



National College for
Teaching & Leadership

Understanding and advancing systems leadership in the early years

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Contents

Introduction	3
The early years landscape	5
What is a system?	8
Systems ‘thinking’	9
Systems leadership – a whole system view	10
Approaches for growing systems leadership	12
Concluding comments	21
References	23
Appendix A: Examples of system leadership	25
Appendix B: National teaching schools	32
Appendix C: SSCCs, nursery schools and family centres in partnership	33
Appendix D: City-wide systems leadership (1)	34
Appendix E: City-wide systems leadership (2)	36
Appendix F: Early years teaching centre (EYTC)	37
Appendix G: Professional associations/charities providing systems leadership (1)	38
Appendix H: Professional associations/charities providing systems leadership (2)	39
Appendix I: Professional associations/charities providing systems leadership (3)	40
Glossary	41

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Introduction

This paper aims to highlight emerging sector leadership practices among practitioners in the early years that might help to bring about quality improvements system wide. The purpose is to discuss and define key terms, trigger debate, discussion and dialogue amongst stakeholders of these practices so that learning can be drawn from these early examples for wider application. This was intended to be a creative thinkpiece similar to that written for schools, however, it rapidly became apparent in our early dealings with the wide range of early years stakeholders (childminders, private and voluntary providers, schools, academies and children's centres) that our early years (EY) provision is far more complex and diverse than other sectors of education. So the paper is carefully researched to provide some explanations and description as well as case studies of practice and provocations to develop thinking on this important and emerging model of sector led improvement during a time of rapid change.

The intended audience of this paper was initially leaders of Sure Start children's centres (SSCCs). However, it soon became clear that the ideas are applicable to leaders across early years, including private and voluntary providers, Early Years Foundation Stage leaders in primary schools and academies, specialist leaders of education in teaching schools early years professionals and childminders. The paper will also offer interesting insights to local authority officers and policy makers. Essentially, the paper raises the following questions and issues for discussion:

- What are some of the relevant research findings on systems leadership, drawn from early years and beyond?
- What are the emergent systems leadership practices in the early years and especially SSCCs? What has worked so far to support quality improvement and sustained impact?
- What are some of the unique challenges in developing systems leadership across early years and especially among SSCCs?
- What are some potential next steps for the development of a robust early years self-improving system?

The paper begins with a brief introduction to system leadership, its origins and conceptions. This is followed by an outline of ideas that are associated with the concept of self-improving system leadership in education. The paper provides examples of emerging systems leadership across the early years landscape in England and internationally with early evidence of impact. In the final section, unique challenges among SSCCs are considered and potential next steps to support the promotion of systems leadership as a driver for quality improvement is discussed.

In writing this paper, we have been inspired by the work undertaken by many professionals in the field. We are grateful for their support and their stories. We are indebted to those who have contributed their perspectives and provided examples which we have been able to use in this paper. They are:

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The early years landscape

The educational agenda of raising quality and closing the attainment gap

In the last 15 years, policy in England has been aimed at narrowing the education attainment gap between children from affluent and disadvantaged backgrounds. A 'command and control' approach was instituted in the late 1990s in an attempt to raise standards quickly (Collarbone & West-Burnham, 2008; O'Leary & Craig, 2007). Every Child Matters (ECM) was announced in 1998 as a rally call to stakeholders in education, and other programmes including the Sure Start children's centres (SSCCs). This ambitious programme of provision for young children and their families was set up, among other targeted initiatives, to focus on narrowing the attainment gap in educational and health outcomes, promoting equity and raising aspiration for all. Most recently, following the Nutbrown Review, the government has published *More Great Childcare*. This signals a movement towards greater sector autonomy and flexibility, underpinned increasingly by sector led quality assurance and shared practice development.

Leadership and management reform

The need to reform leadership from one that was directed from the top to one that would give schools (and early years) more space to respond to local need and context prompted the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Ofsted to jointly publish *A New Relationship with Schools* in 2004. The shifting of a management model to one based on greater interdependency meant building capacity through partnership arrangements amongst schools demonstrated by a culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing. Systems leadership evolved as a key strategy in mobilising such collaborations and commencing the debate about transformational and dynamic school improvement infrastructures.

Over time a range of systems leadership designation and deployment concepts were developed by the National College alongside school leaders to incentivise outstanding leaders to use their expertise to support others. These include national and local leaders of education, specialist leaders of education and most recently national leaders of governance. The intention is for good and outstanding leaders to work beyond their own school to support school improvement, particularly offering support to schools performing less well or facing particular challenges.

Overall improvement in early years

Based on the Ofsted 2011/12 annual report, as at end of August 2012, the early years sector has about 25,700 childcare settings offering care and education for children from birth to statutory school age, with over 56,000 childminders. The report indicates that:

...there has been improvements in EY provisions since 2008, when both the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the new inspection framework were introduced. 74 per cent of provision is good or better compared to 65 per cent three years ago.

HM government, 2012i:5

There is clear evidence of improvement in the quality early years provision but a need for a continued and focused effort to close attainment and achievement gaps and reduce progress and performance variance within and between settings, whilst also increasing the pace of improvement (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, forthcoming).

Ofsted found that while overall improvements can be evidenced, wide variances exist in the provision, accessibility and quality of services between the most affluent and most deprived areas in the country. This is particularly the case for childminders, where the gap between the quality of provision in areas of high and low deprivation is wider than for other childcare providers (HM government, 2012j).

Children's centre efforts to close the attainment gap

SSCCs have a fundamental contribution to make towards closing the gap between the most vulnerable children and their peers. The shift to a locally determined 'core purpose' presents a real opportunity to understand the absolute needs of the local community served by individual centres. It is important to consider what this means for the way they work collaboratively as a professional group.

The current 'core purpose' of SSCCs, introduced by Department for Education (DfE) in 2012, outlines accountabilities clearly:

Improving outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families, in order to reduce inequalities in:

- child development and school readiness; supported by improved:
- parenting aspirations, self esteem and parenting skills;
- child and family health and life chances.

DfE, 2012a

The key changes from the earlier prescriptive 'core offer' of services includes a stronger focus on children and families who are most vulnerable alongside the removal of the prescribed requirement for SSCCs to provide childcare in the most disadvantaged areas. The corollary to the removal of mandatory childcare is the removal of the need for SSCCs to have a qualified teacher to oversee a centre's education programmes.

Up to June 2012, Ofsted has inspected 1,389 out of the 3,741 SSCCs registered with the Department for Education (DfE). Between May 2010 and 30 June 2012, 69 per cent were judged good or outstanding and 98 per cent were judged to be at least satisfactory. Thirty-two SSCCs were judged inadequate. Eleven initially judged inadequate made improvements and were subsequently given a satisfactory judgement (Ofsted, 2012c). On the whole, parents provide compelling evidence of the positive impact of centres on the lives of their children and families.

The range of services and activities provided by the SSCCs vary considerably depending on size, phase, and the extent to which provision has been tailored to meet local needs and contextualised priorities. The best SSCCs have successfully made contact with a high proportion of children and families in the area they serve and engaged them in meaningful activities, often with high attendance and retention rates for all users. They have also demonstrated a relentless focus on engaging the least advantaged families who may not choose to access centre services without high levels of support, advocacy and sensitive encouragement. Ofsted found that the strongest features of SSCC provision are: the quality of care, guidance and support offered to families; the effectiveness of safeguarding policies, procedures, and integrated work with key multi-agency partners. Health outcomes are often highlighted as strengths (ibid, 2012c).

The weakest aspects of the SSCCs work relate to the support offered to get children ready for the school experience, referred to as 'school readiness' and the degree that they are able to help parents achieve financial stability and independence through training and back to work opportunities. SSCCs were also found to be less well equipped in evaluating the **impact** of their work and setting clear targets for improvement (ibid, 2012a). Some SSCCs found themselves less successful in identifying and reaching the most vulnerable families often presenting with a range of complex and 'hidden needs' like domestic violence, substance misuse, and lone and teenage parents (ibid, 2012c).

A common factor among centres judged as underperforming, is their approach to knowledge and data management. Not only is information sharing poorly developed, but data collation and analysis is under-used as a fundamental tool to understand and evaluate community needs and trends, and establish evidence-based improvement priorities. Consequently, data sets are not scrutinised to support service planning. This places limits on the effectiveness of targeting services at those who need help most; monitoring the take-up of services; tracking the difference made and evaluating the impact in the short and longer term. This lack of knowledge and skills around the efficient management of data is sometimes exacerbated by difficulty in obtaining timely information from key partners. Ofsted notes

that although poor knowledge management and sharing is a common factor amongst underperforming centres, it is also an area that requires a sustained improvement focus in centres otherwise judged to be 'good'.

The importance of data in identifying the most vulnerable families is reinforced in the research findings of the *Social Mobility Summit*, a study commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Sutton Trust in May 2012. The study provided evidence of a 19 month vocabulary gap at the age of 5 between children from the most affluent and disadvantaged homes (Gregory, 2012:2). This gap is wider than in comparable countries such as Canada and Australia. Too many children are still entering school without the basic skills to fully engage with learning. So can systems leadership models be developed in early years to drive further improvement and also support the closing of attainment gaps in a consistent and sustainable way?

What is a system?

It is important to consider what is meant by the term 'system'. Historically, our understanding of 'systems' originated from the natural world. Examples of systems include the solar system, the food chain, the water cycle, the ecological system and the human body. All systems are constituted of multiple systems. The human body is made up of multiple systems, for example, the digestive, respiratory, blood circulatory systems, each with a specific role but all working in a co-ordinated manner for the effective functioning of the body. Within the digestive system, the mouth, gullet, stomach, intestines all work in concert to process the food that we eat and absorb the essential nutrients for health and well-being. Systems Theory was developed in the 1920s through scientific research to understand the natural world (Haines, 1998). Interestingly, in its simplest form the Oxford Dictionary defines a system as a "set of things working together as part of a mechanism or an interconnecting network; a complex whole"¹.

Systems were also developed to understand the 'technological and social world' and bring order to daily living and serve industrialisation. Examples of human developed systems include factory production lines, traffic and financial systems. To solve problems in these human devised systems, they were teased apart to expose and resolve any functionality problems.

Realising that this problem-solving mode was not effective for non-mechanistic systems, Systems Theory was applied to leadership and management thinking over 50 years ago in a wide range of professions including urban planning, cybernetics, medical care, family therapy and social services. The quote below explains the thinking behind the adoption of Systems Theory:

From a very early age, we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world. This apparently makes tasks and subjects more manageable, but we pay a hidden, enormous price. We can no longer see the consequences of our actions; we lose our intrinsic sense of our connection to the larger whole. When we then try to 'see the big picture', we try to reassemble the fragments in our minds, to list and organize all the pieces. But as physicist David Bohm says, the task is futile – similar to trying to reassemble the fragments of a broken mirror to see a true reflection. Thus, after a while we give up trying to see the whole together.

Senge, 2006:3

¹ The Oxford Dictionary of English (2nd edition) edited by C. Soanes & A Stevenson and published by Oxford University Press in 2005.

Systems ‘thinking’

The mode of thinking using Systems Theory was referred to as systems thinking. Management researcher Margaret Wheatley, said:

Some believe that there is danger in playing with science and abstracting its metaphors because, after a certain amount of stretch, the metaphors lose their relationship to the tight scientific theories that gave rise to them. Others would argue that all science is metaphor, a hypothetical description of how to think of a reality we can never fully know. In seeking to play with the rich images coming out of new science. I share the sentiments of Frank Oppenheimer: ‘If one has a new way of thinking, why not apply it wherever one’s thought leads to? It is certainly entertaining to let oneself do so, but it is also often very illuminating and capable of leading to new and deep insights’.

Wheatley, 1999:15

Writers of leadership and management have similarly described systems as being made up of constituent parts that are interconnected and working together, towards a common goal. A system is:

...a set of components that work together for the overall objective of the whole.

Haines, 1998:vi

...a set of elements or parts that is coherently organised and interconnected in a pattern or structure that produces a characteristic set of behaviours, often classified as its ‘function’ or ‘purpose’.

Meadows, 2009:188

Meadows helpfully outlines four key principles of systems thinking as:

- a system is more than the sum of its parts
- many of the interconnections in systems operate through the flow of information
- the least obvious part of the system, its function and purpose, is often the most crucial determinant of the system’s behavior
- system structure is the source of system behaviour. System behaviour reveals itself as a series of events over time

Meadows, 2009:188

In the natural world, there are seven levels of living systems – cell, organ, organism, group, organisation, society, supranational systems – forming a specific hierarchy. The cell, at the most basic level, is the unit of life while supranational systems like continents and global systems, consisting of different societies, are at the other end of the hierarchy (Boulding, 1964, in Haines, 1998). These are systems within systems, with each lower level of the system existing as a subsystem of all higher levels. The different levels of a system are hence all linked.

The three levels that are most relevant to leadership and management for early years leaders in decentralised systems are probably the organism, group, and organisation. In the way schools and settings operate and large-scale educational reform works, the interactions between levels are likely to be the key focus.

Systems leadership – a whole system view

Fullan (2005) referred to leaders who are system thinkers and who act on their thinking as ‘system thinkers’ in action” or ‘system leaders’. In educational settings, system leaders can be said to be those who see the system as a whole and who act in ways that reflect this awareness of the big picture. They work to engage their peers across multiple layers and levels. System leaders see the development of individuals holistically, and act to bring together systems and structures in the immediate as well as wider environment for this to happen.

The components of systems leadership

System thinkers are committed to changing the contexts at all levels. They maintain both macro and micro perspectives. This point was developed by Heifetz and Linsky (2002) who wrote that system thinkers understand the macro patterns that are driving the micro patterns. They also know the dynamics at the micro level, for example, the feelings of the people working at this level and the issues they face. Being able to grasp both the macro - and micro dynamics allows the understanding of the whole, not just the parts, and not just at a specific level.

Staying on the balcony and being on the dance floor.

Heifetz and Linsky, 2002:55

This is a real challenge for some of the larger and more involved SSCCs which are complex organisations working within a range of integrated partnerships across numerous agencies and with children as well as families on a range of health, education, social and employment and skills issues.

Leading improvement focused change

System leaders recognise the behaviours that encourage change and seek to encourage them. Kegan and Lahey (2001) wrote that to sustain significant change in behaviour, there is a need to change the meanings associated with those behaviours, and this begins with communication. Leaders themselves need to transform the way they communicate. They go on to suggest seven helpful ways (or languages) to transform communication and these include using the language of commitment instead of the language of complaint, the language of personal responsibility instead of blame, the language of ongoing regard instead of praise, the language of public agreement instead of the language of rules and policies. This supports the view that strong leadership is critical to the sustainability of effective improvement systems.

The system thinker also understands the impact of human emotion and that the rationale behind behaviour needs to be understood. Effective system leaders keep a ‘sacred heart’, maintaining curiosity, love and compassion all necessary for modelling a ‘can-do’ attitude, even at the most difficult moments. The meaning of a ‘sacred heart’ can be understood as:

Leading with an open heart means you could be at your lowest point, abandoned by your people and entirely powerless, yet remain receptive to the full range of human emotions without going numb, striking back, or engaging in some other defense. A sacred heart allows you to feel, hear and diagnose or comprehend the reasons behind their anger. Without keeping your heart open, it becomes difficult, perhaps impossible, to fashion the right response and to succeed or come out whole.

Heifetz and Linsky, 2002:227-228

This might sound a bit new-age and way-out to some, but the essential message is that good leadership requires strong and visible moral purpose. The insufficiency of interaction, communication and effective knowledge transfer across the different levels of systems, among individuals, among groups and among organisations, and across levels, are often associated with excessive bureaucracy, and blamed for duplication, poor transitions and outcomes not accomplished. What holds the different components of a system together is probably not just the interaction and communication but also the co-ordinated efforts of all parts and levels emanating from a shared purpose and intent. Hence, the establishment of a shared sense of ownership and direction is critical.

The willingness to listen to one another, having the skills to challenge channels to give and receive feedback and secure timely and effective knowledge transfer will contribute to better consolidation around shared priorities. Understanding the inter-relatedness of the different parts of the system and that whatever is done in one part of the system will have an impact on another part at the same or different level, are important imperatives in embedding a shared purpose that acts as a unifying force for system operation (Senge, 1990, 2006; Fullan, 2005, 2010; O’Leary & Craig, 2007).

Securing accountability through governance

The importance of governance structures was a point made by Scott (2012). She vividly illustrated the need to set up robust knowledge management structures so that information can flow with data captured, collated and efficiently used to improve decision making and secure accountability. Without information and data, evidence-based planning has no solid basis and is compromised, making the monitoring and evaluation of actions and activity more difficult. This point is critical to the improvement agenda for all SSCCs and is a common feature among underperforming centres, a point highlighted earlier.

In a stimulus paper entitled *System Leadership and Governance* (n.d), the Innovation Unit and the National College wrote that governance issues should be overtly considered when shifts are made to the boundaries of organisations as in the case of forming networks and creating new roles and accountabilities for some leaders.

Approaches for growing systems leadership

Emerging evidence of systems leadership approaches

Appendix A provides examples of a range of approaches, all focused on the effective sharing of information around 'what works' and with a clear focus on improvement and accountability for effectiveness and efficiency.

Growing system leadership: approaches

Arguably the strongest evidence on what system leadership looks like comes from the English schools system. The work of David Hargreaves is particularly important in this respect. Between 2010 and 2012, Hargreaves wrote four thinkpieces for the National College which explored a range of issues relating to system leadership in schools, including the origins of system leadership and the factors which both promoted and inhibited its development.

Hargreaves notes during this period, inter-school partnerships have flourished in various ways across thousands of English schools, in response to government policies that seek to transfer the prime responsibility for teacher development and school improvement to schools themselves (Hargreaves 2012). Indeed he describes the rate of progress as 'exceptional', while at the same time acknowledging that while for many this has been exhilarating and empowering, others have found challenging and potentially disillusioning.

While Hargreaves' work is helpful in providing a record of the explosion in system leadership practice that has occurred in schools during this period, its most significant contribution comes from its proposed 'maturity model' for such leadership – in effect a blueprint for how system leadership may become a sustainable part of every school leaders' role.

Hargreaves maturity model identifies three leadership 'dimensions', each of which comprises four individual strands (Hargreaves 2011, 2012). These are summarised in Table 1. While these dimensions are inter-related and ultimately mutually supportive, they also emerge sequentially, that is, collaborative capital is only achieved as a consequence of repeated partnership practice, which itself only occurs once the imperative for professional development is recognised.

Table 1: Summary of Hargreaves' maturity model for a self-improving system

Leadership dimension	Strands
<p>1. Professional development</p> <p>Partnership is not an end in itself but a mechanism for improving professional development, with the aim of enhancing teaching and learning in schools.</p>	<p>a: Joint practice development [that is, peer to peer working to establish good practice]</p> <p>b: Talent identification and development through distributed leadership</p> <p>c: Mentoring and coaching</p> <p>d: Distributed staff information [that is, collective understanding of the expertise and development needs of each member of staff]</p>
<p>2. Partnership competence</p> <p>Partnership competencies are the common property of the alliance partners, and critical to the realisation of system leadership. They are effectively the <i>sine qua non</i> of any alliance.</p>	<p>a: High social capital [that is, trust and reciprocity]</p> <p>b: Fit governance</p> <p>c: Evaluation and challenge</p> <p>d: Distributed system leadership / collective moral purpose</p>

<p>3. Collaborative capital</p> <p>Collaborative capital relates to the normalisation of system leadership amongst schools as a whole – it is an attribute of the system [not an individual school or alliance] and the stage at which cross school partnerships are the natural way of operating.</p>	<p>a: Analytical investigation [that is, the ability to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of the school and establish an appropriate development strategy]</p> <p>b: Creative entrepreneurship [that is, the ability to generate resources to support the collaboration]</p> <p>c: Alliance architecture [that is, processes for encouraging collaboration and building the expertise necessary to do so]</p> <p>d: Disciplined innovation [that is, the pursuit of learning which supports all, not just some]</p>
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Source: Hargreaves, 2011/12

Based on the various examples, there appears to be awareness and application of some key principles of systems leadership and these include:

- understanding that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts
- understanding the need for communication and knowledge management between levels and within levels in a system to set a clear direction and shared sense of purpose
- understanding the importance of accepting partners, showing mutual respect, and giving time to building trust as a foundation for communications and effective intelligence sharing
- placing a clear focus on joint practice development and actively engaging in action-based research around ‘what works’
- ensuring clear governance arrangements that secure accountability and provide a robust operating infrastructure configured around impact and improvement
- using the best leaders to support others and influence culture changing behaviours through the modelling of professional support, challenge and intervention

So how might this approach progress? Claire Schofield of NDNA recognises the complex nature of the early years sector:

The foundation years sector in the UK is notable in its diversity. There is a wide range of provision—private, voluntary and independent, as well as maintained. Provision ranges from individual childminders to large nursery chains. The sector also encompasses the voluntary and social officers, regulators, government, academia and local authorities. Any work on leadership must recognise and value all these elements and their contributions.

Given such diversity, is there need for customisation of some of the ideas represented in this paper?

Before we discuss how systems leadership approaches could be extended, there are two fundamental questions to address. The first question has to do with whether systems leadership fits into the DfE’s broader plan for the EY sector? The National College for Teaching and Leadership, formed following the merger of the National College and the Teaching Agency, has a vision agreed by the Secretary of State to develop “a 0-18 self-improving, school-led system” in which leaders, not government or ministers, take the lead in improving the education of our children. This is clearly a live policy area which will evolve over time as leaders take on the work of improvement, and it becomes clearer where support from the centre may still be required to support and encourage greater confidence to become independent. Improving the quality of the workforce and helping leaders to support each other to improve must certainly feature as core drivers.

Such a direction is clearly emerging for schools and academies but what needs to happen, if anything, across the diverse world of early years? Are there conceptual synergies between systems leadership and the DfE’s general direction for the early years sector?

The second question has to do with the proven effectiveness of systems leadership in achieving improved child and family outcomes. There is currently no hard evidence that specific improvements in child or family outcomes, can be directly attributable to systems leadership approaches, although there is some positive feedback from the early adopters of system leadership. Without clear evidence of system leadership having an impact on child and family outcomes, should systems leadership be propagated further? We would argue for more research and systematic evaluation of current practices and the dissemination of the best practices supported by evidence of outcomes.

To address the question of whether systems leadership should be propagated in the current absence of clear evidence of its effectiveness in achieving children and family outcomes, we would argue that systems leadership to the system is akin to teamwork to a group of people. There are few situations where teamwork is not desirable although not all groups work as teams. Groups of people do not form teams when the dynamics of their interaction are not well managed. Similarly, systems leadership fails to result in better outcomes when the dynamics in the interaction between groups and sub-levels are not well co-ordinated as a result of structural inadequacies or insufficient will to achieve better outcomes. We also do not have evidence of how much worse a system would be with the absence of systems leadership. As the saying goes, “the devil is in the detail”. Apart from the examples of systems leadership shown to us by the early adopters, how else might systems leadership be applied and used for SSCCs and the EY sector?

Attention to the ‘whole’ as well as the parts

“Staying on the balcony... and being on the dance floor”

It is important that in making decisions both the macro views and the micro dynamics are carefully considered. This can only happen when leaders make the effort to understand what is happening in the broader environment and also the dynamics at work at the point of service commissioning and delivery. For example, when SSCCs decide on how much funding from universal services should be redirected towards targeted services, it is important to consider what motivates the targeted clients to access the services offered to them and whether the most vulnerable families are an absolute focus. Understanding the financial constraints is important, while at the same time, centre leaders need to understand that their targeted clients may fear stigmatisation and not access the support set aside for them. In a recent study carried out, researchers observed that it is often through the universal provisions that signals of more intensive support are identified and help is extended to those needing the targeted service.

With low-income families, targeted parenting programmes report higher retention rates if they are offered following the provision of a universal approach in the context of a local stepped care system that begins with universal approaches and progresses to a targeted approach only when required. Universal programmes can assist in identifying parents for whom a targeted programme may later be relevant and helpful especially in low-income communities.

British Psychological Association (2012), cited in (2012e)

This phenomenon has also been observed by The Children’s Society (2012d) and Lancashire County Council (2012b). Therefore the balance between the universal and targeted offer requires careful leadership attention to reach, audience and sustained engagement.

Another phenomenon of great importance to closing the attainment gap is the mix of children of different backgrounds. It is important for the most disadvantaged children to learn and develop in the midst of children of different social class and family backgrounds in order that they grow up feeling comfortable with people of all backgrounds. This also has benefits for the children and parents due to the compositional effects of daily interactions.

Proximity of SSCCs and economies of scale have become contending considerations in an environment of scarce resources. Having fewer SSCCs and a larger reach area would allow economies

of scale and possibly a range of services that centres serving a smaller population may not be able to afford. This would be the macro consideration of centre managers. However, it is important to know that the targeted families and children may not have the means to get to a SSCC located far away. That distance and geography can be a real barrier to access of services needs to be considered when deciding on how to deploy limited resources to 'reach' within the centre. Again, such decisions require an understanding of the macro perspective as well as an understanding of the complexities at play within the local communities served by centres, what Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) called 'contextual literacy in early years leadership'.

The same can be said of strategic decisions at the local authority commissioning level. A humanitarian group, *Save the Children*, noted that some SSCC leaders now have responsibility for a cluster of SSCCs varying in size from two upwards, and they cautioned that this may over-stretch SSCC leaders and lead to difficulties in delivering effective service (2012i). Hence in deciding how to cluster SSCCs, it is important to consider not only the local need for services and funding constraints, but also the profiles and skills of the SSCC leaders who will be tasked to lead multiple centres. Understanding such complexity is critically important in the effective commissioning of children's centre provision. In times of funding constraints, smart and careful commissioning around proven models of delivery that reflect the local context may be a way to stretch limited resources, but only if the needs have been thoughtfully assessed.

Keeping a balance of measures to achieve long and short-term goals

Pre-emptive measures (like quality childcare programmes, parenting skills programmes, vocational training) which are often associated with longer term goals tend to be compromised in favour of corrective measures (like counselling of abuse victims and treatment of addictions) by virtue of the lack of urgency of the former set of measures, especially at times of resource constraints. However, the sustained neglect of pre-emptive measures often lead to a downward spiral, and a build-up of the need for more corrective measures in the future. From the perspective of building public confidence, on the other hand, there is a need to address issues that are already visible quickly, that is, the urgent matters. Understanding of the dynamics of issues, and careful balancing of resources to meet long-term and short-term goals cannot be overstated.

Avoiding discontinuities

The removal of the requirement for SSCCs to provide childcare and the corollary removal of the need for a qualified teacher to oversee childcare constitute discontinuities. Ofsted noted that inspection evidence indicates that the change in emphasis has led to a reduction in the direct provision of childcare by SSCCs, and the engagement of qualified teachers in the 'learning and development' activities provided by centres. Ofsted also pointed out that the presence of a qualified teacher or equivalent makes a marked, positive difference to the quality of childcare and early education. Referring to the evidence they have on staff qualification,

The data are stark and show a direct correlation between the level of staff qualification and quality.

Ofsted, 2012

Citing Siraj-Blatchford et al (2003) whose research has found that having trained teachers working with children for a substantial proportion of the time in pre-schools had the greatest impact on quality, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) made the point that it is still important to have a trained teacher to oversee the curriculum (2012g).

The NUT (2012g) has also pointed out that by removing the childcare requirement, SSCCs have been distracted from their primary purpose, and that is to provide high quality services relevant to children's education, health, social care and welfare from birth to the age of five. This is important pre-emptive work for which the SSCCs were set up to deliver. Interestingly, many SSCCs leaders choose to retain their teachers to improve quality and retain standards in early education.

Build relationships and strengthen communication

Ofsted (2012c) commented that parents and other users of SSCC services have said that often it is strong relationships with centre staff and the flexibility and responsiveness of centre staff that bring them through the door of the SSCC. Similarly, within and across organisations, codes of conduct, individual agencies and professionalism are often ingredients that go to ensure quality standards, but trusting relationships provide the extra energy for going beyond that. Bandura (1997), cited in Goddard, Hoy and Hoy (2000), in his groundbreaking study on teachers' collective beliefs about their joint ability to produce outcomes at a certain level, found that this belief held by teachers has an impact on student achievement (aggregated to the school level). In fact, it has a greater effect on student achievement than the social-economic backgrounds of students. The importance of dynamics in relationships cannot be overstated.

The building of trusting relationships is dependent on effective communications. As mentioned earlier, there is a need to change the way we communicate if we are to sustain system thinking. All too often, we can hear different parties using the language of blame when things go wrong. To communicate better across and within systems, it is necessary to always bear in mind that we are always party to the problems presented to us either by our action or inaction and we should communicate with this understanding. It is also common in communication that the voice of advocacy is used, as the voice of advocacy is often seen as confidence. It is important that the voice of advocacy is balanced with a voice of inquiry that seeks to understand the perspectives of different stakeholders and the context within which they work, especially when working with families, clients and partners we do not understand well.

A shared vision

There are many stories of the impact of a shared vision on galvanising the workforce in multinational companies. There are also examples of the shared vision of educational systems and individual educational institutions contributing towards galvanising their stakeholders towards a common direction. The power of a shared vision can be understood from the following story. An EY leader who prefers not to be named related a story of the role of a shared vision in spurring multi-agency collaboration. When different stakeholders met on how they could together provide services for the centre, each stakeholder came with the agenda that their resources were stretched and they could not commit to working with the centre. On the spot, this leader decided to turn the meeting into a workshop session. She got everyone to think about what they would like their respective departments to do for a centre that is located in the vicinity of the home of their child/grandchild. The stakeholders soon realised what she was trying to do, but they were very professional and they acknowledged the mindset change that took place during the process. They provided ingredients to write the most compelling of visions. From then on, the communication patterns changed. Instead of saying that they had no resources and could not do anything, the stakeholders began saying that they would bring things back and revert with some options. The magical nature of a shared vision makes it sound too good to be true!

In a situation of limited resources, having a shared vision is all the more important. A shared vision goes way beyond a common reference for action or a statement on the wall that members of the community can recite and explain. It helps establish the needs of the different stakeholders, deepen their understanding of the dynamics at work and most important of all, builds the emotional and intellectual commitment of all involved. It is the process that is important. This process of working out a shared vision alongside partners and stakeholders could take several days, weeks or months. With a shared vision, all stakeholders are committed to and own the common direction although each has a different role to play to achieve this vision and they are more likely to stick to their planned courses of action even in difficult situations.

Feedback and learning

Importance of building capacity

Examples abound among SSCCs of efforts to increase the capacity of practitioners and leaders in the EY sector to work collaboratively and solve problems together. However, Ofsted has consistently observed that a common weakness across SSCCs, including those which are weak as well as those

otherwise judged good, is in the collection, sharing and use of data to systematically drive service improvement, quality and reach. So in what ways can capability and capacity in data collection and use be enhanced? Would bespoke professional development focused on data collection and use be of help? Would it be necessary for important data to be reported to the DfE and the local authorities so that all parties have a regulated duty to collect and use data? Would the capacity building in managing of data at the centre level be fuelled by mandatory reporting either to the local authorities or the DfE, or both?

The DfE, in its evidence to the House of Commons Education Select Committee in 2012, wrote that “effective and appropriate information sharing underpins robust integrated working”(2012f). Indeed, without comprehensive data there is no proper basis for planning. The Local Government Association reported that persistent barriers to effective information sharing between services and childcare had been found. Notwithstanding, some local authorities had developed effective local information sharing processes. They also mentioned that there is a government initiative to develop a national data system that would include a child information project.

Another important driver for learning and improvement is professional reflection. While direct training has its place in skills acquisition, professional reflection provides a vehicle for the practitioner to revisit situations, actions and practices and consider actual against intended outcomes. This can have a particularly powerful effect on changing behaviours, challenging underperformance and holding individuals to account. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007), in their study of effective EY leaders, noted that they monitor and reflect on the current situation, and this is a practice that is to be promoted in the drive for immediate and sustained service improvement.

System structures and governance

It has often been said that structures shape behaviours. Ofsted has received feedback from local authorities and SSCCs indicating that inspections strongly influence the SSCC’s subsequent improvement plans and priorities for action. Given the demonstrated impact of inspection on front line practice, a revision of the framework for inspection of SSCCs and childminders is likely to bring the outcomes closer to the desired levels, particularly as Ofsted is now considered the sole regulator of quality. Ofsted, in revising its framework, will ensure that it is flexible enough to take account of the wide range of organisational structures and delivery models that are emerging across and within local authorities. Ofsted will also offer training to providers.

Other than inspection frameworks, specifications of experience and professional training requirements of leaders holding key improvement and quality assurance accountabilities are important. A case in point is the requirement for the SSCC centre leaders. The need for SSCCs to provide universal integrated children and family services as well as targeted services to the most vulnerable people makes the role of the centre leaders a very complex and demanding one. As integrated centres, SSCCs need to interphase with and influence multiple agencies, each with a different core business and a unique work culture. These agencies will include, for example, health workers and the NHS, housing and employment agencies and social and educational agencies. This is demanding not only in terms of social skills but also intellectual skills. Secondly, in order to safeguard the wellbeing of the most vulnerable, centre leaders need to have immense courage, emotional stability, resilience and perseverance. The professional skills and personal traits needed are comparable to those needed by a headteacher of a primary or secondary school and might even be more demanding in the larger ‘one-stop-shop’ type SSCCs. The lack of a stated requirement on experience and qualification for appointment as the head of a SSCC is seen by many professionals as an arrangement that is not satisfactory.

A related issue is the lack of consistency around multi-agency involvement. As each case presented by the most vulnerable is complex and unique, the key to delivery of effective intervention is the ability to integrate services across agencies and provide seamless help to families. Louise Casey, heading up the government’s troubled family team refers to “one family, one worker, one plan”. Some agencies have recommended a lead social worker at each locality to ensure that barriers to service are looked in to, and there is proper follow through of each case. The DfE is piloting a children’s centre social worker scheme. Having a social worker as a lead person at each SSCC may give a lift to co-ordination and good follow through.

Inspection frameworks, statutory guidance, minimum experience and qualification for job holders, role definitions, job specifications, transition guidelines and standards of service as in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) are necessary structures for the smooth running of systems where quality delivery and secure accountability ensure service improvement. Clustering of centres, knowledge management, data handling and reporting relationships across centres are important in the capacity building agenda in the EY sector, just as they are in primary and secondary schools.

Fullan (2005) in his study of system-wide reforms has expressed his support for networks as a means to disseminate ideas. He thinks that the use of networks to disseminate ideas is stronger than changing policies to bring about the same outcomes as networks would tap in to on the belief that people learn best from peers.

Apart from building capacity, there are economies of scale that can be derived from SSCCs if they operate in 'clusters'. The benefits reported include a reduction in administration and back office costs and increased opportunities to share specialisms. Changes in leadership and commissioning arrangements are also emerging, and an increasing number of centres are being brought together to operate under shared leadership, management and governance arrangements.

Diverse models of collaboration already exist in the UK and internationally. As observed by Sharp et al (2012), there are three emerging models of collaboration:

- clusters consisting of children's centres with a common interest
- clusters with a locality manager who is directly responsible to the local authority for the co-ordination across the schools within each cluster
- clusters operating in a hub-and-spoke model, whereby the leader of each hub-centre is responsible for the work of all satellites or spoke centres

The growth of academy chains in England offers an interesting parallel to consider. A study commissioned by the National College and carried out by Hill et al (2012) showed that collaborations range from the loose to more formalised and tight arrangements. The most effective chains have a shared vision and ethos across their schools and are backed by robust governance with clear lines of accountability. Effective chains deploy their personnel and resources to drive focused school-to-school improvement support and professional talent development and deployment, making them greater than the sum of their parts, maximising impact and achieving greater efficiencies from their collective assets.

In an analysis of the Ofsted inspections of academies between September 2009 and July 2011, Hill et al (2012) found the following:

- chains of three or more academies had a higher proportion of schools classified as outstanding by Ofsted than other academies
- secondary federations with executive leadership, that is a variation of the hub-and-spoke model, outperformed federations with one headteacher leading one school, suggesting that executive leadership structures should be considered
- being part of a federation with a performance focus has more impact than informal school collaborations

Networking and clustering models have been adopted in a number of countries and this has contributed towards building the learning outcomes of students. Fullan and Knight (2011) wrote about a new system leadership role in the state of Ontario, Canada, which has been credited for re-engaging at-risk (or vulnerable/disadvantaged) students. The role of school success teachers (SSTs) has been created within schools to specifically help students who are falling behind in their learning and re-engage them in learning. SSTs focus on student advocacy and mentoring. Each school in the district belongs to a cluster and SSTs of the cluster come together for sharing and learning, led by a SST co-ordinator.

All primary, secondary schools and junior colleges in Singapore are part of an improvement cluster. Collaborations within each cluster are facilitated by a cluster superintendent who also plays the roles of guiding the schools in capacity building and being the reporting officer for the principals within the cluster. The clusters are mostly of mixed levels (primary, secondary schools and junior colleges) and

they vary in their practices depending on needs. Nevertheless, all clusters have subject committees, often with each school leading one subject. Regular sharing takes place amongst teachers of the same subjects. Some schools also offer their extra-curricular activities to students in the same cluster although such arrangements are limited as they pose scheduling challenges. Subject teachers within the cluster carry out joint lesson studies (a series of lessons which they plan, teach, observe and critique together), share resources, assessments, and lesson plans. Having been in this arrangement for about 15 years now, and having established a higher level of trust, schools within each cluster also help each other carry out cross audits, for example, management audits and safety standards for sports and outdoor activities. Systems leadership takes time.

The two examples given above have secure, permanent infrastructures with tight coupling and shared purpose. In the United States as in the UK, EY provisions are fragmented with some programmes and services provided by either the federal government, state government or local communities. Various government departments oversee different aspects of early years provision. Efforts have been made to improve co-ordination and develop partnerships for similar reasons that systems leadership has been propagated all over the world – that is to sustain growth, improvement and quality development of EY provision and to raise standards. In the state of North Carolina, the state governors were credited for providing the leadership for the development of EY.

Describing their journey in building a high-performing state early childhood professional development system, Sue Russell (2012), President of Child Care Services Association, a non-profit agency committed to improving access to high quality care and education in the US, wrote that it required a combination of standards and regulation, investment, planning, cross-sector collaboration and leadership. She shared that the strategies for North Carolina's professional development system depended much on the data collected, and a systematic data collection system. She also alluded to the willingness of various stakeholders to collaborate with one another as an important prerequisite for success.

Collaboration across schools and settings is increasingly seen as an important strategy for raising standards and sustaining growth and development in education systems. Given the examples in the early years sector in the English system, and learning from research and experiences of other systems in education here and overseas, how should the EY sector proceed in extending systems leadership?

Evidence from the first cadre of academies in England and the school collaborations in Canada and Singapore suggests that a common interest in improving quality might serve to promote consistent and sustained development. SSCC cluster models will allow SSCC members within the cluster to specialise in different aspects of work, and support each other in breaking new ground and overcoming barriers to effective local service delivery. Clustering will also make possible shared services as there would be economies of scale. An important and practical consideration is geographical proximity. Communication and learning can be affected by distance and the lack of regular face-to-face contact. With regard to optimum size, this is likely to be affected by the socio-economic background and diversity of the local community, complexity of the work that is needed, the capacity of the people working at the SSCCs, and the distribution of the centres.

Whether hub-and-spoke or clusters consisting of leaders of equal standing, and where leadership is rotated among members, the decision on how collaborative working should proceed depends on the dynamics amongst the SSCCs and the centre managers leading them. A hub-and spoke model led by the early years teaching centres (EYTCs) where training, research and quality services are being built, may make good 'hubs' for other clusters. Fullan's points about the possibility of exchanges residing at the superficial level and the difficulty of peers driving focused implementation of ideas need to be considered.

Currently, the SSCCs have different affiliations within and across local authorities. It is likely that SSCCs of the same affiliations within the vicinity will form clusters. However, there are also situations where the SSCCs are far away from those with the same affiliation. In these situations, SSCCs may form clusters with other SSCCs outside of their affiliation. The role of the parent affiliated body with respect to SSCCs in cluster arrangement with SSCCs of other affiliations may need to be adjusted in the daily operational arrangements.

There are also childminders who form a sizable force within the EY sector. The National Childminding Association (NCMA) has been commissioned by the DfE to form local peer support networks in each community. The goals are to provide ongoing professional support to childminders and nannies, so that attrition of these practitioners can be reduced, professional hardships can be alleviated and continuing professional development can be made available. These networks, which are facilitated by fellow childminders or nannies trained to play this role, convene peer support sessions and online networking for its members. There is a growing virtual community of users and childminders who can now get online and communicate with each other whenever they like (please see Appendix I for more details).

Another arrangement which can be considered as an alternative is for childminders to be affiliated to an EYTC or SSCC with outstanding or good rating in the vicinity. Although some challenges encountered by the lone practitioner would be different from those faced by practitioners practicing at the SSCCs, these differences may provide valuable learning to the childminder and even expand the childminders' repertoire of ideas and skills and vice versa.

As time is needed to build collaborations, it would be too demanding on resources for SSCCs to work towards having membership of more than one cluster. However, it is possible for each SSCC to be a member of multiple networks, where they work with a few SSCCs based on common interest and in an ad hoc manner.

Fullan and other authors were convinced of the importance of governance and structures to support the full operations of the clusters/networks. The study on academy chains also suggested that to benefit from the collaborations, there is a need for some infrastructure to support these collaborations. Wanda Allen, Accreditation Manager at the Pre-School Learning Alliance offered that the strategies adopted needed to build on the strengths of both the central authority and local autonomy while they mitigate the combined weaknesses.

What is the correct balance of central authority and local autonomy? What roles can the local authorities play? Apart from providing strategic leadership as seen in York, Bristol and Birmingham, what other critical roles and services can they play? What are the systems and services that would sit naturally with the local authorities? Could they provide the broader overview which circumvents too much fracturing of the parts of the system so that the whole system can be seen?

What about the professional bodies and their networks. The CCLN has the potential of supporting lateral communication among individuals and networks as well as vertical communication from the practice field to the DfE and the National College.

The networks of the professional associations have been contributing to raising professional standards through providing training opportunities and mentoring of professionals. These networks have shown potential in facilitating the raising of practice standards and the lateral flow of ideas across networks, clusters, federations and academy chains. Like the CCLN, networks set up by professional bodies, as in those established by NDNA, Pre-school Learning Alliance or NCMA can potentially become important links for the clusters and networks that are more geographically bound.

Concluding comments

In this paper, we have sought to provide an outline of relevant research findings on systems leadership. We have also highlighted emergent systems leadership practices in the early years and SSCCs, some unique challenges for promoting system leadership and potential next steps for the development of a successful early years self-improving system.

System leaders can be said to be those who see the system as a whole and who act in ways that reflect this awareness. System leaders also see the development of individuals holistically, and act to bring together systems and structures in the immediate as well as wider environment for this to happen. This thinkpiece has outlined the key principles of systems leadership, these being: attention to the whole as well as its parts, relationship and communication, a shared vision, feedback and learning, and system structure and governance.

Given the key challenges and diversity within the EY sector, the fundamental question remains of how the best systems leadership approaches can be used to encourage collaboration around best practice development and sharing in order to drive quality and improve outcomes consistently.

One way for SSCCs to ensure that quality does not fall back at times of major reform is to monitor their services using a range of measures which SSCCs already use for instance, Ofsted ratings and feedback from children and families. However, objective measures of leadership might also be useful. These include the *Children's Centre Leadership and Management Rating Scale* (CCLMRS) (Sylva *et al*, 2010) and the *Programme Administration Scale: Measuring early childhood leadership and management*, developed by Talan (2004) to monitor their leadership and management and to enhance discussion around what matters in leadership. These can also act as self-reflection tools and not just self-regulation tools.

As with the clustering of schools into improvement partnerships, multiple models could be used by early years settings and SSCCs. It is envisaged that settings could establish membership with one cluster where there could be integration of services and a more formal partnership but could also have multiple memberships to networks which are more ad hoc and informal.

Ball and Junemann (2012) wrote about the emergence of heterarchies, a system of relationships:

“replete with overlaps, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy and divergent-but-coexistent pattern of relationship”.

Ball and Junemann, 2012:138

They described this structure as resembling an assemblage of elements somewhere between hierarchy and network, consisting of a multitude of horizontal and vertical links. Different links would be active depending on the subject of collaboration. These structures are 'loosely-coupled' and allow easy exploration of innovation. They noted that in these structures, there would be asymmetrical relationships and unnatural groupings but they would still be centrally steered.

Anthropologist, Carole Crumley defined a heterarchy as

the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways.

Crumley, 1995

How would systems leadership evolve, and what is likely to be the picture of collaboration in the early years sector in 5 to 10 years from now? Would the picture look like a heterarchies or hierarchies?

Susan Gregory, the National Director of Early Years at Ofsted, in her first annual lecture on early years in 2012 (<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/earlyyears2012>), expressed her view that four areas needed attention:

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1. Variability in provisions – there is still too much variability.
 2. Quality of the workforce – the workforce is under-qualified.
 3. Take-up on free provisions in deprived areas – the take-up is too low.
 4. Inspection intervals – the intervals are too long for weaker providers.

We hope this paper will help in raising discussion and debate around such concerns and what the vision for systems leadership should be in order to move the sector forwards as more children access their free entitlement to early education and care.

Finally, there is no doubt that system change requires increasingly confident and well-informed leaders who recognise the importance of research and evidence-based practice and see themselves as “self-improving leaders”. This involves moving away from a solitary model of single institution leadership to a much more collaborative approach that can demonstrate collective attention directed towards shared improvement priorities with increasing focus on reaching the most vulnerable.

Successful systems leadership will require:

- An ability to understand, engage with and respond at pace to the changing environment. Acting alone will become increasingly difficult. Professional clusters, networks and local configurations, both formal and informal, with a clear focus on improvement will become increasingly important and valuable.
- Challenging professional dialogue about improvement and pedagogy, not in a blanket fashion, but in ways that reflect the diverse operating environments and pressures faced locally.
- Acknowledgement that the work of leading learning is a key responsibility to which time is devoted. It is planned for and takes priority over competing pressures in the most improved settings.
- A creative tension between how leaders support and challenge each other. When the tension is appropriate, leaders will feel stretched to achieve rather than stretched to fail.
- Seizing the opportunity to demonstrate common sense in translating the case for early intervention into common practice. Often a series of technical and bureaucratic barriers push intervention towards rescue and away from the genuine prevention that early years practitioners know works best for all children.
- Attention to resources and efficiency – leaders’ ability to do good work will depend, in part, on the level and kind of resources available to them immediately but also into the future.
- Early years leaders who work to make active links between inside and outside operating environments avoiding becoming traditional and routine. Outside knowledge, support and interaction helps to keep settings thinking, alert and open to improvement opportunities.
- Understanding that leading beyond single institutions assumes confidence that all those around the leader are able to lead in their absence. The majority of early years settings do not have the depth of senior leadership teams available to offer cover as in schools.
- Leaders to think differently about the skills they require to drive improvement. It takes confidence to both push others to improve and also receive critique and criticism in order to improve. Such skills may include conflict resolution, holding difficult conversations, understanding how best to use influence and persuasion and how to build coalitions that support change and challenge underperformance.

Government policy is clear about stepping back from centralised control and promoting bold innovation. This direction towards greater local autonomy and decision making makes it feel like the right time to consider the key features of a self-supporting improvement system and begin a shared professional dialogue about sector-led workforce development and quality assurance to ensure equity of access and opportunity for all children, staff and families.

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Appendix A: Examples of systems leadership

Example 1

Systems leadership in Sure Start children's centres

Sharp et al (2012) in a National College commissioned study found that a number of SSCC leaders had already taken on some aspects of systems leadership and were keen and ready to expand on them. They noted, however, that more work had to go into helping SSCC leaders deepen their understanding of the concepts surrounding systems leadership and potential benefits to early years core activity in terms of sustainable quality improvement.

The emerging models of collaboration, according to Sharp et al (2012), are as follows:

- clusters consisting of children's centre leaders working together locally with a shared sense of purpose and towards agreed strategic goals that meet contextual need
- clusters with a single locality manager who is directly responsible to the local authority for the coordination and impact of a number of centres and their outcomes
- clusters operating in a hub-and-spoke model, where a single leader of the hub-centre is accountable for the work of all satellites or spoke centres

Everton Nursery School and Family Centre (ENSFC) in Liverpool, operating as a hub in a hub-and-spoke cluster, is one of the early adopters of systems leadership. It is also one of only a small number of government designated teaching schools. The centre has partnerships with a range of early years settings, both on and off-site, including close working collaborations with local primary schools. It provides a wide range of CPD opportunities including a range of evidence-based programmes for children and has produced learning resources for practitioners, parents and carers.

In delivery of the six core functions of a teaching school (see Appendix C) ENSFC also supports partner schools in professional development programme evaluation. Through working with different partners, they have developed innovative initial teacher training (ITT) and programmes leading to certification and degrees, for example, the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leaders (NPQICL) and management modules at Master's level. ENSFC's engagement with university partners has made possible the opportunity for the centre to be fully engaged in the teaching schools initiative, working together to lead research and action learning sets and learning communities of practice. The economies of scale in a hub-and-spoke model makes possible more formal professional development arrangements, enabling many more teachers and practitioners to engage, work together and ultimately develop their professional knowledge, skills and expertise. Facilitated by ENSFC, many school and centre leaders have pursued, or are beginning to pursue, professional qualifications.

The headteacher of ENSFC, Dr Lesley Curtis, recounted for us that the key challenge was to nurture and train the team to a high level so that they could role-model high quality early education. Initially, she had a team of 16 staff, and has grown the team to 50 (all with varying terms and conditions of service) through creative, well-organised and flexible staffing structures. Staff at all levels, including the business manager, information and communications technology (ICT) co-ordinator and daycare manager, have been involved in supporting partners to improve practice (please see Appendix C for a case study write-up).

Example 2

Shared community partnerships

In York, partnerships with schools and the wider local community feature strongly. Collaborations include playgroups, childminders, summer/holiday clubs and after/before school groups/clubs. This makes possible the provision of wrap-around care services for the children.

Clusters of providers of Early Years Foundation Stage education and care within the community, including day nurseries, play groups, childminders, children centres, primary schools, school nurseries, summer/holiday clubs, after/before school groups/clubs started developing 'Shared Foundation Community Partnerships' (SFCPs) about 10 years ago. SFCPs were formed to support and develop best practice within all early years provision in the community and to help parents access wrap-around care for their child.

Practitioners meet once or twice per term with the chair normally rotating amongst providers. The local authority supports these SFCP's with the meetings being attended by their early years support advisors. The authority has in the past also provided funding for training and support towards the costs of a teacher with qualified teacher status and a special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) to lead the partnership in quality improvements, special educational needs, and purchase of training and shared resources.

Many SFCPs have also agreed on transition reporting procedures, systems of joint working and processes for sharing of information, paving the way for speedier and more consistent service.

Example 3

Early years teaching centres (EYTCs)

A number of outstanding SSCCs and nursery schools nationally have been identified to be developed into EYTCs in the pilot project led by Pen Green Centre for Research and Development Base. This two year pilot project, funded by the DfE, aims to develop and promote different ways for outstanding centres to train and support staff in other local early years settings to improve the quality of practice. Pen Green is currently exploring with the National College how this project can align with the growing number of national teaching schools, some with a focus on early years improvement.

Each of the 10 EYTCs in the pilot have worked with up to 20 settings in their local reach area and with no fewer than 4,000 practitioners over the two year period.

Dr Margy Whalley, Director of the Pen Green Research and Development Base, states that an important mindset for everyone involved in the initiative is that the culture is one of collaboration, not competition. Reflecting on the project, she thought that investing time and effort to establish trusting relationships is one of the most important aspects. Her team ensured that their interactions with partners were founded on mutual respect and they also showed genuine interest in the work of their partners by inviting them to share and learn from each other with a key focus on quality improvement and effective service delivery.

Fairfield Children's Centre in Lancashire, one of the 10 pilot EYTCs, has focused on working with childminders. They have been supporting more than 30 childminders in the region and close to 85 per cent of them have received good or outstanding Ofsted ratings.

The EYTCs have worked together on several ideas including an assessment model, *Making Children's Learning Visible*, that engages parents in the collection of evidence on their child's progress. A spring-off from the assessment project was the realisation of the need to collaborate with the local authorities on data sharing so that progress made by the children could be fully and comprehensively understood.

A consortium made up of three outstanding nursery schools and children's centres from Bristol has been working actively with their local authority. They have seen their authority as an equal partner

throughout their journey with recognised responsibilities and accountabilities. They are working with the authority and other partners, including the higher institutions of education, on ITT and leadership development. The latter will give attention to succession planning and talent retention.

Over the last couple of years, the EYTCs have established diverse ways of working with different partners, and the combination of training and professional support offered by outstanding leaders has received positive feedback. Although the impact of work of the EYTCs is unlikely to have been fully felt at this point, given that the pilot is at an early stage, there has been interest by stakeholders in leveraging the networking and leadership opportunities across SSCCs offered by EYTCs as a model of district level improvements. A couple of local authorities have introduced their own EYTCs and several others not yet involved in the EYTCs have shown interest in developing similar projects. (Please see Appendix F for information on the Pen Green EYTC and the East Lancashire Consortium EYTC).

Example 4

Local authorities supporting systems leadership

Bristol local authority is an excellent example of local authorities supporting systems leadership. It has embraced the concept of systems leadership and is beginning to experience the benefits of doing so, particularly in the tight fiscal climate. Despite increasing numbers of children in the 0–4 age range, and growing diversity, the quality of services provided by the early years settings in Bristol have continued to improve. Ofsted outcomes for all providers, including childminders, are improving consistently and all nursery schools have been judged as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ while all but one SSCC inspected in 2012 have been judged ‘good’ or ‘better’, of which seven have been judged outstanding.

These improvements in outcomes did not take place by chance. Sally Jaeckle, Service Manager of their Early Years and Childcare Service, says that practitioners in Bristol have attributed these improvements to the constant search by the city for ways to reduce inequality and give every child a positive start in life, prioritising what is most important, and promoting seamless multi-agency services. More specifically, the Bristol local authority focused on:

- providing strategic leadership, monitoring the quality of provision across the sector
- building partnerships across foundation years settings
- building partnerships between foundation years settings and higher education institutions to develop professional development pathways for early years and family support practitioners
- building the capacity for collaboration with different agencies working with children and families, for example, health, the prison service and voluntary organisations
- having a clear focus on service and quality improvement using good and outstanding leaders to support others

Sally Jaeckle argues that multi-agency partnerships were developed over time by having health and EY education practitioners undergo joint training, opportunities for different partners to work together, building genuine partnerships with parents, and developing reflective practice across the sectors. The Bristol example tells us about the importance of using structures to shape relationships.

In order to achieve its strategic goals for EY children and their families, Bristol local authority is also seeing current fiscal constraint as an opportunity to sharpen its strategic focus. In partnership with stakeholders including SSCCs, the authority has identified communications and the sharing of resources as areas for improvement. Bristol has also reviewed leadership positions to give more focus and clearer accountabilities to roles and core responsibilities (please see Appendix D).

Barbara Mands, Head of Children Strategy and Business Management Service, City of York Council shared information about the York experience. Wrap-around care services were started about 10 years ago with the formation of communities called ‘shared foundation community partnerships’ (SFCPs) facilitated by the City of York Council. The SFCPs, consisting of SSCCs, playgroups, childminders, summer/holiday clubs, after/before school groups/clubs, were formed to support and develop best

practice within all early years provision in the community and to help parents access wrap-around care for their child. Practitioners meet once or twice per term with the chairperson normally rotating amongst providers. Many SFCPs have also negotiated successfully the transition reporting procedures, systems of joint working and processes for sharing of information (please see Example 2).

The early years support advisors from York local authority attend the termly/bi-termly meetings of the practitioners. The authority has in the past also contributed funding towards training, and employing a teacher with qualified teacher status (QTS) and a special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) to lead the SFCP in driving quality improvement, special educational needs, training and sharing of resources.

Another local authority led systems leadership effort to improve the early years sector is in Birmingham. The strategies applied by Birmingham local authority appear to be similar to those adopted by Bristol except that in Birmingham a deliberate stand might have been taken to institute compulsory participation in critical programmes as a condition for funding. One could speculate that Birmingham's approach has been designed with the intention of providing a clear direction and making explicit critical decision points but still giving room for choice on these matters (please see Appendix E).

The experiences of Bristol, York and Birmingham local authorities demonstrate possible models for local authority involvement in this changing landscape. These authorities have acted as facilitators, pulling together different stakeholders in the district to provide EYs and care services that centre on the needs of the child and focus on consistent improvement and challenge where performance is unsatisfactory. They have also supported the development of infrastructures to allow collaborations to take root and become sustainable, at the same time allowing leaders the space to develop ideas and practice together.

Example 5

Professional networks and sector led alliances

Children's Centre Leaders Network (CCLN)

The Children's Centre Leaders Network (CCLN) is a dynamic and growing network of professionals who have leadership roles within children's centres. Supported by the DfE and the National College, the network includes leaders from SSCCs as well as co-ordinators and local authority professionals leading outreach or early education work. Besides providing a platform for communications amongst its members and facilitating the sharing of best practices amongst them, CCLN also offers leadership capability building and direct consultation opportunities with the DfE. As a network officially sponsored by both the DfE and the National College, it has the potential of becoming an important channel of professional communication between the operational frontline and policy makers, bringing together the different levels in the system. The CCLN could also become an important platform for cross cluster or network linkages, helping in the spread of evidenced effective practices from one cluster/network to another and opportunity for joint practice development around common improvement themes.

National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)

The NDNA provides leadership to the private and voluntary early years sector at a national and local level. The focus of the organisation is to empower day nurseries to deliver sustainable high-quality care and early learning. NDNA carries out horizon scans, analyses and interprets the EY policy agenda and uses this to inform all its delivery of support and services to nurseries. As a membership association, NDNA provides thought leadership, encourages two-way communication between members and the association management, and offers a platform for practitioners to come together with the common aim of raising the quality in early years education and care.

NDNA has stated aims and an action plan to promote quality improvement. NDNA's quality networks are facilitated by 'quality experts' whose role includes the brokering of peer-to-peer support. They bring stronger and weaker settings together with the aim of raising professional knowledge, contributing to practice development and cascading good practices locally (please see Appendix F for more details on NDNA).

Pre-school Learning Alliance

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is an educational charity with a large membership base. Among the schemes offered to members is a three-stage quality improvement scheme called Reflecting on Quality developed to support self-evaluation and continuous quality improvement in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The scheme's purpose is to develop individuals as leaders and help settings sustain their development and growth around carefully identified improvement priorities.

The basic premise of the design of the scheme is that 'leaders learn in context'. The staged approach is to allow continuous improvement in the setting's practice to be embedded and entrenched. Leaders participating in Reflecting on Quality form learning communities with parents as well as children. Members are encouraged to support one another and use a mentoring style of interaction, believed to be important for sustained shared thinking and effective learning among children (please see Appendix G for further details).

Example 6

System leadership designations and deployments

System leadership is central to the National College's overall vision of a self-improving system, where schools, academies and children's centres take collective responsibility for leading, co-ordinating and delivering sustainable school improvement.

System leaders care about and have the skills and capacity to work for the success of other children as well as those in their own school. They collaborate with other leaders within and beyond their own organisations to share and develop common solutions, making efficient and effective use of resources to raise standards. They shape thinking, policy and practice so as to have a positive impact on the lives and life chances of children and young people.

The College's system leadership provision is underpinned by:

- being committed to closing the gap and taking action to lead school improvement work
- recognising the reciprocal benefits of peer-to-peer support and joint working
- moving increasingly from intervention to prevention
- accepting collective responsibility and shared accountability for performance
- ensuring there is a positive impact with measurable outcomes

The National College has established a range of designated system leadership roles with the aim of recognising and supporting leaders who are excellent at what they do and are able to help leaders in others schools to improve. These comprise:

- specialist leaders of education (SLEs)
- local leaders of education (LLEs)
- national leaders of education (NLEs) and national support schools (NSSs)
- national leaders of governance (NLGs)

Specialist leaders of education

Specialist leaders of education (SLEs) are outstanding middle and senior leaders such as assistant headteachers, key stage leaders or subject leaders, with at least two years' leadership experience. They have a particular area of expertise (for example, a subject area, early years, behaviour or special educational needs) and a successful track record of school improvement.

SLEs support leaders in other schools. They have excellent interpersonal skills, are able to work sensitively and collaboratively with others and have a commitment to outreach work. They understand what outstanding leadership practice in their area of specialism looks like and can help other leaders to achieve it.

The role focuses on developing leadership capacity. Whilst other roles (for example advanced skills teachers) focus on developing pedagogy and classroom expertise, the SLE role is about developing other leaders so that they have the skills to lead their own teams and improve practice in their own schools. This may be done through one-to-one or facilitated group support and could involve a variety of activities, such as data analysis, coaching or joint action-planning.

In April 2013, there were over 2,000 SLEs with 115 working in the early years.

Local leaders of education

Local leaders of education (LLEs) are serving headteachers or principals with at least three years' headship experience, good outcomes in attainment and Ofsted measures and a successful track record of school leadership and management.

LLEs work outside their own school, providing support to another headteacher and his or her school. The two headteachers work together to drive forward improvements. Through a coaching and mentoring approach, the LLE's support builds the supported headteacher's leadership capacity to ensure that these improvements can be sustained.

LLEs also act as professional partners, providing mentoring support to new heads in their first two years of headship as part of the Head Start programme.

In April 2013, there were over 2,000 LLEs nationally, of which 183 work with the foundation years.

National leaders of education and national support schools

National leaders of education (NLEs) are outstanding headteachers or principals who use their skills and experience to support other schools. NLEs' own schools are outstanding, with consistently high levels of pupil performance or continued improvement over the last three years. They have outstanding senior and middle leaders who have demonstrated the capacity to provide significant and successful support to underperforming schools. Their schools are designated as national support schools (NSSs) in recognition of the fact that their staff are likely to work alongside them in any support they may provide.

The aim of the programme is to support schools in the most challenging circumstances. Usually, this means schools identified as being in need of significant improvement by the DfE, Ofsted, a teaching school or a local authority. The focus of NLE/NSS work is to assist the supported school in making significant progress.

In April 2013, there were over 600 NLEs and NSSs, of which 32 NLEs work with the foundation years.

National leaders of governance

National leaders of governance (NLGs) are highly effective chairs of governors who use their skills and experience to support a chair of governors in another school or academy, providing additional support alongside provision offered by local authorities, dioceses and other partners. The two chairs work together to drive forward school improvements. Through a coaching approach, the national leader of governance support builds the supported chair's capacity to ensure that these improvements can be sustained.

All have at least three years' experience as a chair within the last five years. They have contributed to raising standards in their own school by providing appropriate support and challenge to their headteacher and by developing the governing body.

In April 2013, there were 111 national leaders of governance, of which 74 were from nursery or primary schools and therefore had an interest in the foundation stage.

Example 7

Children's centre system leadership pilot

In addition to the established system leadership designations, the National College is also piloting the children's centre system leaders (CCSL) role.

Based upon the successful LLE role (see example 6), CCSLs work with their local authority to offer a range of support for other leaders in their area. Examples include:

- peer-to-peer coaching of CC leaders by CCSLs over a defined period
- intensive hands on support by a CCSL for a targeted leader or centre
- CCSLs implementing a specific new programme across a system or cluster
- CCSLs leading leadership learning groups around a particular challenge
- CCSLs leading a focused whole system improvement programme

The pilot is running in 11 local authorities and supports approximately 50 CCSLs. The evaluation of the pilot has found evidence of a range of positive impacts. For example:

- several local authorities have achieved rapid improvement in targeted centres, with improved processes, governance and understanding of data leading to better, more targeted provision
- in two local authorities, CCSLs led targeted programmes across the CC network resulting in increased provision for and take up by key vulnerable groups
- in many local authorities, centres were supported by CCSLs so they could better demonstrate and evidence the impact of their work to Ofsted, typically resulting in better gradings than would otherwise have been achieved
- in many pilot local authorities, there was evidence of stronger partnerships within a locality or cluster resulting from CCSL support, and improved outreach
- almost all pilot local authorities reported that peer-to-peer support was an effective way to share good practice, build leadership capacity, and drive improvement

Appendix B: National teaching schools

The role and who it is for

Teaching schools are part of the government's drive to give schools more freedom and to enable schools to take increasing responsibility for managing the education system. They will provide coherent training and development for new and experienced teachers and leaders, which in turn supports school improvement and meets the needs and context of the local area.

Teaching schools are among the best schools in the country. They are outstanding in their own performance and have a track record of working with others to raise standards for children and young people beyond their own school.

Designation is open to all types of school including primary, middle, secondary, all-through, special, pupil referral unit, short-stay schools, academies, schools in chains, free schools, faith schools, independent schools, sixth form colleges and nursery schools.

Teaching schools have six key roles. These are to:

1. Play a greater role in recruiting and training new entrants to the profession (initial teacher training).
2. Lead peer-to-peer professional and leadership development (continuing professional development).
3. Identify and develop leadership potential (succession planning and talent management).
4. Provide support for other schools.
5. Designate and broker SLEs.
6. Engage in research and development activity.

How it works

The first 100 teaching schools were designated in July 2011, followed by a second cohort in March 2012. By 2014/15 the College aims to have established a network of around 500 teaching schools that will have driven significant improvement in the quality of professional practice and pupil attainment.

The quality of a teaching school's partnerships will be critical to its success. Each teaching school works closely with a group of schools and other partners (for example, universities or local authorities), known as its alliance, to deliver the key teaching school roles. The alliance may be cross-phase, cross-local authority or cross-region: the model is flexible and enables schools to build on existing partnerships where appropriate.

There is no minimum or maximum size and an alliance may include more than one designated teaching school.

Some alliance members are strategic partners. These are schools or other partners that take responsibility for some of the teaching school's delivery (though it is the teaching school's responsibility to ensure that the work of its strategic partners meets the high standards expected).

A number of alliances may decide to work together to form a network, to share services, pool funding or to offer support to a larger community of schools.

Appendix C: SSCs, nursery schools and family centres in partnership

Everton Nursery School and Family Centre

Everton Nursery School and Family Centre (ENSFC) was judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2004, 2008 and 2011. It has been an Early Excellence Centre since 2001 and a children's centre since 2003. It has been providing system leadership initially to local partners, and later expanded this to regional and national partners. ENSFC is a nursery school, daycare provider and children's centre for over 134 children on-site and 800 families with children under 5 in the children's centre. ENSFC has achieved the Team Teach Gold Standard (2011), National Inclusion Quality Mark (2012) and the Investors in People Silver Award (2011). The head of ENSFC, Lesley Curtis, commented that the multi-disciplinary nature of the site provides a wealth of opportunity to share with colleagues.

Lesley recounted that over the last 13 years her role changed dramatically. Initially, she had a team of 16 staff, and she had to grow the team to 50 (all with varying terms and conditions of service) through creative, well-organised and flexible staffing structures in order to provide the services needed. The key challenge was to nurture and train the team to a high level so that they could role model high quality early education with care through demonstration lessons, learning walks, coaching, mentoring, practitioner training and conferences. Staff at all levels, including the business manager, ICT co-ordinator and daycare manager, have been involved in supporting partners.

ENSFC has partnerships with a range of early years settings both on and off-site. ENSFC has link learning partnerships with 12 local primary schools to which the centre provides access to the Forest Schools programme, outdoor programmes and ICT to foundation age children. Other aspects of their practice shared with partners include environmental awareness and inclusion. ENSFC has even produced DVDs and booklets for practitioners, parents and carers.

Apart from providing programmes for children and sharing research about programmes designed for children, ENSFC has also provided support for school staff development programme evaluation. In addition, they have developed innovative programmes on initial teacher training with partners. From 2005-2008, ENSFC facilitated the NPQICL programme on-site. They have also facilitated a 20-credit module on early years leadership and management at Master's level. ENSFC's engagement with university partners has provided an opportunity for her to be engaged in the teaching schools initiative. Arising from efforts in professional development, school and centre leaders have pursued professional qualifications which support their leadership in their own school or centre.

Lesley Curtis reflected that her role was to oversee the practice, look into quality assurance and co-ordinate collaborations and visits, both voluntary and statutory. She encourages her staff to be outward looking and reflective, to be continuously self-evaluating, and to seek ways of delivering services to bring about the next improvement. Looking back, she thinks ENSFC has delivered high quality support to a range of schools since 2000 both in meeting the Early Years Foundation Stage standards and special educational needs (SEN), and this is supported by written/oral feedback.

(Contributed by Dr Lesley Curtis, Headteacher, Everton Nursery School and Family Centre).

Appendix D: City-wide systems leadership (1)

Bristol local authority

Early years systems leadership in Bristol embraces the new role of local authorities in championing the most vulnerable children by:

- i. providing strategic leadership that establishes a vision, rooted in partnership with schools and settings and a commitment to collegiality
- ii. monitoring the quality of provision across the sector (using both Ofsted and locally developed criteria) and identifying strengths and areas for development/improvement
- iii. building capacity through generating opportunities for collaborative working with other agencies and pooling resources, including, for example, health, the prison service, *Safer Bristol* and voluntary organisations
- iv. building capacity through working with foundation education and health education partners to develop progression routes for early years and family support practitioners, from level 2/3 to post-graduate, and providing bursaries for under-represented groups
- v. signposting and brokering support according to need
- vi. assuring the quality of services on outcomes and promoting an evidence-based approach to improvement
- vii. using joint needs assessment data to identify priorities, at city and community level, to secure an equitable approach to the deployment of resources and value for money

With reduced early years funding and the removal of ring-fencing, leadership roles and responsibilities across the local authority were reviewed, and a smaller, sharper and more focused local authority leadership team now fulfill the leadership roles. The local authority is committed to identifying and developing expertise from the sector to support continuing professional development (CPD) across identified priority areas. The local authority early years leadership team now includes:

- i. An early years improvement officer – leading on quality improvement and early education priorities in early years settings and schools (including childminders).
- ii. A children's centre improvement officer – leading termly quality improvement conversations with children's centre leaders.
- iii. A family support and partnerships manager – leading the development of integrated family services.
- iv. An inclusion manager – leading the development of services for vulnerable children and children with complex needs and disabilities.

The local authority is establishing new sector leadership roles (similar to the SLE role) to address identified priorities such as children aged up to three, family support, inclusion, speech, language and communication, early mathematical thinking, assessment and transition.

Settings that have been judged good or outstanding will be asked to submit expressions of interest in taking on these roles. The successful sector leaders will model effective practice and provide opportunities for continuing professional development across the sector, including supported visits, mentoring and coaching. A small amount of funding will be provided by the local authority to release staff for one day a week so that they can play these roles.

The local authority leadership team will now provide an infrastructure of support for these sector leaders, including professional development and supervision, and will maintain a brokerage and monitoring role to inform ongoing improvements.

Bristol has a strong early years profile, including 12 maintained nursery schools, all of which have been judged good or better by Ofsted. The majority of Bristol's children's centres are managed by nursery schools or primary schools and seven have been judged outstanding under the new Ofsted children's centre framework. Eight have been judged good to date and only one has been judged satisfactory.

A consortium of three children's centres is currently part of the early years teaching centre Pen Green pilot and the local authority has been engaged as an active and equal partner throughout this process. The authority is already commissioning the early years teaching centre pilot consortium to deliver Forest School experience, supervision training (to meet the new EYFS expectations), leadership and support for early maths CPD, including the development of an early maths Master's module in partnership with Bath Spa University and the local authority. It is hoped that if designated as a teaching school there will be further opportunities for initial training of teachers and leadership development, including the development of new leaders to secure succession planning.

(Contributed by Sally Jaeckle, Service Manager, Early Years, Early Years and Child Care Services, Bristol).

Appendix E: City-wide systems leadership (2)

Birmingham

A consortium of five outstanding nursery schools and children's centres in Birmingham has successfully developed EYTCs into a city-wide approach, with far reaching effects on outcomes. The EYTC consortium helped to set up an early years improvement group for Birmingham, and is now leading the development of an early years improvement strategy for the city. The group includes a collaboration of 26 nursery schools in the city, children's centre teachers, early years consultants, children's centre area managers, primary school heads and early years teacher centre representatives. The group reports to the Children's Trust Board.

The key strategy is the early years locality networks led by nursery schools and children's centres in each of the 16 localities across the city. The monthly network meetings bring together the whole range of partners mentioned above and provide platforms for professional support in areas including assessment, transition, parent engagement and creativity. To encourage participation, attendance at these meetings has been made the condition for funding of two, three and four-year-olds. The locality networks are also helping to identify areas of work currently held by the LA and finding partners to work on them together.

Further support is provided through a 'team around the setting' approach within each locality, which may take the form of visits to settings, modelling good practice, or specially tailored training.

Every child in Birmingham is tracked and all funded settings are required to use the same assessment procedures. The profile of the children from assessments has shown an improving trend.

(Contributed by Dr Margy Whalley, Director of the Pen Green Research and Birmingham EYTC Consortium members).

Appendix F: Early years teaching centre (EYTC)

Pen Green

The Pen Green Centre for Children and Families in Corby, Northamptonshire was established some 30 years ago as an integrated centre to serve an ethnically diverse community. Just over 90 children attend the nursery and 21 languages are spoken by their families.

As an EYTC, Pen Green focuses on identifying the most vulnerable children and families. Staff have developed a comprehensive system for monitoring children's progress called Making Children's Learning Visible (MCLV) which helped them to reflect on which children and families were most vulnerable. They have also been working with parents in ways that celebrates and draws on parents' knowledge of their own children. In addition, they have involved parents in discussing how to make judgements on their children's learning. Parents have given feedback that they are now more confident in supporting their children in learning and in being advocates for their children.

The EYTC has worked to make profile data available to all Early Years Foundation Stage 1 settings so that they can now see the outcomes of the children one year after they have left the nursery. The EYTC has also collaborated with private and voluntary institutions around training and on the children's transition to school.

East Lancashire

This is a consortium of Fairfield, Staghills and Whitegate nursery schools and children's centres in East Lancashire. The consortium has developed individual key strengths. For example, Fairfield has a focus on improving outcomes for children through improving the quality of childminding. They have developed an accredited childminding network. Working with 31 childminders who are now qualified to level 3, there is already a significant impact on quality. They are working with a local university to support the accreditation of their training courses for level 4. They have also supported the childminders through home visits, group supervision and mentoring.

The EYTC consortium is also working with the local authority to assess the progress of each child and to track learning outcomes. The consortium is also working with local schools to help them develop early reading skills.

(Contributed by Dr Margy Whalley, Director of the Pen Green Research and Development Base, East Lancashire EYTC Consortium members).

Appendix G:

Professional associations/charities providing systems leadership (1)

The National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)

NDNA provides leadership to the private and voluntary nursery sector at a national and local level. Established in 1999, the charity's focus is to empower nurseries to deliver sustainable high-quality care and early learning. At a national level NDNA is a strategic partner and critical friend to government. NDNA horizon scans, analyses and interprets the early years policy agenda and uses this to inform all its delivery of support and services to nurseries.

As a membership association, NDNA provides leadership by bringing people together with the common aim of raising quality in early years and members sign up to this principle when they join the association. A governance structure across the three home nations provides elected representation on NDNA's strategic board and three national policy committees with strong two-way communication channels with the member base.

At local level, NDNA quality networks build the capacity of the sector, bringing together nurseries to focus on professional and practice development. Facilitated and supported by NDNA expert practitioners, NDNA quality networks have stated aims and an action plan to promote quality improvement, with a model that develops peer-to-peer support from trained quality champions in stronger settings to weaker settings, cascading good practice locally. Evaluation shows an 82 per cent positive rating for increased confidence and knowledge by network participants.

NDNA has also developed an online quality scheme specifically for nurseries. A tool consisting of 15 sections, covering all areas of management of nursery business, has been made available online to support nurseries in self-assessment, reflection, planning and development. This tool has been mapped against the Early Years Foundation Stage, the Early Years Foundation Phase and Curriculum for Excellence.

(Contributed by Claire Schofield, Director of Membership, Policy and Communication, National Day Nurseries Association).

Appendix H:

Professional associations/charities providing systems leadership (2)

Pre-school Learning Alliance

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is a membership organisation and a voluntary sector provider of childcare and education. This educational charity has 14,000 members serving over 800,000 children and families every year.

Among the schemes offered to members is a three-stage quality improvement scheme called Reflecting on Quality developed to support self-evaluation and continuous quality improvement in the Early Years Foundation Stage. The scheme's overriding ethos is to develop individuals as leaders and help settings sustain their growth and development.

Some key considerations in the development of the scheme included personal effectiveness, leadership, team-building, communication, staff development and communication skills. The basic premise in developing the scheme was that 'leaders learn in context'. There are three stages to the scheme.

In the first stage of this scheme, participants are involved in self-reflection around how the team members work together and how this can be developed to create a learning community. It aims to strengthen links between personal and professional development and between individual development and the development of the whole setting.

Hopes and aspirations of practitioners and parents provide a basis for observing, reflecting on and in places, improving existing practice in the second stage. Observation is carried out directly by practitioners and by consulting parents and listening to children to gather their observations and perspectives.

The third stage of the scheme supports the identification of an aspect of already effective practice that can be developed further. These developments then form the basis of case studies that can be shared with parents, local authorities and the wider early years community.

To encourage ownership by the early years setting of the quality improvement process, teams are asked to set their own deadlines for completion of each of the three qualitatively different but overlapping stages. The staged approach is designed to embed continuous improvement in the setting's practice. Throughout the scheme the emphasis is on team members supporting one another by using a mentoring style of interaction. In many ways mentoring mirrors the style of interaction that is known to support sustained shared thinking and promote effective learning in children.

This importance of the development of the leader and the setting together has led to a plan to develop 15 module assignments for the Institute for Leadership and Management level 4 award based on continuous improvement in the settings. This will fit well with Reflecting on Quality's emphasis on the importance and value of active learning for adults and shared leadership across the setting.

(Contributed by Wanda Allen, Accreditation Manager, Pre-school Learning Alliance).

Appendix I:

Professional associations/charities providing systems leadership (3)

The National Childminding Association (NCMA)

The NCMA's mission is to establish and maintain high standards of service delivery in childminding. NCMA supports its members by providing advice, information and opportunities to learn. They create a community for sharing of ideas and experiences.

NCMA has been commissioned by the DfE to create NCMA Local, which consists of local peer support networks for Ofsted registered childminders and nannies. The goals are to provide ongoing professional support to childminders, improve retention, alleviate professional hardship – including the feeling of isolation – and ensure their continuing professional development. These goals will be achieved through peer support sessions and online networking. Both childminders and nannies will be invited to join these networks and participation will be voluntary.

The networks will be facilitated by fellow childminders or nannies. The role of this NCMA local facilitator is one of facilitation alone, as neither managerial or coordination roles will be included. They will encourage local childminders and nannies to come together both physically and online to share experiences and develop solutions for common problems. They will lead and steer conversations and be a positive role model to other childminders and nannies. They will be trained to play this role and will be supported by guidance handbooks, templates, and ongoing networking sessions. Initially, there will be one local facilitator per local authority.

There are currently 76 NCMA local peer support networks across the local authorities in England. The initial response has been positive with users and facilitators reporting that they have benefited from these networks. The networks have created communities in which advice, support and guidance can be sought. These communities have also offered opportunities for individual practitioners to gather and organise joint activities for the children, hence expanding the learning horizons for the children, and to work jointly on projects.

(Contributed by Catherine Farrell and Liz Bayram, Joint Chief Executives, and Amanda Carmichael, Director of Membership, NCMA).

Glossary

Academy chains: Academies are publicly-funded independent schools. Academies receive their funding directly from the Education Funding Agency (EFA) instead of the local authority but the amount of funding is the same level per-pupil amount. Academies have greater freedom over how they use their budgets to benefit their students. Academy chains consist of a group of academies that have pledged to support each other and their collaborations are often formalised.

Clusters: A group of schools working together, often with some operational and organisational integration across the members. Compared to networks, arrangements of collaboration are often more formal and structured.

Early years teaching centres: These are outstanding Sure Start children's centres identified to explore ways to train and support early years and childcare staff in their respective local communities. This project is funded by the DfE, and the aim is to set up a national network to support staff capacity building.

Federations: Federations consist of schools that have come to a formal written agreement on ways of working together to raise standards of service for their students. This is an arrangement invoked in the 2002 Education Act allowing the formation of a single governing body or committee across two or more schools. Federations are clusters, but not all clusters are federations.

Governance: Governance of organisations and systems include the setting of broad direction and boundaries, deciding on what the accountabilities are and who should be accountable, and what matters need permission from the governing body.

Network: An informal group of schools that have come together to collaborate on areas of common interest.

Sure Start children's centres: These centres bring together different support agencies to provide integrated services for young children and their families. The range of services they provide range from those directed towards the child, from prenatal care through to the reception year, as well as their parents and families.

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