

Presentation to Basic Skills Networks in Australia 2004

In response to joint support from Australian Council for Adult Literacy and Adult Learning Australia, I was delighted to be able to take part in a number of events and to:

- describe some of the journey that Birmingham, England, has made in trying to drive up levels of language, literacy and numeracy (for all ages; via all organisations i.e. taking a 'whole Birmingham' approach).
- describe how the development work to improve adult literacy/numeracy outcomes in the city was interacting with the more recent national whole-of-government developments.
- set this in a context of Birmingham's wider aspirations to be a city that is 'learning about learning'; and the attempts to create neighbourhoods where learning is one element in ensuring that they are places where residents are happy to live and work.

Ten years ago the state of learning was such that two thirds of children entered secondary school with a low skills set, such that they were unlikely to be able to really get to grips with the secondary school curriculum. One result of this was a 20-25% 'success rate' at age 16, in terms of school leavers having the levels of language, numeracy and literacy skills to underpin their transferable employability across into their first job and on into subsequent jobs or promotions. Whilst 9,000 adults were in basic skills classes, with around 3,000 substantially making progress each year, the entry of an equivalent number of underachieving school leavers into the 'pot' meant that the overall size of the adult problem remained the same year-on-year.

There was a realisation that Birmingham's ambition to be a forward-moving city was being absolutely held back, in a number of ways, by these 'drag effects' of low levels of basic skills. The mechanisms to bring about change (annual development bids; fragmentary attempts at being 'innovative'; short term funding; disconnected developments even across different parts of the same organisation, let alone across different organisations; 'either/or' arguments about educational approaches; focusing on processes, meetings, ownerships, structures rather than on a concerted drive to make real tangible differences to people's lives etc) had got us to where we were, so weren't going to be the solution looked for.

If we were to make real, lasting differences to the ways that people were helped to get the necessary skills (in ways that people could have some choice over); within relatively short timescales ('3-5 years to transform the system'); in ways that would impact on huge numbers ('every school pupil', 70,000 adult learners etc) – then a totally new approach had to be tried out.

In 1995 the major education and training bodies across the city signed up to working in partnership and to having joint development money sitting behind a jointly agreed annual business plan ('this is how much change we're going to bring about this year – and this is how we're going to pay for those changes').

All of this was ambitious and innovative at the time. The approach is now also being used at regional level (an English region covers around 6 or 7 million people). The national 'Skills for Life' adult basic skills strategy introduced, in 2001, similarly takes a cross-cabinet whole-government approach with a key strategic objectives and a coherent set of developments.

In all cases the purpose is to ensure that larger numbers of learners get ready access to an appropriate, high quality service whichever part of the system they find themselves in and they then can expect to make relevant progress in acquiring skills. Previously the variability in effectiveness between providers was too great, learners were far from guaranteed any substantial outcome to their learning and moving from one bit of the system to another could easily mean the learner disappearing down the gulfs, or being endlessly reassessed by different organisations etc.

The realisation that the partner organisations couldn't solve their problems alone, and the commitment to get real about finding a way of productive working in partnership that would focus on maximising change and keeping procedural structures to an absolute minimum, was all begun in a different political climate to the one that exists now. The work was started before any national school literacy or numeracy strategies; before the election of the current government; at a time when publicly funded organisations were often being defined as the problem not as potentially the solution; when some historical funding was being shifted onto more modern agendas (but coming across as 'cuts') etc etc. As the national context changed, the Partnership has a close interaction with emerging national developments (having both fed up into those developments, and drawn the benefits down as quickly and widely as possible)

The original 'start-off' long-term development resources were gained by redefining an area-based regeneration budget as being applicable to the regeneration of people (through higher skills etc) rather than simply assuming that it only applied to physical regeneration. Since then there have been a number of budgets that have been lined up behind the joint commitment for change.

The Partnership made rapid success early on. Reflecting on why it was able to be so effective from the beginning has highlighted a few key elements (that are adaptable to other developmental contexts):

- The key partners were those able to bring about large-scale change to parts of the education/learning infrastructure. They were the organisations responsible for running chunks of the system; their Chief Executives/Leaders met as a strategic board 3-4 times/year to focus on 'How far have we got? What's the distance still to travel? What still needs changing? What needs to be done to make it happen?' The senior managers of the same organisations then came together to put together the annual business plan and to make sure that their own teams and own delivery mechanisms were best placed to respond.
- A systems of loose 'attachments' of key development workers, for a small proportion of their time, to the Partnership meant that the partner

organisations had a direct mechanism for discussions with each other, on a day to day basis, about what ideas each were thinking of. It also meant that the recurring, common 'Partnership' messages were able to be fed constantly and directly into the planning mechanisms of the various partners. This was vital since the Partnership was intended not to take on a life of its own, but to operate by influencing the ways the various partners planned and delivered their mainstream services.

- The focus was kept on changing how people do their existing jobs (within the confines of those things that the Partnership was unable to change – even though we were able to influence much more than we had at first thought) – and what supports and challenges they needed to be able to successfully make those changes. Initially these were mostly 'education workers' i.e. school teachers and support staff; college and adult education teachers and learner-support people; but soon included librarians; staff of preschool groups; community workers; probation service staff; health service workers; people in social benefit and work-linked offices etc. This focus on changing systems and processes kept it well away from the old agenda of 'doing projects'.
- The other dimension to focusing on change was to keep stressing that we were engaged in development activity i.e. were a Development Partnership. Reports to the Board mentioned money only in passing – the focus was kept on 'change' and on 'getting there'. How will we know when we've got there? What more needs to change to sort out e.g. secondary schools? When can the Partnership think about ending?
- The business planning against the same strategic objectives meant that, although the emphasis may change from year to year, rapid progress would be made across a broad set of fronts, in ways that went faster, deeper, wider than any partner organisation on their own could manage.

The scale of the task was set as challenging as possible whilst still being just at the edge of being realistically feasible. For example, the task around adult basic skills was to halve the problem over the ten years from 2000 to 2010. The 140,000 adults with low levels of basic skills would be reduced to 70,000. This would be achievable if we reduced the 'flow' in from schools by working to double the success rate of school leavers (which we did); by doubling the number of adults working seriously on the gaps in their spiky profile of basic skills (which we have more than achieved); and by improving the achievements on courses (which we are currently doing).

70,000 felt like an unmanageable number, but over 10 years it meant 7,000 'successes' per year. The types of people likely to have low basic skills were known, as were the programmes designed to meet these needs. Breaking the 7,000 down into these groups and looking at how individuals progressed through the various programmes, most relevant to those groups, made the whole thing feel much more do-able.

We needed ever more reliable and ever more disaggregated data and that was something we put energy and resources into. Analysing this data has

helped us be more and more specific about what needs accelerating, for what groups of people, in which locations across the city – which has helped pinpoint the agencies already engaged with those learners and the most appropriate responses to make.

In some cases this has led to clarifying the roles (signposting to other provision; doing initial assessments; meeting people's needs but not necessarily by direct teaching etc) that staff can play in housing, in libraries, in community groups etc. Some of the work has been practical (producing helpful checklists or exemplars; confirming the roles already played; pointing out the gaps and the things that might be done); some of the work was more on attitudes and assumptions (unravelling that adult learners mostly didn't mind assessment and achievement, if done properly); lifting the definition of adult basic skills to mean much, much more than being equated with learners who are likely to make fairly slow progress to focus on the larger numbers who may need a rapid, intensive, focused brush up on specific, neutral skills.

Considerable progress has been made:

- literacy levels are climbing – halving the need by 2010 is quite feasible
- numeracy is a huge problem – larger need; few classes; very few skilled teachers etc – but we're focusing on it
- basic skills work has a high profile – and in many ways is leading the way
- literacy, language and numeracy issues have been built into a range of other developments and is one of several key commitments in the long term Community Plan for the area
- literacy and numeracy issues have been connected across to the progress to be made if Birmingham is to make progress in its aspiration to be a learning city and if it is to raise the levels in particular neighbourhoods.

All of this is exciting stuff - but challenging - and necessary, which is what keeps us going and why we are happy to exchange ideas with others as much as possible.