

Case Study: Portsmouth Education Partnership

Portsmouth's context

Portsmouth is a small, urban local authority with higher than average levels of deprivation. There has, for many years, been a strong sense of local identity for those who live and work in the city and this has translated into a sense of 'family' and community among the city's schools. However, Portsmouth is also an area where, historically, it has proved challenging to make sustained improvement in progress and outcomes in education. For a number of years, the percentage of good or outstanding schools was consistently below the national average, as was the proportion of children achieving the expected level at Key Stage 2 or five good GCSEs at Key Stage 4. While improvements were made, they were not as swift as those made by schools nationally.

In 2016 Portsmouth local authority received a critical Ofsted inspection of their school improvement arrangements. Too many schools were requiring improvement and progress of pupils was weak compared with similar areas. This provided the impetus to do something different. The local authority took two key decisions that would fundamentally reshape its future working relationship with schools. Firstly, it took a proactive stand on academisation and actively encouraged all their schools to become part of strong Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) as one of the engines for school improvement. Secondly, it stepped away from the direct delivery of school improvement support and outsourced the majority of it to the local Teaching School Alliance.

Stepping back from the role of providing education or school improvement services in the city, gave Portsmouth local authority the opportunity to redefine itself both as a strategic leader and a champion of children and young across the city. However, schools in Portsmouth and the local authority also recognised a potential risk in moving towards a fully academised system – the possible erosion of the sense of Portsmouth as a single community of schools and the opportunities for collaboration and joint working between schools in the city in the future. To combat the risk of fragmentation the Portsmouth Education Partnership was born.

About the Portsmouth Education Partnership

The Portsmouth Education Partnership (PEP) was established in 2016 and now acts as the key strategic partnership that brings together system leaders within the city. The vision is that each MAT should be an engine of improvement and it is the role of the PEP to bring those engines together. The aim of the partnership is to provide greater support and challenge and to exploit every advantage of proximity.

The PEP includes representatives from both primary and secondary schools (maintained and academies), MATS, the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC), the Dioceses, the local teaching school, FE colleges, the University and business / parent & carer representatives. It is not a formal legal entity and is viewed instead as a space for strategic leaders to come together in Portsmouth and determine strategy to raise educational standards and outcomes. Some of the distinctive features of the partnership are:

- The PEP is independently chaired to encourage ownership by schools and to provide a clean break with previous ways of working.
- Schools are automatically considered part of the PEP and do not have to pay a membership fee. The LA funded the partnership and the chair's role for the first two years to enable the partnership to establish itself and prove its value.

- The Partnership started with a simple one-page list of strategic priorities – the partnership’s vision – which was a clear agenda for moving forward. This was developed into a three-year education strategy 2017 - 2020. It was developed with headteachers in the area and provides the blueprint for their joint endeavour.
- There are five sub-groups within the partnership. These groups are organised around agreed priorities that drive subsequent collective action. These groups are typically chaired by headteachers and include representatives from schools, MATs, the TSA, the LA and other partners. The sub-groups report progress or escalate issues to the overall strategic board.
- To determine the level of support required across the local area, and how that support should be targeted, the school improvement board produces a dashboard of performance. The dashboard is based on published data to ensure it generates objective and transparent conclusions and is viewed as a means to open up a conversation.
- The school improvement support commissioned by the LA is delivered or brokered through the Teaching School Alliance but under the auspices of the PEP, particularly drawing on the expertise of stronger schools and MATs in the area. One of the main strengths of the partnership’s school improvement offer is how it has been able to increase the capacity available for support. The number of SLEs and NLEs in the area has increased considerably and the TSA has a key strategic role in deploying how this resource is used.

Although there was some initial scepticism, the majority of schools in Portsmouth and the majority of the MATs are now actively engaging in the partnership – chairing or sitting on the partnership board or sub-groups and providing their expertise to support other schools. Whilst it is too early to definitively evaluate the impact this approach is having, it has been encouraging to note the increase in the percentage of good and outstanding schools in Portsmouth from 77% in August 2016 to 85% by March 2018. However, whilst there have been improvements in outcomes for children and young people, the step change that has been witnessed in the proportion of schools that are good or better has not so far translated in a similar step change in school standards, and for most performance measures Portsmouth remains below national averages and below that of many of its statistical neighbours.

Key reflections – what makes it work?

There is an increasing number of local systems which have established, or are in the process of establishing, strategic education partnerships. Each one will be uniquely influenced by the particular context of education in the local area - the relationships between schools and with the local authority, the specific pressures and challenges facing the system and the opportunities for collaboration. It can therefore be difficult to pinpoint features of a partnership that work in one area and feel confident that these could be successfully be replicated in a different context. Indeed, one of the aspects that makes the Portsmouth Education Partnership successful is that its role has been developed within an internally coherent systemic approach to school improvement that is quite specific to the city of Portsmouth. Having said this, there are wider lessons and implications from the Portsmouth experience that should be reflected on in terms of their broader applicability.

Exceptional clarity about the role of the LA

One of the most striking characteristics of the PEP is the clarity and transparency with which the LA has set out its role. From the outset it made sure that schools and partners understood that establishing the partnership was not about seeking to retain the previous local authority model and roles but bringing a different type of accountability to the system. The local authority was explicit about withdrawing from the provision of school improvement services and the critical role they saw for MATs going forward. They

articulated a role for exercising the democratic mandate of local government in strategically shaping the vision for the city, supporting the connections between those who could put that vision into action and creating capacity for dispersed leadership of the system. Partners welcome the fact that they all feel valued and individual participants of the PEP rather than being led by the LA. One MAT CEO said “it is not being run to safeguard the LA position. The PEP has a very firm belief that Portsmouth needs to change and, to do this, they are aware they need to bring in expertise and impetus from elsewhere.”

Understanding the drivers for school improvement

The second important lesson is developing the partnership with a clear understanding of where the capacity for school improvement will come from. Portsmouth realised that if its schools were to collectively achieve a step-change in performance in the city it would need to significantly increase the capacity and quality of the school improvement support on offer. Simply creating partnership structures without shifting the underlying capacity for improvement is unlikely to have the desired impact. So, in Portsmouth capacity and depth was created by bringing in more multi-academy trusts into the city and better harnessing the expertise and coordinating capacity of the Teaching School Alliance. It is a hallmark of the partnership’s success that the number of SLEs and NLEs in the area has increased considerably and the TSA has a key strategic role in deploying how this resource is used. This year there have been 89 SLE / NLE deployments through the PEP about three-quarters of which were from MATs – a big contributor to the shared resource of the city.

Shared vision and values

It has perhaps become a truism that shared vision and values sit at the heart of every successful partnership. What is perhaps more unusual about Portsmouth’s model is the extent to which the entire structure rests on a set of shared values and a small number of key priorities which were agreed between headteachers, MATs and the local authority. The Partnership has not been overly concerned with lines of accountability and the formality of governance structures. It has been ‘a coalition of the willing’ or a ‘space where those interested in system leadership can come together and shape Portsmouth’. Headteachers and MAT CEOs echo the sense of a partnership driven by a shared vision and values. In many cases their engagement is motivated by a strong belief in the need for a mechanism to sustain and increase collaboration between schools in Portsmouth. One head said the system ‘needs an anchor’. Another head said “it is the way in which everyone comes together. There has been a conscious decision to have a nucleus of city ambitions.” The local authority also described how those who first came on board with partnership have been ‘relentless and resilient’ in pursuing the vision.

Organic development

Whilst it is important to be clear on the wider vision for the local area, Portsmouth has also shown the benefits of being able to develop and evolve in response to a changing landscape. The DCS described the temptation to ‘over-articulate’ the partnership from the outset, at risk of getting bogged down in detailed structures, KPIs or action plans. Instead the local authority and partnership tried to focus on the long-term goal and the behaviours they were seeking to develop and leave space to pivot in order to seize on opportunities as they arose. The PEP has been characterised by pragmatic, strategically-minded and proactive leaders who have been able to bring their ideas to the table. Portsmouth likened the process of creating the partnership to growing a garden – being open to the possibilities of cross-pollination and seeing it as a living organism that self-seeds and evolves.

‘A congregation, not a gym membership’

If one of the common pitfalls of developing a partnership is the risk of becoming mired too early in detailed discussions of structures and systems, an associated risk is embarking upon the ‘what do I get for my money’

debate before the partnership has had a chance to establish itself. Portsmouth was very clear from the outset that the partnership did not represent a transactional relationship between the local authority and schools. Schools were not expected to buy in, but nor did they receive services in return. Every school is a member of the partnership by dint of being a Portsmouth school and in turn can decide for themselves how active a member they wish to be – in giving their time, expertise, support and capacity. The local authority has provided funding to get the partnership up and running and concede that this may be an ongoing financial contribution that they make to support the educational future of the city.

Proving value through action

Finally, Portsmouth Education Partnership has been adroit in seizing early opportunities to prove its worth. While at the outset leaders describe how they ‘talked the partnership into existence’ they realised that they would need quickly to show small but significant impact to not just maintain but increase the commitment across the city to collaboration. They achieved this in three ways. Firstly, they have been smart in using the PEP brand and vision to bring coherence to a range of disparate school improvement initiatives and programmes that were already underway – making sure the existing capacity in the system is all driving towards the same set of priorities. Secondly it identified some key areas where they could achieve concrete improvements – for example through coordinating ability of the PEP, CAMHS clinics were re-brokered to schools so that now there are clinics in all secondary schools. Thirdly the partnership used data very thoroughly and analytically to identify its strengths and areas for development. This put Portsmouth in a good position to bid for funding from the Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF) as they clearly knew and understood their priorities, they had schools on board, and it was clear how they could hit the ground running. Two bids were successful securing nearly £0.5m to address two key priorities: improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and those pupils on SEN Support in mainstream schools.

Summary

Context is all important when considering how to develop a vision of a coherent local education system – what works for one area may not be right for another. The vision and priorities, the nature of the strategic partnership and its role in bringing partners together or driving collective responsibility, the nature of membership, the coordinating capacity and the role of school-level partnerships will all vary given the dynamic of the local area. The Portsmouth Education Partnership has been successful in working within existing accountability structures to encourage collective responsibility for pupils across the city. This has depended on clarity of vision and leadership, understanding local capacity and strengths, the ability to adapt and evolve and a pragmatic resilience in the face of competing pressures.

Those who have been part of the PEP say that their collaborative working has enabled:

- An improvement in both the quality and capacity of school improvement support, including more meaningful opportunities for school to school support.
- A better alignment between the investment made in training and support and the strategic priorities for improvement.
- A greater ability to ‘join the dots’ and maximise the impact of every investment and initiative.
- A space for system leaders to work together to advance the outcomes for all children in Portsmouth, rather than just those in their individual school.