

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LEARN SHEFFIELD

2015-2023



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This brief history of Learn Sheffield document is one of the supporting documents for the Learn Sheffield Independent Evaluation 2015-2023.



Introduction

Learn Sheffield has carried out an evaluation of its work across the eight years since it was incorporated in the summer of 2015. This impact review has involved our team, board, members and stakeholders. We have also worked with a number of external colleagues to ensure that this work provides objective and informative learning for our city, our organisation and for place-based education partnerships across the country.

The [Learn Sheffield Independent Evaluation 2015-2023](#) can be found on the Learn Sheffield website and this brief history of the organisation is one of the supporting documents for this work. It has been developed as part of the evidence base for the evaluation.



What is Learn Sheffield?

Learn Sheffield is a not-for-profit company. It is limited by guarantee, of which 80% is owned by Sheffield's schools and colleges and 20% by Sheffield City Council (SCC). It is a School Company and is governed by the [School Companies Regulations \(2002\)](#).

Any publicly funded Sheffield school, academy or college can join Learn Sheffield, and those settings will own an equal share of eighty percent of the company. All eligible Sheffield settings have chosen to be a member of Learn Sheffield.

The governance of Learn Sheffield is via a Board of Directors. Nominated Directors must be currently employed by an organisation which is a member within the sector from which they have been nominated. The membership of the [Learn Sheffield Board](#) includes:

- Two Directors who are nominated by the primary education sector
- Two Directors who are nominated by the secondary education sector
- One Director who is nominated by the special education sector
- One Director who is nominated by the further education sector
- Two Directors who are nominated by Sheffield City Council
- Up to four Directors who are co-opted by the Board.

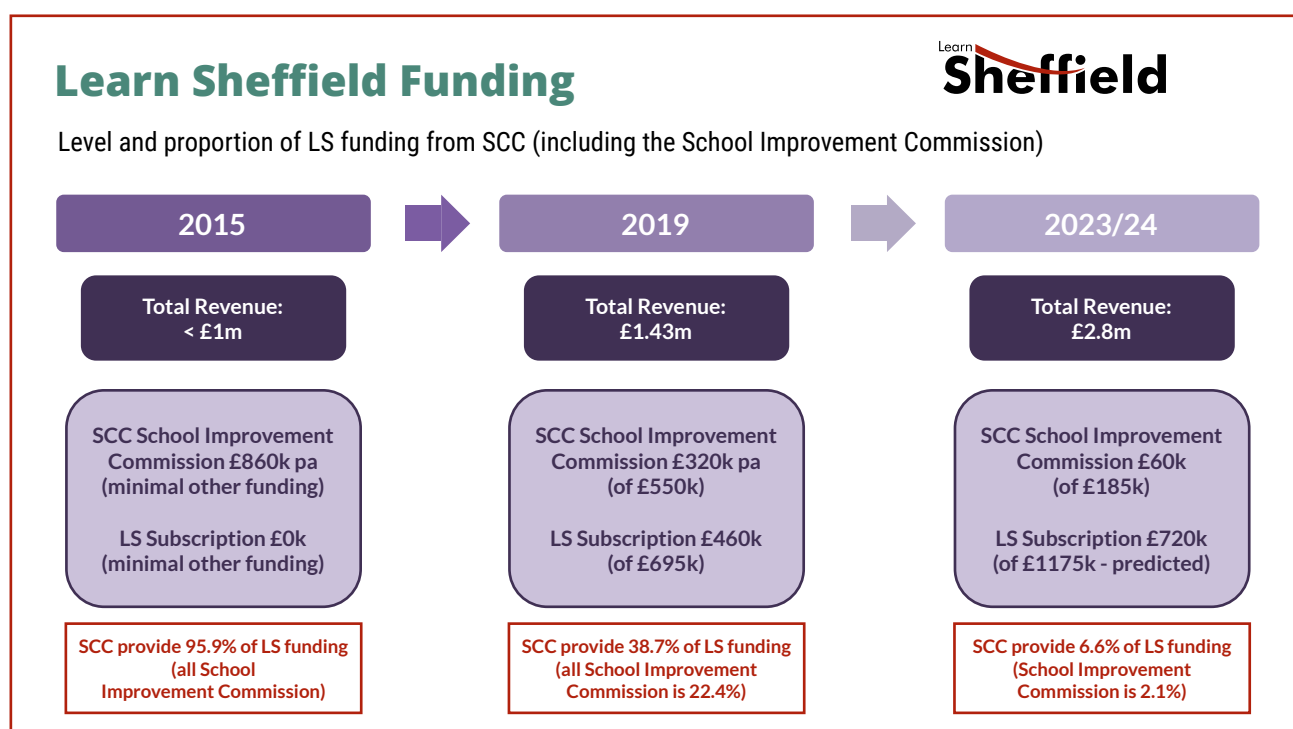
The Learn Sheffield team is here to provide expertise and opportunities for our city, alongside our education settings, to improve the life chances of every child and young person in Sheffield. Our motto 'By Sheffield. For Sheffield. In Collaboration.' reflects this.

Learn Sheffield is one of the leading place-based, sector-led school improvement partnerships in the country. Our funding comes from commissioned and traded school improvement plus a wide range of funded projects. This has developed over the time since Learn Sheffield was incorporated and this paper seeks to document the learning from the first eight years of Learn Sheffield's history.

What does Learn Sheffield do?

The core business of Learn Sheffield is school improvement. This currently includes both commissioned and traded activity, although the proportions of each have changed significantly between 2015 and 2023.

The graphic below shows how this has developed during the eight years that Learn Sheffield has existed. In 2015, School Improvement Commission funding from SCC accounted for almost 96% of our funding. By 2019, this had reduced significantly to 22.4% (although the total funding from SCC had extended beyond the School Improvement Commission to represent almost 40%). In 2023, the SCC commission has reduced further and is now only 2.1% of Learn Sheffield income and all funding from SCC (including this commission) accounts for only 6.6% of income.



Later in this document there are a number of sections which provide a specific focus on key aspects of Learn Sheffield’s activity, including SCC commissions, the subscription and our project work. In this section, below, we have summarised each significant area of income and activity that Learn Sheffield has delivered between 2015 and 2023:

- Commissioned school improvement
- Traded school improvement- Learn Sheffield subscription
- Other traded school improvement activity
- Project work.

Commissioned school improvement

Page 10 contains a more detailed breakdown of the four SCC School Improvement Commissions that have been, or are currently being, delivered by Learn Sheffield.

The current commission (which is valued at £60k per annum for two years) includes four areas of work: Primary SATs monitoring, primary SATs moderation, maintained school headteacher recruitment, supporting Ofsted inspections and speaking to inspectors. These activities are commissioned to Learn Sheffield due to the specific expertise within the Learn Sheffield Improvement Partner (LSIP) team.

The previous commissions included additional activities and had correspondingly larger values.

The first SCC School Improvement Commission (2015-2018) was valued at £860k per annum for three years. This commission included developing and delivering a categorisation system for the city, supporting the infrastructure of partnership groups and providing targeted support for schools with identified needs.

The second and third SCC commissions (2018-2023) were valued at £320k per annum for three years and then a further two years. These commissions continued the activity above but recognised the declining funding available to SCC. Maintained schools were a focus for Learn Sheffield, given the available funding, but resources were used to support academies when appropriate.

Traded school improvement – Learn Sheffield subscription

Page 12 contains a more detailed breakdown of the Learn Sheffield subscription offer, including the specific proportion of the city's settings who have subscribed.

The vast majority of Sheffield schools, academies and colleges work with Learn Sheffield through our subscription packages. This offer includes days of support from our LSIP team, plus a wide range of training opportunities.

The Learn Sheffield offer has developed year on year, but the structure of the subscription has remained consistent. The offer can be accessed by an individual setting or a group of settings (ie. a multi-academy trust) but the cost is calculated at a setting level with the combination of a core cost and a per-pupil amount. The inclusion of a per-pupil element was decided by school leaders in the development of the first subscription package to reflect the ethos that all settings had a responsibility to each other and therefore should contribute differently according to their size.

In recent years the offer has included different packages, each with a different core cost, dependent on the number of days of LSIP support being purchased. Detailed information about the 2023/24 offer can be found on the Learn Sheffield website: <https://learnsheffield.co.uk/Services/Subscription-Offer>

Our Strategic Leadership courses were new for 2023/24. These courses can be accessed through the subscription or purchased separately. Each course is delivered over a series of sessions and led by our specialist partner in that aspect of strategic leadership.



Other traded school improvement activity

In the early years of Learn Sheffield, two additional school improvement activities were developed: [governance and clerking services](#) (which were initially commissioned and then transitioned to Learn Sheffield) and a GDPR service (which was developed in response to new legislation).

The development of our governance service has been a significant factor in the success of Learn Sheffield, both in terms of strategic impact and financial sustainability. Our team of governance professionals offer support and advice, training and clerking packages. More information about the impact of this work can be found in our [Questionnaire Responses](#) document.

Learn Sheffield has also generated income from additional ad hoc school improvement activity. This has included both activities which are based on areas of specific expertise (for example e-learning, RSHE and website compliance) and aspects of our core school improvement work delivered outside Sheffield.

Having a base which includes the capacity to host meetings and training and provide a space for collaboration for the sector has been a significant factor in the development of Learn Sheffield. We were originally based on the site of Newfield Secondary and Talbot Special schools. Our original building had previously been a City Learning Centre and provided office space, meeting and training rooms. In August 2020, Learn Sheffield moved out of the Newfield building to allow it to be utilised for specialist school provision and relocated to our current base at Albion House, which has similar facilities.

Project work

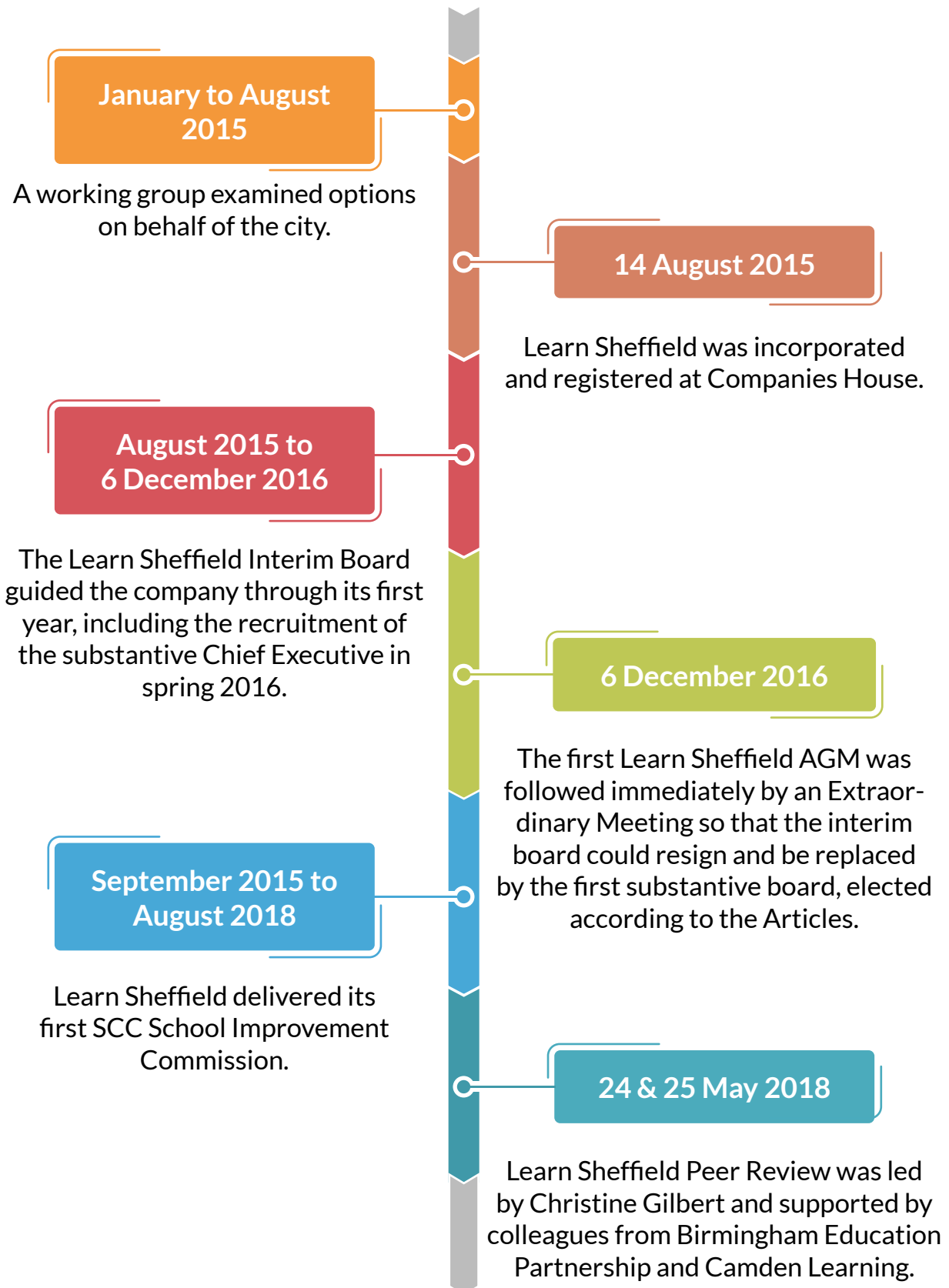
Increasingly, during the life of Learn Sheffield, our income has been generated by project work. As the graphic on page 5 demonstrates, in 2023/24, approximately half of our revenue will come from school improvement and the rest from other activities. Our largest current project is the DfE SAFE Taskforce, which is a DfE initiative to remove the impact of serious youth violence on young people, and more information can be found about this and other project work on page 11.

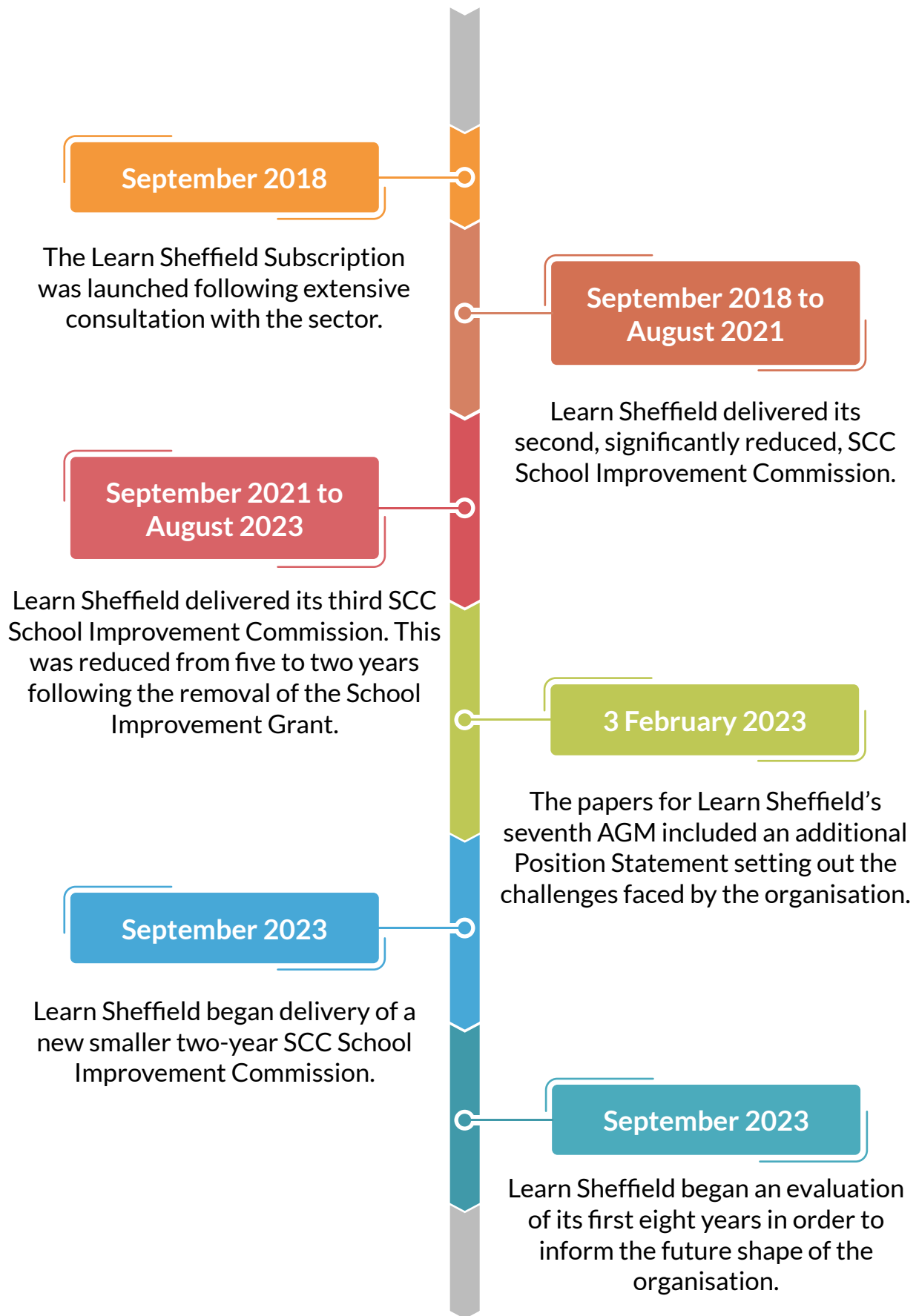
We work with a range of partners to deliver projects for the city. The partners and projects information on the Learn Sheffield website includes a number of examples, including those below.

Eat Smart Sheffield	→	Racial Equity	→	Developing Healthy Attitudes	→
Sheffield SAFE Taskforce	→	Climate Emergency	→	Sheffield Strategic Partnership	→
Educating for the Future	→	Governance Engagement	→	Learn Sheffield Evaluation	→

This includes projects funded by Sheffield Public Health (Eat Smart Sheffield), South Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit (Developing Healthy Attitudes) and both local and national pilot projects.

What have been the key moments in the history of Learn Sheffield?





FOCUS: School Improvement Commission (from September 2015)

The four SCC School Improvement Commissions below have been mentioned earlier in this document and were included in the timeline on the previous two pages. The sequence of commissions has reflected the changing educational landscape both nationally and locally, with the size and scope of the activity and the funding reducing over time.

September 2015 to August 2018

Learn Sheffield delivered its first SCC School Improvement Commission for three years and received £860k per annum. The distinguishing feature of this commission, beyond its size, was the expectation that support would be targeted to schools in need. Learn Sheffield developed its approach to the categorisation of schools and academies in order to fulfil this commission and this, with the school's self-evaluation central to the approach, was innovative.

2018 to August 2021

Learn Sheffield delivered its second, significantly reduced at £320k per annum, SCC School Improvement Commission for a further three years. This commission began just after the Peer Review and coincided with the introduction of the Learn Sheffield subscription. This fundamentally changed the distribution of school improvement activity by ensuring that the improvement partner team was now visiting almost all schools and academies through the traded offer.

September 2021 to August 2023

Learn Sheffield delivered its third SCC School Improvement Commission for two years. This continued at a level of £320k per annum. The commission was reduced from five to two years following the removal of the School Improvement Grant and coincided with a period of reduced alignment between Learn Sheffield and SCC (as described in the [Position Statement](#) of January 2023).



September 2023 to August 2025

Learn Sheffield began delivery of a new smaller two-year SCC School Improvement Commission in September 2023. At the time of the position statement, it was expected that the commission would finish in August 2023. It was eventually determined that Learn Sheffield should continue to deliver a reduced commission of £60k per annum to support specific areas (monitoring, moderation, recruitment and inspection) where the Learn Sheffield team contained colleagues with the necessary knowledge and experience.

The future shape of commissioned school improvement is uncertain at the time of undertaking this evaluation. The current government has been clear that school improvement is a traded activity but we have entered what is likely to be an election year. The education landscape continues to develop, as more schools join MATs, and this also generates new school improvement demands. Changes to the civic landscape, with the development of regional mayoral roles, may also have an impact.



FOCUS: Learn Sheffield Peer Review (May 2018)

The last wide-ranging review of Learn Sheffield, prior to this evaluation, was a Peer Review led by Dame Christine Gilbert on 24 and 25 May 2018. [The Peer Review report](#) sets out the key findings and more information can be found on our [website](#).

The review team was led by Christine Gilbert, Chair of Camden Learning, and included Jon Abbey, Managing Director, Camden Learning, and Tim Boyes, CEO of Birmingham Education Partnership, with support from Owen Rees, a senior officer from Camden Learning. Learn Sheffield, and all of the organisations involved, are founding members of the [Association of Education Partnerships](#).

“We were highly impressed by the terrific work that is happening in Sheffield. The approach of Learn Sheffield, particularly given the size and stature of the city, makes it a standard bearer for partnerships everywhere. The very high level of engagement from schools is testimony to the inclusive approach that has been developed. The City Council, the education sector and everyone involved in Learn Sheffield should be very proud of what they have achieved to date and excited about the platform they have for the future.”

~ Christine Gilbert

In advance of the review, the team considered a range of key documents, 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. Over the two day period 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 held on the evening of 25 May 2018 and, as part of her broader presentation, fed back some of the key findings to governors.





The key report findings and recommendations are listed below.

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:

- *Strengthening its vision and new strategy*
- *Building and strengthening system leadership across Sheffield*
- *Giving a harder edge to its intervention model*
- *Doing more to demonstrate progress and impact*
- *Producing a strategy for financial sustainability.*

The external colleagues who have worked on the [2023 evaluation](#) have used the Peer Review as a significant piece of the evidence base covering the first three years of Learn Sheffield. When we consider the future shape of Learn Sheffield, we will reflect on how and when the organisation evaluates its performance.

FOCUS: Learn Sheffield Subscription (from September 2018)

At the time of the Learn Sheffield Peer Review, the new subscription had been designed and shared with Sheffield school leaders, ahead of its launch in September 2018.

The level of subscription since it was launched is below. The proportion of settings who have subscribed has remained extremely consistent, ranging from 87.4% to 91.2%.

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Primary (inc. nursery)	90.6%	88.3%	87.6%	87.9%	90.5%	89.1%
Secondary (inc. FE)	81.3%	83.9%	81.8%	88.3%	90.6%	75.8%
Special	100%	100%	100%	83.3%	100%	100%
OVERALL	89.6%	88.3%	87.4%	87.9%	91.2%	87.5%

When we consider the future shape of Learn Sheffield, we will reflect on the structure of the subscription. The need for a more flexible offer, which enables settings and organisations to access the activities they require in a more targeted way has been explored as part of this evaluation.



FOCUS:

Learn Sheffield Project Work

As outlined on page 7 (and in the diagram on page 5), the proportion of Learn Sheffield's income generated by project work has grown significantly over the past eight years.

We have provided more information about three current projects below, to exemplify this aspect of Learn Sheffield's work.

DFE SAFE Taskforce

The DfE SAFE Taskforce, which is a DfE initiative to remove the impact of serious youth violence on young people, is our largest current project. It brings over £1m per annum into Sheffield for three years to support mentorship interventions with young people who are at risk of involvement with serious violence. As the lead partner locally, Learn Sheffield has facilitated the development of a taskforce containing school leaders and other civic stakeholders. This project capitalises on the strengths of Learn Sheffield as a vehicle for the city and also models approaches to national policy that could be applied more widely to other areas.

Eat Smart Sheffield

The Eat Smart Sheffield project is funded by Sheffield Public Health to develop and deliver a whole school and setting approach to food and nutrition. This five-year programme focusses on encouraging and supporting pupils, their families and the wider community to adopt healthier lifestyles. It capitalises on the connectivity of Learn Sheffield, with the sector and other partners. It has also enabled us to understand the value of having dedicated staff supporting a project and based within Learn Sheffield.

Developing Healthy Attitudes

The Developing Healthy Attitudes project is funded by the South Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit. This project has a number of areas and outcomes, including developments to the RSHE curriculum and the student wellbeing resource. It is a good example of developing a commission that builds upon previous activity. Developing Healthy Attitudes also includes activities that seeks to support the education system with challenging issues. The report into Young People's Experience of Sexual Harassment and the development of risk assessment resources to support settings to successfully recruit speakers with lived experience address issues that no setting or organisation could feasibly do alone.

What has changed across the last eight years?

Number of children and young people

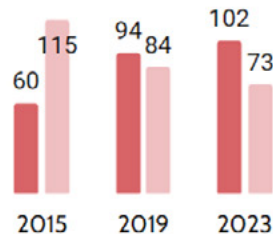
↑ 8%

The number of children and young people aged 5-16 has increased 8% from 73k to 79k between 2015/16 and 2022/23.

There are an additional 500 children in special schools, an increase of 55%.

+500

Setting numbers and types



There were 175 school and academy settings in September 2023; 58% of these were academies or free schools compared to 34% in 2015.

● Academy & Free
● Maintained

Disadvantage

31% of 5-16 year-olds were eligible for the pupil premium in 2015/16. This increased to 35% by 2022/23.

31% → 35%

This equates to around 5,000 more pupils eligible for pupil premium in 2022/23 compared to 2015/16.

Additional needs

The number of pupils whose first language is not English has increased by over 6,000 (44%) between 2015/16 and 2022/23.

+6,000

+72%

There has been a 72% increase in the number of young people with an Education Health & Care Plan since 2015/16

Learn Sheffield funding

Revenue & operating reserve ratio (%)

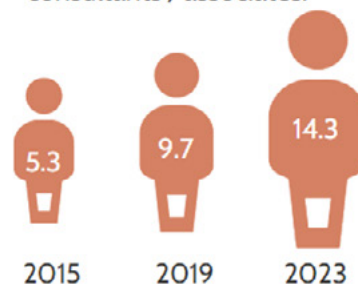


Learn Sheffield's total income has increased from just under £1 million in 2015 to nearly £3 million in 2023.

The operating reserve ratio has increased to 9.5% (target 25%).

Learn Sheffield staffing

In 2015, Learn Sheffield had 6 employees (5.3 FTE). By 2023, Learn Sheffield had 17 employees (14.3 FTE) and ~30 casual / consultants / associates.



REFLECTION: Learn Sheffield as a place-based education partnership

Learn Sheffield is a very different organisation today than it was in September 2015. It has grown and developed significantly during this period, whilst responding to the many changes that have occurred in the education and civic landscape in which we operate.

This brief history document, in many ways, is describing the evolution of Learn Sheffield as a place-based education partnership. The reflections below, in the form of questions and answers, reflect on the complex challenges that have evolved over the past eight years. The answers below, which share our understanding of these challenges, have informed many of the choices described in this document.

How was Learn Sheffield originally formed?

The formation of Learn Sheffield followed the recommendation of a working group. The group was convened by Sheffield City Council in partnership with the education sector partnership chairs, each of which nominated school leaders from their sector to support the work. The working group was convened in the autumn term of 2014 and met through the spring and summer terms of 2015 to consider whether there was merit in continuing to work as a city and, if so, what form this should take. The working group was chaired by the current CEO, who was a primary headteacher in the city at the time. Recommendations were taken back to the wider sector partnerships in the summer of 2015 and SCC took the [decision at a meeting of the Co-operative Executive](#) to form a School Company on 22 July 2015. Learn Sheffield was incorporated as a Schools Company on 14 August 2015. Every publicly funded school or college in the city had the option to become a member and all chose to do so during 2015/16.

What were the key drivers to the formation of Learn Sheffield?

The working group which designed Learn Sheffield had explored how school improvement could work in an education landscape which included both maintained schools and academies. The organisation was launched with a school improvement commission from SCC, which included the duty to categorise settings and provide support and challenge to any setting which was vulnerable. School improvement was at the heart of Learn Sheffield from conception and the decision not to initially move other school facing services into the company meant that school improvement was the identity of the organisation.

The other key driver was the shared belief that sector-led improvement was more effective. This was reinforced by a complicated relationship between SCC and the sector. The period immediately prior to the formation of Learn Sheffield had seen a move in the

direction of sector-led improvement and the formation of a City-Wide Learning Body. The period before this had seen the city respond to poor outcomes through a command-and-control approach. The toxicity of the relationships from this period was a factor in many of the decisions taken by Learn Sheffield in its early period, to ensure that the new organisation was identified as separate and independent from SCC even though it was the source of its funding.

What is the purpose of Learn Sheffield?

Learn Sheffield has been reflecting on its purpose in recent months in order to re-write our **purpose, vision and values**. Our purpose, to enhance the life chances of children and young people in Sheffield, has been consistent. We are now, however, much clearer about the way that our education partnership works with and through our member settings to achieve this by: providing high quality school improvement support for Sheffield settings, leading collaboration within and beyond our education sector and being the 'glue' in the education system of our city.

The most striking thing about this new statement is how fundamentally different it is from the previous version, written in the autumn of 2015. At that time, the statement was framed from a civic perspective rather than the current version which locates an organisation within a more complex landscape.

Whilst statements of this kind have limited value, this change reflects real and significant changes during the time that Learn Sheffield has been in existence. Some of these changes reflect an organisation becoming more mature but several reflect fundamental changes in the education landscape.

How does Learn Sheffield support and challenge settings to improve?

The answer to this question has evolved and changed during the past eight years. In one sense the answer has remained consistent; Learn Sheffield employs a team of highly qualified improvement partners who work directly with schools to support and challenge them and support their leaders to improve the education provided to their community. The framework in which this occurs, however, has changed substantially during the time that Learn Sheffield has been in existence.

In the first three years, the SCC commission was a high proportion of the organisation's revenue and the delivery of a commission which was targeted to vulnerable schools was the core business of Learn Sheffield. In this period the model had two defining characteristics; a categorisation process drove decisions about resource allocation and funding through locality and sector partnerships ensured that collective universal support was provided to the system.

As the level of funding declined and the traded income from the subscription exceeded the commissioned income, from 2018 onwards, the model became more complex. More activity was directed by schools and academies themselves, as customers, and less funding was targeted according to vulnerability. Learn Sheffield has become accustomed to managing the potential tension between commissioned work and commercial need.

This change was amplified by academisation, as the proportion of maintained Sheffield settings declined, but not caused by it directly. The change was driven by government policy, which considers school improvement to be a traded activity rather than a civic one, but the impact of this was felt in the way that school improvement was delivered. In the Sheffield model, school improvement activity can only have an impact if settings choose to engage with it. Engagement is usually traded in our model, but even when the opportunity is cost free the culture means that engagement is driven by the choices that settings make.

What difference does the proportion of academies in a place make to its school improvement vehicle?

The Learn Sheffield model was deliberately designed to support all Sheffield settings. Whilst some of the commissioned school improvement applies directly to maintained schools, the approach sought to minimise differences in how schools and academies were approached. As the proportion of academies has grown and the number of MATs has developed, systems have been developed to enable each organisation to engage in the model with an approach that makes sense for their context. Traded school improvement, through the subscription model, has also been developed to enable MATs to engage.

The majority of Sheffield settings are now academies and this does, however, make a difference to the type of school improvement model that can operate effectively. When Learn Sheffield works closely with other education partnerships, differences in approach to school improvement can most often be attributed to the balance of maintained and academy settings in each place. Where a significant proportion (in our case the majority) of settings are part of a MAT the offer must be sufficiently flexible that settings can engage without duplication of activities. Because MATs are not all designed in the same way, and have different resources and offers to their academies, this means that different offers are often required.

Although engagement in the Learn Sheffield subscription remains high (87.5% of settings currently subscribed in 2023/24), we will remodel our offer from September 2024. This is based on our understanding that an 'all encompassing' subscription is not sufficiently flexible to continue to work in the current landscape.

What is the value of Learn Sheffield to the city?

The principal value of Learn Sheffield to the city stems from the role that it has alongside the education sector, particularly in relation to school improvement. This value is based on the quality of expertise that we can make available to Sheffield settings and the level of strategic coordination that we bring to the city. The value of a school improvement infrastructure or architecture should not be underestimated. When we have supported other areas this is often a key difference, and this is also recognised by our leaders and stakeholders in their [questionnaire responses](#). The existence of an infra-structure of partnership meetings, events and communications provides the basis for the implementation of school improvement strategy and activity.

Learn Sheffield also provides considerable added value to the city. It enables the education sector to connect strategically to other sectors, using the infrastructure and capacity to support opportunities for Sheffield schools, academies and colleges. Beyond this, the existence of Learn Sheffield as a vehicle enables a range of projects to be accessed efficiently by Sheffield settings. Some of these projects are developed by Learn Sheffield in response to the strategic needs of the city, but others are curated and accessed more effectively because of the capacity provided to the system. The graphic on page 5 of this document shows that Learn Sheffield will spend almost £3m in 2023/24, of which circa £1.2m will come from the sector and less than £200k will come from SCC. The existence of the Learn Sheffield vehicle enables many opportunities for Sheffield settings that would either not be available or which would be less coherent.





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of which 80% is owned by schools and colleges and 20% by Sheffield City Council.