

If we share the expertise, we all reap the benefits



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TODAY there is a major national debate on the role of local authorities with regard to the education process.

In 1996, I was appointed executive director for education at North Tyneside Council. I was ably supported by the lead member for lifelong learning who clearly positioned herself as a leader. As a new boy to local government, I heavily depended on the expertise of Pat Jefferson, Gill Alexander and Peter Parish, all with long experience and high expertise of working within local government.

Essentially, we harnessed the power of local government and key partners to support schools to be self-managing and self-directing, to create a new relationship with schools. We also wanted to demonstrate that we were a learning organisation, emphasising leadership as a key aspect. School failure was considered unacceptable.

Central to our thinking was the concept of a community of learning providers working together on ambitious targets for raising standards of attainment; improving attendance and reducing exclusions and for raising the attainment of looked after children. School representatives sat on new partnership boards for education, regeneration and social inclusion, for health, for crime and community safety as well for lifelong learning.

The Schools for the Future strategy was developed in partnership with the social services, adult education, the education business partnership, the Tyne and Wear Health Action Zone and the voluntary sector. There was a whole council approach to supporting school improvement. Other departments in the council added leverage to improving attainment in schools in the most disadvantaged areas by deploying complementary regeneration strategies to improve surrounding communities. Strategies were implemented to identify and remove surplus places (for instance through reorganisation from a three-tier to a two-tier system in some parts of the borough), thereby ensuring schools were financially viable.

One major development, probably because unusually I came from a headteacher background, was the substantial use of headteacher

secondments. We introduced the concept of school improvement partners, using the expertise of both headteachers and local authority officers, jointly to support and challenge schools. The improvement targets were monitored by steering groups comprising officers, inspectors, school representatives and key partners relevant to the individual priority area.

Headteachers, inspectors and local authority officers worked together to publish guidance materials on school improvement – the School Improvement Toolkit. Following a favourable review in the Times Educational Supplement, other local education authorities began using the materials. Building on the success of this, the local education authority was awarded, in 1998, a licence by Ofsted to run training courses for school managers on school self-review.

As a former headteacher, I had a particular concern that challenge and support from the local authority should be intelligent. Intelligent accountability essentially depends on the quality of data and information, including contextual information, which we apply. Critical to this was the establishment of a new data management team in 1998. The team produced data outlining the performance of schools relative to other schools. We then became one of the first LEAs to develop and pilot baseline assessment materials and have a baseline assessment scheme accredited by QCA.

As well as being challenged by Ofsted, there were termly reports to elected members in the Reference Group for Lifelong Learning, which supported and challenged our work. We were also held to account by the Select Committee for Lifelong Learning.

Headteachers accepted this level of challenge because they trusted the basis of the challenge and more importantly that support was also very much to the fore.

Annual assessment of school and LEA performance against national performance indicators were used to assist with the early identification of problems and the networking of good practice with statistical neighbours.

The council, therefore, became extremely successful in ensuring that

schools did not develop serious weaknesses or fall into the Ofsted special measures category. We operated strategies, which complied with the model of intervention in inverse proportion to success. Intervention strategies ranged from consultancy to support leadership and management to special projects to focus on weakness in literacy in school clusters.

As a learning organisation, which placed leadership at the centre, the council was determined to ensure that its elected members and officers were well trained and motivated to develop the key policy commitments. Inspectors had a rigorous training programme fully focused on school improvement and the vulnerable schools strategy in particular. Officers and elected members undertook joint leadership training so there was a shared understanding of the characteristics and behaviours of highly successful leaders.

Without doubt, we were innovative and had an influence beyond our borders. We established a regional leadership centre, which offered the latest national and international training programmes. The purpose of the centre was to promote excellence in leadership and management. The centre accessed a network of local and national expertise to promote training opportunities and drew on the latest international and national research.

Our Annual Standing Conference attracted some of the most significant educationalists across the UK and abroad, including Canada and the USA. Headteachers were invited to join the Council's training and development team.

Total quality management and organisational development were key elements in the training provision.

Working closely with a new established Centre for Advanced Industry, we used the latest technology to network mentoring training and research with schools and other local authorities.

By 1999, no school in North Tyneside had been found to require special measures. The overall standards in North Tyneside schools were high compared to its statistical neighbours and nationally.

In the same year, we were awarded Beacon Council Status for tackling school failure.

North Tyneside Council transformed education within the area by developing a new relationship with schools.

The question for local authorities over the next few years is how they will develop a new relationship with all education providers, including academies.

■ Les Walton CBE is chair of the Northern Education Trust.

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