Leading in Local Areas

Government policy continues to carry a clear direction of travel aimed at localist and devolved approaches. There is an emerging cross-party consensus on the need for further devolved approaches and acknowledgement that LEPs in some form are set to remain a central feature of the landscape of English local economic growth for the foreseeable future.

The emergence of new localist mechanisms and infrastructure such as Local Growth Deals, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), Community Budgeting, City Deals, elected mayors, combined local authority programmes and other devolved or 'devo' arrangements presents a challenge for leaders and those involved in governance within the Education and Training sector. The 2014 Scottish referendum amplified the degree of attention being paid to arrangements for English devolution.

The Education and Training sector therefore will increasingly be expected to work with devolved entities tasked with multiple economic growth priorities including infrastructure, transportation, employment and skills. Clearly, the sector needs to look at how to engage with and influence this agenda.

Early in 2015, the Foundation commissioned two projects to run area 'demonstration sites' in differing local areas in England. The projects were asked to establish a minimum of three demonstration sites in differing areas. The purpose of the demonstration sites was threefold:

- identify the key features of local leadership required by the emerging localist agenda
- assess how far new ways of local working are emerging in areas, and whether leadership methodologies such as systems leadership and design thinking have anything to contribute
- capture the challenges and opportunities presented by localism in different areas

One project, led by HOLEX and 157 Group, established three demonstration sites in Bristol, Leeds and Manchester. The other project, led by Curee, worked in North Warwickshire and Leicestershire, Oxfordshire, Walsall and the Black Country and Bristol.

This paper provides a summary of learning from both projects, framed in terms of nine key messages. The details from each local area can be found in the extensive project reports.

1. **Localism must be for broad and clear purposes. Localism is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve improved outcomes in terms of economic growth and public services.**

   1.1 This means excellent outcomes and improved employer responsiveness.

   Now more than ever the sector's economic role is critical. But its economic potential can no longer be fulfilled through a top-down, delivery mindset. For 2020, we must see a culture shift towards networked local growth where the sector co- creates value, future jobs and economic growth through better relationships across the spectrum from learners to employers, to public authorities and civil society. (RSA)

   1.2 Leading in local areas should be based on clear values.

2. **Localism is about remodelling leadership as much as it is about economic growth or freedom from central control**

   2.1 Providers of all types will, if they seek to maintain volumes of provision anything like current levels, **need to secure alternative sources of funding**, whether that be from private sector sources and/or from demonstrating that their provision meets other aspects of the localised agenda

   2.2 Leading in local areas is not just about formal leadership roles. Certainly senior managers are crucially important but governors, staff, learners and employers are increasingly taking on leadership roles in local areas and these are worth sharing.

3. **Leaders will need agility to plot a way through national v decentralised tensions**

   3.1 Tensions between national and decentralised regimes and, in localities where responsibilities and funding are being devolved, **potential tensions between those charged with leading such arrangements at the local level** - providers will need to be adroit in plotting a way through this high-risk period, both individually and collectively, and will need to be prepared, strategically and operationally, to flex and change both their forward planning and ways of working for some time to come.

   3.2 The vision held by many local education and training leaders is currently compromised by national constraints, including funding regimes. Leaders must use evidence and success to further promote the needs in their area, and insist that national systems are relaxed and devolved, giving freedom and autonomy to enable providers to truly meet learner need.

   3.3 Collaboration must be balanced with the need for leaders both to preserve the viability of their own organisation and to strive for the sustainability of the wider local community, and their place within it.

4. **Localism starts from relationships and shared purpose rather than systems and funding**

   4.1 The local agenda can become very complex and it is important to be aware of who the key players are. The top ten most important people in the locality should be targeted through an engagement strategy, which should be continuously updated and refreshed.

   4.2 Both projects noted the significant contribution made to local collaboration of establishing relationships of trust and confidence over time. The role of a 'reservoir of relationships' was similarly noted in our project.

   4.3 On the evidence of our fieldwork, some Design Thinking tools offer an effective vehicle through which sustainability in those relationships can be strengthened.

   "Behave your way to change, don't think your way to change"

5. Localism requires leaders who can work beyond their own institutional boundaries

5.1 The leader needs the astuteness to identify key people and form meaningful relationships with them. This is unlikely to be simply sitting on Boards and will more likely be based on personal relationship building, which can achieve more than meetings and bureaucratic processes. It is important to have a face to face relationship with the key players so that phones can be picked up for early alerts of opportunities and issues. Local and social media present a great opportunity for continuous communication of this sort, and their use is very time efficient.

5.2 Partnerships require time and people, in a context of shrinking resources. It is important for leaders of provider organisations to be clear about what level of commitment they are able and/or willing to make to this agenda, and allocate resources accordingly.

5.3 If strong trust with partners already exists, along with experience in working together on productive collaborations, then potentially major partnership activities can be explored/undertaken to address the localism agenda. However, if there is little experience between the local partners and trust has not been established, small incremental work can help establish those relationships and build trust.

6. Localism constitutes a strategic risk

6.1 Localism may simply transfer difficult decisions about prioritisation and cuts to the local level – providers should not see localism as necessarily meaning funding pressures will be alleviated. FE and skills will have to compete with other local demands for investment. Some suggest local competition for public funding will become even more acute, rather than less, under localism – which means the education and training sector will have to justify investment from the public purse, and further develop the evidence base to support its arguments

7. Governors and boards can reach across boundaries and foster collaborative linkages

7.1 Our projects noted that governors operate within different, sometimes less constraining, organisational contexts than executive leaders. Individually, they can reach across those boundaries (for example those between schools and colleges). Collectively, governors represent a strategic resource in a locality which is underutilised.

7.2 Single coherent dialogue on education and training spanning compulsory and post compulsory sectors. School leaders, for example, can lay the foundations for a well-functioning citizen as well as encourage a passion for skills that are shown to be in demand. The learner journey must be supported by leaders who see the importance of making transitions well informed and smooth, and so are committed to making the outcome as successful as possible for the individual.

7.3 To some extent, Communities of practice are emerging as a response to gaps at executive level, and our fieldwork suggests that research and development to explore the potential of communities of practice in creating strategic collaboration and building effectiveness and impact.

8. **Localism must be joined-up. A consonant strategic approach is needed across different spatial scales and between a wide range of providers and services.**

8.1 It is important that the education and training sector recognises that the role of local politicians as leaders of localism is crucial. Many parts of the sector have operated outside local authority regimes for some time, and it would be astute to seek to establish positive relations with local government and its key players where these do not currently exist.

8.2 Current leadership programmes tend to focus on leading 'an institution' rather than leadership of an ecosystem.

9. **Localism needs time.**

9.1 Long term thinking and strategy is imperative. A decade of localising is needed to make the adaptations necessary, develop local capacity and embed a culture of decentralisation.

9.2 Short term thinking and timescales will result in surface changes. Localism and devolution will be, indeed needs to be, asymmetrical. A multi-speed approach to decentralisation is taking place, driven by those areas with the greater appetite to take on additional powers and responsibilities.

9.3 Meanwhile central government needs to do more to facilitate truly ground-up approaches. The focus for education and training organisations should be on enabling a more organic approach to collaboration at local and, where appropriate, regional levels.

Simon Beer, Programme Manager, Leadership Management and Governance
June 2015