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'Moving the Mountain: Halfway There?'
a whole-city approach to basic skills developments

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In January 2003 Geoff Bateson, Partnership Manager of the Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership, was pleased to be able to accept an invitation to present the work of the Partnership to various audiences in western Canada.

This invitation arose out of a British Council seminar on Learning Cities, held in Birmingham in 2002. The co-presenter of this seminar (at which the work of the Partnership had been presented) realised that Vancouver and parts of British Columbia were at the same position of being ready for a whole-system drive on literacy that Birmingham had been at in 1995/6 i.e. at the start of the Partnership, and that particularly Vancouver could learn much from Birmingham's experience over the last few years.

The invitation to visit coincided with Canada's Family Literacy week, was predominantly to Vancouver, but also took in inputs to groups in the Columbia Basin and in the Yukon Territories. During one week input was made to the Breakfast of Champions in Vancouver, to librarians, to university researchers, to school teachers, to city leaders, to a cable daytime TV show, to community development workers, to workers involved with developing area-based literacy strategies, to key employers, the Chamber of Commerce and to mixed audiences.

Thanks are due to the organisations that make up the Core Skills Development Partnership and who have done the work that forms the basis of the presentations. Thanks are also due to those organisations that sponsored the activities in Canada of which the Partnership's presentations were one part – the hotel, coffee and pizza organisations and the British Council. Thanks go especially to those workers in Vancouver, Nakusp and Yukon who made Geoff feel so at ease and so welcome – and to more than a thousand people who were interested enough in what we had to say to form the various audiences.

The Partnership was pleased to be able to share its thinking and practical experiences in this way, and to learn so much in return. There is a commitment both to continue the dialogue around learning cities and to exchange, over an extended period, information and expertise with the contacts made.

What follows is an amalgamation of the various inputs made to the range of audiences in Canada.

<u>'Moving the Mountain': a whole-city approach to basic skills developments</u>

We all have different stories to tell in relation to reading, writing, language and number. In some cases these are deeply moving personal stories. My story is the story of a city – Birmingham, England – and is none the less exciting for that.

Birmingham is a city of around 1 million population; set within a wider regional economy (and core to that economy); with highly diverse populations; facing a number of challenges and undergoing a number of changes.

It founded itself on 'metal-bashing': Making the thousands of everyday items – nails, nuts and bolts, chains, locks etc – that were in huge demand during the industrial revolution and the expansion of trade and exploration in the Victorian era: Making swords and guns, and later having a reputation for high calibre machine tool production: Making finely crafted jewellery in hosts of small factories. People knew what Birmingham stood for. 'Made in Birmingham' meant something worldwide. Much of this diverse manufacturing base remained throughout the twentieth century, but there was also an increasing reliance on larger-scale car manufacturing, with large factories having supply chains of part suppliers, who in turn often had their own network of more specialised suppliers. When I was a secondary school teacher pupils could leave on a Friday and start a well paid job on the Monday. If they didn't like this job they could leave on the Wednesday and walk into any one of three other jobs. In that setting, why bother much about school qualifications?

Once the car manufacturing trade started to become uncertain, the future of the whole of Birmingham was uncertain. A bold leap of the imagination was taken: Birmingham needed to transform itself into a European tourist attraction. Initially this was received as some kind of joke: remember that Birmingham at that time was a declining industrial area that people avoided. Who on earth would want to holiday in Birmingham?

Investment was made in the physical infrastructure – convention centres, world-class symphony hall, national exhibition centre, hotels etc – a complete revamp of the city centre – and it worked. There are now parties of tourists, from a variety of countries, visiting the city as a holiday venue!

The manufacturing base was still there, but the city had reinvented itself to add a layer of leisure and tourism to this base. Many jobs were created and these held off the worst levels of unemployment that were beginning to characterise other cities. Many of the jobs were low skill/low wage and it soon became apparent that if it was to flourish rather than survive Birmingham needed to add a further layer – that of high skill/high wage jobs in larger numbers. This would require an investment not only in physical infrastructure but in the human skills infrastructure. 'Made in Birmingham' was now going to apply to products of the knowledge economy.

Companies with high skill/high wage jobs were attracted to Birmingham because of the availability of (ex-industrial) land, the plentiful supply of workers and the general new attractiveness of the city – but couldn't fully make the commitment to locate in Birmingham whilst there was the shortage of skilled school leavers and re-skilled adults, and whilst the overall level of secondary education in the city could be seen as a disincentive to asking managers to relocate there with their families.

A serious jump had to be made in the education and skills level. At that time, however, around 1995, things weren't quite taking off. Not enough children were entering school aged 5, with the basic 'kit' of skills and approaches to get off to a flying start as learners; only around one third of children were leaving primary school with the skills and attitudes to make a reasonable success of the secondary school education – and so it was no wonder that by age 14 a lot of pupils had wandered off (physically, or in their minds) and that measures of secondary school success rates were much lower than the national average – with few 'rescue routes' back in for underperforming young people. Not enough young people were taking up opportunities for continued education and training; and not enough adults had the underpinning skills necessary to make the best of job changes as Birmingham continued to adapt to changing world situations.

Two other things happened at around the same time, i.e. around 1995. There was a common understanding emerging from discussions between a few key 'movers' within Birmingham. The newly appointed Chief Education officer was looking at what things kept getting in the way. The Chief Executive of the organisation that was responsible for post-school training and enterprise activity, similarly a strategic visionary thinker, was looking at why the rates of achievement of vocational qualifications, the success of business support activity etc all were lower than needed. The thing that kept being returned to was the 'drag-down' effect of the low underlying levels of literacy and numeracy. There was little choice then but to commit to a long-term attempt to fix these levels at a higher point. This might take 10, 15 or 20 years but was a prerequisite for most other areas of progress being thought about.

The second thing that was happening was the release, by the government of the time (which was the predecessor of the current one) of money for regeneration. Several regeneration budgets had been brought together into a Single Regeneration Budget, with substantial amounts available over relatively long timescales of up to seven years. Again, this needed a leap of imagination. The assumption was that 'regeneration' meant 'area; roads; housing; business parks etc'. Substantial energy was put into the argument that a proportion of this money should (instead of the total regeneration of one locality) be available for regenerating the skills levels in Birmingham by raising the platform of literacy and numeracy across all areas, all ages, all sectors of Birmingham. This wasn't an easy argument to win and required explanations of how (if it wasn't going to be used for the total regeneration of one small area of Birmingham), any resource might ensure that the needs of all Birmingham could be met and how Birmingham could rid itself of the long, linked chains of underperformance, at basic levels, that was preventing the

city achieving its wider ambitions of being a modern, diverse, prosperous, flourishing, inclusive, competitive, European city.

Whilst there were some obvious priority target groups (homeless young people, offenders, low skills workers in declining industries, certain underachieving pupil groups …) it really was a matter of there being, more generally, a huge basic skills gap across much of the city.

There was an immediate recognition that the historical ways of approaching things weren't working and, as well as a focus on literacy and numeracy, a quite different approach to managing change would be needed.

There had been no shortage of willingness within the organisations involved, there were lots of good people doing excellent work, but no matter how hard they tried to break through to a higher level of performance on the scale of the whole city it never quite succeeded. The traditional approach was based on:
- Discrete projects; disconnected developments
- Short term funding; 'pilot' activity that wasn't linked to any mainstream change
- Having to be seen to be 'innovative' i.e. creating the appearance of 'difference' each year or two
- No real reporting of performance or real accountability
- No sense of where the city wanted to be e.g. in 5 years or 10 years time
- No overall coherence – more a range of different agencies doing things in parallel
- Focusing more on the money than on the plan, and how budgets would be carved up

15 –20 of the key heads of service in the city were invited to sign up to a different approach that:
- took a 10-20 year view; with a 5-7 year initial plan
- committed them to working more in partnership, to secure a number of 'common purpose' outcomes
- would take a strategic, whole-system approach
- would aim to impact on large numbers (all schools; 125,000 pupils; 100,000 parents; 10,000 employees etc …)
- was necessary whatever money was available. The scale of the money would simply enable more or less to be done each year
- would build on what already was known; by testing the reality (and the rhetoric) of existing developments, stripping out the elements that worked best, rearranging these into a model that had a 'best fit' universal application; putting this in place everywhere
- would make 'change' the focus, rather than creating a focus on 'money'

The decision was taken to create a formal, independent legal entity – owned by all the partners but not in the control of any one of them. The mechanism chosen was that of a private company limited by guarantee (although this was one of a number that might have worked equally well). Not only did this create the required independence, it enabled the creation of a Board of

directors in a very formal way. It was possible to specify that the board would be composed of only 8-10 people and that these would be the Chief Executives/Leaders of the key education and training bodies in the city.

The Board would meet up to 4 times per year and would concentrate on strategic level direction. It would be composed of people who were able both to see the larger links with other development thrusts and to pull the 'big levers' to make things happen across the major structural blocks of the education and training landscape. Board membership would be kept at this senior level. The Board would not constantly expand to take on ever more factional interests; nor would membership slide down the hierarchy of partner organisations – the Chief Executive coming to the first meeting, then ever more 'junior' members of staff (with no decision-making power) attending, as time went on.

The Board would sign off an Annual Business Plan and receive an Annual Report. Having given formal approval to the strategic objectives; the development framework, a communication strategy; an evaluation strategy etc they would have fixed the parameters of the development activity and by signing off the overall Annual Business Plan would not need to spend lots of time giving approvals for small development activities. Safeguards were built in. 'Novel or contentious' developments would need to be agreed by the Board; the Board would need to be kept informed of 'distance still to be travelled' to reach planned outcomes; the Board would get reports on broad areas of development (e.g. work with young people) rather than on discrete activities; there would be progress reports by exception i.e. highlights of any deviations from planned spend, planned numbers, planned progress.

The Partnership was established by working out sets of principles, by going backwards and forwards between the different partners until everyone was happy with the basis that was being established. Some of these principles were:
  • The Partnership, whilst having an identity of its own, would not create its own substantial existence outside of the various partners (i.e. no large staffing team; own premises; own services etc). It would maintain the smallest, most flexible infrastructure that enabled it to work through partners, changing their ways of doing things.
  • Decisions about the 'best fit' of developments for each year would be made through dialogue with senior managers from each partner, with reference to their own organisation's development plan.
  • The focus would be on permanently changing the ways that partners delivered their main structural programmes. This would involve work on outreach to bring (or keep) more people into main programmes; improving the materials, curriculum and delivery infrastructure of those main programmes; training/retraining of large numbers of individuals (paid and voluntary). This would, after several years, leave a legacy of permanently improved services to people in Birmingham.
  • There would be a balance between some universal support activity to raise the spread of wider understandings re language, reading, writing, and number developments; some targeting based on reliable data (via

work with underperforming schools, work to improve the quality of provider organisations etc); and some tight targeting of underachieving individual pupils in order to sweep up the historical long 'tail' of underachievement.

Progress was to be made through consistent and coherent pushes on a small number of key strategic objectives. These would aim to:
- ❑ Raise the baseline skills of children on entry to school
- ❑ Raise attainment levels of 7 year olds, 11 year olds, 14 year olds and 16 year olds
- ❑ Raise the achievement levels for adult basic skills
- ❑ Increase the number of volunteers, supporting basic skills development in others
- ❑ Produce more 'own-time' engagement to target groups of young people in basic skills developments
- ❑ Raise the basic skills of unemployed people
- ❑ Raise the basic skills of employees
- ❑ Close the attainment gaps for specific disadvantaged groups

Each of these strategic objectives was to be carried forward by a set of agreed developments
E.g. 'Improving literacy, language and numeracy levels of children aged 7, 11, 14, 16' by:
- promoting best information from research
- having specific time (e.g. 1 hour/day) focusing of teaching specific skills
- improving the resources in schools
- retraining all teachers, learning assistants etc
- lead teachers/expert teachers released to work with others
- securing the engagement of parents on a large scale

These activities were specified, year on year, in the annual business plan – with proposals fed in from the different partners.

Every document produced – Annual Business Plan; Annual Report; briefing papers etc – repeated the same messages in the same format. This ensured that there was no mixing of messages to different partners and kept both a transparency to the decisions made, and an overall sense of purpose to the whole venture. The key parts of these messages were:

The Vision:
> The long-term aim was to work towards Birmingham as a self-sustaining literate, numerate and IT competent community, within which:
> - adults and young people have adequate literacy/numeracy skills to be able to participate in community, social and economic activity
> - adults in employment have levels of communication/numeracy to do work tasks well and see opportunities for self-development
> - employers and employees recognise a shared responsibility for continuing development of communication/number skills of employees and the workplace

- those seeking employment have essential communication and number skills for employability
- pupils leave school having reached highest achievement levels in literacy/numeracy and confident with IT support for these
- children, young people and adults see themselves as able to be readers, writers, communicators in a range of ways
- there is a strong culture of reinvesting literacy/numeracy skills for the benefit of others
- parents are confident in own abilities to develop literacy/numeracy skills in children
- levels of literacy, numeracy and IT skills in Birmingham increase to exceed national target levels for pupils at Key Stages 1-4, and for adults

Development Framework

The Core Skills Development Partnership supports activity which:

through strategic elements
- links to the implementation of broader strategies
- adds value to mainstream activities by improving the quality and diversity of opportunities
- focuses on the needs of specific client groups, especially at identified critical transition times
- trains staff in appropriate ways of embedding key skills in a wide range of mainstream programmes
- enhances the existing professional development of staff to create whole-organisation approaches to core skills development
- sustains the changes long-term by creating new ways of working that become independent of on-going financial support

through activity/operational elements
- is structured not just on pilots but on activity that has impact on whole structures
- increases multi-agency approaches and joint planning, with differing roles clearly defined
- assists organisations to identify what creates success and to make this the norm
- has some targeting based on need, without defining people/organisations as failing
- expands the use of appropriate technologies to accelerate learning
- supports assessment and target setting, based upon disaggregated, reliable information
- increases the volume of voluntary activity
- contributes to planned outputs and contributes towards longer-term outcomes

The common approach to be taken across all partners was:
- to establish what really needs to change each year

- to look robustly at what is already being done (locally, nationally etc) and to strip out those bits that appear to be making real differences
- to repackage these elements into a model that will work on a large scale in the Birmingham context
- to push these changes everywhere they are needed, and to check for new insights
- to check that it is making a difference, and to try to understand more about how/for whom etc
- to let others know what is being done, in case there are lessons in it for them, without getting overly into self-promotion.

These strategic objectives, long term aims and development principles were the framework within which senior managers from the partners arranged the proposed developments for each year to create the annual business plan. Once this plan had been signed off by the key strategists (i.e. the people who were the board members) the proposed set of developments for that year were captured in a range of Activity Agreements, commissioning the work to be done; whose progress was monitored quarterly.

The above set of aims, principles and overall approaches underpinned all that the Partnership did – and were constantly rehearsed with key staff in partner organisations. Through all of this, within four years of its establishment, the Partnership had supported change via:

- giving motivating packs to every parent with a one year old baby (15,000/year)
- every library encouraging use by more families with children 0-3
- improved resources and staff skills in 160 nursery, day nursery and hostel settings
- improved planning, staff skills and resources (including ICT support for literacy, numeracy and language development) in all primary, secondary and special schools in the city and every environmental, residential and day-visit centre: a total of more than 450 organisations
- homework support resources and sessions established in every library
- literacy and numeracy components built into all out-of-school-hours activities – summer schools; weekend sessions and holiday activities; some youth service activities etc
- engaging large numbers of parents in large numbers of schools (around 20,000 at that time – nearer 70,000 in 2003) in curriculum activities with their child and the child's teacher. These activities, in turn, were structured as part of a wider set of family literacy and numeracy activities – increasing the numbers involved in these substantial courses from just over 100 in 1996 to more than 1000 in the year 2000 – and now more than 2500).

Wrapping people around with this high volume of literacy/numeracy/language experiences meant that, after a while, there was no escape from opportunities to improve.

This raft of developments, embedding high levels of basic skills activities by taking whole organisation/whole population approaches (as opposed to one off 'pilots'), bringing about sustained new ways of working across the city, soon began to contribute to long term changes in terms of attainment levels reported by the key agencies in the city. People began to see the benefits of a new collaborative, long term, system-change approach.

Not that everything was simple, fully agreed. Not that there weren't strong disagreements to be worked through – but the will to shift outcomes was held on to, as were the set of agreed principles signed up to by the various key partners. There were lots of interesting discussions, and arguments, along the way during the early years when, although signed up to the Partnership and to new ways of thinking and acting, different staff in separate agencies were still (to varying degrees) stuck in mindsets that:
- focused on money and not on change ('What's the annual allocation for my organisation?')
- focused on process rather than outcomes ('we'll need 2 development workers, who will need administrative support; so that's an office and a computer as well as a clerical post; …'. 'What will we do? Oh, we'll decide that when we have all the structure in place')
- focus on 'running a project' not 'bringing about change' ('If we work with 10 pupils in each of 6 schools at a cost of £60,000 we can try to get more of the African-Caribbean boy cohort to pass the English and Maths exam' … To which one reply might have been: 'So that's 60 pupils … £60,000 …, so that's £1,000 per pupil … How about if you gave me their names and I just wrote to them saying pass the exam and you'll get £1,000 – wouldn't that be just as effective as this long scenic route you are proposing?')

The key staff within partners adapted to the different ways of working and, although this took time, the impacts showed through quickly enough to convince the partners that all of this was going to work.

Within each area of development there was a strong concern to pull together (from the mix of local expertise from practitioners; national policies and developments; and wider research) those parts of the framework that were likely to have the largest impact for the largest number of organisations and largest number of individual beneficiaries – but then to present these as a 'menu', leaving space for professional decisions whereby organisations were able to select the combination of elements most relevant to them at that particular time.

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So, where does Birmingham want to be – and how do we know how to get there?

The schematic chart below shows indications of the actual skills levels in 1994 and now in 2003, and in the top two lines indicates the levels of aspirations

that Birmingham (as an education and training support system) might have for its population by 2010 and beyond.
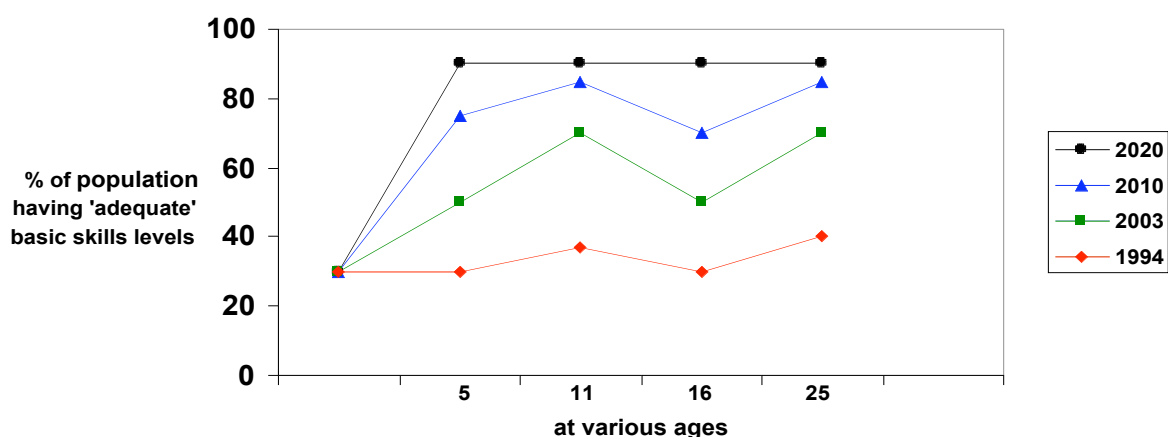
In 1994 the system was relatively content with aspiring to levels of abilities/skills for its children entering school being ok at around 30%; that it felt adequate for around 30-40 % of its children leaving primary school without the skills necessary to move on successfully through the secondary curriculum; that around 30% of young people leaving school had Level 2 skills (the level of reliance and transferability needed to underpin further education, further training or employability); that around 40% of adults had this level of skills in both English and Maths.

None of this was because there were teachers deliberately holding back people's learning or a deliberate plan to keep skills levels low. It was just how things were. Aspirations were simply too low. There was a mismatch between these low levels on the one hand and the aspirations on the other hand for Birmingham to be a modern, European, inclusive, economically-competitive, learning, progressive etc etc city.

By now, in 2003, the achievements for under fives, for pupils entering secondary education, for pupils leaving school have all been doubled - as a result of the work done by organisations and individuals in the city.

If levels on transition to secondary school are now up from 30% to nearly 70% we have to be pleased, but we also have to say 'can it go to 75%, or 85%, or 90% or …?' We could also ask the reverse: 'Why isn't it 100%?' – Well, there are children with severe learning difficulties, or strong emotional damage … so it won't be 100%, but it could be quite a bit more than 70%.

By 2010 we could aspire to having raised achievements through schools even more, and we could aspire to strongly affect especially the improvements at aged 16 and for adults.

The line at the top of the chart is the longer term aspiration of Birmingham for itself. There are no logical reasons why we can't get there. There aren't many educational reasons why it shouldn't be above 90%. There are social reasons, political reasons, family support reasons, - but no absolute reasons why it can't be done. Other bits of the wider social systems may have also to be fixed, but educationally it's all do-able.

It can work so long as we don't collapse back into the old ways of working – where 'ownership' and 'products' and 'projects' and 'processes' and 'budgets' all take back over again.

So we knew where we were heading. We knew how far we had to travel each year. All we had to do was to have the will to make it all happen, to fit it into the day to day practicalities of running services in the city, and to have a strong idea about what would work.

I want to talk now, for a while, about this evidence/information driven approach to development. Knowing what might work best in terms of large scale outcomes. This won't be about the fine detail of research work done – after all the Partnership wasn't a research organisation. We were (and still are) an implementation organisation – but this assumed that we were really interested in anything that would help partners decide what to implement, and how to implement it, - and to what effect.

What I want to describe is more about the Partnership's relationship to different kinds of research and information, and the pragmatic approaches taken to changing life chances for large numbers of people over relatively short timescales. This took a variety of forms, which all needed bringing together behind the coherent drive for change. I will use a number of examples to illustrate all of this.

Bookstart was an activity that had taken place in Birmingham in 1992/1993. The idea was simple – every parent takes their 9 month old child to the local health clinic for a health check, so why not use this as an opportunity to give parents a motivational pack (a Bookstart bag) containing a free book, a poster, a card used for joining the local community library etc. This initiative had been tried with 300 families and the impacts on those families were being researched by staff at Birmingham University. The intervention was producing raised levels of book/reading/language/general interest outcomes for a relatively modest input. On the ground it also fostered new links between health visitor staff and library service staff around their joint concerns re child development and family support.

Bookstart was no 'magic cure-all' but was one strong strand in a number of early development threads that would help children 0-3 to get off to a flying start in their use of language.

In 1995 the Library input to the Partnership planning was a proposal to double the size of their Bookstart activity (from 300 families to 600 families). The children of the original 300 families were, by 1996, about to enter school and

a comparison was able to be made between the children getting this support and their peers who did not. The 'Bookstart' children were noticeably ahead on a range of measures.

If it was that good, it was surely good for a much larger number of children. With 15,000 children being born each year, the Partnership were keen to scale Bookstart activity up to cover at least 12,000 children per year i.e. a 40 fold increase! As will be reported later, the Library Service responded fantastically to this challenge, with the result that 13,000-15,000 parents have been supported each year for more than 5 years. Overall this has given support to around 80,000 children, at least 60% of whom were in need of early development boosts. Working on this scale began to produce a noticeable raising of the platform of skills by the time cohorts of children entered schools across the city.

At one level, the Partnership was constantly faced with a number of recurring issues. One was the issue of 'scaleability'. Most interventions that were shown to work well did so with small numbers of families, small numbers of schools, small numbers of employers. The art was to take a leap of faith concerning those combinations of activities that would continue to produce high impact once outside the special context of low numbers/high level of support/ unusually high funding levels etc into the 'real' world of everyday activity/huge numbers/normal levels of support/sustained from normal budgets etc.

Bookstart was one of those leaps of faith. The investment was made; the health and library services responded at a whole-city level, and Birmingham became a unique demonstration of what could be done. This was recognised nationally and so, within 5 years there is a cross-city level of service in place that has government funding as part of a national support programme.

The other components of support for families, with children 0-5 years old, were constructed from what was known about brain plasticity and early environmental experiences. Research wasn't the issue here. There was lots of research, and some emerging repeated conclusions about how to best support young children's language, literacy and number skills. Knowing what should be done was no longer the problem; the problem was getting organisations to push ahead and do it.

The skills that might be developed by children, through their early experiences, were listed as a Baseline Assessment set of observations (on entry to school) and early years settings were encouraged to 'guarantee' experiences that fostered the development of these skills.

A set of key messages to parents were repeated in many different ways; a set of repeated experiences were built into the normal routines of day nurseries, nursery schools, hostels etc. Through these repeated devices (and the boosting of books/writing materials/ICT in under-fives settings) the skills of children entering the school system have increased progressively year on year. Let's be clear – we're not talking rocket science here – the messages

were simple, the interventions easy, the list was well known and had been for some years. The issue was one of 'ownership' i.e. organisations focusing more on producing their own local 'brand-named' project, owned by their organisation, than on getting the real benefits to people by whatever means was best.

I now want to turn to a different area – the improvement of schools. Scanning the research on school improvement and pupil performance, the Education Service had produced seven areas that were significant in their effect on raising abilities in literacy and numeracy. These seven processes of school improvement were not the only list that could be produced but, rather than endlessly debate about whether various minor factors were to be included or not, it was decided to pragmatically go with the list of the seven key influences and to build it into the repeated messages to schools – the recurring phrases that became Birmingham's language of change ('Improvement on previous best'; 'Support and challenge'; 'intervention in proportion to need'; 'seven processes of school improvement' etc). These recurring messages, used as part of culture change, helped to make schools thirsty for improvement rather than creating a regime of forced improvement. Again, this arose from reflections on the current research about bringing about change on a large scale.

The seven foci of school improvement derived from the research literature were:
1. Leadership
2. Management and organisation
3. Teaching and learning
4. Staff development
5. Environment for learning
6. Collective review
7. Parental/community involvement

These seven foci were described in terms of the key factors for improvement. As a further development each of the seven 'processes of school improvement' could be described in three categories:
'emergent'; 'established'; and 'advanced', for any particular curricula area e.g. mathematics. This gave a set of frameworks against which – as part of their annual school development planning – schools were able to decide where they were in relation to each of the seven elements and to plan where they wanted to move to next.

In a parallel set of evidence-based developments what was known from research about teaching and learning in the key subjects of language, literacy and numeracy was pulled out into guidance about the development steps that could be expected of young children. This led to a stronger focus on the definite teaching of specific skills; a stronger focus on whole-school planning for progress by individual pupils and by groups of pupils (based on reliable pupil performance data; comparisons across schools in similar circumstances; identification of underachieving groups of pupils etc); positive statements of the next steps expected for each pupil – and sharing these expectations with

pupils and their parents; stressing the need for work on whole texts, on sentences (punctuation/grammar etc) and on individual words (spelling; phonetic structures) to produce the best pragmatic approach – and to sidestep the sterility of the phonics/whole language debates.

At the same time (around 1998) a new government was looking to introduce a National Literacy Strategy and a National Numeracy Strategy. Drawing on the same sort of research base that had been used to develop Birmingham's approach, and building in some of the lessons from Birmingham and elsewhere, the National Literacy and Numeracy strategies were developed and implemented nationwide. This brought government support and funding to give intensive support in literacy to 40 primary schools within Birmingham. This would move Birmingham a considerable way towards its targets, but wouldn't be enough. The Partnership was able to put additional resources behind this national strategy enabling intensive support to be offered to 100 primary schools, and enabling some additional flexibilities to be build in to meet local needs.

This highlights a further feature of the partnership approach in Birmingham. Where there is a clear national drive this has often been developed in ways that draw on Birmingham thinking (i.e. 'Made in Birmingham' being applied to knowledge products as well as manufactured ones); and where the Partnership gets behind the national strategy's implementation in Birmingham it is able to help it go 'deeper; faster; wider' than it would otherwise have done. There has been a continuous evidence-focused dialogue between 'national' and 'local', with Birmingham helping to shape national developments; embracing the implementation of those developments in ways that made sense locally, then feeding back on further developments that could be made.

In 1995, at the start of the Partnership, we also looked at what was being done to really engage parents in their children's learning. There were various models but when these were really 'pushed' to see how robust they were, they were:
  ➢ working to engage small numbers of parents with the school, but these parents too often then became a clique preventing a wider engagement with larger numbers of parents
  ➢ 'classes' taken by external adult learning providers which (however informal) were still constructed around a model of teaching parents about how schools worked; provided little or no additional contact between parents and teachers; were around a fixed curriculum rather than drawing flexibly on what the pupils were learning at that time.
  ➢ closed 'clubs' where entry to the process was only by signing up to purchase of a particular set of materials or a specific training programme – making the model costly for the relatively small numbers of parents involved, and prohibitive when scaled-up to the large numbers of parents we envisaged working with.

One model was different and had the potential for whole-city application. The lessons being learnt from this approach were stripped out, refined and tried

out in larger numbers of schools. This action-research approach, where school teachers were the creative driving force and where the best practice in working with parents was brought into conjunction with engaging parent, child and teacher in practical-based interactions around the pupils' live curriculum topics, led to more than 70% of parents being engaged in all classes in large numbers of schools (with the aim of 80% of pupils in more than 400 schools by the end of 2003 i.e. more than 100,000 parents involved).

Schools consistently reported 'having tried other things, but nothing has worked like this' and 'we didn't think this would work with our parents, but it did!' When schools were reporting these massive shifts in engaging parents it was clear that something was going on and the Partnership made the pragmatic, professional choice that this was the model to support. To then lock this into a huge data collection process, in order to 'research' it or 'prove it' would slow down the development. Again the approach taken was a combination of leap of faith; reliable data on impact; and an intelligent stripping out of the lessons being learnt. These developments, under the name of Inspire, are described on the Partnership's website.

Data – ever more reliable and ever more disaggregated information – became the bedrock of the improvements being supported.

The early years of the drive for higher pupil attainments in literacy and numeracy were characterised by the twin-track approach of:
  (a) ever more detailed attempts at understanding 'what works' (and why it works) on the grand scale necessary if Birmingham was going to achieve its ambitions of being a high skills, inclusive, competitive, modern city and
  (b) ever more detailed analysis of data available re performance levels. In 1995 all that Birmingham had to go on was some rather headline data about overall levels of attainment at whole school level. By 2000 it had several years worth of data, allowing trends over time to be analysed. This data was available by whole city, by school, by gender, by ethnicity. It was possible to pull out finer details re underachieving groups – leading to the possibility of ever more targeted challenge and support at school and whole-city level.

In other cases the research was more at the level of school-focused action research. The Education Service was engaging schools in action-research projects about how to analyse school pupil performance data; which groups of pupils needed additional boosts to their literacy and numeracy if they were not to irrevocably start to fall further and further behind; how best to reinforce bits of the English or Maths curriculum with those pupils; and how best to measure whether or not any impact was being made. From a start with a relatively small number of schools this was built into a set of development activities in more than 150 schools over three years.

This provided a base for how to improve in-school support.

By 2003 this data gives almost everything you might want to know at city level (and is mirrored by detailed longitudinal data for individual pupils at school level – allowing schools to plan for support and challenge at pupil level).

In the 6 years of the Partnership's existence, more than 50,000 eleven year olds had substantially raised their skills levels, feeding into the potential for ongoing successes in secondary school attainments.

From all of this there were also the beginnings of case-histories demonstrating the mix of interventions that were producing improved attainments – and despite the continuing existence of particular underachieving sets of pupils, overall there was much to be pleased about. Birmingham had improved faster than the national average; had improved faster than other areas that were similar in population; and had shifted the unacceptably low statistic of just over 30% of pupils leaving primary school with the skills required to make a reasonable success of their secondary education to more than 70% of pupils having these skills.

Schools were offered access to a menu of support that, if presented badly, could have come across to schools as a disconnected set of initiatives. Presented well, however, the various forms of support activity could be seen as facets of a wider framework based on evidence of things known to make a difference.

The menu included:

❑ Updating sessions for head teachers; language and maths coordinators, classroom teachers and learning assistants re focusing on the teaching and learning of specific skills in reading and writing, language, numerical transformations, number patterns etc.
❑ 10 and 20 day courses for English coordinators and maths coordinators in schools – allowing the key staff to meet others in the same position and, at the same time, to really get to grips with bringing about improvements in literacy and numeracy at a whole school level within their own organisations.
❑ Upgrading the software and paper-based resources used by schools to support literacy and numeracy developments in their pupils.
❑ Sharpening whole school plans and policies that linked understanding which groups of pupils were under-performing (and what to do about it) with staff development programmes and targeting of resources.
❑ Increasing links with parents in ways that created shared understandings of what the school, teachers, children and parents could all do to improve the skills levels of the children in definite and focused ways.
❑ Additional support for newly appointed teachers and newly appointed school managers re literacy and numeracy development.
❑ Support materials produced centrally and available free to schools – videos on 'best practice'; curriculum materials to help children bridge the learning gap that might occur between primary and secondary school, etc.

- ❑ Certificates that recognised where pupils had got to, indicated their next sets of skills to be developed and suggested (to parents) ways that they might best tackle the new skills sets.
- ❑ Free books to seven year olds at a time when research was indicating a potential drop-off in reading activity at that age; crates of high quality books which could be delivered rapidly and left with schools for a term in order to 'flood' the schools with books.
- ❑ Opportunities for primary school teachers to sit in on 'demonstration' lessons by colleagues in other schools and take the insights back to their own school.
- ❑ Visits to schools by literacy and numeracy 'lead teachers / consultant teachers' who could work with staff on the issues for their school, undertake demonstration teaching of particular curriculum skills, bring in examples of expertise from other schools, make links with wider staff development programmes etc.
- ❑ Professional development sessions on specific topics e.g. 'literacy through art' – for art teachers; often sitting alongside attempts by schools to build reading, writing, language and number skills into broader curriculum areas (ensuring that key words for e.g. a geography topic were known and understood by pupils before tackling that topic in geography; repeating the skills gained in English – use of writing frames, skimming and scanning for meaning, using text for different purposes etc – in other subject lessons: and so on.
- ❑ Support for building literacy and numeracy activities into all aspects of learning – whether this be after school clubs, weekend or holiday activities, stays at residential/environmental study centres, or into the different 'pathways' through learning that the government was trying to encourage in secondary schools.
- ❑ Small amounts of additional resources or extra staff hours to enable 'boosting' work to be undertaken with pupils who had clearly not grasped some specific curriculum skills – enabling these groups to 'catch up and keep up' before they started to fall ever further behind because of gaps in their skills.
- ❑ Access to an experienced headteacher, released to work with the Partnership, who could work with headteacher colleagues and could 'broker' learning between schools.
- ❑ Action-research activity, at school level and via city-level working groups, to collectively work on how to improve achievement for underachieving groups, on how to produce consistency across schools etc.
- ❑ Increasing the use of ICT to support literacy and numeracy – whether this was digital cameras to help nursery children make their own personal books; use of electronic whiteboards to support whole-group teaching; research into teaching and learning via ICT; laptops and desk top computers into children's homes linked to good content that would enable easy access to learning materials; e-learning via laptops; email and good content for disaffected non-attenders etc – all sustained over a number of years in the knowledge that it takes at least a year for new methods/new technology to be built into everyday classroom activity in ways that enable it to impact substantially on learning outcomes.

This menu of support created a wide-ranging, yet clearly targeted, set of activities that schools could selectively draw on (and they did). The various elements of support were picked up by all 25 nursery schools, all 322 primary schools, all 78 secondary schools and all 36 special schools (more than 450 schools in all!)

Was there a way of showing precisely which activities and interventions had produced what degree of change? Yes, it was possible. It was possible to list the various activities and interventions in each school, listing which year group they focused on, when they were done, which year they were expected to show through in SATs attainment results. To this could be added data from visits by advisers, national inspection reports, data about changes of staffing, levels of staff illness (and therefore cover by supply teachers). Given that pupils, by now, had unique identifiers it would be possible to factor in the high levels of pupil turnover between schools – to code all of this up and endlessly run analytical software to show the various effects different factors had on different pupils' attainments. But we didn't do it. It simply wasn't value for money. The huge data capture exercise would have itself started to act as a burden on progress as schools were asked to account for every kind of activity rather than getting on with making change happen rapidly, for large numbers of pupils.

Of course there were some intermediary level samplings to check that the major interventions were each contributing their bit to the overall complex patterns of change. Additionally, those schools that were unusual in not responding to the change-potential within the menu of interventions were observed with more interest. Were these schools that had everything sorted; or were they schools 'coasting' along satisfied with moderately high levels of overall success; or were they schools resistant to any ideas that they themselves hadn't thought up; or were they schools that had lost the plot and were chasing all sorts of dazzling schemes that were not having any overall impact?

Of course all of this was a very pragmatic approach but then, as I said earlier, this was about making real changes to people's lives, not about a large scale research project.

One thing that was obvious was that there was no intervention strategy that stayed the same forever. The early successes of lead teacher support to school, retraining of school staff, better materials, the challenge of targets etc worked well for a few years. There were then a set of schools, where pupils were not leaping onwards, and for those schools 'more of the same' was not the answer. Strategies and the range of interventions needed to be refined as the data about schools and pupils became more closely understood. In place of 'global' responses there was a need to work more closely with each school on its own specific needs and capabilities. Schools were approached and asked (and challenged) to identify the things that would make a difference for specific groups of pupils around particular curriculum topics. Very small amounts of money to these schools produced further leaps in attainment.

This would have been the time to change tack – to shift gear and do 'more but different'. At the time however, to many people, the current strategy seemed to be highly successful. Birmingham was still improving faster than other comparable areas, even if this rate was visibly slowing year on year. The right decision then, around the year 2000, would be to have ditched a winning strategy and gone for a new updated evidence-based strategy that gave a whole new boost to the system. But winning strategies were hard to let go of, even though it would have been the right decision.

Whatever the approaches, they always needed to be supplemented by specifically targeted approaches. A clear example arose when the data analysis showed that although the overall 'success rate' for 11 year olds had risen rapidly across the city (the 30% to 70% leap referred to already), for Children in Public Care the 'success rate' had only gone up from 20% to 30%. New agendas were emerging all the time, requiring new, focused sets of challenge and support – and an increased requirement to bring together previously disparate activity via social services, education, libraries, schools, housing etc. Even where joint plans were being firmed up, the drive to improve literacy and numeracy levels sometimes needed a bolder emphasis.

I think this somewhat lengthy digression has captured some of the ways in which information, research, activity, planning and skills all interacted together in ways that:
- ❑ balanced targeted support with some universal support
- ❑ improved ways of working – better outreach; better materials; better delivery practices; better co-ordination
- ❑ allowed organisations to bring their own professionalism to bear – making best choices within an overall framework for progress
- ❑ linked separate organisations and areas with a whole city/whole system approach
- ❑ based decisions on knowledge and understanding, in ways that recognised the professional expertise of staff
- ❑ worked through existing structures; existing structural partners – but with background linkages and suggestions being made and implemented at a Partnership level.

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I now want to take a different tack and look back on all of this through the experiences of one agency – in this case I have chosen to focus on the role of libraries within a whole city approach to literacy, numeracy and language development.

For library services, although they saw themselves as having a part to play in raising the attainment levels of school pupils, the agenda also included:
- ➢ boosting user numbers in community libraries (a key reportable indicator for them)
- ➢ increasing library use by particular groups
- ➢ more generally fostering a love of reading

How might librarians have responded to the opportunities, created by the Partnership, to meet some of their key objectives?

Some of the early responses were cautious e.g. 'we could replace all the labelling and signs inside libraries in my area of the city'. The logic was to focus on do-able, immediate bits of their own part of the service; improving the environment inside libraries would motivate librarians and potential users; people will see the library as a place to go; numbers will go up; etc.

This was fine as a starting point, but it was clear that small-scale activity at this level wasn't going to change the library service as a whole. It was also too long a chain of assumed levers: signs, to motivation, to library image, to public perception, to increased usage …   These linked chains exist but aren't the best vehicle for interventions designed to bring about widespread change.

Another response could have been (but was discouraged from being) to create an army of outreach workers; lots more mobile libraries; rebuild some of the libraries that were approaching their hundredth birthday etc. Not really practicable within the budget available. Nor were lots of 'permanent' posts sustainable from ongoing library budgets. What was feasible was to think in terms of small numbers of development hours for specific purposes (increasing overall library take up by black families; increasing the opportunities available for young people to engage with the resources of the central library etc). This raises the possibility of having people deployed flexibly, for short periods of time, to bring about development – as opposed to locking people into fixed job descriptions forever. How do organisations create focused development capacities without creating a series of personnel problems?

A third response might have been the more plaintive simple plea along the lines: 'Our library stock purchasing budget keeps being cut, so can any extra resources from the Partnership simply go into replacing our mainstream stock?'

Whilst there was a certain logic to this (How can we do development work when the mainstream is being eroded?) the Partnership was committed to focusing on development work. The way to address the 'stock' issue was to link it to development – what work needed to be done to engage those Children in Public Care with library activities and what small amounts of new stock was needed to make this effective? Similarly with other groups – and suddenly all these 'bits of new stock' began to add up to a way of reshaping the stock held by community libraries.

The other early response has already been talked about – the way that the library service responded magnificently to the challenge to scale their Bookstart activity from its original 300 families, not to 600 families as they proposed but to nearer 15,000 families per year – and at relatively little additional costs. This approach was mirrored in rapid, whole service drives to establish homework support in libraries etc.

Many of the early suggestions for developments were thus put forward as 'pilots' or 'projects' until it became clear that this wasn't 'winning' language. Within a short time the proposals were couched more in terms of 'making a contribution to the school standards agenda' or 'contributing to national library development agenda' – phraseology that was more guaranteed to convince the group of senior managers from the various partners that libraries had a real, whole-system role to play. This was just one example of the way that all partners got cleverer at using language – but it did have real effects as well.

'Contributing to the school standards agenda' enabled libraries to consider the need for homework support stock into every library; working with education service advisers to train librarians in the changing nature of the school curriculum; some rearrangement of librarian tasks so that staff were freed up to offer support to those young people who came into the library on their way home from school; provision of small, heavy-duty photocopying facilities, internet access, word processing facilities etc.

It also encouraged the Schools Library Service to be asked to work alongside an Education Service adviser to undertake a review of the school library facilities in every secondary school, and to draw up an improvement plan for these. (A plan that could immediately be acted upon with Partnership support.)

By now the library service had picked up on the national government strategy for adult basic skills. Entitled 'Skills for Life', this strategy expected every organisation to contribute to a concerted effort to raise overall levels of literacy and numeracy. As will be described later, the Core Skills Development Partnership's experience was drawn upon both in the early arguing for a coherent, consistent strategy (rather than disconnected, one-off 'projects') and in showing how nationally-agreed strategy could be implemented as quickly, deeply and widely as possible throughout a large, complex urban area.

The library service's contribution to structural approaches to adult basic skills had, up to then, been restricted largely to the usual links between local libraries and local adult basic skills providers (i.e. maybe the occasional class being held at a library; libraries holding a small stock of materials etc), and an eagerness for library staff to be involved in the schools-led model of family literacy and family numeracy. Within this model the Local Education Authority worked with schools to identify which Year Group of pupils it would be best to target, around which pupil curriculum topics. When the school was ready, they signed up to 12 weeks of intensive work with the nominated pupils and their parents around the literacy, language or numeracy topics. The children continued work with their class teachers; their parents were worked with, in parallel, with an adult basic sills tutor; and there were joint sessions where children and parents worked together. Librarian input to this process was invaluable in strengthening the resources available, in ensuring that the families began to make more use of the public library services etc. The issue for librarians was one of time. Feeling that they needed to be present at every session and every planning meeting may have been fine when there were

only a handful of family literacy/numeracy courses – but as these grew to more than 70 substantial courses this meant that librarians had to be much smarter about targeting and prioritising their inputs.

The enthusiasm of librarians (and they are amongst some of the most enthusiastic workers – passionate about books and reading) to be involved in the developing adult basic skills agenda led to a plan for:

- ➢ upfront posters in every library
- ➢ 'modernisation' of each library's adult basic skills stock i.e. more of it; more clearly accessible; more up to date; including self-access CDROMs; guides to the appropriateness of different materials etc
- ➢ library staff updated on the strategy; much better at 'signposting' people into appropriate learning opportunities
- ➢ boosting particular levels of stock e.g. resources for English for Speakers of Other Languages
- ➢ some minor refurbishment of family areas
- ➢ increased numbers of CDROMs with children's interactive stories; to encourage more families in (and thus be able to talk to parents about their own basic skills needs as well as sessions on book sharing, storytelling etc)
- ➢ links across to the growing use of Internet access via public libraries; and the establishment of learning centres within libraries (including on-line practicing of basic skills learning).

In parallel to these strategic shifts in what counted as 'library services' was a concern to support disadvantaged groups, to target identified groups and communities under a general 'social inclusion' heading. Where this meant more people engaging with reading or writing, and particularly if those people were from the underachieving communities in Birmingham, then the Partnership was keen to offer whatever support was reasonable.

These developments took several forms:

- improving physical areas of libraries for use by families; increasing stock particularly relevant to lone parents, to ethnic communities, to refugees etc.
- opening up library opportunities for groups of children to review books; to share these reviews on-line with others around the city or elsewhere in the world; to ensure that these opportunities were open to children in public care; supporting the activity with a range of author/illustrator visits to hostels, children's homes, libraries, schools etc – and to ensure that children's homes had stocks of books in them (in addition to the ICT resources that our Education Service partner was putting in). By 2003 this activity involved almost 27,000 attendances/year by 2,500 children.
- creating 'routes to reading' for African-Caribbean families; for the Bangladeshi community; for particular excluded groups (e.g. homeless people) etc.

The library staff drove these forward really well – often in response to quite simple queries such as 'If each of 40+ libraries were able to use £2,000 each – what differences could they make, for how many people, over a year or so?'

A similar overarching query that hung over library proposals for developments was 'What will it take to double the number of young people (from disadvantaged target groups) using public library services in their own time - (and not e.g. for study purposes because their college had run down its own library service)?' This query produced, over a five year period:

- Young people's input into stock purchase processes; a shift to include graphic novels etc
- Cultural awareness sessions with more staff
- The youth service and library service having a youth worker based within the central library, and reaching out from there to engage a wide range of young people with the library's vast resources
- A series of annual festivals for Young Readers – with thousands attending each year, drawn by key names and a wealth of activities.
- The establishment of 12 teenage reading/writing groups, involving links with authors, etc. The library service was able to work in a much more proactive way with young people.

In the early years the Library Service did not have one overall coherent annual library service plan (in common with most other partners in the city). At the same time as supporting what you can see by now had become a very substantial set of library-focused developments, the Partnership was keen to help the Library Service to see these separate activities as all part of a wider raft of developments across Birmingham – by encouraging the Library Service itself to not see them as disparate activities; and by cross linking where possible to developments through other partners. We were also able to use our own Partnership resources to directly fund some of these changes, or to reshape libraries' use of their own resources (budgets and librarian hours), or to match-fund to bring in resources from elsewhere. All of this was increasingly built by the library service, into a coherent annual Library Service Development Plan.

The latest Library Services Plan recognises that the Partnership helped to stimulate many of these developments, but it is also clear that the energy and commitment of library staff has brought these to the position where there is talk of 'a remodelling of the services offered by libraries' having occurred.

The new services are clearly no longer simply developments but are part now of mainstream library activity. Probably this might have occurred anyway, but library managers are certain that their engagement with the Partnership has accelerated the changes to the extent that the Library Service 'wouldn't be where we are today without this support'.

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So – a quick recap. We've covered so far:

Some of the thinking behind the setting up of the Core Skills Development Partnership; some of the early negotiations and minimal structures; some of the development principles, longer term aims, and more immediate business planning objectives; some examples of how partners carried developments forward; some of the pragmatic relationships between evidence and research-based information and driving real changes into place; some of the thinking and practical developments with preschool, school based and family-focused developments; and some of the impacts being brought about over the Partnership's first five years of substantial developments.

I want to move on – there's so much more that could have been said about the topics already covered, and so much more still to tell.

People from other parts of the country say 'but Birmingham's lucky. It has the Core Skills Development Partnership'. I step in quickly at this. It isn't 'luck' – it was the result of clear decisions made in 1995, based on a clear understanding of the changes needed.

In one sense the Partnership has had a lot of luck. I hope that I haven't given the impression that it was all simple, all straightforward – nor that there was always total, harmonious co-operation between partners. It took an enormous amount of thinking, planning, negotiation, prodding and (sometimes) difficult arguments to get us to where we are. The 'luck' element came in two forms:
   (a) one was the long-term consistency of the people involved. I have stayed with it from the early idea to now. The two or three key 'movers' who initiated the whole thing have been in the same key posts for the six years of the Partnership's life. This, whilst not being due to sheer fortuitousness, has proved enormously helpful in keeping a consistency to the developments.
   (b) The other (again not down to sheer 'luck') was a change in government approach. The Partnership was established under a government that seemed committed to devaluing the work of educationalists, and seemed equally committed to cutting public service budgets. Whilst some of these were features of wider social restructurings taking place, it did take an amount of creative energy to win full backing for the approach that Birmingham wanted to take. It is easy now to forget the difficulties of that early context. The change came about, a couple of years into the life of the Partnership, with a shift to a government in which the Prime Minister made an immediate and strong commitment to prioritising 'education, education, education'.

A twin-track approach was used by this new government – one that involved both the specification of broad strategies for social improvement and a release of the resources necessary to deliver these improvements. It seemed, on the broad front, that everything educationalists had been arguing for was now possible.

Those who previously had argued that they could deliver greatly improved outcomes if only… (their work was valued; or more money were available; or staff were better trained and supported; or …) – these people were now

challenged to visibly be seen to be delivering their side of the promise. This left some people and organisations exposed when all the 'if onlys' had run out and they still weren't delivering better outcomes for people.

The consequence was similar for the Partnership. Our early developments became incorporated into national strategies which were fed back to Birmingham with national resources attached. This drove the Partnership to be visibly staying at the development edge. There was no relaxing. The various partners were all exposed, willingly and happily, by being at the front end of most new developments.

One simple example was the introduction of a piloting of a national strategy for literacy and numeracy improvements in secondary schools. Areas of the country offered to pilot the approach with a few teachers and relatively small numbers of pupils, in three or four schools. Because of the work we had already been doing (and which had been fed into the thinking re the national strategy) Birmingham was able to offer to implement the new strategy in all 70 secondary schools, with all English and Maths teachers in those schools, involving somewhere in the region of 25,000 pupils.

A more recent example, of the interaction between the developments in Birmingham and wider national strategies, is the national 'Skills for Life' adult literacy, numeracy and language strategy. This was a key priority for the current government, and was launched in March 2001.

Again, some of our ideas had fed into the strategy as it emerged. So, obviously, we liked what was formulated and were keen to try to implement it as deeply, quickly, widely as possible throughout all of the organisations in the city. The first step was to rapidly convert the larger strategy document into a couple of sides of A4 checklist of developments that needed to take place. This fed immediately into our own business planning process. We were able to move rapidly because the national strategy wasn't something imposed 'out there', hard-to-comprehend etc: It was an extension of, and additional support for, our existing commitment to substantially raise levels of adult literacy, numeracy and language in Birmingham, with its key local objectives of:
- reducing the number of adults with poor basic skills by 25% by 2005; and by 50% by 2010 (a real challenge to ourselves!)
- providing, by the end of 2003, a wider range of more diverse learning opportunities for adults with low levels of basic skills
- ensuring, by the end of 2003, that all basic skills provision in the city meets (at least) minimum quality standards.

The ten year task – to reduce levels of need by half – was sketched out in the table below:

Year	Numbers working on their basic skills	% achieving	Numbers achieving	Increase in level (from school etc)	Net reduction in basic skills need	Level of basic skills need remaining
2000 baseline	9,874	approx 30%	3,000	3,000	0	141,440
2000-2001	12,000	40	4,800	2,000	2,800	138,640
2001-2002	15,000	50	7,500	2,000	5,500	133,340
2002-2003	15,000	50	7,500	1,500	6,000	127,340
2003-2004	16,000	50	8,000	1,500	6,500	120,840
2004-2005	18,000	50	9,000	1,300	7,700	113,140
2005-2006	18,000	50	9,000	1,200	7,800	105,340
2006-2007	18,000	50	9,000	1,000	8,000	97,340
2007-2008	18,000	50	9,000	500	8,500	88,840
2008-2009	18,000	50	9,000	500	8,500	80,340
2009-2010	18,000	60	10,800	500	10,300	70,040

In 2000 it was estimated that there were around 140,000 adults with basic skills needs in Birmingham and that although (reading across the '2000' row) more than 9,000 adults were addressing their basic skills needs, and although around 3,000 of these were succeeding in absolute terms (i.e. 'being lifted out of the pot') – around 3,000 young adults were added to the 'pot' each year i.e. there was little or no impact on the overall levels for the city as a whole.

In this context, reducing the 140,000 to 70,000, over ten years, (i.e. 7,000 'successes' per year) was an immense challenge, but would be achievable if we could:
- double the number of adults seriously doing work on their skills levels in literacy, numeracy and language
- double the 'success rates' i.e. move more people from making relatively slow progress along the same level to making progress up the skills levels
- reduce substantially the numbers of young people leaving secondary schools with low levels of literacy, numeracy or language.

I have already described the work being done to improve the skills of pupils entering secondary schools; and the menu-driven approach of improving literacy and numeracy work within secondary schools – all of which would begin to reduce the numbers feeding into the 'pot' of adults with basic skills needs.

Distributing the necessary 7,000 adult 'successes' per year across the major existing structural programmes started to indicate the kinds of targets that organisers of these programmes might need to contribute to:

Programmes focusing on specific literacy/numeracy needs of:	Possible ambitious targets/year
Unemployed/claimants	1360
Prisoners/probation	280
Public sector employees	240
Low skill employees	1040
Young people	800
Homeless	90
Refugees/Speakers of other languages	1040
Parents	490
Adults in disadvantaged communities	1730
Total	**7070**

i.e. somewhere between 250 and 300 adults might be needed to 'succeed' via Probation Service and prison programmes; more than 1000 through programmes targeted at low skill employees; around 70-100 via programmes targeting the homeless adults in the city; 400 – 500 through family literacy and family numeracy programmes; and so on.

The outcome of the use of such 'thinking tools' was to identify aspirational changes in the levels of adult basic skills, and to reflect these on as challenges to each of the partners (with menus of support to go alongside the challenge).

A wide-ranging review of adult basic skills was undertaken by the Partnership, on behalf of the Birmingham and Solihull Learning and Skills Council. This review highlighted the extent to which the national strategy was being incrementally locked into place across Birmingham and the neighbouring town of Solihull.

One part of the review was a substantial survey of levels of basic skills needs. This demonstrated that less than 3% of the population had such extremely low levels of literacy or numeracy that might be associated with 'basic skills' being seen as 'illiterate or innumerate'. Much larger numbers – up to 20% of the adult population for literacy and up to 50% for numeracy – had levels of skills which were below those needed if these skills were to be regarded as readily useable by the person across a range of settings (i.e. the levels being talked of as required by employers and for comfortable participation in social decision-making processes).

The overall levels of adult literacy and numeracy were able to be further disaggregated to give patterns of skills levels by gender, by ethnicity, by employment status, by local area i.e. began, for the first time, to give the levels of detail about potential need that were required in order to make

evidence-based decisions about types and levels of provision needed in different areas.

The Partnership brought together the basic skills staff from different organisations (colleges, adult education, probation service, Jobcentre Plus service, Connexions service for young people, the Learning and Skills Council, the Regional Development Agency, the national Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit, the family learning service, the 'learndirect' service etc), once every three months or so, as a forum for updating and reflecting on new expectations re adult basic skills.

Some of the developments underway as the new national strategy emerged were:
- ➢ working with Post-16 further education provider organisations (adult education, colleges, training providers etc) to ensure some consistency in basic skills assessment tools being used with adult learners; to get a consistency in the ICT software being used – all of which helps learners as they move from one programme to another, or one organisation to another.
- ➢ working to give additional support to organisations, where this was felt to be helpful, in relation to their own basic skills development planning; their stocks of high quality resources; their level of staff expertise in delivering adult basic skills – all as ways of raising the overall platform of quality of provision across the city.
- ➢ working with organisations that, whilst not direct providers of learning themselves, were in daily contact with a client group that were highly likely to have substantial basic skills needs. Organisations were supported in improving their own stocks of basic skills materials; the general awareness levels of their own staff in relation to recognising the varying levels of basic skills needs of their own clients (and how best to respond to these); the quality of the contact between these organisations and the more established providers of basic skills courses. The organisations involved included:
  - • Youth Offending Teams, specialist voluntary organisations and Probation Service – all working with offenders.
  - • Particular voluntary organisations working with people with drug and alcohol abuse issues.
  - • Foyers, hostels, housing association and organisations working with homeless people and rough sleepers.
  - • Organisations whose main concerns were those young people being left out of mainstream developments because of learning difficulties or disabilities.
  - • Day centres, drop-in centres and counselling agencies.
- ➢ working with those colleges and work-based providers who were beginning to engage substantially with employers to offer additional support in terms of exploring and sharing, what worked for different types of employer.
- ➢ working, in an emerging way, with hospital and city council departments to try to get more structured approaches to meeting the work specific basic skills needs of their workers.

The Partnership acted as a regional 'pathfinder' for the new adult literacy, numeracy and language strategy. It was also able to be part of a number of national development projects – both keeping us at the 'cutting edge' and being able to influence, to an extent, the way that the national strategy was being further developed and implemented.

One of the latest strands of the strategy – and one that was already a key development point locally – was the development of basic skills work with employers.

The Partnership had already supported a number of developments of new services with employers:
- unlocking more than 500 employee volunteers, released by their companies to be reading volunteers in schools
- managers of companies working with small groups of pupils on the reading, writing, speaking, listening and number skills associated with live company projects. The manager spoke to the pupils at their school; the pupils then worked at the company premises on the company topic; the group would then prepare a presentation to do either at the company or back at their school. These 'Maths@Work' and 'Words@Work' developments created strong links, for pupils, between practising basic skills and gaining insights into the world of work.
- The focused-time during primary school literacy and numeracy lessons relied on group sessions using a Big Book (a large format book used as a teaching aid by the teacher). Links were made between schools and businesses which resulted in the creation of Big Books. Groups of pupils visited local shops, or a pizza restaurant, or a city centre tourist organisation, or a manufacturing factory. Work with the pizza restaurant – as an example – led to lists, menus, instructions, calculations of numbers able to be sat (e.g. four to a table x 16 tables), fractions created as pizzas were shared out etc. These were cut and pasted onto sheets that were laminated and fastened together to produce a 'Big Book of Pizza Work' that could be used and re used in classrooms during the rest of the year. This was an additional way of linking school-based literacy and numeracy work with a deeper understanding of the world of work. The Partnership helped establish the model, produce a 'how to' manual for the production of these books, and help extend this into the creation of interactive work-task focused literacy and numeracy materials on a CDROM that pupils could continue to access.

In the early years of the Partnership's work, work on the job-related basic skills in particular companies had grown, but was still being done on a company-by-company basis. Organisations were negotiating with a company to undertake literacy/numeracy work with relatively small groups of employees – and then moving on to go thorough the whole process again with another company. This was useful work, but was never going to hit the huge numbers of employees needed if the city was to impact substantially on levels of need.

A new model was needed. The lead partner in this was the local Learning and Skills Council. The model was constructed around a framework of elements:

- briefings to large groups of employers, drawing on inputs from enthusiastic and experienced 'champion' employers.
- training of business advisers – teams of people whose job was to advise companies on a whole range of business-support issues. Their portfolio of advice initially didn't include 'basic skills at work' advice – but once trained they were able to include this and act as brokers between the needs of employers and the best organisation with experience of delivering basic skills in that particular sector or work context.
- Research into changes within employment sectors – which job roles were increasing; what literacy and numeracy skills would be needed by these roles in the near future? Knowing the communities that recruits to these jobs would come from (and knowing the existing levels of literacy and numeracy skills within these communities) it might then be possible to start to construct skills programmes that would act as a ramp between people in those communities and being able to effectively do the new jobs at the new levels.
- Analysis of the common, recurring tasks in various sectors (Health and Care; Retail; Manufacturing; Leisure and Tourism) where higher level literacy and numeracy skills were needed – usually tasks associated with report writing; estimating; record keeping; reading instructions; scaling up or down; percentages and ratios etc. A set of five self-access CDROMs were produced highlighting these tasks, using video shots filmed within Birmingham companies to give it a local flavour. More than a thousand copies of such CDROMs are available to employers.
- Employers supported with the creation of learning centres or, more simply, access to single computers in the open workplace (i.e. not relying on using the 'office' computer). When a worker was having difficulty with one particular skills someone, e.g. a trade union learning representative or a supervisor or simply a workmate, could suggest 'Why don't you spend 10 minutes looking at the second of those CDROMs we were given. That has a useful section on temperatures. Look at that then if you are still having problems come back to me and I'll find someone to go through it in more detail' i.e. the solution being presented more as '5 minutes to brush up on one specific skill' rather than the solution always being offered as 'going on a six week course'.
- Basic skills providers going into companies in more structured ways and delivering number and communication improvements to employees and managers as part of wider business support packages. This 'keeping a focus on basic skills, but at the same time losing the focus in wider processes' continues to emerge as one of the skills needed for planners, funders and deliverers over the next few years.

I hope that this has given an idea of the way that companies are both contributing to the basic skills of pupils and are also addressing, in much

larger numbers – several thousand this year – the basic skills needs of their own workforce.

There are still enormous challenges in all of this. Are the organisations that are there to enhance the work with companies up to speed on 'modernised' approaches to basic skills? Are the resources really available to support work-related number and communication skills? How do we get into ever larger numbers of small companies (and, in parallel, are we really making large-scale inroads into those larger companies and public service employers who employ large numbers of people whose basic skills need cranking up a level?)?

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This rounds off the overview of what the variety of organisations (that had signed up to a partnership, developmental drive on literacy and numeracy seven years before) have been able to achieve through this concerted approach. If this is the 'halfway there' position – if there is at least as much again that can be achieved over the next several years – where will Birmingham be by 2010. Will it have got the majority of very young children (from all communities) off to a flying start? Will almost all school pupils (again from all communities) be achieving at high levels? Will all routes into, and within, employment guarantee a continuous updating of relevant basic skills? Will there be large numbers simply getting on with improving specific skills, becoming more competitive and more involved in their communities? Will all provider programmes meet the highest quality standards? Will there be a wide community network of support mechanisms that help everyone to keep polishing and practising the underpinning skills? Will there be large numbers of children, young people and adults who see themselves as 'readers' and 'writers'? And will Birmingham have become the first city to really have halved the gap in the basic skills levels of adults?

Simply put – will Birmingham be quite close to achieving its longer term vision? And if so what role will the Partnership have played within the wider web of interconnecting developments?

So this finally brings us to the point where some overall lessons need to be pulled out from all that the Partnership has done to date. What have we learnt, as a Partnership, from all of this development support, now that we are around the 'halfway there' position (i.e. have moved things on a long way but still have just about as much still to do)?

As part of the long-term evaluation of the Partnership's work our external evaluator has looked at:
- the range of evaluations within each development activity
- the extent to which the variety of development activities did actually add up to some higher-level shift in the direction of the key strategic objectives
- the progress being made, via those objectives, to raise skills levels as planned

- the extent to which the Partnership way of working has made a difference (compared with the extent to which outcomes could have been achieved without it)
- the value-for-money offered by the Partnership approach

In addition the evaluator is also currently (consistent with the Partnership's approach) trying to strip out the wider lessons that can be learnt from the Partnership's experiences; to package these into some 'how to' guidelines that can be of use to other regeneration activities. These outcomes will be posted on the Partnership's website in the near future.

The lessons will be used to shape the future of the Partnership's work. We know that literacy and numeracy levels still need considerable work; we know the priorities for the next five years – and that partners have recommitted to operating collaboratively to bring about changes over this period (and then review the situation again). We know that it is all do-able if we can keep the focus and the momentum. The plan to take Birmingham towards 2010 is currently being written (with that previously mentioned goal of reducing the basic skills gaps by 50% by 2010).

Most of the goals set in 1995 are being reached during 2003. This position will be used as the new baseline from which to undertake the second leap forward to 2010 or thereabouts. The plan for the 'second half' will be built upon ten strategic objectives. These are:

Strategic objective 1: Raise levels of language, number skills and literacy skills for children, aged 0-4, in designated localities
by:
- disaggregating data to identify interventions needed in target areas
- focusing on work with families
- promoting work via voluntary and community groups
- bringing all forms of provision up to higher levels of quality, assessed against local/national frameworks
- increasing the amount of cross-agency and integrated working, within an overall agreed set of developmental drives
- ensuring better alignment of a range of interventions and support activities
- using evidence-based support for improved language development
- gaining a clearer understanding of the factors producing developmental delay 0-4, and the interventions to counter these
- supporting the increased use of ICT linked to language, literacy and numeracy skills

Strategic objective 2: Secure continued annual improvement of literacy, numeracy and language skills of pupils aged 5-16
by:
- ensuring the progressive annual achievement of local education targets (including targets for underachieving groups)

- aligning annual improvements with the distance to be travelled to reach national levels by agreed dates
- focusing 'non-school' resources onto activities that make a difference re community support for raising standards
- supporting and challenging schools through a menu of reliable interventions
- increasing the sophistication of use of data, and of the knowledge of impacts
- working with schools in new ways to establish ways of bringing skills levels to at least the national average
- increasing the engagement of families and the community in activities that raise levels of literacy, language and numeracy
- supporting collaborative work across organisations and networks to improve the infrastructure re language, literacy and numeracy
- supporting the increased use of ICT linked to language, literacy and numeracy skills

Strategic objective 3: Secure the achievement of local contributions to national 'Skills for Life' targets
by:
- improving the style and range of promotional activities re adult basic skills
- shifting perceptions of 'adult basic skills'
- promoting a range of national qualification opportunities (to learners, to key intermediaries and to employers)
- establishing better patterns of shorter 'top up' booster courses (basic skills for a purpose, not basic skills as a lifestyle)
- increasing the opportunities for securing national qualifications within existing and new activities
- increasing the volume of numeracy, higher level ESOL, work-related and embedded basic skills
- increasing the amount of employment sector specific activity
- ensuring an adequate number of skilled and qualified teachers, in a range of contexts
- ensuring that young people make the transition to training or employment, 14-19, with specific basic skills needs being met
- clearer targeting of Skills for Life priority groups
- ensuring appropriate engagement of a wider range of organisations
- increasing the focus on the skills of teaching and learning
- securing increased clarity on the functions expected of different parts of the infrastructure

Strategic objective 4: Ensure that levels of adult literacy, language and numeracy are above aspirational levels for each area of Birmingham and Solihull, and for various demographic groups
by:
- agreeing aspirational 'floor targets' for areas and for target groups

- ensuring that sufficient provision, at appropriate levels, is available to support necessary levels of progress
- creating stronger links between neighbourhood renewal processes and Skills for Life agenda
- enabling local planning to be on the basis of reliable data, and within agreed frameworks
- enabling employee focused work to be undertaken on the basis of better knowledge
- ensuring a focus on widening achievement

Strategic objective 5: Increased volume of opportunities that support the use of reading, writing and language for creative purposes
by:
- promoting the cultural and creative uses of a range of core skills
- increasing the number and range of opportunities for school pupils and young people 14-19 to invest their own time in these activities
- ensuring that these activities encompass the interests of target groups (e.g. looked after children; children with language development needs; children with disabilities etc)
- increasing the role of media, arts organisations, private sector organisations etc in developing the overall levels of engagement with reading, writing, speaking etc

Strategic objective 6: Ensure the progressive embedding of core skills within national and regional strategies:
by:
- ensuring clear descriptions of the basic skills elements of national primary strategy; Key Stage 3 strategy; national Skills Strategy; 14-19 strategy etc
- ensuring a more transparent linkage between core skills developments and the renewal of neighbourhoods
- ensuring clear descriptions of the basic skills elements of Regeneration Zone developments; area-based regeneration programmes; regional frameworks etc
- identifying the core skills elements/outcomes of planned developments, with a mechanism whereby each element can be effectively made part of mainstream/ongoing activity
- using checklists to monitor progress of core skills developments, linked to specific local activities to ensure that annual progress is made
- aligning development plans of a range of organisations; to identify any gaps and overlaps in core skills developments
- keeping some focus on literacy and numeracy, but increasingly as a contributor to wider strategic outcomes

Strategic objective 7: Raise provider quality to a consistently high grade re literacy, numeracy and language
by:

- encouraging regular self-assessment as a non-bureaucratic way of identifying the menu of developments to be worked on
- aligning resources behind a menu of developments aimed at 'bringing up to level'
- promoting assessment frameworks as development tools
- assisting pre-school; out-of-school; and voluntary/community activity to meet quality standards
- assisting post 16 providers to reliably self-assess at inspection grade 2 or above

Strategic objective 8: Increase the contributions being made, by a wide range of support and development organisations, to raising levels of literacy, language and numeracy

by:
- creating increased expectations of what can realistically be done by various networks of organisations
- increasing alignment of renewal, regeneration and development proposals
- ensuring increased engagement of all major structural groups (justice system; health; housing; community groups; libraries; Information and Guidance organisations etc)
- developing a wider variety of managed activities to unlock and meet adult basic skills needs
- clarifying and strengthening the role of key intermediaries
- ensuring the existence of routes into appropriate, highly effective provision
- ensuring effective mechanisms within each set of organisations to identify basic skills needs, to plan for meeting identified needs, to review and record progress, and to access appropriate accreditation of skills

Strategic objective 9: Create increased amount of organisational collaboration; shared expertise; and mutual recognition

by:
- creating more opportunities for sharing expertise at a number of levels
- supporting organisational mentoring, collaboration and joint activity
- increasing amounts of peer support, cross-sector and cross-phase support around specific developments
- promoting high value activities, as robust frameworks of elements that can be taken and customised by others
- increasing the use of expert seminars, 'springboard' meetings, 'think tanks' around specific topics and problems; limited use of 'standing groups'

Strategic objective 10: Increase the area's reputation for being at the forefront of developments

by:
- promoting robust, sustainable models and approaches

- contributing to regional and national developments
- proposing and testing more effective ways of working
- applying learning city/learning organisation principles
- better use of research and learning from skilled practitioners
- taking opportunities to contribute to leading developments at regional, national and international levels without detracting from the local work to be done.

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In the next stage of developments all the bits need to move together and that has been the secret to moving the mountain so far up to now – dividing it into manageable chunks; planning the shifts possible each year; recognising which partners will shift which bits; and keeping everything moving in a coherent and linked way.

As a set of organisations in Birmingham we are pleased with how far things have moved, pleased that it is still moving, and very pleased to have been able to share it with others as part of Birmingham's contribution to wider national learning and developments.

Thank you.

Geoff Bateson
Partnership Manager
(August 2003)