

Next Practice in System Leadership – Case Study

System Governance in Knowsley

Context for the Field Trial Site

Knowsley Local Authority in the north west of England is engaged in a long-term transformational programme of all its children's services, including education. Knowsley is the third most deprived borough in the country and has a history of innovation to offset the challenging circumstances it faces. Over the last five years, Knowsley has succeeded in raising standards in its secondary schools, doubling the number of young people achieving five A* - C at GCSE.

Underpinned by Building Schools for the Future, ten secondary schools in the authority will be closed and replaced in 2009/10 with seven Centres for Learning. Knowsley is seizing the opportunity this represents to introduce the step change they identify as required to raise achievement even further. The Centres for Learning will eventually become hubs for local community services, including education.

Knowsley's current secondary schools are:

- Brookfield High School
- Knowsley Hey School
- Ruffwood School
- Higher Side Community Comprehensive School
- Prescott School
- Halewood College
- Bowring Community Sports College
- St Edmund Arrowsmith Catholic High School,
- St Edmund of Canterbury Catholic High School
- All Saints Catholic High School

The Next Practice field trial focuses on processes surrounding the development of a system level model for governance of and for the learning centres.

Organisational structure underpinning Next Practice

The model that Knowsley is currently consulting around is a three-tiered system governance model involving multi agency representation, school, parent and community leaders, children and young people.

Each of these groups has opportunities to influence planning and decision-making relating to the redesign of governance, through existing forums, such as partnership boards, and through newly established focus groups. Schools councils are the mechanism through which pupils and young people can become involved.

During the period of transition, Knowsley is discussing the potential move from discrete governing bodies for each of the secondary schools to a locality-based model of seven temporary governing bodies. However, the final proposals for potential three-tier governance will be subject to formal consultation later this year.

The temporary governing bodies, along with members of the wider Children & Young Peoples Partnership, are a key strategy in the ongoing development and consultation work needed to secure widespread ownership of the restructuring to Centres for Learning and a complementary permanent model for governance. Knowsley is also exploring the option of semi professional governance, where some governors with specific expertise might be directly recruited and remunerated in some way for their contribution.

Leadership management & governance practices being developed

Systematic horizon scanning and enquiry processes have provided a secure and shared evidence base for discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of existing governance arrangements and possible future models. Knowsley commissioned two reports; one scoping and evaluating the range of governance models in the public sector and one a survey, analysis and interpretation of the views of existing governors. On this basis, the authority has successfully made official representations to the Cabinet and consulted amongst school leaders, governors and other stakeholders. The research findings have also provided a stimulus to discussions about possible future developments.

One of the issues that the enquiries highlighted was the need seriously to engage with a wider group of stakeholders, especially children and their families. Stakeholders identified this as a particular area of weakness in current arrangements. Knowsley's response has been proactively to seek out participation from the three key stakeholder groups that they identified; parents and carers, the wider community and pupils and young people, by mobilising existing forums such as school councils and partnership boards and by setting up new forums such as focus groups.

Of all the groups involved in the consultation, learning to work productively with governors themselves has presented Knowsley with one of its greatest challenges. Despite the survey of governors, there remained for some time a resistance to any change of the current arrangements from amongst some governors and headteachers. The project leaders understood this to be a protective behaviour springing from uncertainty about the effectiveness of possible future models for governance. They have tackled this head on with a range of engagement and development opportunities for governors and with the move to seven temporary governing bodies as an interim measure. The temporary groups will allow governors to rehearse some of the new ways of working and to take a more active part in designing the detail of the eventual model.

Impact; actual and predicted benefits

Knowsley's aim is to design a diverse and adaptive, high performing and accountable child-centred system of education that can readily adapt to the social and economic challenges of the 21st century. Specifically Knowsley aim to:

- adopt principles of 'deep' leadership and active governance;
- establish a robust and enduring cross sector partnership;
- end the traditional LA/School dynamic; and
- improve standards through support and collaboration.

Political sponsorship for the principles and strategy for system governance has been secured from council members. Widespread ownership and support amongst schools and the communities they serve is growing.

Emerging issues

Sustained and varied forms of communication are emerging as critical to the success of an ongoing and deep consultation like this. As the project has evolved, project leaders have learned that personalising their approach for different groups and sometimes different influential individuals is necessary to ensure that everyone both hears and understands messages in the ways they are intended. On their own sending out a newsletter or posting a message on a website, cannot secure the kind of engagement required to move serious consultation and co-development work forward.

Knowsley has learned too that, to be effective, such communication also needs to be two-way. Systematically listening to the concerns of individuals and groups of governors and school leaders provided the breakthrough they needed to really engage headteachers and governors, where invitations to drop in meetings and briefing sessions had previously failed. Although this approach was more labour intensive, involving a core group of officers visiting schools at times convenient to them, it produced results. Identifying and tapping into existing groups and structures within the authority has also proven to be a helpful tactic.

In a period of significant structural change within the overall authority, project leaders have found it important to stay abreast of developments that may be relevant to, but may not directly or immediately affect their own development work. Parallel redesign processes, taking place independent of one another can be wasteful and have the potential to undermine efforts to engage stakeholders if they start to perceive a lack of coherence in development activity.

Partnership working with the outside world places considerable demands on an organisation like a local authority to have effective internal partnership working or network arrangements too. Secure internal communications, so colleagues know who is working with whom in the wider community, can help to inspire confidence that decisions will stick and not be undone by another part of the organisation. This kind of cohesiveness also creates opportunities for synergy and efficiency – shared agendas and communications for instance.

Implications

The outcomes of this case study suggest that designers of new governance arrangements could usefully consider the following questions:

Who are the stakeholders in the process and its outcomes? How and how early can and should you actively involve them?

How will you communicate with each part of your stakeholder community? Are there existing groups and forums that you can access? Are you aware of any particularly influential groups or individuals? Who can help you to find out about this?

What are the other strands of development that you need to be aware of that might complement or conflict with your own. How will you connect with them and keep

them informed of what's happening in your project? What will you need to know from them?

How can research and enquiry provide you with an impartial perspective and convincing evidence on which to base your development work? How could you use research evidence and enquiry processes for consultation and ownership building?