

Achieving the long-term aspiration: 'Getting there' in Birmingham
(June 2006)

Underlying assumption

The work of any partnership is not to do the work of the partners. From the beginning of the Core Skills Development Partnership it has clearly never attempted to do that. In 1996 it was not the Partnership's job to manage schools, act as an 'umbrella' for the voluntary/community sector, organise training for young people and adults, nor get more people employable and into jobs with ongoing training.

Developments 1995-2005

The job of the organisations signed up to the partnership arrangements from 1995 to 2005 (from an initial situation of low levels of achievement, and sparse levels of activity to change things on a large scale) was to demonstrate and help develop models, that:

- increased exposure to books, to language, to reading/writing/speaking/listening experiences for under 5s
- created a sustained, taught, consistent set of approaches to reading/writing/speaking and listening as part of everyday lessons in schools
- wrapped younger children around with more books; more activities related to reading and writing; created more opportunities to discuss books (including opening up more access to authors) – for more hours in the week. Opportunities to enhance literacy and numeracy skills were almost inescapable.
- engaged far more parents than ever imaginable in literacy, language and numeracy activities with their children (0-14)
- tested out widespread, sustainable models that schools could build into their everyday work re support for those needing an extra focus on language development; 'curriculum catch up' activities to prevent groups of pupils being left behind within the general enhancing of literacy, language and numeracy skills; sort out e.g. language development needs from special educational needs.
- tested out alternative pathways, gateways, and 'employability' approaches (with literacy, language and numeracy practices embedded within them) for 14-16 and 16-19 year olds
- raised the literacy, language and numeracy content (and quality of content) within the wider curriculum subjects at secondary school – supported by a network of improved school libraries and homework/revision supports across the network of public libraries
- enabled libraries to shift their profile of users (to bring in more socially-excluded groups; to open up the resources to more teenagers from Pakistani/Bangladeshi communities; to engage more looked after children; to undertake more work with adults with low literacy and language skills; and to do more work with families)
- put many more books into circulation (with a boost of 70,000 free books to one year olds; 20,000 free books to seven year olds; more books/magazines for teenagers into the library system (with young people having an impact into stock choice); waves of book loans for

- creative use within schools; stocks of books into Children's Homes, study centres, community nurseries etc, and to promote the value of books through festivals, on-line activities, use of writers etc.
- trained school teachers; private/community nursery staff; adult learning teachers; youth workers; librarians; members of voluntary and community groups; business skills advisers etc
 - developed tools that could be adopted city wide for literacy, language and numeracy skills assessment and training (at a range of ages); made more use of data and assessment for planning 'next steps' learning
 - developed literacy, language and numeracy support materials that could be used in formal and informal learning contexts
 - unlocked far more volunteers (with more consistent forms of training and support) to assist others further develop their language and literacy skills (across primary/secondary/adult sectors – including volunteers from businesses and volunteers operating within community groups).
 - put consistent sets of software into learning venues, and trained staff in use of ICT resources for assessment and learning of adult basic skills.

For a description of the seven year process from 1996 to 2003 see 'Moving the Mountain' (www.coreskills.co.uk/download/index.html)

In the 1996-2003 period the developments tested out across Birmingham helped to create a business case momentum (with large-scale, demonstrable and robust models of implementation) for whole-city literacy, language and numeracy developments. The developments in Birmingham fed into, and benefited from, emerging national approaches. These early developments were mainstreamed through the national strategies at primary and secondary level, through the adult Skills for Life strategy, building the base for a range of national models. The aim was to influence national frameworks and then implement developments, within the frameworks, taking them as fast, as deep as wide as possible across the system.

Senior managers from the organisations in Birmingham, who were actively involved, believe that we did this very successfully. This belief is endorsed by an extensive external evaluation of the approach taken, by the national recognition given to the work of learning and skills agencies in the city, and by the faster-than-average rise in achievement rates. The work in Birmingham is recorded in the quantifiable range of raised skills for people across the age range.

The interagency partnership ways of working around literacy, language and numeracy developments were initially unique, even if now accepted as the expected norm. The approach has had national (and international) recognition in a variety of ways.

Gains made over ten years

Birmingham has very much, in many senses, been a pathfinder and, after ten years, has partially 'got there' in terms of its longer term aspirations to be an

'above average' city. The basic skills situation in Birmingham in 2006 shows real gains made since 1996:

- ❑ Overall Birmingham has made outstanding gains in achievement levels, with further increase in skills levels being planned (at Foundation stage; Key Stage 1; Key Stage 2; Key Stage 3 and GCSE levels) to 2009. Resources are available to raise schools and localities above a 'floor level', and to reinvigorate some organisations to aspire to even higher levels. Particular work is needed with a number of primary schools. The targets to 2009, and the means to ensure these outcomes, are set out in the Children and Young People Plan.
- ❑ Responsibility for securing these planned outcomes now rests with the Children and Young People's Board (and its Operations Group), sitting within the broader Local Area Agreement framework and the city's Community Strategy.
- ❑ Within these improved overall outcomes there is also a closing of many of the attainment gaps between the highest and lowest performing areas and communities. These groups are now known in detail and work has been done to describe the further practical steps that need to be taken in order to ensure that gaps are progressively closed further.
- ❑ From a situation where adult basic skills was seen as a relatively isolated part of Learning and Skills Council programmes, the Skills for Life developments have been woven into the work of a wide range of teams concerned with learning and skills programmes being offered to people 16+ (and the 14-19 programmes that feed into these). This is being taken forward within a regional skills framework and is shifting from a broad set of developments around participation, quality and achievement (which was initially needed to raise the whole 'platform' of adult basic skills) to more focused work with particular low skill groups (in order to ensure that those most in need are able to make substantial progress).
- ❑ Birmingham providers are making a larger than anticipated contribution to the Public Service Agreement targets for adult basic skills. This data has been analysed in ways that point to next step developments via Learning and Skills Council local planning mechanisms.
- ❑ Over a five year period many of the basic skills achievement gaps, between different localities and different groups of people, have been substantially closed. Strong links have been made between basic skills improvement and the city's community strategy and aspirations around neighbourhood renewal.
- ❑ Literacy, language and numeracy are now recognised as core components of work with the rehabilitation of offenders and reduction of reoffending; of employability work with claimants and unemployed people; and of programmes to raise the skills levels of low-skill workers. The Learning and Skills Council has overall responsibility for these but works closely with a range of local and regional partners to secure the best outcomes and the best value.

- ❑ There is now an established broad range of programmes to sustain young people and adults' interests in books, writing and writers. From a situation of random, spasmodic public sector activities these programmes now are linked more into private sector organisations and are moving closer to being a new managed set of services.

Clearly much has changed over a ten year period:

- the focus on core skills is now substantial and system-wide
- attainment levels have risen faster than in other comparable cities, with the work still to be done being more clearly understood
- the case for developments being taken forward on a wide multi agency, jointly-planned, outcomes-driven basis is accepted – the interagency ways of working on a range of developments, and with core skills embedded in them, are now expected as the norm
- some of the approaches and mechanisms associated with the Core Skills Development Partnership approach have been built into the new agendas and structures, for example:
 - ❑ interagency planning of those developments that are collectively judged to be most valuable
 - ❑ long term (5-7 year) outcomes focused planning with annual deliverable steps on the way
 - ❑ joint decision-making about best use of development resources
 - ❑ creation of a focus on the big picture whilst delivering on separate parts of it
 - ❑ new ways of staff working together

The challenge for the future – what next re further core skills improvements?

The challenges, from 2006 onwards, include the need to further embed basic skills developments within the much broader set of learning and skills developments that are the concern of the City Strategic Partnership, to further close the gaps between different areas of the city, and to reinvigorate basic skills momentum where progress seems to have stalled.

One task is to recognise where various organisations have got to in the drive to take Birmingham to 'well above average' in terms of levels of literacy, language and numeracy skills and to identify where energies need to be put next. This involves recognising the differences between applying existing strategies to continue the steady improvement of organisations and the development of new approaches that will have different leverages on specific parts of the system.

The systems and structures put in place will continue to lift standards in the city but 'more of the same' is not going to fully lift Birmingham to its higher aspirational level. It is clear that there are new areas of development to be explored, prototyped, challenged etc – and that it is often somewhat beyond the current systems and structures to do this work. New, joint approaches continue to be needed, bringing in a wider range of organisations whilst retaining a focus of purpose and a commitment to open collaborative development work.