

Update (June 2011)

In 2003 a couple of presentations were made under the title of 'Moving the mountain: Halfway there'. An audio version and a text version of this are in the Articles section of the website and are well worth revisiting. The presentation (to audiences in Birmingham and in Vancouver) described the establishment of the whole Core Skills Development approach in 1995, the long-term 15-20 year ambitions, and the activities and progress secured in the seven of eight years up to 2003. It was judged, at that time, that Birmingham had had great success in shifting organisational practices, changing professional expectations, lifting management aspirations, establishing more integrated and collaborative working, and increasing the levels of voluntary/community support – with gains showing through in higher levels of core skills for people of all ages across the city. All of this added up to an assessment that Birmingham was about halfway there in the longer-term aspirations for the city. Since that time, further progress has been made.

Earlier updates have described this progress. Alongside this determined effort for change there were, however, some unanticipated things that slowed things down:

- Although great progress has been made in improving overall levels of the early language development of 0-5 year olds, we underestimated the extent to which English language levels of parents would remain at weak levels. This was partly due to the slowness in the ways English for Speakers of Other Language provision was able to change things, and partly due to increases in the number of new arrivals with low levels of spoken English. Early language developments continue to be needed – with a more consolidated focus in 2011; and more remains to be done to support adults to improve their own spoken English.
- In an earlier update we commented on the ways that the initial approach to developments in schools (with its reliance on teacher flexibilities; its use of ongoing assessment for next steps development; its encouragement for schools to improve against their own previous best benchmarks; its focus on enjoyment and interest in learning etc) was changed through national interventions into an over-focus on league tables, reactions around external inspections, formulaic teaching for assessment etc. We did not anticipate the extent to which professional decision-making of schools or of the advisory service in the city would become driven by that same, misplaced agenda. It is encouraging therefore to see some loosening up again and a recognition that literacy, language and numeracy skills in practice are much more than what gets reflected in simple test results. If the will is there, on behalf of children in Birmingham, then there is scope for further explorations, professional stretching, enjoyment and achievement.
- At secondary school level Birmingham had improved from an unacceptably low baseline to a much more credible position in relation to national expectations and needs. The number of schools below the (albeit somewhat arbitrary) national benchmark was reduced from 27 to zero. New benchmarks are being put in place and, if tackled in the right ways,

these can similarly be met. At the same time we underestimated the extent to which the pattern of secondary school provision would become dominated by issues of school status, local structures and the changing role of the local authority. If Birmingham can get beyond these preoccupations to retain a focus on what needs to be done to get almost all of its young people competent in functional literacy, language and numeracy then there is no logical reason why further substantial gains should not be made.

- The drivers that result in too many 16-19 year old young people being out of education, training or employment, have been well understood. Focused work was put in place which resulted in a 50% reduction of those in this category. There was a higher than anticipated set of funding changes and service re-designs relating to programmes for 16-19 year olds. The focused approach is being continued and it is possible to get an even stronger set of leverages in place to produce even better outcomes for such young people.
- For adults, similarly, great progress has been made over the past 16 years. Adult literacy and numeracy skill levels are at an all-time high. Internal floor targets for local areas in the city have all been surpassed. The skills gaps (e.g. between employed and unemployed; between highest and lowest attaining localities; and between various communities in the city) have been progressively closed. We did not anticipate the number of organisational restructurings that would weaken the drive forward on this. A new national skills survey is planned for autumn 2011 and this should recreate some of the lost momentum.

All of the above represents substantial change to date, with more still to be done if at least 95% of all children are to be 'school ready'; if 95% of young people are to have adequate core employability skills; if 95% of adults are to be functionally literate and numerate – all in 8 to 10 years time.

This may, in the current context, sound aspirational but unrealistic – just as the initial proposals felt in the 1995-2003 period, and some of the further progress made in 2003-2011 felt in the early years of this century. The approach that produced the successes to 'halfway there', and the progress since, can similarly drive the next phase of consolidated development 2011-15 which (if securely in place) will deliver the aspirations in 2015-20.

One recurring theme within the above is the extent to which planned drives forward have been slowed by energies being drawn off into dealing with national or local restructurings. Birmingham, as a system of learning, does not cope well with institutional change. This is something that links back to its aspiration to be more of an adaptable, learning city and is something that will need to be reflected on if the outcomes for residents are to be secured rapidly enough.