

Peer review of Learn Sheffield May 2018

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Peer Review of Learn Sheffield

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1. Background

This report sets out the key findings from the peer review of Learn Sheffield held on 24 and 25 May 2018. The review team was led by Christine Gilbert, Chair, Camden Learning, and included Jon Abbey, Managing Director, Camden Learning, and Tim Boyes, CEO, Birmingham Education Partnership. The team was ably supported by Owen Rees, a senior officer from Camden Learning. The review had its origins in discussions between Christine Gilbert and Stephen Betts, the CEO of Learn Sheffield, at a meeting of the newly established Association of Education Partnerships.

In advance of the review, the team considered a range of key documentation, including much relating to Learn Sheffield's priorities, its commission from Sheffield City Council, its school improvement strategy, and a self-evaluation document put together by the CEO of Learn Sheffield. During the two days, the review team met with a number of stakeholders including headteachers and governors of Sheffield schools and academies, Board members, representatives of Sheffield City Council and Learn Sheffield staff. Christine Gilbert also attended the Governor Briefing meeting held on the evening of 25 May and, as part of her broader presentation, fed back some of the key findings to governors

The team wish to thank the staff of Learn Sheffield for their assistance with the review and thank those interviewed for their time.

2. Context for the review

2.1 Development of Learn Sheffield

Learn Sheffield is a not-for-profit school company owned jointly by Sheffield City Council (20%) and by the publicly funded schools and colleges of the city (80%). It is a company limited by guarantee. At the time of the review, the company was coming to the end of its third year of operation, having been formed in the summer of 2015. All 173 eligible settings in the city chose to become members of the company. The Council has been a key driver in establishing the partnership and ensuring it established itself well.

Learn Sheffield has two main sources of income: funds received from Sheffield City Council under its commission and income received from schools for services and products. Under the 3-year commission from 2015-18, Sheffield Learning has received £860,000 per year. The new commission from 2018-2021, reduces this figure to £320,000 per year, with additional, transitional funding of £185,000 over the three-year period. Income from schools was £140,000 in 2017-18.

Moving forward, Learn Sheffield aims to meet the funding gap through the introduction of a subscription offer and an increase in the services to schools. Nonetheless, the reduced funding available for intervention and support in schools categorised as 'at risk' represents a major challenge for the partnership. It also presents a risk in terms of positive inspection judgements from Ofsted on Sheffield schools and of pupil outcomes, with the consequent risk to Sheffield's place in the performance tables.

To date, Learn Sheffield's activities have had a fairly narrow focus on school improvement. This is because Sheffield's nine teaching schools are seen as primarily responsible for CPD and training. In April 2018, the council's Governance Service became part of Learn Sheffield. Given the importance of governors to school improvement, and indeed, to partnership working, this is a wise decision by the Council. From May 2018, a Data Protection Officer Service and a Communications Service will also be available from Learn Sheffield. Expanding and commercialising its offer is key to Learn Sheffield's strategy for growth.

2.2 Outcomes for Sheffield children and young people.

Overall, outcomes in Sheffield have improved during the lifetime of Learn Sheffield.

Inspection outcomes have seen the percentage of schools in Sheffield judged as Good or Outstanding by Ofsted increase by 7% overall, and the gap to the percentage nationally reduced by 2.2%; this continues the previous positive trend and is improving faster than the national average. However, the gap remains at 5.3% overall, with 15.9% of schools judged as Requiring Improvement or Inadequate, which compares unfavourably with the national average.

Pupil outcomes too have improved, in absolute terms, across the majority of national indicators since Learn Sheffield's inception. Sheffield also performs well when compared to other Core Cities or to its Statistical Neighbours, particularly at primary level. Against its Statistical Neighbours, it is above the median in 10 of 11 measures at primary level. The position at secondary is more mixed, with an above median Progress 8 score but with attainment measures at or below the median

While the majority of outcomes at primary are at or above national average, outcomes in Y1 Phonics, KS1 Reading attainment and KS2 Reading attainment remain below national averages. Reading gives access to the whole curriculum so these are serious weaknesses. These areas need to be identified clearly as key areas for development and action in the new three-year strategy.

At secondary level, Sheffield had a Progress 8 Score (0.01) and an Attainment 8 score above national averages (by 0.1), while reaching national the average for C+/4+ English & Maths. KS5 outcomes, measured by APS, were below the national average.

3. Key findings from of the peer review

3.1 Strategy and vision

- Learn Sheffield has an agreed vision and strategy, linked to clear priorities: school improvement, system culture, inclusion; workforce; readiness; enrichment. The strategy underpins all aspects of the partnership's work and is set out clearly and accessibly in a range of publications and on Learn Sheffield's website. The partnership understands its context well and its strategy reflects both local and national priorities. The strategy is now coming to the end of its three-year life and Learn Sheffield is undertaking a formal review as it draws up its new strategy. The review team recommends that the new strategy has a sharper focus on broadening the horizons of young people so that they are more confident and ambitious about the world of work and the many opportunities open to them. This should encompass careers education in schools.
- All schools chose to become members of Learn Sheffield when it was set up. Learn Sheffield has taken the unusual step of treating academies in exactly the same way as it does other schools so it does not, for example, charge them any more for services than maintained or voluntary schools. This approach is replicated in the localities where academies enjoy equal access to the funding available from Learn Sheffield. Schools themselves argued for this approach with one telling us, *'These are all Sheffield children, so they are all our children'*. Another described Learn Sheffield as a way of *'holding that vision of all Sheffield children and turning it into reality'*. A key consequence of this approach is a very inclusive and cohesive community of schools.
- We recognised strong pride in the city of Sheffield from all those we met and a collegial commitment to improving the lives of children and young people in Sheffield that went beyond individual schools. Most interviewees articulated both an emotional and a working commitment to the city and its children. As indicated above, the majority see Learn Sheffield as central to making that commitment a reality. One headteacher described Learn Sheffield as *'having consolidated us as a city'*. A key feature of this consolidation is the life and energy Learn Sheffield has built into Sheffield's geographical localities most of which now work well for primary schools. These localities had been established by the Council but there was consensus that Learn Sheffield had developed them so effectively over the last three years that primary headteachers, in particular, found them an invaluable base for collaboration. We understand that some of these locality clusters work more effectively than others but they have all identified their distinct local priorities and set out plans to address need and secure improvement. In terms of development, it would be valuable to see more of a link between Learn Sheffield's strategy and locality action plans.
- Learn Sheffield's vision is widely shared and its strategy and priorities are reflected in much of the practice under its aegis. However, most school leaders had difficulty in articulating clearly the vision or the priorities in the current strategy. Few could even remember Learn Sheffield's simple strapline *Improvement through partnerships*. Using a

common language helps build culture and greater ownership of specific priorities would ensure greater clarity about direction and the shared journey of improvement across Sheffield planned for the next three years. Engagement and consultation on the new strategy over the next few months provides a timely opportunity for securing greater shared ownership. This should also mean that the key features of the overarching strategy are more frequently picked up in the locality plans.

3.2 The quality of practice: general

- The quality of relationships between schools and Learn Sheffield is very good. Many people we spoke to referred to the excellent, collaborative culture that had developed over the last three years. Relationships are characterised by high levels of mutual respect and trust, with a culture that results in high levels of participation and engagement in both locality and central partnership activity.
- The Chief Executive of Learn Sheffield is a huge asset to the partnership. He is highly valued by schools and stakeholders alike. He is seen as visionary, deeply committed to the city, hardworking and as someone who listens hard to schools. The review team saw him as both rooted in Sheffield but as outward facing too; he is a founder member of the Association of Education partnerships. However, the partnership's dependence on the CEO was identified time and time again as an area of risk for Learn Sheffield. This dependence is not healthy and indeed, puts the sustainability of the partnership itself at risk. A recurring point for discussion raised by many stakeholders is the need to appoint a deputy or chief operating officer in Learn Sheffield to provide greater capacity and less reliance on the CEO for so many things.
- The Learn Sheffield central team is small and highly regarded. Both heads and governors commented on the excellent service received through governance briefings and the governor Training Package. The head of the service was described by governors as *'someone schools want to work with'*. Schools were positive too about members of the School Improvement Team. They were seen as highly supportive but challenging, as one head put it, *'in a constructive way'*. A number of schools highlighted that they received support over and above their agreed allocation and were concerned that the subscription model would stretch the team too far.
- It was noted that the age profile of many central staff has resulted in considerable part-time working within Learn Sheffield. Although this gave helpful flexibility, several heads and stakeholders identified the sustainability of this model as a concern and a risk. This underlines the need for some detailed thinking to be given to succession planning this coming year as well as further consideration about how Learn Sheffield's capacity might be expanded.
- The relationship with Huntingdon Research School was identified by a number of stakeholders as a strength of the partnership. In particular, it is seen as supporting Learn Sheffield in embedding and extending a culture of evidence-based practice.

3.3 Practice: school improvement

3.3.1 Intelligence gathering and analysis

Learn Sheffield has a mature and considered approach to the use of data. The excellent quality of the data analysis provided by the local authority's Data Service is considered invaluable. The impressive quality of its work was mentioned by schools, governors and indeed, Learn Sheffield staff themselves. This is an important resource which is put to good use in analysing performance within individual schools and across Sheffield.

Learn Sheffield's processes for categorisation are very strong, with high levels of school involvement. The processes for categorisation in primary schools – in which schools self-assess and are then challenged on that assessment by other heads in their locality - is innovative and was described by a headteacher as creating '*a strong sense of joint endeavour*'. Schools are remarkably open about sharing data and information and this indicates high levels of trust in each other. We heard specific examples from heads where they had challenged other heads in their locality, or been challenged themselves, about their RAG- rated self-assessments. It is unusual to see this level of peer challenge and a tribute to the way in which improvement work in these localities has been established. There is, for example, shared ownership of the criteria for categorisation which had been pulled together by heads themselves, led by Learn Sheffield.

Secondary schools do not see the localities as a source of school improvement for their work but they meet regularly with Learn Sheffield's CEO. However, most are equally open about the use of data and see peer challenge as very helpful to their development. They are categorised and challenged through a process of peer discussion these sessions were described as well thought through and carefully put together by Learn Sheffield. Participating schools found the detailed analysis and use of subject data in these secondary meetings particularly valuable. Secondary headteachers make considerable use of the benchmarked subject data in their own schools, describing it as a very powerful tool for use with heads of department.

The quality of relationships between Learn Sheffield staff and schools means that soft intelligence proves a helpful support in identifying strengths and weaknesses. This allows them to spot risk and broker support to pre-empt failure before problems become entrenched.

As Learn Sheffield moves to greater use of local system leaders to support school improvement in the next stage of its development, it will be important to develop an information system which records where expertise, skills and capacity sit locally. It has a very strong base on which to do this.

One of the innovations valued by schools is Learn Sheffield's growing expertise in horizon scanning. Heads pointed to leadership briefings as tremendously helpful in doing that for them.

3.3.2 Brokerage

Good intelligence gathering provides a secure base for professional knowledge and is essential for good brokerage, i.e. specifying and setting up the intervention or improvement programme. The design and construction of programmes of support to primary schools is undertaken at locality or partnership level. Packages are generally delivered by Learn Sheffield staff. There is scope to increase school-to-school support, with a need, as mentioned above, to identify outstanding practice and practitioners within the city so that this expertise can be effectively shared across the partnership. We recommend that outstanding practitioners be identified from within both maintained schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs). Further, Learn Sheffield should build on its current efforts to work with teaching schools to make full use of the opportunities they offer to support practice. Nine teaching schools is a large number even for an area as big as Sheffield and Learn Sheffield may wish to engage in detailed planning with a smaller number of them.

The secondary heads do not see localities as a source for school improvement. Those in MATS saw that as the base for their school improvement planning and activities though they still saw some value in being part of the Learn Sheffield community. A very practical benefit identified is the role Learn Sheffield has established for itself as an effective broker, when necessary, for the city's schools and academies with the Regional Schools Commissioner and others.

3.3.3 Development and improvement

As referenced above, for the primary sector, the locality is seen as the foundation for school improvement and development activities, with an Improvement board operating in each area. This is a key part of Learn Sheffield's model for improvement. The current commission from Sheffield Council has funded a number of 'support and challenge' days within a locality, with those schools categorised as red or amber receiving a larger entitlement. These days are well regarded by schools with some heads even telling the review team that they deliberately did not categorise themselves as green against the criteria as they wanted more days! Schools told us the support and challenge received through this process was a key factor behind the progress they had made, with one head telling us. *'The support and challenge process definitely got us to good'*.

Unlike most partnerships, Learn Sheffield does not have a large CPD programme. This is because this had been seen as the prerogative of the many teaching schools in Sheffield. However, more recently they have begun to see the importance of a core programme in supporting their school improvement work and have begun to run some central development sessions and conferences. A forthcoming conference, *Making Evidence Work in Schools*, is an example of the latter and the high calibre of the speakers was mentioned to us several times by different groups so there is clearly an appetite for central CPD. It is certainly important that teachers, in particular, have access to good centralised CPD and if Learn Sheffield is not offering this, it is important that they work closely with some of the teaching schools to provide it.

A number of interviewees commented that too often one support programme followed another with no clear assessment of impact. Several heads argued that Learn Sheffield could play a stronger role in assessing impact and initiating 'hard' conversations about performance. Several stakeholders, including headteachers, told us that there needed to be greater challenge of underperformance and more robust challenge to headteachers themselves.

As part of its new improvement strategy, Learn Sheffield should offer a clearer vision of its recommended approaches to curriculum and the improvement of teaching. This might well be best done in collaboration with local teaching schools and system leaders. Greater clarity would sharpen commissioning and brokerage of support to schools. For example, the review team was surprised by the absence of a view from Learn Sheffield about what constituted good programmes for reading, writing and numeracy and indeed, the curriculum more generally. The team felt Sheffield's poor performance in Phonics might be improved by greater knowledge about the different curricular models available and indeed, knowledge of their impact in Sheffield schools. Too often schools and localities came up with their own schemes rather than seeing what had worked well in a similar school in a different part of the city.

Partnerships have a key role in transferring knowledge, skills and good practice. Given the high quality of the data available, the review team felt more should be done across localities to identify strong performance in particular areas of the curriculum. Strong performance could be used to show what good looks like on the ground in Sheffield.

As part of its approach to improvement, Learn Sheffield could develop further by ensuring that ambition is built in more explicitly in relation to standards, as measured by pupil outcomes. The improvement in standards is encouraging but in its new strategy, Learn Sheffield should aim for outcomes above the national average.

3.4 Evaluation

While there is evidence of improvement in performance in Sheffield over the last three years, it is hard to attribute that entirely to the influence and activities of Learn Sheffield. However, the positive impact of Learn Sheffield on the development of the city's schools was identified by many stakeholders.

The review team endorse Learn Sheffield's intention to make evaluation a strong part of its new strategy. Currently, it undertakes routine monitoring and evaluation of student outcomes and progress and of Ofsted judgements of local schools. However, it can do more to capture:

- individual case studies of impact
- schools performing well against the odds in particular aspects or subjects
- the impact of locality plans
- the differential impact of locality plans across Sheffield
- the impact of the partnership itself.

The review team considered it would be timely to undertake a more general review of the effectiveness of the localities so findings might feed into the plans underpinning the new strategy. While the feedback about Learn Sheffield's approach to improvement in the localities was generally positive, there is scope to consider the extent of involvement in all localities and how it ensures that all localities are equally effective.

The review of the localities should consider the balance of responsibilities currently held by the localities and how they can be managed and supported. Sheffield City Council has delegated some responsibilities in SEND to the localities for special needs. The review team heard many concerns from schools about a lack of clarity around these responsibilities and a potential negative impact on inclusion provision within the city. The review team was not in a position to evaluate this. Nevertheless, concerns may well impact on the effectiveness of the school improvement work of the localities and this should be monitored by Learn Sheffield. More generally, there is also potential for Learn Sheffield to develop its work in inclusion and SEND.

4. Governance

As Learn Sheffield is a limited company, it has a properly constituted board of directors. The directors we spoke to were aware of their legal responsibilities. They demonstrated a shared understanding of the issues facing Learn Sheffield and ownership of the strategy for moving forward. They were understandably proud of all that had been achieved in the first three years of Learn Sheffield's life but were aware too of the considerable challenges before them.

The CEO felt held to account by the Board but also well supported.

The relationship with the Council is good and effective processes are in place for monitoring the commission. The review team endorses the Council's intention of building in more specific targets for particular aspects of its new commission with Learn Sheffield.

5. Resources

Learn Sheffield has managed the significant reduction in the resources supporting the Council commission very well indeed. It is very difficult to expect schools to pay for services they had been receiving 'free' for three years, yet schools in Sheffield are doing just that through their purchase of the Learn Sheffield Subscription Offer, 2018-2011. At the same time many heads described their commitment as a '*cautious commitment*'. One said, '*We have committed to what we want it to be*'. Schools do believe, however, that they can make the partnership what they want it to be.

As subscriptions from schools are so important to its survival, Learn Sheffield will need to ensure they do not become all-consuming. For many partnerships, resource pressures and the need to generate income risk causing them to lose sight of their core purpose. Learn Sheffield must take care to retain its current focus must remain on increasing aspirations and outcomes locally.

Given the tightness of resources, it is inevitable that Learn Sheffield must function with a small central team. As indicated earlier, the partnership's reliance on the current CEO for a wide range of functions is a huge risk which must be addressed sooner rather than later. Learn Sheffield's Board is aware of this risk and the review team recommends that succession planning becomes a top priority now.

6. Key Recommendations

Learn Sheffield is a thriving local area partnership which is working collaboratively and effectively to improve outcomes for children and young people in Sheffield. Supported by a commission from Sheffield City Council, it has established a strong partnership over the last three years to improve outcomes for local children and young people. It now faces the challenge of a much smaller commission from the Council but the extent of school sign-up to its subscription offer from 2018-21 reflects a strong commitment to the partnership and a desire from schools to make it work for the benefit of the education community.

We recommend that Learn Sheffield builds on its many strengths by:

6.1 Strengthening its vision and new strategy with:

- a more explicit and ambitious focus on higher standards
- an emphasis on curriculum
- an objective relating to building knowledge, understanding and confidence about the many different opportunities available post 16 in education, training or the world of work.

6.2 Building and strengthening system leadership across Sheffield by using strong practitioners from maintained and voluntary schools, from MATs and from Teaching Schools to support improvement.

This also has the added advantage of reducing reliance on the small central team within Learn Sheffield.

Learn Sheffield should also consider how it might develop its strategy for attracting and developing Black and Minority Ethnic leaders, including governors, within Sheffield.

6.3 Giving a harder edge to its intervention model, particularly through more robust challenge in the localities so poor progress and performance are not allowed to run on too long.

6.4 Doing more to demonstrate progress and impact through:

- greater use of metrics and targets
- forensic analysis of progress and performance within and across localities
- use of case studies of impact
- evaluation of the partnership itself.

6.5 Producing a strategy for financial sustainability.

This should ensure that the activities funded by the new subscription are delivered robustly but do not become all-consuming. However, a clear commercial strategy is needed identifying additional services and products, all related to core purpose, that might generate revenue.