

Learn
Sheffield



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Learn Sheffield Position Statement January 2023

LEARN SHEFFIELD AGM

THURSDAY 9TH FEBRUARY 2023



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This Position Statement should be read alongside the 2021/22 Annual Report to Shareholders as a paper for the Annual General Meeting on Thursday 9 February 2023. The papers for this meeting can be found on the Learn Sheffield website under the [AGM 2023](#) tab.

The statement has been produced to support the wider discussions about the next phase of Learn Sheffield's development, in light of the Sheffield City Council School Improvement commission to Learn Sheffield coming to an end in August 2023. Learn Sheffield has organised additional workshop events, in the run up to the AGM, to provide additional opportunities for discussion.

This document seeks to provide an overview of the issues outlined below in the contents. The executive summary is intended to function as a stand-alone document, with the greater detail following for colleagues who would like more detailed information.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learn Sheffield is a successful school's company with a strong moral purpose. It is valued by Sheffield settings, as the level of subscription demonstrates, and has had a positive impact on the city, as Sheffield's strongest ever Ofsted outcomes indicate.

Over the past seven and a half years Learn Sheffield has grown as a company. We have developed greater capacity and also a clearer strategic understanding of how to provide both support and challenge most effectively. This document outlines the strength of the Learn Sheffield team and our clear understanding of the role that we play in strategic school improvement. The quality of the supportive scrutiny that we provide, working alongside leaders collaboratively, enables our settings to self-evaluate accurately and implement well-designed improvement plans effectively to meet their priorities for children's learning and wellbeing.

The Sheffield City Council (SCC) School Improvement commission ends in August 2023 and this makes next year the beginning of a new phase in the development of Learn Sheffield. This position statement has been written to inform our discussions about our strategic direction with our member schools and academies. It acknowledges frankly that the relationship with SCC has changed fundamentally – partly through Government funding changes and partly because of a significant difference in ethos and approach between Learn Sheffield and the Council about how best to support and challenge further improvements in our schools. Therefore, we will not be delivering the SCC commission from September 2023 and have made strategic choices to be more independent from the council and to diversify our income, while remaining committed to wider strategic partnership. The statement sets out how we intend to grow as an organisation without diminishing our identity or values.

The change in relationship with the Education and Skills portfolio within SCC goes beyond the end of the commission and this is also outlined in this document. Changes in the national funding position would have brought the commission into question whatever the relationship, but the increasing divergence in ethos between us makes it unlikely that Learn Sheffield could deliver key aspects of the commission on behalf of SCC.

The implications of the commission ending are significant for the sector and it is essential that settings have clarity about what will continue and how it will be delivered from September 2023. This document provides an overview of this and we also anticipate that this will form an important part of the workshops that we are hosting this half term.

The loss of the commission is financially challenging, but not business critical for Learn Sheffield and this document sets this out in greater detail. Having already begun to develop new income streams, Learn Sheffield currently needs to close a gap of around £150k in the 2023/24 budget to manage the change without a reduction in capacity. Through careful financial management, we have reserves that will allow us to return to a balanced in-year position over two years if necessary.

The final section of this document sets out the plans that we are developing in order to address this financial challenge. These include activities that develop our existing work and the introduction of new services which address the challenges faced by the sector, including on Early Years and SEND. We recognise that the changes make Learn Sheffield's role more straight forward in many ways. Our strategic planning now relates only to how we can provide the services and projects which support Sheffield settings, without the need to provide a bridge between the sector and the LA.

We are confident that our track record and quality provides the platform for Learn Sheffield to manage this latest challenge and step forward confidently into this next phase of our development. We are excited by the possibilities and look forward to building our next strategic plan alongside Sheffield leaders.

INTRODUCTION

Learn Sheffield is a small but successful not-for-profit Schools Company owned by the schools and colleges of Sheffield alongside Sheffield City Council. It is not unusual for organisations of our size to reach 'cross-road' points with reasonable frequency, as funding sources and strategic objectives change and new approaches are required.

This is the third time that Learn Sheffield has reached such a position. The first was at the point of formation in 2015, when it was unclear how many settings would choose to join. The second was in 2018 when the SCC Commission significantly reduced and the proportion of settings who would sign up to our subscription offer was unknown. We successfully navigated both of these turning points.

The end of the SCC commission in August 2023 is financially and strategically challenging but not business critical for Learn Sheffield. As these challenges represent our third 'cross-roads' moment we have produced this position statement to inform our discussions with members and stakeholders about our next steps and future strategic direction.

We will reflect upon city and company performance and our perspective on the features of effective school improvement in 2023, to establish our context. We will consider the wider relationship with SCC and the implications of the end of the commission, including the financial impact on Learn Sheffield. Finally, we will consider the resources that Learn Sheffield has to offer to the sector as the basis for considering the future planning and strategic approach for Learn Sheffield in the next phase of its development.

We hope that this document will support the kind of active and productive engagement with our members that has been so important to the growth of Learn Sheffield, especially at significant moments in our short history. In this way we will further develop our shared analysis of our performance challenges and ensure that Learn Sheffield's future strategic approach is focussed upon these priorities.



CITY AND COMPANY PERFORMANCE

Learn Sheffield has a strong school improvement track record and this provides a platform for the future success of the company, both commercially and strategically. School improvement services are our core activity and have grown and developed over the past seven years. The quality of our team is central to our offer (see page 12) and the strength of our subscription offer underpins both our commercial and strategic offer.

The scale of engagement with Learn Sheffield is impressive (Directors Report p13) and this has been accompanied by an upward trend in the levels of service that have been purchased. In the current school year (2022/23) 91.2% of settings have subscribed, with around a quarter of those purchasing a larger package than they had in previous years.

Our understanding of how Learn Sheffield will work as an integral part of an increasingly MAT led landscape is based on experience rather than conjecture, and our 2023/24 subscription offer will evolve to reflect this learning. This is outlined in the final section of this document, which explores our future planning.

Learn Sheffield has worked closely with the sector and SCC over the past seven years to significantly improve outcomes in the city. Given the challenging funding position of the city historically, the levels of collaboration and quality of strategic approach have underpinned those improvements.

During this period the proportion of good or better schools in Sheffield has improved by more than 12 percentage points relative to national (moving from 11.6% below national to 0.5% above national at the end of the 2021/22 academic year). This would suggest that the quality of education available to Sheffield children and young people is currently the strongest that it has ever been.

Over the same period, pupil outcomes had also improved before falling back in 2022. These improvements were characterised by gaps to national averages reducing (although generally not closing completely), LA and core city rankings improving and out-performing deprivation (child poverty rankings) consistently.

In 2019, Sheffield's LA ranking out-performed our deprivation ranking in all but one of the nineteen measures in our EYFS-KS5 dashboard (Directors' Report p12). Sheffield was in the top three core cities for each of the four most important end of key stage measures in each of the three years before the Covid pandemic (2017-2019).

Key Stage 4 and 5 headline measures were at or above national and found in the second quartile of LA rankings during this period. Early Years and Key Stage 2 headline measure were just below national and found in the third quartile. All measures were above the deprivation ranking and significantly better than they had been historically, when the majority of measures were found in the bottom quartile of LA rankings.

The latest Sheffield school and pupil outcomes are included in the Director's Report (pages 11-12). Our 2022 outcomes present us with a dichotomy, with school inspection outcomes the strongest that they have ever been while pupil outcomes have declined disappointingly. Establishing a clear understanding of this and developing a collective approach to addressing priorities will be our focus as all of the data becomes available in the early part of 2023.

STRATEGIC SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN THE CURRENT EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

The education landscape today is very different to the one that Learn Sheffield emerged into in 2015. Whilst the development of MATs has always been a feature, the proportions have shifted to the point where a model designed for individual settings and then adapted for MATs is no longer the optimum approach.

Our 2023/24 subscription offer will change to reflect this, with a more flexible offer that enables an individual setting or a MAT to build the package that they require.

This will ensure that we continue to provide established services to Sheffield settings (irrespective of whether their academy or LA maintained status) whilst developing the offer to support settings to meet the challenges that they and the city are facing.

Learn Sheffield's strategic approach to school improvement has also developed across the past seven years. This has been informed by our analysis of our impact, including both successes and failures. As an organisation, all of our work is informed by the beliefs below.

Learn Sheffield's guiding principles:

- **The starting point for effective leadership is accurate self-evaluation**
a setting with an accurate self-evaluation is likely to improve and one without it is likely to decline from whatever starting point.
- **External eyes are crucial to accurate self-evaluation**
both school leaders and leaders from within a MAT cease to be external eyes quickly and the risks of 'marking our own homework' are considerable.
- **The impact of external eyes is maximised when activities are carried out alongside colleagues rather than 'done to' them**
each evaluation activity is a development opportunity and working together accelerates the process of identifying next steps and makes successful implementation more likely.
- **A setting can only be improved from the inside**
those with responsibility for the improvement must ensure that sufficient capacity exists to drive improvement effectively.
- **External eyes can support accurate self-evaluation but also support leaders to determine how to prioritise and plan for improvement**
this process is most effective when a shared understanding of context and quality has been developed between those involved.

The optimum circumstance occurs when external eyes come alongside an established relationship and understanding of context, with the flexibility to call upon the right specific skills set for each required evaluation or enquiry. Learn Sheffield continues to develop our capacity so that Sheffield settings can access consistent and high-quality support, with the ability to use different colleagues for specific activities.

THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCC AND LEARN SHEFFIELD

SCC and Learn Sheffield have historically worked closely together to support schools. This was built on frequent and open communication, which ensured that the approach to schools was based on a shared understanding and ethos about how best to support and challenge improvement in schools.


This had many benefits, but particularly ensured effective dialogue between the sector and the LA. The facilitating role of Learn Sheffield enabled this to happen on sensitive and difficult issues, underpinned by mutual trust.

In the summer of 2021, SCC and Learn Sheffield agreed a five-year extension to the School Improvement commission alongside a commitment to funding programmes that had been developed as part of a Sheffield Education Strategy.

However, the relationship changed throughout 2021/22, as regular meetings stopped and SCC began to grow its own education team rather than rely on the capacity of Learn Sheffield. The change reflected a fundamental difference in approach to supporting further improvement in our schools and a breakdown in communication.

This was further complicated by the government's decision to withdraw the School Improvement Grant, which would have been challenging anyway. The removal of the grant would probably have led to the commission being reduced or removed whatever the wider working relationship.

At the current time, the lack of alignment in ethos between Learn Sheffield and the Education and Skills portfolio in SCC would make it inappropriate for Learn Sheffield to provide some elements of the commission on half of SCC.



We ... remain committed to working with civic leaders where it is in the interests of Sheffield schools and the children and families they serve.

Learn Sheffield has accepted that strategically SCC no longer wishes to maintain a close relationship on school improvement and education. This brings into question the basis of the relationship, that Learn Sheffield is a Schools Company with SCC as the supervising authority and member.

Our view is that the potential of the partnership remains unchanged and so, providing Learn Sheffield's Articles can be amended to be fit for purpose for both sides currently, Learn Sheffield should remain as a Schools Company. We hope to return to a position of effective strategic partnership and remain committed to working with civic leaders where it is in the interests of Sheffield schools and the children and families they serve.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SCC COMMISSION TO LEARN SHEFFIELD ENDING

The SCC commission to Learn Sheffield regarding the delivery of statutory duties will end in August 2023. A brief overview of how the commission is currently used can be found in the Directors’ Report (page 14).

Each of the elements on the right will need to be considered separately, as each has different implications for SCC and the sector, in particular the maintained sector.

SCC will need to determine which activities it wishes to continue to deliver (noting that some are statutory) and then determine how to approach delivering them.

Some of this activity has been designed locally and therefore

could be discontinued. The universal support (partnership groups) above, which seeks to support our education infrastructure, is an example of this. SCC will need to consider whether to invest in sector partnership groups, and if so whether it has the capacity to provide this following the end of the commission.

Other activity, including the statutory elements, could be modified to reduce the cost of delivery. This might include narrowing the offer to maintained schools in some instances or modifying the delivery to reduce the cost. In each instance SCC will need to consider the capacity and expertise required.

It will be important for SCC to work closely with the sector to ensure that there is clarity ahead of the new approach in September 2023. The sector will be concerned that provision continues without a delay but also that the offer is of a high quality.

School based colleagues will be acutely aware that speaking to an inspector during an Ofsted inspection, providing accurate monitoring information or advice and supporting governors in the recruitment of a headteacher are all areas where the quality of the support can have significant impact.

The government is clear that school improvement is now a traded activity and Learn Sheffield is well placed to provide that support to Sheffield settings. We are also very clear that the culture of support and challenge has a significant impact on provision in the city.

The reduction in government funding necessitates change but does not make it inevitable that the education culture of the city has to change as well. Learn Sheffield will do what it can to support a smooth transition and will always retain a collaborative approach to our work. We do also need to be clear that we will not always be able to mitigate the gaps that are created if SCC does not make appropriate provision or continues to take a different strategic approach to school improvement.

Maintained Sector Support	Core package of support for all maintained schools (purchasing the core component of the Learn Sheffield subscription - £750 per school)
Targeted School Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeted support following categorisation Additional support for schools causing concern Statutory moderation SATs and phonics monitoring Headteacher recruitment Ofsted inspection - speaking to inspectors and attending feedback
Universal Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitation of sector partnership groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary (steering and full partnership) - organisation and support Special & IR (steering and full partnership) - organisation and support Primary (PLP and PIB) - organisation and support Primary (7 localities) - attendance and support

THE FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THESE CHANGES FOR LEARN SHEFFIELD

The latest financial performance of Learn Sheffield is set out on page 10 of the Directors Report and in the 2021/22 audited accounts. A fourth successive year with a small trading surplus has led to a trading reserve of just over £80k by the end of 2021/22. This represents our strongest balance sheet position so far and we project that the trading reserve will exceed £100k by August 2023.

Whilst this reserve remains below our target, it nonetheless provides some scope to under-write the transition to new funding streams during 2023/24. We intend to continue to balance our budgets and deliver a trading surplus, but if we need to take two years to regain a positive in-year trading position, we do have reserves to draw upon if required.

The end of the SCC commission in August 2023 presents a financial challenge to Learn Sheffield. The loss of the commission (circa £320k) is likely to be accompanied by the loss of wider SCC funding. This could take the loss to more than £500k but we await confirmation of this at the time of writing.

The financial implications of the commission ending are significant, but they are not business critical.

Naturally, some of this income can be offset by spending that will no longer be needed if we are no longer fulfilling the commissioned activity, whilst some of our expenditure is fixed and will remain. Our working assumption is that the funding gap will be in the region of £300k per year from the 2023/24 academic year onwards.

We have been working on our growth plan for almost a year and the changes we have made already will offset almost half of this projected loss. This has come through an increase in our school improvement work, involvement in two significant violence reduction projects and the first phase of an expenditure review.

Learn Sheffield is currently developing a small number of new projects, some of which are outlined in the final section of this document. Our target is for the income from these new projects to exceed £150k per year from the 2023/24 academic year onwards.

If this can be achieved, then we are likely to break even in the first year after the commission ends. If not, then we can draw upon some of our reserve to bridge the gap in the first year to give us two years to return to an in-year trading surplus position.

As we said earlier in this document, the financial implications of the commission ending are significant, but they are not business critical. Learn Sheffield is well placed to navigate these changes successfully, as we have before alongside our members. We are excited by the opportunities and possibilities that are ahead, and the impact that our new work strands can have.

LEARN SHEFFIELD'S CAPACITY AND RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The Learn Sheffield team has grown significantly over the past eighteen months, as partly described in the Directors' Report (page 16). These changes have provided the company with the capacity to support the next phase of our development.

Further recruitment is likely in the months ahead to ensure that Learn Sheffield has the right resources to support our range of future projects. This will include new colleagues with specific skills that match the priorities that we share with our members.

The school improvement team remains central to our planning and the quality of this team is key to the credibility of Learn Sheffield and to the impact that we can make on the quality of education in the city.

The recruitment of Jean Watt (Director of School Improvement) and Nick Whittaker (LSIP – SEND /Special Sector) added significant additional capacity to an already strong team in 2021/22. They have been joined by two more colleagues in the current school year, with Michele Costello and Sarah Hubbard both joining Learn Sheffield from HMI.

This team includes:

- Colleagues with extensive knowledge of the city, its context and its leaders.
- Colleagues with specific expertise across primary, secondary and special and in specific areas such as safeguarding, assessment and moderation.
- 5 colleagues who have previously worked for HMI (including former Senior HMI and national leads for SEND and English).
- 4 colleagues who are currently inspecting.
- Associate team members with nationally regarded expertise – for example in SEND and Pupil Premium.

The team has the capacity to provide more than 1100 school days of support per year. This is enabling Learn Sheffield to expand its work outside the city whilst still retaining the resources to deliver on our commitments to Sheffield schools, academies and colleges.

Learn Sheffield's resources to support the sector are also reinforced by its strong national relationships and profile. Our ongoing relationships with highly regarded organisations and individuals directly impact on the opportunities for those involved in leadership and governance in Sheffield.

This also extends to Learn Sheffield's internal governance and development. Sir David Carter continues to act as the Learn Sheffield Board Advisor and has, alongside Dame Christine Gilbert, provided personal mentorship to leaders within the organisation.

Learn Sheffield will continue to bring together the best local and national capacity to work with Sheffield settings, their leaders and those involved in governance. This approach will continue to drive and shape our subscription but also, using what we have learned from previous programmes, support us in addressing our collective priorities.

LEARN SHEFFIELD'S FUTURE PLANNING AND STRATEGIC APPROACH

We have described the challenges that Learn Sheffield faces in the year ahead. Whilst we recognise these challenges, we are also very aware that the end of the commission makes Learn Sheffield's strategic direction more straight forward.

Our future role will be to continue to support our member schools and colleges. We will work with stakeholders, including SCC, when it is helpful to do so in order to achieve the priorities we have identified with the sector.

Learn Sheffield's work with the sector will continue to include offering high quality services, including the development of new services in some of the areas where gaps have been identified. It will also continue to involve projects and programmes which seek to address the key strategic priorities that we have identified alongside the sector.

Learn Sheffield believes that school improvement activities are most successful when they are clearly linked to shared priorities. When this happens colleagues can make more effective links between their own improvement plan and the opportunities on offer.

Similarly, as outlined earlier, our understanding of how Learn Sheffield will work as an integral part of an increasingly MAT led landscape is also based on experience. We believe that MAT collaboration works best when it is facilitated by an external (but connected) organisation. Learn Sheffield will enable local MATs to collaborate in a wide number of ways, including school improvement projects, peer review, recruitment and trading of resources, research and collective purchasing or employment.

As with all improvement activities, MAT partnership requires a strong collaborative culture and high levels of trust to be effective. The role of Learn Sheffield in supporting and developing this infrastructure will be crucial and all activity will be set within the framework of a strategic vision and moral commitment to the city.


The development of Learn Sheffield's offer in relation to MATs will not come at the expense of maintained schools or single academies. Our collaborative approach will continue to include all aspects of the Sheffield landscape, including groups and partnerships which contain settings with a range of different governance.

Some of our activities, including within those outlined below, will be new but our ethos and approach will continue to build on everything that has gone before within Learn Sheffield. We will develop this alongside the sector as we further develop our shared analysis of our performance challenges. Our current plans include:

- **Reshaped subscription** with flexible access to a wider menu of school improvement options.
- **Growth in our school improvement activity outside Sheffield** with local partners, non-Sheffield based MATs and individual schools within the region. This will include a growth in our school improvement activity online.
- **A renewed focus on leadership at all levels** to support a stronger pipeline of leaders as well as supporting leaders to be effective in their roles.
- **Growth in our school improvement activity online** to also include those outside our region.
- **Governance services** including a new focus on the pipeline of governors and trustees.
- The addition of **Early Years expertise** to our LSIP team and our subscription offer.

- **Further development of our SEND offer** to develop (non-statutory) services which support schools and groups of schools to provide an inclusive, high-quality education.
- **Data management** including developing new services for MATs.
- Identifying **wider grant funding and project opportunities** which address our shared priorities.

We will review Learn Sheffield's mission and vision over the next few months to ensure that it is relevant for the next phase of Learn Sheffield's development.



We believe that our track record and resources are strong and that we therefore have a strong platform from which to approach the next phase of our development.

We will also use this time to work with the sector to develop some of the ideas above, as we did when we designed the original subscription model. This will ensure that the services we design will meet the needs of Sheffield settings first, even when the product has a wider reach. We will also seek, for some projects, local development partners who will access reduced costs in return for supporting the testing and development of our offer.

In these developments Learn Sheffield will play a variety of roles dependent upon the area of work. This may, for example, include delivering services, facilitation of joint projects or commissioning on behalf of the sector.

We are extremely excited and optimistic about the future of Learn Sheffield. We believe that our track record and resources are strong and that we therefore have a strong platform from which to approach the next phase of our development.

We are proud of the contribution that we have made to improvement in our city but are focussed on the impact that is needed to ensure that the life chances of all Sheffield children and young people are maximised.

The more distant relationship with Education and Skills portfolio of SCC, as the commission ends, opens up opportunities. We believe strongly that Learn Sheffield has the right relationships and culture to enable us to capitalise on these opportunities alongside the sector.





Please contact us to find out more. We look forward to hearing from you.

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Learn Sheffield is a not for profit company limited by guarantee,
of which 80% is owned by schools and colleges and 20% by Sheffield City Council.