

**Next Practice in System Leadership – Barnsley**  
**Shaping the Future Conference, Barnsley, Thursday 1 February 2007**



**Background**

This paper reports on the key messages from a series of interviews with Headteachers and Governors from the borough of Barnsley during the course of the Shaping the Future conference, held at the Burntwood Court House in Barnsley on Thursday 1 February 2007. The conference was seen as an opportunity to capture the attitudes of local educational leaders about the borough's agenda for significant change.

'Remaking Learning' is a programme to transform lifelong learning in Barnsley, which underpins radical physical regeneration. It will, through Building Schools for the Future (BSF), create a network of full service Advanced Learning Centres (ALCs), extended Primary Learning Centres (PLCs) and Children's Centres. In two localities Strategic Boards will be established to test out a new approach to focusing the work of the centres – auditing need, engaging the community, securing commitment and brokering appropriate services. These reform initiatives are likely to require changes to current leadership and governance arrangements across schools and communities and the trial of new models and structures.

**What do Headteachers think about this vision?**

The interviews elicited responses from five Headteachers (of high schools and primary schools, as well as one school Governor), most of whom are leading schools earmarked for involvement in the BSF programme in its later stages. Interviewees were specifically asked for their responses to the vision outlined by

Edna Sutton (Executive Director of Education and Designate Director of Children's Services, Barnsley Borough Council) and Maggie Farrar (Strategic Director ECM, NCSL) at the conference. They were asked:

- to name the points from the morning's presentations which resonated for them in particular;
- to identify the key challenges that, from their points of view, would need to be met in order to realise the vision for Barnsley; and
- to comment on whether they felt changes to models of leadership and governance might be required to support the vision, and what form these might take.

This paper synthesises the interviewees' responses to the questions. It also weaves into this discussion feedback gathered in other conference sessions, specifically from the Next Practice in System Leadership workshop.

### **The Standards Plateau and the need for a new approach**

When asked which aspects of the morning's proceedings resonated with them most powerfully, Headteachers identified the Standards plateau and the struggle they currently have leading on both the Standards agenda and the ECM agenda (and the apparent tensions between the two agendas) as being key. Maggie's metaphor in which Headteachers were pictured as keeping a truck from slipping down a steep hill struck a clear chord. The description felt accurate to Headteachers and they were heartened to have the particular nature of their struggle publicly articulated. But this acknowledgement also filled some with a sense of unresolved frustration – What is the answer to moving on from this position?

Headteachers agreed with Edna's assessment that "Educational attainment has increased, but there is a widening gap" and corroborated this with their own experiences. Many described significant improvements in their own schools through the past few years, but also explained that these have indeed plateaued. The challenge had once been to get from "awful to adequate" – now it would be to move from "adequate to great" and to focus on building the foundations for a sustained, long-term improvement to provision.

Most recognised that the Barnsley vision means radical change, which all welcomed in theory. All felt it was 'time' for change and that the Standards agenda was no longer delivering desirable outcomes: "Why aren't standards rising? We've done everything – nothing has worked. It is time for a new approach." Others felt it would be difficult to realise the potential of the Barnsley vision while the Standards agenda remained in place:

*I feel uncomfortable about the Standards agenda – there is still too much emphasis on it. Standards are important, but not as important as everyone being the best they can be. Fulfilling potential is not the same as being ‘the best’.*

While enthused by the possibilities of the vision for Barnsley, Headteachers also voiced concerns about its relationship to broader national policy frameworks – they feel that these continue to pull them in contradictory directions.

### **Focus on ‘users’ – pupils, their families and the community**

By far the most important priority that resonated with interviewees was the need to focus more deeply on the project of engaging pupils, families and the wider community. Few felt they were currently doing this well. As one interviewee powerfully put it:

*We are steeped in the challenge of community involvement. Engaging families – has anyone ever cracked it?*

Headteachers spoke of a need to transform “the culture of learning” in their communities and to build expectations and aspirations. Many reiterated the significant challenge of shifting a prevailing attitude that “it doesn’t matter if I don’t succeed in school.” As one Headteacher explained:

*We need to change the idea that learning and school is of no consequence. We need, moreover, to change the attitudes of parents. The world has changed since they were at school, Barnsley has changed. They often say: “I didn’t do well at school and I did okay.” But that is not the norm.*

Two Headteachers reflected on recent positive experiences in attempting to forge closer relationships with children’s parents and carers, and home lives. Both emphasised Edna and Maggie’s point about the time and effort it takes to build effective relationships. As they explained:

*We must not forget the importance of building up relationships and the time this takes. Spreading the hope and building the relationships outside of school and making these links is a top priority. That there are no quick fixes and we are thinking of long term growth – that resonated.*

*You need to start very small. The first thing we did was open posts for parent mentors. This has grown into a role for a Family Support Worker. We have spent a long time trying to change the attitudes of parents and now it is possible to look back and see how closed the school had previously been to parents.*

Both interviewees implied that creativity and initiative (along with patience) were important to leadership in this area. There may be no formula for successfully engaging parents, as each community of parents, and what draws them into school, will be different. The same can be said for securing wider community engagement. Discussing ideas for connecting to key community members, one Headteacher commented that she was thinking of spending an evening networking in the local Working Men's Club.

Many interviewees were particularly persuaded – and 'inspired' and 'captivated' – by Maggie's point that children, parents and the wider community should be seen as assets and resources to work with, rather than as problems to be solved.

One interviewee (currently serving on the governing body of a school earmarked for imminent re-development as an ALC) demonstrated the point to which his thinking had reached. He was excited by the ALC idea because it seemed to offer a way for school to become a very different kind of place; one that students and their families would enjoy using regularly. He cited the example of what it might mean simply to open a state-of-the-art gym on a school site in terms of giving students and the wider community good reasons to visit and value a school:

*Maybe if there's something in it for parents – facilities that can be seen as common resources for the community – then families might buy-into the vision.*

In the Next Practice workshop, pupil, family and community engagement also surfaced as one of the most important challenges. There was a particular emphasis in the findings of this workshop on the importance of including all children and young people – and “not just the high performers” – in a vision for gaining their deeper engagement, participation and leadership. Strategies for engaging the vulnerable and at risk were listed as priorities. It was also suggested that children and young people be asked to play a role in leadership and governance.

### **Is the leadership we've got the leadership we need?**

All interviewees were asked specific questions about leadership and governance structures and whether they felt current models were likely to be able to support the vision for Barnsley. All felt that significant structural changes would need to be affected if the vision was to be made a reality and all expressed degrees of enthusiasm for this prospect – they feel a radical overhaul is the best and the only way forward.

Interestingly, however, the majority of interviewees did not name collaborative working or collaborative leadership amongst the most important messages they

received. Nonetheless, attitudes towards and experiences of collaborative leadership (both leadership across more than one school and leadership in a multi-agency context) were clearly evident in other parts of the interviews. Attitudes and experiences varied greatly between interviewees and these differences are discussed in the two sections below.

### **Belief in collaborative working – Leadership across more than one school?**

For some Headteachers, not naming collaborative working as a priority seemed to be because they already believe in its potential and are already taking steps towards building beyond-school leadership relationships. “I think it is clear,” one suggested, “that it takes more than a single Head to lead a school towards this vision.” At least two interviewees are pushing at the boundaries of their current leadership structures and are keen to move towards more collaborative leadership arrangements. Their concerns were about certain challenges and blockages that appeared before them along this path.

For example, one Headteacher of a high school is gearing up for a BSF makeover, but is unsure whether the proposed changes will be radical enough to make a difference. He would like the new build to support a vision of 3-19 education that includes primary schools in the locality, but the vision is currently for the redevelopment of a single school on a single site. The Headteacher feels strongly that a new leadership structure that functions across a group of schools would have numerous advantages – a continuum of provision would mean the opportunity to personalise learning options for children by allowing them to move at their own pace; staff could be flexibly deployed across schools, which would be great for their own professional development; and resources and accountability could be shared. He is concerned that BSF will, in this case, build a physical space that restricts rather than enables innovation. In the face of this prospect, he is keen to investigate what a hard federation might offer as a means of sharing leadership and provision across a group of local schools on different sites.

It is fair to say that everyone interviewed had an interest in a change towards collaborative leadership, but some looked upon this prospect as exciting, while others felt daunted. One Headteacher described his current role in sentiments that were echoed by others:

*I don't think anyone will do this role in the future. It is impossible to do this all yourself – there are enormous draws on the Headteacher's time. The role is changing, but sometimes it seems as though the job is simply getting bigger. Leadership and governance needs a major overhaul, but we seem only to be tinkering with change at the moment.*

While welcoming a vision which might require a radical reinvention of leadership structures, the Headteachers also felt that they had a difficult task ahead of them, one for which they felt under-prepared:

*I am aware of the challenges and feel the need for change, but I feel like I'm groping in the dark.*

Interviewees felt that one of the most difficult challenges for collaborative working would be to transform entrenched leadership behaviours. Some found the idea of Headteachers leading collaboratively across institutions laughable. The suggestion was that it would be hugely difficult to shift the mindset of some Headteachers away from thinking territorially and competitively. As one Headteacher described it:

*We need change and it will need to be radical. I can envisage a future in which 'families of schools' are overseen by a single board with shared accountability – there are the benefits of economies of scale and we can move more speedily in groups. But there is a fear of federation. For me the problem is that the CEO will always care more about their 'own' school.*

This sense of trepidation underscores Edna's point – not specifically identified by interviewees, but latent through so much of their discussion – that leaders would need to be willing to 'unlearn' practices before they could easily participate in the agenda for change.

### **Belief in collaborative working – The multi-agency context**

The prospect that schools and children's services will in future be working more closely together was certainly on the minds of Headteachers, but this was not something most interviewees regarded as an immediate priority. Most lead schools currently offer some form of extended provision or co-location of services, such as breakfast and after-school clubs, nurseries or child care facilities. Many spoke of a desire to further enhance these kinds of services, and some were looking ahead to becoming Extended Schools. However, the vision of "not separating learning from care" and the particulars of how this might be realised were not topics upon which Headteachers commented in depth. Most seemed to be at the point of believing that "Leadership needs to be building outwards from education" rather than the point at which specific multi-agency relationships had been brokered or new structures imagined.

One interviewee is directly grappling with what the idea of 'community leadership' as opposed to traditional 'school leadership' might entail. His school is in the midst of becoming an ALC, so debates about multi-agency working and the re-invention of leadership and governance structures are an immediate priority:

*We need to become better at multi-agency working, and to work at breaking down professional boundaries. Headteachers can no longer come into this role and be Headteachers in the traditional sense. They need to develop business savvy and to work with staff from non-educational backgrounds. There is a whole new set of skills that Headteachers will need to have to work in ALCs.*

### **Governance has also emerged as a key challenge:**

*If the community is our campus, what role does the governing body play? We are talking about combining schools with businesses and other agencies. I like the idea of a 'locality board' because governance will no longer be just about schools.*

Beyond the interviews, the challenge of multi-agency governance was also identified as key. Participants in the Next Practice workshop pointed to the 'problem' of governing bodies being school-centric and, therefore, something of a barrier to effective leadership of new learning centres. *We need a multi-agency governing body*, was a clear message; we need governing bodies to be *a joint group with a single identity rather than a school being supported by others*.

Those engaged in this discussion realise that reinventing the governing body may present huge challenges. School leaders and other leaders must construct a new view of "who and what we are." All must also be prepared to cede some of their traditional grounds for authority. The question was posed: *How do we get a common understanding and agree common areas of interest so that we do not see ourselves to be winners and losers?* Such questions go to the heart of the current challenges of the change agenda and emphasise, again, both the difficulty and the necessity of 'unlearning' professional practice.

### **Other issues around Governance**

The Headteachers interviewed raised a handful of other issues around governance. There was a notable level of support for the idea of change to governance protocols and structures into which it was possible to read, at times, a level of frustration with the ways things currently work. Several Headteachers commented that their boards never seemed to attract the people they feel the school needed to be well governed. They want to secure greater parental and community representation on governing bodies, but struggle to attract people. Further, parental and community representatives can lack crucial skills needed to work as an effective governor (such as being able to read budgets):

*How can we get more parents involved? And how might we help them to develop the skills they need to do the job?*

Headteachers feel that current governance arrangements are restrictive and prescriptive and they would like more freedom to reinvent the model and tailor it to the particular needs of the school and the community. Ideas for innovation included:

*Getting a professional element on board with a knowledge base that the school could draw upon and recruiting professional salaried governors who perhaps oversee a number of schools, equalising the inequalities faced by schools in lower socio-economic areas.*

Finally, a significant message from the Next Practice workshop was that a shift to a joint governance structure (which represented different schools and different agencies) should also mean a shift to joint accountability, and perhaps, pooled budgets. It was suggested that a framework for locality-based shared outcomes should be a key and logical part of the vision for reform.

### **Concluding remarks**

Some further points that surfaced in the interviews are worth mentioning in conclusion. There is a general feeling of excitement and possibility amongst educational leaders in Barnsley, and a willingness to commit to a long-term vision for change:

*“Change is too important this time to jump to a quick solution. We have the talent in Barnsley to make it happen.”*

There is also an optimism borne out of the signs of positive change already evident:

*“The transformation is already amazing in Barnsley. The community has changed and the sense of hope has changed. The new direction is breaking the cycle.”*

Along with firm expressions of support for Barnsley’s new direction, interviewees also identified some issues of concern or potential concern. Some Headteachers feel they and their schools are on the periphery of the action and that, “at our end the drive feels diluted.” Headteachers understand the wisdom of prioritising areas of greatest need and they look forward to learning from the PLCs and ALCs as they develop. It will be important, however, to find effective ways of sharing this learning and otherwise keeping the development of the vision alive across the borough so that it continues to feel inclusive.

One Headteacher also feels that a collaborative ethos is not working at all levels of the local authority. He feels that he is being given the freedom to be creative

and take risks by those who set the vision for Barnsley, but that the authority is also continuing to operate in a “controlling” manner at lower levels of engagement and that an “old-fashioned LA mentality” remains and “stifles creativity”.

The following people gave their time to be interviewed for this paper:

*Maureen Andrews (Headteacher, Doncaster Road Primary School)*

*Julie Brown (Deputy Headteacher, Wellgate Primary School and Designate Headteacher, Gawber Primary School)*

*Karol Grabowski (Headteacher, St Michael’s CE and Catholic High School)*

*Sarah Creighton (Headteacher, The Hill Primary School)*

*Rob Bowley (Headteacher, Hunningley Primary School)*

*Mick Tinch (Children’s Services Manager and Governor, Edward Sheerien High School).*