, which are scored 1 to 10 to allow for quantitative analysis. Over 50% of member schools responded to the survey in 2024, with an overall rating of 9.0/10 across all responses.

To what extent do you feel: [2019-2024 scores]

1. HEP is focused on the issues that matter to your school? [8.1 -> 8.6/10]
2. HEP has made a significant positive difference in your school? [7.8 -> 8.9/10]
3. HEP acts with integrity and reflects the values you have for children and young people? [8.9 -> 9.4/10]
4. HEP supports a culture of high aspiration and shared responsibility between schools? [8.4 -> 9.1/10]
5. HEP keeps your school ahead of the curve through new ideas, innovation and partnerships? [8.0 -> 8.9/10]
6. HEP's offer as a whole represents value for money for your school? [7.9 -> 8.7/10]
7. You would be likely to recommend membership of HEP to another school? [8.8 -> 9.3/10]

Local education partnerships are regularly tracking evidence of the impact on individual schools, teachers and leaders of their school improvement support and specific professional or leadership development programmes. For example, one partnership pointed to the impact of their school improvement support for schools identified as 'most at risk': 88% of the schools that received more intensive support were judged as good at their next inspection (SAfE). Another partnership identified the impact they had seen after supporting schools that had been identified as 'at risk' following an ungraded inspection: 85% of these schools subsequently secured good or outstanding judgements (HFL). The case studies included in this publication include further examples of impact linked to the specific programmes and interventions.

Many partnerships are contracted by their local authorities to be the main source of support for schools causing concern. They are held to account not only in terms of schools causing concern but also in terms of their impact on the overall performance of their local education system, as measured by Ofsted outcomes and test and examination performance. These are also important metrics of partnerships' overall success in supporting the local system and in showing that their way of working with schools can deliver high standards and narrow performance gaps.

09

How education partnerships work

Most, but not all, local education partnerships are legal entities, usually a school company limited by guarantee or limited by shares, with schools as legal members. Local authorities can also be represented on the company board.

The funding for local education partnerships comes from a range of sources. Commissions from local authorities are common, but for many, the main sources of income are schools – as one-off, annual, or multi-year payments for a range of support. Other sources include payments for other traded services, commissions from other public sector organisations, and other grants or awards. Many local education partnerships have, and have had to, develop their financial model to rely less on income from local authorities – especially following the demise of the School Improvement Monitoring and Brokering Grant. For example, Haringey Education Partnership has reduced LA income as a proportion of turnover from 45% in 2019/20 to just 14% over the following five years.

Fundamentally, local education partnerships have to demonstrate clearly the value they offer to their schools. In a time of extremely stressed school budgets, partnerships need to respond to their schools' individual needs and provide a unique wider local benefit that cannot be replicated otherwise. Accountability to schools and local partners is very direct and immediate, and the consequences of failing to deliver will be felt financially very quickly.

Membership

Bolton Learning Partnership

Croydon Education Partnership

Ealing Learning Partnership

Harrow Education Partnership

Hillingdon Learning Partnership

Hounslow Education Partnership

Lambeth Schools Partnership

Leeds Learning Alliance

Leicester Primary Partnership

Lewisham Learning

Liverpool Learning Partnership

Milton Keynes Education Partnership

Newham Learning

Redbridge Education Partnership

Stratford School Academy

The Seven Kings Learning Partnership

VNET Education CIC (East Anglia)

West Northamptonshire Council

Steering Group

Birmingham Education Partnership

Camden Learning

Haringey Education Partnership

HFL Education (Hertfordshire)

Learn Sheffield

Tower Hamlets Education Partnership

Schools Alliance for Excellence (Surrey)

Acknowledgements

The AEPA Steering Group has provided invaluable guidance and support in shaping this work. Particular thanks go to:

Carole Bennett, Chief Executive, HFL

Stephen Betts, Chief Executive, Learn Sheffield

Maria Dawes, former Chief Executive, SAfE

Hana Emami, AEPA Co-ordinator/Programme Manager, Camden Learning

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