



Leading for learning: how the intelligent leader builds capacity

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Resource

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the 10 directors of children's services (DCSs) whose day-to-day work is at the core of this study. They all contributed their time so generously.

Thanks are also due to the members of the project advisory group for their sustained and constructive engagement with the work:

- Dr Andrew Coleman, Senior Manager, Commissioned Research, National College for School Leadership
- Anton Florek, Chief Executive, Virtual Staff College
- Toby Greany, Director, Research and Development, National College for School Leadership
- John Harris, Director, Children, Schools and Families, Hertfordshire County Council
- Professor Eileen Munro, London School of Economics
- Heather Rushton, Deputy Director, C4EO
- Patrick Scott, National Lead (Succession Planning), Virtual Staff College
- Sue Wald, Director of Strategy and Commissioning, Swindon Local Authority

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How to cite this publication:

Daniels, H. and Edwards, A. [2012]. Leading for learning: how the intelligent leader builds capacity. Nottingham. National College for School Leadership.

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Foreword

In June 2010, the Secretary of State for Education asked me to carry out a review of child protection in this country. The central question that I set out to answer was this, “What helps professionals make the best judgements they can to protect a vulnerable child?”

I found that the system had become over-bureaucratic and too concerned with compliance. I concluded that instead we need a system which values and develops professional expertise more, and takes greater account of the experience of children and young people themselves. That’s why the sub-title of the report is ‘a child centred system’. The implications of this for all those leading services for children and young people, in whatever capacity, is that we need to move from a culture preoccupied with compliance to one focused on learning, where professionals have the freedom to use their expertise to assess and provide the help each individual child needs.

That is not an easy journey to make. There is something reassuring about centrally determined rules and targets which only become apparent when they disappear. There’s a fine line to be drawn between, on the one hand, helpful guidance which distils best practice, and, on the other, time-consuming bureaucracy which distracts those at the front-line from doing their best for children and creates an over-rigid system that is not sensitive to the diverse needs of individual families.

But if we don’t build a system which can learn from the daily experience of everybody working on behalf of vulnerable children and young people, we will fail. This research, commissioned by the National College with support by the Virtual Staff College, makes a significant contribution to the debate about how this might be achieved. I commend it to you and thank the authors, Professor Harry Daniels and Professor Anne Edwards, for their considerable work on this project.

Professor Eileen Munro
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Executive summary

Background

Government policy offers new freedoms to the public sector that have enhanced the responsibilities of practitioners and make new demands on the systems tackling the often complex needs of vulnerable children and their families. While such developments bring very significant challenges to leaders of children's services, they also offer new freedoms and opportunities. Local authorities are therefore responding to these developments in a wide variety of ways, resulting in 'a mixed economy of provision with a greater role for citizens, communities, voluntary agencies and the private sector in children's services commissioning and delivery' (C4EO, 2011:10).

In this context, all practitioners need to adapt to the changing environment without increasing the risk of failing vulnerable children and their families. Leaders need confidence that professional judgements will lead to the best possible outcomes for children, young people and families. Meanwhile the practitioners they lead need to learn a) to recognise what it is important to work on and b) how to collaborate with others to achieve what really matters. These demands have led to increased attention to building capacity within and across children's services to develop well-informed, child-focused systems. At the heart of this process is a focus on the learning that creates a self-improving system, within which practitioners learn by listening to each other to build the knowledge needed to improve the lives of children, young people and families. This report describes innovative and outstanding leadership practice in the development of learning organisations in the public sector. It identifies what effective directors of children's services (DCSs) do to promote a learning culture and learning practices in which knowledge is nurtured, shared and utilised within an ongoing climate of change to achieve positive outcomes for children, young people and families.

The aims of the study were to identify:

- the actions taken by senior leaders to build capacity
- how these actions link to the strategic purposes of their organisations

The study was undertaken by Professor Harry Daniels (University of Bath) and Professor Anne Edwards (Oxford University). It involved intensive work with 10 DCSs gathering evidence on how they fostered learning. While this research focused on the work of DCSs, it is also of potential interest to school leaders and others with an interest in promoting learning within their organisation.

The learning challenges facing directors of children's services

The study found two broad **learning challenges** for leaders in public services, which were reflected in the strategies they adopted in this area. These are:

1. Designing learning systems, ie establishing the processes and protocols that ensure the appropriate flow of information and learning between professionals and organisations:
 - The design of learning systems is a crucial part of developing a learning organisation.
 - At their best, learning systems enable a sound flow of knowledge vertically (between operational to strategic and executive levels) and horizontally (across professional groupings within services).
 - A strategic priority for leaders is to work with practitioners to shape what matters to them.
 - These learning systems need to support **all** of the system – the whole is only as strong as its weakest part.

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2. Building capacity to support the organisational priorities, ie promoting a common public narrative of the collective mission for children's services:
 - To foster learning, leaders help practitioners align their personal understandings with the wider organisational narrative to establish a clear and commonly held view of the key priorities for children's services.
 - Capacity-building needs to occur in relation to shared understandings of organisational purposes and how each practitioner can contribute to them.
 - Specialist expertise is crucial in helping to establish this common understanding and needs to be recognised, drawn on and developed.

In each of these broad areas, DCSs face a variety of challenges at a range of levels, including those that are system wide, cultural and group/individually based. Some of the more specific issues leaders need to address as part of this process include:

- How do leaders create and sustain systems that enable intelligence to flow across, as well as up and down, the organisation to ensure that strategy and frontline delivery inform each other?
- How do leaders sustain organisational stability while building the capacity to adapt to a rapidly changing policy landscape at both a local and national level?
- What are the triggers for change within learning systems? In particular, how do senior leaders deal with signs of resistance, rule-bending or contradictions between practices and good outcomes for children, young people and families?
- How do leaders manage uncertainty and emotions?
- How do leaders enable the development of increased professional responsibility within a culture that is oriented to accountability?

Addressing the learning challenges: leadership learning processes and activities

The study found that in addressing these challenges, these DCSs did not follow a formulaic set of strategies but rather made conscious choices from their wider repertoire as they adopted approaches that promoted learning with different groups or individuals, focused on different challenges. Nevertheless it did identify three key **processes for leading learning** which underpinned their leadership. Collectively, these leadership learning processes underpin a form of **intelligent leadership**, intended to build capacity within children's services. These processes are:

1. **Recognition:** identifying the specific learning challenging and the nature of the learning required to address it through the use of appropriate forms of intelligence and data
2. **Response:** establishing the best way to promote the learning needed, the form of leadership this requires and the specific leadership actions that need to be undertaken
3. **Reflection:** asking if the learning challenge has been addressed, whether the leadership approach adopted was effective and what improvements could be made in the future

Intelligent leaders promote learning to realise the changes necessary in the values, beliefs and practice of professionals in order to make the improvements needed to achieve the common vision for children's services. As part of this, they undertake a common set of activities through a variety of means to support the overarching processes of **recognition, response** and **reflection** described above. These comprise:

- questioning practices
- examining practices
- formulating and modelling solutions

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- implementing solutions
 - reflecting and realigning purposes

This study found that **intelligent leaders** also recognised the need to undertake these processes and activities with colleagues from beyond their own organisations as well as within it, viewing this as part of a wider process of **negotiation** rather than more traditional management.

The leadership behaviours that promote learning

As noted, a central part of **intelligent leadership** involves helping to create a common public narrative which weaves together the different ways in which practitioners contribute to outcomes for children, young people and their families. These narratives provide the glue that holds together the different purposes and practices that make up children's services and offer a collective framework for accountability. In this context, the priority for **intelligent leadership** is to help practitioners to recognise and contribute to this narrative.

The DCSs in this study deployed a range of leadership behaviours as part of their broader activities, which were intended to address the key learning challenges they faced in their specific context. Not all DCSs demonstrated all behaviours, but rather each developed a repertoire and drew upon it as they saw fit. While the ways in which they performed these leadership behaviours varied, they all nevertheless reflected a collective recognition of the need for empathy, emotional intelligence and the ability to vary one's approach to meet the specific needs of the individual follower.

These DCSs also showed a desire to utilise the evidence available to correctly interpret the nature of the learning challenge, identify the kind of learning needed to address it and select the actions necessary to achieve their identified strategic goals. In total this study identified nine **leading learning behaviours** which **intelligent leaders** utilise to address challenges as follows:

1. Leadership behaviours for addressing system-level challenges:
 - Directing
 - Questioning
 - Pulling together
2. Leadership behaviours for addressing cultural challenges:
 - Translating
 - Taking the standpoint of the other
3. Leadership behaviours for addressing individual or group challenges:
 - Enabling
 - Coaching
 - Facilitating
 - Collaborating

Leaders as reflective learners

The **intelligent leaders** in this study were high performers who demonstrated thoughtfulness and a desire to promote a strong degree of evidence-informed reflection throughout the organisations they led. As part of this they reserved time for reflection, with some setting aside diary time for personal reflection, while others invited peer challenge and shadowing opportunities. Several continued to work in the action learning sets that they had encountered during their participation on the DCS programme. Many valued the systematic use of peer self-review with other DCSs or the contribution of external professional coaches.

Concluding points

- **Intelligent leaders** build capacity for learning by carefully matching their actions with the demands of the learning challenges and their strategic priorities. This involves recognising the nature of the challenge they face, developing an appropriate response and reflecting upon the effectiveness of that response.
- **Intelligent leadership** is not formulaic; rather it is a thoughtful form of practice in which the best possible responses are made to their interpretations of the learning challenges.
- There is a common repertoire of leadership behaviours which **intelligent leaders** utilise in different degrees depending upon their context. These behaviours are aimed at tackling the specific challenges of systems and cultures and those presented by individuals and groups.
- **Intelligent leaders** are highly empathic in their interactions with others and systematically reflective when reviewing their own actions in relation to strategy.
- The emphasis **intelligent leaders** place on building workforce capacity may offer long-term benefits by creating an evidence-informed workforce able to make child-centred decisions throughout the organisation.

1. Background and aims

1.1 Resourceful leadership in challenging times

In 2011, the National College published its research *Resourceful leadership: how directors of children's services improve outcomes for children* (Canwell et al, 2011). This study, which at the time of publication was the largest of its kind¹, described how leaders throughout the public sector and children's services face a number of challenges, including:

- an increasingly tough financial climate
- high expectations of services at lower cost
- uncertainty and public expectations
- shifts in demographics
- complex and shared delivery
- public sector reform

Collectively these developments require practitioners to respond flexibly to a complex, changing context without increasing the risk of failing vulnerable children and their families. They also require leaders to do more with less, to build local capacity and deploy that capacity to work on complex problems. The study found that in essence, the leaders of children's services need to be **resourceful leaders**.

In this context, resourcefulness involves having the ability to both a) assess and widen one's resource-base, and b) select and apply the best mix of resources to address the type of challenge faced. To achieve this, the study identified eight key behaviours that resourceful leaders possess, each of which is underpinned by a range of knowledge areas, skills and attributes. Figure 1 summarises these eight behaviours and shows how they are concerned with four broad leadership priorities. These are:

- the bottom line: focusing on what truly matters for children and families
- working together: bringing people together to improve outcomes for children, young people and families
- commitment: ensuring that everyone sees the job through
- openness to learning: creating a positive climate for change

¹ Completed between March and August 2010, *Resourceful leadership* involved the completion of eight case studies of local authorities from a broad performance spectrum, additional follow-up interviews with 22 DCSs and a number of group discussions with other leaders in children's services.

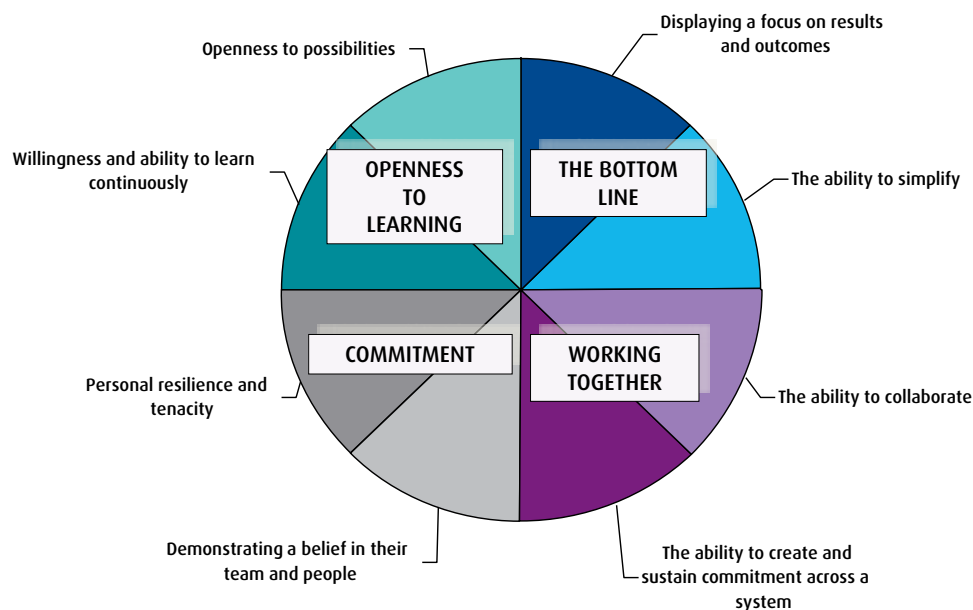


Figure 1: Overview of resourceful leadership

This study builds upon earlier work into **resourceful leadership** by exploring the fourth of these themes, **openness to learning**, in more depth. At its heart is the recognition that while such developments bring very significant challenges to leaders of children's services, they also offer new freedoms and opportunities. Local authorities in turn are responding to this challenge in a wide variety of ways resulting in the emergence of 'a mixed economy of provision with a greater role for citizens, communities, voluntary agencies and the private sector in children's services commissioning and delivery' (C4EO, 2011:10).

In such a context, leaders need confidence that professional judgements will lead to the best possible outcomes for children, young people and families. Meanwhile the practitioners they lead need to learn a) to recognise what is important to work on and b) how to collaborate with others to achieve what really matters. These demands have led to increased attention on building capacity within and across children's services to develop well-informed, child-focused systems. Central to this is a focus on the learning that creates a self-improving system, within which practitioners learn together, while challenging one another to do their very best for the children, young people and families they support.

Of course, leaders in children's services are not alone in facing such a complex picture of challenge and opportunities. Indeed, leaders in schools, federations and chains, children's centres and more broadly across the public sector will find much in this report that resonates with their own day-to-day leadership experiences. It is therefore anticipated that leaders in each of these settings will be interested in the findings from this study.

1.2 The study

The study that underpins this report was undertaken by Professor Harry Daniels (University of Bath) and Professor Anne Edwards (Oxford University) and took place between July and December 2011. Its aims were to identify:

- the actions taken by senior leaders to build capacity
- how these actions link to the strategic purposes of their organisations

The study was completed in three stages. Stage 1 involved identifying the learning challenges in children's services and developing a model for analysing how DCSs foster the learning needed to address these challenges (July to August). Stage 2 was concerned with checking the scope of the challenges and testing

the learning model with a small group of senior leaders in children's services (September). The third and final stage involved using the learning model to collect and analyse evidence about the work the senior leaders do to create a culture of learning (October to December). As part of this, the research team worked intensively with 10 high-performing DCSs, selected by the National College, over 2 months, gathering evidence weekly on how they fostered learning, and interviewing them to explore how they built capacity. Single examples of promoting learning were also gathered from more than 40 senior leaders at 2 seminars where the team discussed the study.

1.3 Organisation of the report: an overview of intelligent leadership

This report describes innovative and outstanding leadership practice in the development of learning organisations in the public sector. It identifies what effective directors of children's services do to promote a learning culture and learning practices in which knowledge is nurtured, shared and utilised within an ongoing climate of change to achieve positive outcomes for children, young people and families.

As part of this, it seeks to trace the links between the actions DCSs took to promote learning, their everyday activities and their longer term strategic concern with promoting positive outcomes for children, young people and families. In doing so, the report describes a model for understanding the nature of leadership for learning within these organisations (Figure 2).

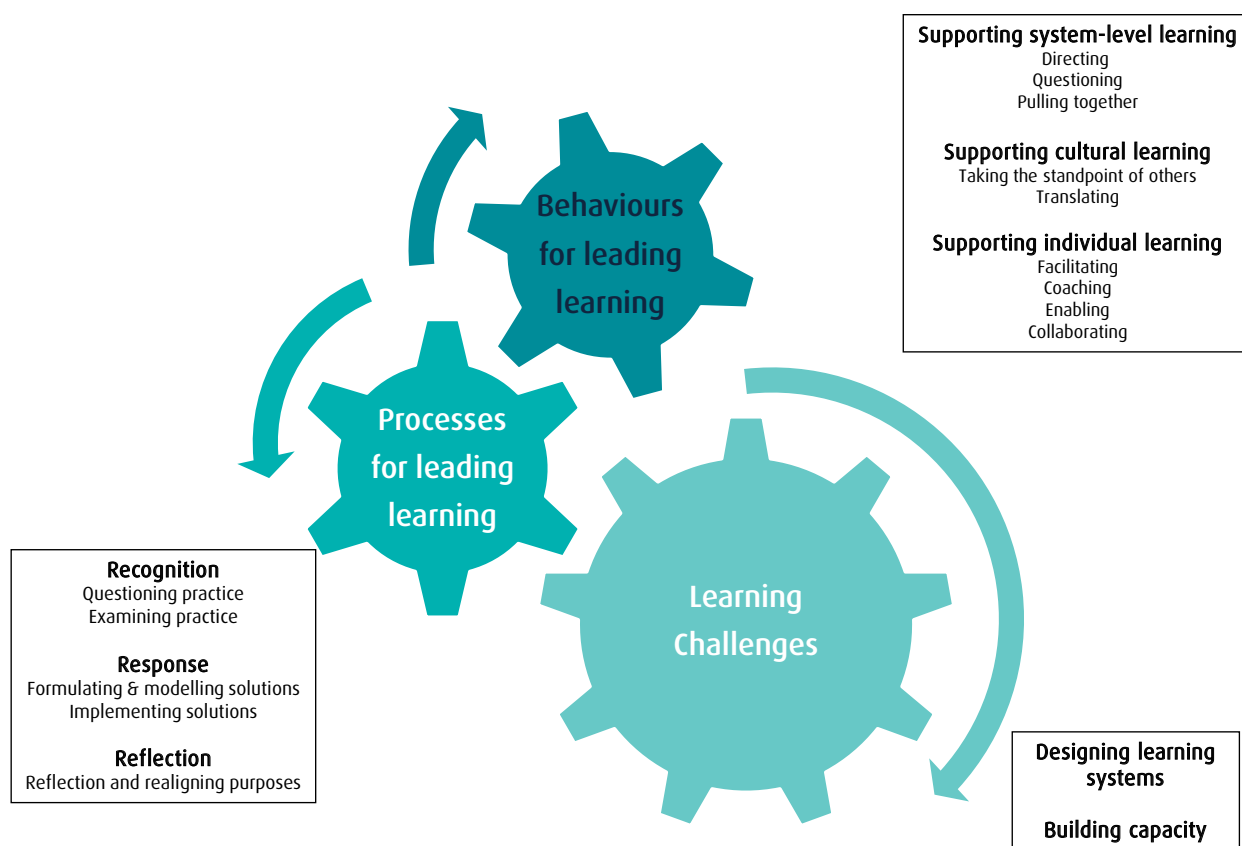


Figure 2: Intelligent leadership: leading for learning

This model comprises three interlinked elements. At its heart is a clear understanding of their vision for children's services, and the systems required to support this **leadership challenge**. The learning challenges that need to be addressed to realise this longer term strategic concern are explored in more depth in Chapter 3.

The study found that these DCSs did not utilise a formulaic set of strategies to address these challenges, but rather made conscious choices from their wider leadership repertoire, in line with the demands of the context. Nevertheless this research did identify three common processes for leading learning, which underpinned their leadership practice, and these are discussed in Chapter 4 of the report.

The third element of the model relates to the specific **leadership behaviours** adopted to complete these processes and in turn address the leadership challenge. These behaviours form the focus for Chapter 5, which also explores some of the factors that inform their selection by leaders. Chapter 5 also discusses how successful leaders of learning reflect on their organisation's aims and take them forward. A template to guide this reflection is offered in Appendix A.

However, the report begins its consideration of **intelligent leadership** by reflecting on the recent changes in children's services and the ways in which these have influenced the context within which it occurs.

2. Context

This chapter outlines the policy context of the work of DCSs. It suggests that leading learning is central to sector-led improvement. It argues that new freedoms which bring new responsibilities for practitioners make learning a key lever for leadership. It also points to the challenge for DCSs of promoting learning while managing risk and ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.

2.1 From public management to new freedoms

The last 10 years have seen a growing recognition that interprofessional collaborations benefit children, young people and their families, whether the concern is prevention or protection. The seismic shifts in the organisation of children's and adults' services that have resulted have therefore created systems in which new challenges are the norm, and learning, however uncomfortable, is part of professional life.

Different local starting points have meant that services have moved towards integration and interprofessional collaboration at different rates. For some, tight performance management has been essential while for others it has been easier to rely on professional judgements within broad systems of target-led accountability. For all local authorities, central government expectations, often supported by initiative funding, have until recently largely shaped local priorities.

The current coalition government has taken a somewhat different approach, however, by introducing a range of new freedoms to the delivery of children's services. Michal Gove, discussing education policy, explained its direction thus: '[We] will give progressively greater freedom, by stripping away targets, rules, regulations and ring-fencing' (HM Government, 2010:5).

These new freedoms have brought new responsibilities for practitioners. As one DCS in an earlier (2011) study by the research team for the Local Government Association put it:

[T]he world has changed... [practitioners need to] think about outcomes for families... but sometimes you give people the freedom and they don't know what to do with it.

Director of children's services

The new freedoms have also brought new demands on systems that have only recently got to grips with the risks for professionals and service users involved in aligning services to tackle the often complex needs of vulnerable children and their families.

2.2 The broader policy context

Expectations of those working in children's services are invariably high. The recent analysis of the social dimensions of the Europe 2020 strategy (Social Protection Committee, 2011) identifies the need to raise at least 20 million citizens out of poverty and social exclusion over the next decade. Key to this is a policy of social integration and building capacity for active inclusion which will involve mainstream as well as specialist services.

Recognising students as people with lives beyond the school gates means that vulnerable children cannot easily be parcelled into discrete needs and each need sent to different agencies which work independently. As the 2011 Munro Review of Child Protection (Munro, 2011) in the UK observed, 'child-centred' systems of services are needed. An earlier discussion paper produced by HM Treasury focused more on prevention and emphasised the crucial role of schools in such a child-centred system. It argued: 'A preventative schedule of support needs the full engagement of universal services, especially schools' (HM Treasury & DfES, 2007:20).

These collaborations are reflected in the new localism policy agenda (DCLG, 2011). This agenda offers possibilities for greater diversity in the local organisation of services for children and young people, thereby encouraging providers to be more responsive to their needs and focus on early intervention in the lives of the most vulnerable. However, such local autonomy and diversity call for robust systems of close-to-practice accountability which ensure that the clients of these new arrangements are being best served and supported. These changes also demand a high degree of practitioner responsibility within a framework of managing risk. New localism therefore requires strong and confident leadership able to meet the learning demands that arise as practitioners work responsively with clients.

This need to promote learning in support of greater freedom and increased autonomy is also evident in how DCSs work with other partners. A key priority for all DCSs is therefore to work with all individuals, teams and agencies involved in the delivery of children's services, to negotiate and promote a common understanding of **what children's services are actually for**, in other words, to build the common public narrative that promotes a collective vision and supports vulnerable children, young people and families.

2.3 The importance of learning in new policy shifts

These changes mean that, more than ever, all practitioners need to be prepared for enhanced responsibilities without increasing risks. In addition this needs to happen within a climate of funding cuts to local authorities and the recent closure of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC). For leaders these alterations in the context of their work mean needing to be confident that professional decisions will be those most likely to lead to good outcomes for children, young people and families. Meanwhile practitioners need to learn a) to recognise what is important to work on and b) how to collaborate with others to achieve what matters.

As noted above, the 2011 Munro Review pointed to the need for a focus on learning organisations which placed the child at the centre, arguing that:

- the current system is too preoccupied with procedure and insufficiently focused on the needs of children and young people
- accountability should ultimately be linked to whether there is evidence that interventions are helping children and young people
- children's services should be seen as learning and adaptive systems
- leadership should be committed to promoting learning but remain accountable

However, the focus on structural change in children's services since the 2004 Children Act has meant that workforce development has sometimes been neglected, and the capacity to work in the ways called for by the Munro Review reduced. Indeed, the increased investment in preventative work (Boddy et al, 2009; McAuley et al, 2006) has not, despite the best efforts of CWDC and C4EO, always been supported by a parallel investment in developing a workforce.

For instance, a CWDC review of the workforce implications of preventative work, based on an analysis of 20 evaluations of interventions in the UK, concluded that more early intervention services are being offered but the workforce needs more skills in order to offer effective early intervention services. It concluded that:

Although there is strong evidence of a workforce that is re-orienting its work to make early interventions to prevent later problems for children, young people and their families, it seems that there are still lessons that employing organisations can learn from these changing practices. One lesson in relation to the workforce demands of preventative work is the need for strong support for workforce training and development to take forward these new practices.

Edwards & Stamou, 2009:22

In part this problem has arisen through an emphasis on initiative funding over the previous decade, which has resulted in a proliferation of short-term contracts and a flexible and rapidly trained workforce (Evangelou et al, 2008). The introduction of the new freedoms described above together with the withdrawal of much initiative funding have subsequently created a somewhat different landscape where the investment of time in building capability can be seen as having longer term benefits.

The importance of workforce quality is seen clearly in a substantive US study of the relationship between the organisation of services for children and outcomes. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected over 3 years on services provided to 250 children by 32 public children's service offices in 24 counties in Tennessee. A quasi-experimental, longitudinal design was used to assess the effects of inter-organisational service co-ordination. The study revealed that:

...organizational climate (including low conflict, cooperation, role clarity, and personalization) is the primary predictor of positive service outcomes (the children's improved psychosocial functioning) and a significant predictor of service quality. In contrast, interorganizational coordination had a negative effect on service quality and no effect on outcomes.

Glissen & Hemmelgarn, 1998:401

These findings support the argument for greater flexibility and more personalised approaches to prevention and protection. They suggest that outcomes can be improved when professionals are able to exercise professional judgements when supporting vulnerable children and that over-co-ordination can be detrimental. More integrated working approaches are therefore insufficient if they do not occur within a mutually trusting and supportive context.

In the light of this, the key challenges for leaders who aim to foster learning are how to:

- create a framework within which professional judgements can be safely made
- ensure the professional capability to make those judgements

This report is about how DCSs and other public sector leaders do this. It is therefore not about how to train people to become part of a learning organisation, but rather focuses on leaders' strategic interactions with practitioners, which inform both their motives and actions in line with the common public narrative DCSs are taking forward.

2.4 The move towards a self-improving system

A further driver for embedding processes and a culture for organisational learning comes from the new emphasis on sector-led improvement. The underlying principles (Local Government Association, 2011) are that:

- councils are responsible for their own performance
- stronger accountability to local people drives further improvement
- councils have a collective responsibility for performance in the sector as a whole
- the role of the Local Government Association is to provide support and assistance

These principles build on C4EO's work to encourage those working in children's services to use both evidence and effective good practice to inform leadership and decision-making. This has demonstrated that the sector has both the capacity and commitment to improve itself by successfully laying the foundations for sector-led improvement.

In this report we take these findings and recommendations as a starting point for an investigation of how DCSs interpret learning challenges and work with others to tackle them.

2.5 Summary

- New freedoms bring new responsibilities which make learning a key lever for leadership.
- Services for children, young people and families are most effective when they respond to the specific challenges they face. Delivery of this requires adaptable systems, peopled by informed and skilful practitioners, operating within firm frameworks.
- The attention paid to workforce development, in terms of both skill levels and numbers, has often been insufficient, given the major structural changes that have occurred within children's services.
- A key challenge for leaders of children's services is to foster learning by creating frameworks which provide a safe environment for exercising professional judgements.
- DCSs need to work with other individuals, teams and agencies to promote clear understanding of how they contribute to the broader vision for children's services.
- Leading learning is central to sector-led improvement.

3. The learning challenges facing DCSs

Leaders of services for children, young people and families are tackling complex problems that call for a rich mix of expertise and an ongoing commitment to learning. This chapter describes how **intelligent leaders** work to improve outcomes for children, young people and families by addressing the key learning challenges of a) designing learning systems that support the flow of information and learning between professionals and organisations and b) building capacity by promoting a common narrative around the aims for children's services.

3.1 From compliance to adaption

As noted in Chapter 2, children's services are characterised by high levels of change in both policy and practice, evidenced by:

- almost all authorities changing or reviewing their delivery of children's services
- increased contracting-out of services
- the development of cross-authority services
- increased portfolios for senior leaders

These and other changes present leaders of children's services with a range of specific challenges, many of which are best described as wicked issues (Key concept 1) in the light of their complexity and intractability.

Key concept 1: Wicked issues

Wicked issues represent complex challenges which cannot readily be solved but are more frequently managed or contained. Wicked problems require leadership that is focused on building capacity and promoting learning rather than a more straightforward application of a tried and tested solution. They frequently involve multiple stakeholders, each of whom brings a different perception of both the problem and strategies through which it may be addressed.

Examples of wicked issues faced by senior leaders in children's services include the following:

- How do leaders create and sustain systems to enable intelligence to flow through the organisation to ensure that strategy and frontline delivery inform each other?
- How do leaders sustain organisational stability whilst developing the capacity to be innovative in response to a rapidly changing policy landscape?
- What are the triggers for change within systems? In particular, how do senior leaders respond to signs of resistance and rule-bending to improve outcomes for children, young people and families?
- How do leaders manage uncertainty and emotion?
- How can leaders increase professional responsibility and distribute accountability across the organisation whilst managing external accountability demands?

Addressing wicked issues requires a collective acceptance of the need for learning by all stakeholders. Evidence for this comes from research, such as the report *Resourceful leadership* (Canwell et al, 2011), which shows that organisations that are focused on learning are better able to evolve to deal with changes in their operating environment. Such organisations learn to adapt to the changing demands they face, spot new opportunities and understand what they need to learn to thrive.

However, as already noted, the Munro Review of Child Protection (2011) concluded that the current system of children's services is too preoccupied with procedure and insufficiently focused on needs of the individual child. This legacy of compliant or performative behaviour within many authorities means that many professionals find it increasingly difficult to introduce innovation to improve their practice and achieve better outcomes for children.

In an uncertain world I attempt to anticipate possible changes for the future. I check any patterns and common themes. Decide what actions we should take now in order to influence, shape and prepare for these futures. I link strategic analysis to concrete actions. It helps to crystallize the factors that will influence the future and gives the senior team a feeling of empowerment over the destinations we expect and want for the service. It gives us the opportunity to discuss the involvement of third- and fourth-tier managers in this planning - how they can engage in creating a vision and gearing up to take practical decisions to realise it.

Director of children's services

Instead Munro argues for greater effort to establish a view of children's services as a learning and adaptive system in which leadership is committed to promoting learning while nevertheless remaining accountable for the overall effectiveness of the services delivered. In systems of **distributed expertise** (see Key concept 2) such as children's services, this involves recognising the strengths and focus of individual practitioners, while aligning them to support the strategic vision for the provision of children's services as a whole.

At the same time, improvements in the children's services sector are dependent upon a more effective use of distributed expertise to identify the relative strengths and weaknesses of existing practice, and the challenges being faced by children's services as a whole. Such intelligent leadership involves using international and national evidence to challenge local assumptions while developing capacity across the workforce to deal with the uncertainty and anxiety that arise in interprofessional work with vulnerable children and young people.

Key concept 2: Distributed expertise

Children's services contain a great deal of distributed expertise. They bring together different forms of knowledge and skills, including the expertise that is held in families or is available in other agencies. Expertise is located and developed in specific practices such as social work, educational psychology and teaching. Complex problems call for several forms of expertise to be brought into play to interpret and respond to them, and systems need to be established to allow this to happen.

A key to successful leadership is recognising and mobilising and enhancing the expertise distributed across local systems. Expertise can be enhanced through collaborations where personal expertise needs to be made explicit and the expertise of others recognised.

3.2 The two key learning challenges

The study found two broad **learning challenges** for leaders in public services, which were reflected in the strategies they adopted in this area. These are:

1. Designing learning systems, ie establishing the processes and protocols that ensure the appropriate flow of information and learning between professionals and organisations
2. Building capacity to support the organisational priorities, ie promoting a common public narrative of the collective mission for children's services

3.2.1 Designing learning systems

The design of effective learning systems is a crucial part of developing a learning organisation. At their best, learning systems enable a sound flow of knowledge vertically (between operational to strategic and executive levels) and horizontally (across professional groupings within services).

A key strategic priority for leaders is to work with practitioners to shape what matters to them, to ensure that systems can be developed that support the whole system rather than evolve in isolation. This study found that the most effective learning systems are adaptive systems which respond to new demands, evidence and priorities. This in turn had three aspects.

1. Effective learning systems can cope with tensions and contradictions.
 - Learning systems need to be responsive to policy, changing local demands and the specific needs of children, young people and families. They therefore need to be alert to evidence that old practices are impeding new purposes.
 - Recognising tensions and contradictions between purposes and practices is a sign that an organisation is open to learning². Rule-bending is often an early sign that old practices are getting in the way of new purposes. Encouraging the recognition and the reporting of contradictions that impede practice makes them visible and helps the system to respond.
2. Effective learning systems utilise evidence to develop strategy and to persuade.
 - In learning organisations the ability to make decisions based on evidence is found at every level.
 - The expectation is that evidence will be gathered, interpreted, distilled, interrogated and used from the frontline upwards and that systems will be in place for strategy to learn from the interface with users³.
 - Learning organisations also demonstrate an openness to evidence from elsewhere that will challenge assumptions and provide new ways of interpreting the local context.
3. Effective learning systems create space and time for building common knowledge and a shared understanding of the narrative.
 - Weaving individual sense-making into public meaning requires practitioners to make explicit what matters for them in conversations about problems of practice (see 3.2.2).
 - Opportunities need to be created for these conversations to happen. This is not a training model of learning and development, it needs systemic support.

² These ideas have been developed in the activity system work of Yrjö Engeström (eg Engeström, 2008) and they have informed our work.

³ Evidence from our series of studies, including Learning in and for Interagency Working funded by the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme and the Developing Interagency Working study for the LG Group, lies behind these statements. We have called the process 'upstream learning'.

Designing and acting to change the local landscape

One DCS outlined the challenge he faced in ensuring that senior managers could understand the contradictions and dilemmas faced by operational colleagues as they sought to improve the quality of their services. The DCS arranged workshops and discussion groups in which approaches to the collaborative analysis of problems between strategic and operational staff were refined.

The DCS discussed leadership for learning in pedagogic terms. The emphasis was on processes that resembled a teaching and learning cycle in which all participants needed to enhance their capacity to articulate their own concerns and listen and respond to the concerns of others.

He explained, “Last year’s focus was on middle leaders – we have a good second tier. They are well aligned and good at getting messages to tiers three and four. I encourage them to be more proactive and to engage more with each other – I am always emphasising the need to ensure that there are good connections across as well as up and down the services. It has taken years to get to the point that service managers are not threatened by a DCS talking to frontline staff. To do this you have to demonstrate integrity.

“I have tried to encourage a culture of being open to what one does know in order to identify what one needs to resolve. It is very important that we make public how positions are changed as a result of consultation and dialogue. Different ideas are not blocks – it is a matter of enabling people to see their contributions and those of others.”

3.2.2 Building capacity to support the organisational priorities

The second key challenge for leaders is to promote the capacity for learning by helping practitioners to align what matters for them with the purposes of children’s services more broadly.

Building **common knowledge** (see Key concept 3) is a key strategy in this work. This involves establishing a shared understanding of what matters for each service, which forms the basis for aligning practitioners’ motives and building the collective public narrative for the role of children’s services. This study found that **intelligent leaders** exerted considerable effort into building these shared understandings of what mattered (Edwards, 2010, 2011 and in press).

...empathy throughout – mediating different positions and priorities, linking conversations to outcomes for learners in schools, drawing everyone into a common theme, explaining but being relentless in my focus on the quality of learning

Director of children’s services

Key concept 3: Common knowledge

Common knowledge is made up of the motives that shape practices. It is built at the boundaries of different practices in meetings where the different purposes of practices are made explicit and respected. Common knowledge helps different professions to understand what is important for others. For example common knowledge can help a teacher see that what matters for a social worker is sustaining family support, while for a teacher it might be access to education. This respectful understanding helps to break down boundaries and allows open discussions about how to help vulnerable children and young people.

Building common knowledge involved constructing collective understandings amongst professionals and this study identified several key elements to this process.

- At every turn the DCS demonstrated intelligent leadership, utilising evidence and demanding that others did the same to develop the capacity to recognise and respond to demands in ways that reflected the common narrative for children's services.
- DCSs also sought to promote a culture in which all professionals were expected to be reflective in their practice and, where necessary, able to consciously realign their actions to improve outcomes.
- By recording their actions and outcomes, professionals gathered evidence to support their own practice while also making a crucial contribution to local intelligence and ultimately shaping the broader strategy for children's services as a whole.
- This commitment to learning helped practitioners in the sometimes uncomfortable process of identifying their own position in the shifting landscape. DCSs played an important role in this by demonstrating support for colleagues in this process.

Building organisational narratives

Brown and Duguid (1991) showed how individuals use narratives to share their unique professional knowledge and collectively solve problems. Organisational narratives provide an articulation of the collective meaning of the activities which an organisation supports and enables individuals to make personal sense of their own actions. The dynamic building of narratives involves ongoing dialogue between collective meaning and personal sense-making. This dynamic weaves together the different organisational purposes and is the driver of learning in institutions and for professionals. It forms the basis for innovation and change.

In the interviews, DCSs provided many examples of how they act to promote the formation and development of organisational narratives:

There has been much talk and speculation about co-location and 'modern ways of working' plus anxiety about future funding. I used my presentation by telling stories that described where we wanted to go, building on best-evidenced practice and that there has never been a greater time for collaborative working rather than a defence silo mentality.

Director of children's services

The leaders in this study also worked with other agencies and with members and officers to both understand and influence others' priorities. They also encouraged others to do the same at all levels of the organisation.

Navigating the priorities of others and seeking to influence

One DCS spoke of having what she described as "a different approach" with the chief executive and members. She focused on "starting where they are and getting the right language". She observed that "different members come from different places. It is therefore important to also work at an emotional level and be interesting". She also noted that you have to be "very clear about what you are trying to get to" and "take them through a learning experience so you show you are consolidating and it is not a question of brand-new learning".

Commissioning was another opportunity to work pedagogically with external partners. The same DCS discussed working with external agencies as "a relationship" and having "a dialogue with providers". They have joint training sessions about outcomes. Everything is shaped by data and a focus on outcomes.

3.3 Summary

- Leaders in public services working with children, young people and families in tackling complex problems require a rich mix of expertise.
- They work in systems where expertise is distributed across practices and they need to recognise where it is.
- To mobilise and enhance that expertise they need to create learning systems which ensure good knowledge flows to and from strategy and the frontline.
- Learning systems are given direction by strong organisational narratives which recognise and align what matters in different practices to achieve good outcomes for children, young people their families and communities.

4. The processes for leading learning

Chapter 3 explored the key learning challenges facing intelligent leaders. Chapter 4 builds upon this by outlining the processes they utilise to promote change and build capacity to address these learning challenges. It also describes how intelligent leaders think about learning and the broad, long-term goals they seek to pursue, and how they recognise the significance of their everyday actions in taking forward their strategic intentions.

4.1 The strategic goals of leading learning

Chapter 3 described a number of factors that were key in encouraging DCSs to promote learning in their organisations. In broad terms, these comprised the following:

- Organisations are more likely to deal effectively with change when they utilise the learning that takes place within it.
- Ongoing improvements in the delivery of children's services are dependent upon the effective use of this knowledge and learning.
- New demands often require agile responses and these can challenge established rule systems, leading to rule-bending.
- The overarching goal of a DCS who is leading learning is to release and deploy available expertise to produce improved outcomes for children, young people and families.

Addressing these drivers produces two broad learning challenges for intelligent leaders, which in turn formed the strategic priorities for their leadership of learning. These are:

1. Designing learning systems, ie establishing the processes and protocols that ensure the appropriate flow of information and learning between professionals and organisations
2. Building capacity to support the organisational priorities, ie promoting a common public narrative of the collective mission for children's services

4.2 Processes that supported leaders of learning

Discussions with the high-performing DCSs who participated in this study found that they undertook three key processes for leading learning in order to address the priorities outlined above. These processes are neither sequential nor hierarchical but rather part of a broader toolkit to be utilised in accordance with the specific demands of the context. Collectively they underpin a form of **intelligent leadership**, intended to build capacity within children's services. They can be summarised as **recognition**, **response** and **reflection**, and explored further in the remainder of this subsection.

4.2.1 Process 1: Recognition

Recognition is concerned with identifying the specific learning challenge and the nature of the learning required to address it through the use of appropriate forms of intelligence and data. Key elements of recognition involve questioning practice and examining practice.

a. Questioning practice

Intelligent leaders constantly questioned current practice in order to check that it was fit for purpose. These DCSs asked wicked questions and checked on practice through processes such as:

- opening meetings through a focused 10-minute session of raising concerns
- asking ‘what are we here to do?’
- having an unrelenting focus on outcomes
- holding a regular forum based on problems where people challenge each other
- setting up a fishbowl where people listen to each other

I use data often to encourage reflection and analysis as well as monitoring progress. It can be a very powerful lever for change. I wonder if the emotional and interpersonal are more memorable and so we select those as examples?

Director of children’s services

b. Examining current practice

Questioning practice usually involved a close examination of current practice. The examination was most frequently undertaken using data. For these leaders, data was seen as:

- a navigational tool that ‘forms an essential aspect of everyday work’
- ‘just an essential tool to do the basics of our jobs’
- ‘embedded and automatic’
- ‘for hypothesising and questioning’
- ‘a starting point for drilling down from the data into specific issues’

I am very data-led (and becoming therefore more intelligent data-led) especially around needs assessment and the implementation of the commissioning cycle... It might also be something that is now embedded and automatic showing that the work of the National College, C4EO etc on outcomes-based accountability is beginning to hit the mark.

Director of children’s services

Methods they used:

- using ‘soft data’
- ‘culturally encouraging things to be put on the table’
- ‘mirroring’ or representing aspects of practice
- discussing material from C4EO and research in practice
- drawing on discussions on Linked-In or other social networking sites

On the basis of the data and other forms of evidence the challenge is to recognise and respond appropriately to problems.

4.2.2 Process 2: Response

Response focuses on establishing the best way to promote the learning needed, the form of leadership this requires and the specific leadership actions that need to be undertaken. At the heart of response is formulating and modelling solutions, and implementing solutions.

c. Formulating and implementing solutions

This study found that high-performing **intelligent leaders** know how to respond to problems. They also need to know how others will react as they align motives in interpreting and responding to problems. This study found that there was sometimes a tension between the desire to drive a solution forward and the need to delegate and get ownership. A central feature of leadership for learning is conscious reflection on the kind of action that is most appropriate and likely to promote the kind of learning that the DCS is leading.

My natural inclination is to think the problem through and know the answer. But I fight it and go out to people who might help with solving it. I help them get the tools and offer to help myself.

Director of children's services

The **intelligent leaders** in this study recognised that they need to lead organisational learning but that also included helping and encouraging colleagues to engage with cultural change and to learn and change themselves. They also needed to foster learning beyond children's services and among partners.

Within each of these personal, organisational and partnership learning challenges they distinguished between:

- horizontal learning relationships across boundaries within organisations
eg when individuals or groups of professionals from different professional groups are faced with the challenge of understanding each others' interpretation of a child's trajectory
- vertical learning relationships within organisations
eg when innovative learning takes place in operational work and managers and strategists do not have established learning relationships that allow them to learn about this learning as it emerges
- partnership learning relationships
eg when agencies are commissioned to carry out tasks and the DCS faces the challenge of ensuring that the narrative of the children's service is understood by members of these new and complex partnerships

You have to acknowledge that people make mistakes. They also need to trust and can be rightly sceptical. You do need a culture of checking. I can create a structure, for example, a children's centre. Then I play back what I see there. You might think you have the overview but [it's] really important to look through the kaleidoscope as a practitioner might. You have to give the best chance of success for the social worker to trust the teacher.

Director of children's services

At the same time, these leaders also recognised that colleagues may become champions, sceptics or cynics with respect to specific innovations and changes. DCSs clearly valued the support of champions and found the questioning of sceptics valuable in challenging and shaping developments; however, they presented an account of zero-tolerance towards those who took up the position of cynical negativity. This was discussed in terms of a firm articulation of the moral imperatives of the service and professional responsibility.

It's about knowing where we are going and we can get there. I can't cope with pessimism. If that's where they are I need to work with them. I check whether they are clear about the vision and signed up to it. It's important that we have honest conversations.

Director of children's services

d. Implementing solutions

A major difficulty for DCSs when implementing solutions is dealing with distance in the chain of command from strategic leadership to frontline delivery teams.

Maintaining a record of decisions made and their purposes was often seen as crucial for the creation of institutional memory.

Challenges in implementing solutions included ensuring that:

- the frontline delivery teams and strategic leaders construct, identify and sustain the same priorities
- deliverers of commissioned services are fully conversant with and committed to sustaining the organisational narrative
- partner agencies recognise the implications of their roles in these processes

Consistency is therefore needed in both understanding the shared narrative and the performance of the ways of working necessary to build outcome-oriented capability for learning. This is needed at all levels and to be mirrored across the whole system.

You can't achieve outcomes on your own. Look at the local conditions. What are the conditions for success? Children live in complex arrangements. Outcomes enable me to think about what it is I want to contribute to at times and at times to lead. Other parts of the council tend to be more mono and linear.

Director of children's services

The successful DCS achieved this by building common knowledge using the following methods:

- being explicit about what mattered in terms of outcomes for children, young people and families
- recognising the priorities and motives of those they were influencing
- being sensitive to the Rosetta stone of subtle variations and assumed meanings associated with language when speaking across boundaries
- engaging and displaying emotional intelligence to encourage others so people champion the narrative
- drawing on historical examples of shared working

For sustainable change you need to be part of the re-setting and re-set yourself. Re-setting is not a quick fix. You need to tell a grand vision story and enable people to see their pathways. It is not as linear as you would like.

Director of children's services

This form of **intelligent leadership** rests on the understanding that strong personal engagement with the narrative is needed if complex solutions to sensitive problems are to be achieved. The most successful DCSs worked hard to support individuals in their learning and acknowledged the potentially significant implications it presented for their personal and professional identity, as people increasingly moved away the security of long-established professional practices. They also recognised that capacity-building could take time.

4.2.3 Process 3: Reflection

Reflection involves asking if the learning challenge has been addressed, whether the leadership approach adopted was effective and what improvements could be made in the future. Reflection and realignment for DCSs and their colleagues occurred throughout each process. It involved reflection with others both in and on practices through:

- inviting peer challenge at every stage
- providing shadowing opportunities to gain better understandings of roles in the organisation
- taking themes selected by second-tier staff for focused interprofessional knowledge-sharing
- having feedback and challenge right the way down the system
- commissioning external reviews

Policy has changed – a lot of certainty has been pulled away from them. Motives are constantly under review.

Director of children's services

The DCSs in this study knew that reflection was not enough and that learning for realigning also involved:

- providing a safety net when people try out new roles such as chairing meetings with members
- reviewing motives when discussing actions
- getting people comfortable and then turning up the heat
- managing the risk while people do their best work
- being consistent with the messages
- creating a landscape in which people can grow
- setting up mentors and coaches for staff

I try to understand where people are coming from – their agenda and motives and what the end-game solution might be... and you need to negotiate measures of success.

Director of children's services

4.4 Summary

- The DCSs in this study were mainly concerned with transformatory learning: building capacity by supporting a change in people and practices.
- Key stages in this building capacity involved:
 - recognising the learning challenge
 - responding to the challenge by selecting the best actions
 - reflecting on the actions and future resource implications
- These **intelligent leaders** worked hard to build strong institutional narratives while working with others to ensure collective ownership.
- These narratives were held together by focusing on outcomes for children, young people and their families.
- Key stages in building capacity were:
 - recognising the learning challenge
 - responding to the challenge by selecting the best actions
 - reflecting on the actions and future resource implications
- DCSs promoted change through a combination of:
 - questioning practices
 - examining practices
 - formulating and modelling solutions
 - implementing solutions
 - reflecting and realigning purposes

5. Behaviours for leading learning

This chapter goes to the heart of what DCSs do to foster learning. It outlines nine behaviours that DCSs used to address the learning challenges they face. It explains that intelligent leaders select their behaviours to meet the specific demands of their context, responding in ways that create systems and promote a culture that helps colleagues to achieve their strategic priorities.

5.1 Actions in activities

As noted elsewhere in this report, this study sought to identify what effective directors of children's services do to promote a learning culture and learning practices in which knowledge is nurtured, shared and utilised within an ongoing climate of change to achieve positive outcomes for children, young people and families.

As part of this, the research sought to trace the links between the actions DCSs took to promote learning, their everyday activities and their longer term strategic concern with promoting positive outcomes for children, young people and families. This link is summarised in Figure 3.

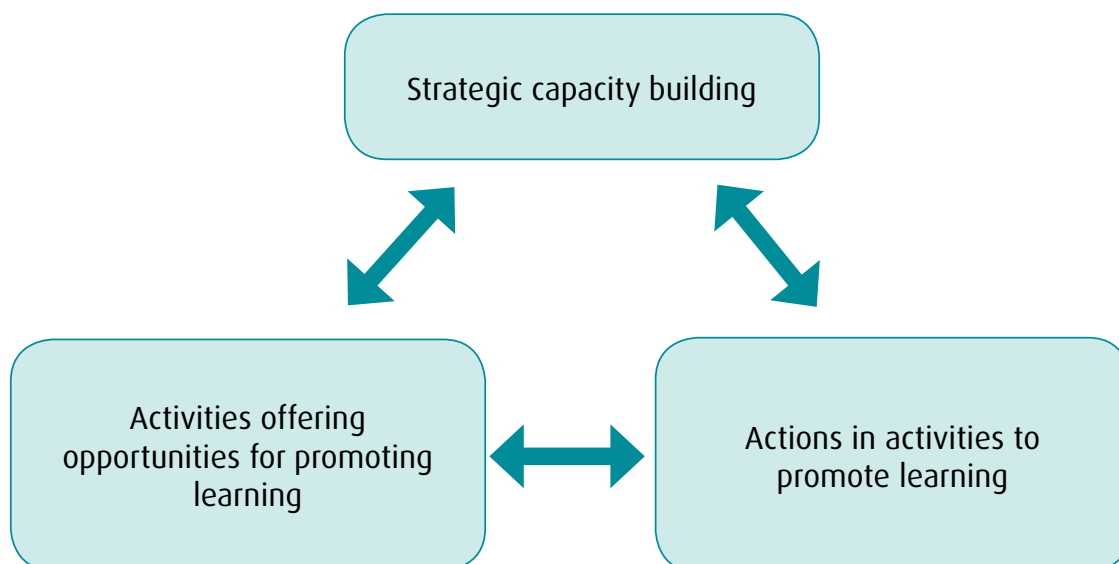


Figure 3: Intelligent leadership: leading for learning

The model in Figure 3 comprises three interlinked elements. At its heart is clear understanding of their vision for children's services, and the systems required to support this (the leadership challenge). The **learning challenges** that need to be addressed to realise this longer term strategic concern formed the focus for Chapter 3 of this report.

Chapter 4 focused on the three key processes for leading learning that underpinned leaders' practice and the strategies they adopted to address these challenges. A template which helped the leaders who participated in this study to reflect on the connections between these elements is included in Appendix A.

In this chapter, we examine the third element of this model, the specific leadership behaviours used by leaders to promote structures and a culture of learning, and some of the factors that inform their selection.

5.2 Connecting action and strategy

This view of small-scale action connecting with large-scale strategic intention connects firmly with the idea of the learning organisation. Peter Senge's description of a learning organisation points to the need for the kind of analysis undertaken in this study. Writing in 1990, Senge argued that organisations need to 'discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at **all** levels' (Senge, 1990:4). He observed that that people in learning organisations are able to make a difference in them.

Senge's challenging view of productive learning was echoed in how the DCSs talked about learning. In this study DCSs were presented with three common ways of thinking about learning, which can be summarised as:

- acquisition: learning involves filling the mind with knowledge which can then be applied in different situations
- participation: learning involves participating in established practices
- knowledge creation and transformation: learning involves working with others to develop ideas which change people and change practices

These were explored in the interviews with DCSs, all of whom reported that they drew on all three views at different moments. Which they used depended on the learning challenges they met. When they needed to disseminate information quickly, acquisition prevailed. When new staff were put alongside existing experts, participation was invoked. However, the dominant metaphor for most of them was knowledge creation and transformation. Like Senge, these **intelligent leaders** wanted learning that would make a difference in the organisation.

5.3 The repertoire of behaviours for leading learning

The study identified two broad **learning challenges** for leaders in public services, which were reflected in the strategies they adopted in this area. These were:

1. Designing learning systems, ie establishing the processes and protocols that ensure the appropriate flow of information and learning between professionals and organisations
2. Building capacity to support the organisational priorities, ie promoting a common public narrative of the collective mission for children's services

This study revealed that the actions DCSs undertook to promote learning coalesced around three broad themes consisting of nine different behaviours. (see side panel) which reflected the two broad learning challenges. As noted above, the art of **intelligent leadership** was being able to select and operationalise these actions in ways that best promoted learning in the context in which they were working and, in particular, to the kinds of capacity-building in which they were engaged. A fuller description of each of the nine behaviours is provided in the next section of this report.

The behaviours could be broadly grouped as addressing: system-level challenges, cultural challenges and individual or group challenges.

1. Supporting system-level learning:

- Directing
- Questioning
- Pulling together

2. Supporting cultural learning:

- Translating
- Taking the standpoint of the other

3. Supporting individual learning:

- Enabling
- Coaching
- Facilitating
- Collaborating

5.3.1 Supporting system learning

Directing

All DCSs stated that at certain moments there was a need for colleagues to acquire new knowledge. Directing was concerned with supporting the practice of knowledge transmission, which was often embedded within the strong organisational narrative they were sharing. They felt that the turbulent contexts in which services were being developed meant that some clear knowledge transfer was crucial to keep everyone informed.

It was important to position the meeting in the budget-setting context and process, ie explore options, condition people to risks etc and making sure no firm decisions were taken. It was important therefore for some straight talking for its own sake to take control of the agenda.

Director of children's services

Directing also could be very pedagogic.

For substantial change people need to understand the reason for change and over time can reflect on it.

Director of children's services

Questioning

Questioning was concerned with providing challenge and seeking to ask the key, killer questions which promote reflection and deeper learning. It is "not about providing answers". Questioning can support the identification of contradictions between old practices and current intentions. Bringing them to the surface and discussing them in a robust way, based on data, happened frequently.

I asked a series of challenging questions about the use of resources, budget profiling, monitoring and impact on outcomes. [I] interpreted spreadsheets for patterns of resource use that fell short of initial profiles, [and] challenged managers to give up resource, identify future savings and consider new service models as part of the corporate change and transformation programme.

Director of children's services

Questioning by leaders also encouraged others to offer challenge.

Sometimes you need to plunge in and explore with people and not close down options. 'I am learning here – and what about?'

Director of children's services

It's fantastic when people come up with new ideas and, for example, people start to challenge one another... It is not a question of giving permission. It is best if people simply make suggestions. I will come back on the propositions and people need to give alternative proposals. There is enjoyable to-ing and fro-ing – building on each others' ideas.

Director of children's services

Pulling together

DCSs described their work in terms of "noticing the things that others do not notice" and then knitting together different, hitherto unnoticed strands of thinking and acting across the domains of the service in order to align motives.

I have a broad style, but I do adapt it to whether I am working with groups, individuals or partners, and whether it is formal or informal. I'm interpersonal, reaching out and being inclusive, but not ducking challenges.

Director of children's services

The mediating, or knitting, is helped by common knowledge as this DCS explains:

In a meeting I might stand back and let the process work its way through. Find common ground and get things aligned and pull things together so we can come back to it again.

Director of children's services

There was also a concern that senior colleagues should mirror the noticing and weaving together out and beyond and down the system:

There is collective learning through the leadership group aiming at behaviour change. We try to learn together and then decide who should take it up and down the system.

Director of children's services

5.3.2 Supporting cultural learning

Translating

DCSs promoted learning by acting as negotiators of meaning, particularly in relation to helping others to understand the external demands that were being placed on services. These **intelligent leaders** simplified what were often very complex challenges and removed jargon. In some instances, DCSs also utilised maxims, phrases and other, more immediate, simple forms of communication that become shorthand for a deeper dialogue.

Some DCSs identified a feature of their work as being akin to acting as rapporteur:

I outlined the significance of the Future Schooling in the [local authority's] strategic programme in delivering £250m of secondary, primary and special school buildings, the role of pupils in the process, [and] the links to wider community provision via the co-location of health, library and leisure facilities.

Director of children's services

Sometimes translation involved helping people speak across professional boundaries:

'Risk', 'safe' and 'supervision' mean different things. Sometimes vocabulary gets in the way. So I say 'what is best for young people now and in the future'. In the future is important. Then I play it back to people and say, 'Can you help me here?' 'What can you do?'. I use 'early help' instead of 'prevention' which was getting very loaded. Most helpful is playing it back. Saying thank you and being genuinely grateful.

Director of children's services

Taking the standpoint of the other

Identifying how others were seeing a situation was key to DCSs' decisions on what actions to take. It was central to building common knowledge and was at the same time enhanced by the reservoirs of common knowledge that were created in discussions over time.

I make a great play of listening skills and not being judgemental. I do deep listening and try to transpose myself into how others are listening... I try to understand where people are coming from – their agenda and motives.

You need to find out what is the grit in their shoes. Understanding that means you can get to aligning motives. You can talk in a way they will understand.

Director of children's services

Listening and the conversations that subsequently followed were always shaped by a focus on outcomes.

The people side of what we do is important. The quality of relationships: I get to know people, take an interest in what they do and try to understand it... Our approach is dialogue, but I don't shy away from outcomes. We are very focused.

Director of children's services

Some DCSs described how taking the other perspective could be more difficult with agencies outside children's services. In such instances, being able to negotiate became more important than establishing empathy.

There is a degree of reciprocity and understanding their agenda. But their constituencies may not align with what I want. So then it is, 'We are working a deal here and I need you to help me out'.

Director of children's services

5.3.3 Supporting individual learning

Enabling

Intelligent leaders enabled others to take on tasks by building a deep sense of internal control. Importantly they went beyond the everyday sense of the term 'empowerment', and argued that empowerment involved taking responsibility for decisions and holding people to account. This was seen to take place at individual and group levels of engagement.

I worked with [name] in designing what was just an hour, getting colleagues to focus on the positives, acknowledge the 'dark moments', commit to what we will take forward, and what new things we would want to see in the [name] group.

Director of children's services

It's about recapping knowledge already held. Modelling. Reflective listening. Confirming and affirming others' knowledge and building it where necessary.

Director of children's services

You have to keep giving away options, possibilities and give feedback on what they have done. I model good feedback - with the executive and members too - and that is mirrored down the organisation. And when you see it you feed back with personal emails. You are never going to know everything - you need that mixture of trust and challenge.

Director of children's services

Coaching

A history of supervision within some of the services for children meant that one-to-one coaching meetings with colleagues about performance was seen as normal and positively by most DCSs.

I explored his leadership style - the activities he was comfortable with and those he was not. Considered how others perceived this. Discussed how certain problems might be handled differently if some of his behaviours were modified.

Director of children's services

I approached it in terms of his own development. He agreed there was a problem and agreed to talk with his coach.

Director of children's services

Several DCSs observed that at times the challenges of the role were too great for some colleagues, who for example, "just left, they were in the wrong job."

I have a competency-based approach. In one-to-one meetings I discuss strengths and weaknesses... and I won't flog a dead horse.

Director of children's services

Facilitating

Facilitation occurred in almost every context. For example, DCSs helped individuals and groups of people to understand the challenges and the knowledge they have in common and how they differ. They promoted the formation of a common basis for future action without necessarily taking a particular position in the discussion and provided support when colleagues take new actions.

They create the conditions in which learning can take place.

I helped stimulate the debate by creating a 'goldfish bowl' scenario in order to understand the different agenda (Whitehall departments versus the local authority area).

Director of children's services

The DCSs could be quite structured in how they facilitated capacity-building.

I started with fears, hopes and aspirations – now and for the future. [The warm-up was achieved] using scenario-planning techniques (with backing papers). I identified the possible significant drivers of change for the future (global, national and local). I chose two of these – one for each axis – thus creating four different futures. I identified the main conditions in each – then chartered the likely implications for children's services.

Director of children's services

DCSs were also aware of the need to provide a safe environment for this to take place by managing the potential risks while colleagues learned.

You have to acknowledge that people make mistakes and you need a system to assure yourself.

Director of children's services

I was there at the meeting as a safety net as it was the first time for them to chair it.

Director of children's services

Collaborating

Collaboration is distinguished from facilitation in that it requires the DCS to remain part of the decision-making process. There are degrees of difference in the extent to which the social relations of the decision-making processes are genuinely open and free of status relations.

There were four things. 1) I really listened to colleagues' concerns and preferred solutions. 2) We worked hard to offer preferred scenarios that take account of colleagues' concerns (recognising their interaction with their Cabinet members). 3) I offered a simple dedicated schools grant explanation! 4) I was challenging myself to learn about risk-assessed innovation, ie balance between protecting care, learning for children, young people and vulnerable adults and thinking and operating differently with resources available to us.

Director of children's services

Collaboration and facilitation were sometimes challenging for highly experienced DCSs who were more used to taking the lead in decision-making.

Sometimes I go back to my default model [of finding the solution] and I wonder whether they will come up with a solution. Then I ask myself, 'Who owns this?' And the answer is, 'You guys'.

Director of children's services

Collaboration with partner agencies was again a matter of negotiation rather than capacity-building.

The partnership approach is embedded. It is a matter of working with shared priorities and not a question of getting them to work with mine. I need to be clear about the 'must dos and the commonalities' and then negotiate towards an agreed measure of success.

Director of children's services

5.4 Additional factors

a. Building empathy through small-scale actions

Intelligent leaders carried out each of these strategically oriented actions to foster learning with a high degree of interactive sensitivity. Although all the DCSs had limits beyond which they could not go with people who were clearly not likely to work productively in the new landscape, they were all highly empathic. Their ability to align motives drew on the efforts they made to identify where others were coming from and to weave their intentions into the organisational narrative.

They listened carefully, used counselling skills to reflect back what they heard and attended to the language of the person they were talking with and often used it in their responses. They were also assiduous in giving feedback, primarily aimed at setting high expectations and encouraging colleagues, but also of a less positive nature when necessary. They consciously modelled the behaviour they wanted and expected their way of encouraging learning to be mirrored down the system. They were also very hard-nosed. The learning was always outcome-oriented and evidence as a basis for action was crucial.

All of these small-scale behaviours were evident across all the DCSs and were drawn on in all the nine actions listed above, although of course there were personal styles which meant that some features predominated.

b. Leading as reflective learning

Intelligent leaders worked consciously to diagnosis the action needed to foster learning and build capacity. This involved:

- assessing the organisation and its resources, now and in the future
- identifying where they can inform and shape the context they operate in to promote the interests of children and young people
- selecting a range of responses, drawing on both themselves and others as resources
- applying responses and seeing them through

These were all demanding tasks that required a high degree of organisational and interpersonal awareness in everyday activities.

Each of the high-performing DCSs was extremely thoughtful. Each, in some way, saw themselves as a learner and aimed at mirroring a strong degree of evidence-informed reflection down the organisations they led. They all reserved time for reflection on their own roles and the outcomes, both intended and unintended, of their actions. To do so they employed one or more of the following strategies:

- setting aside time for personal reflection
- inviting peer challenge and shadowing opportunities
- continuing the action learning sets that they encountered on their National College training
- using systematic peer self-review with other DCSs
- using external professional coaches

Responses to the data collection template at seminars with larger groups of DCSs indicated that the template was a useful tool for reflection. Its linking of actions in activities with strategic aims captured the focus of the reflection undertaken. This template is appended in Appendix A and offered as a tool for reflection.

5.5 Creating the knowledgeable practitioner

This report is based on the understanding that:

- leaders need to be confident that professional judgements will lead to the best possible outcomes for children, young people and families and that risk will be managed
- practitioners need to learn a) to recognise what it is important to work on and b) how to collaborate with others to achieve what matters

The DCSs who contributed to the study all sought to reconcile the tension between a) frontline responsibility for responding to the strengths and needs of children, young people and families, and b) managing risk. An overarching strategy was to build workforce capacity for evidence-based, responsible practice aimed at good outcomes for vulnerable children. The present study did not examine the impact of leadership strategies on the frontline. Nevertheless, it was clear that capacity-building strategies that a) created learning systems and b) mirrored informed actions down the system were aimed at producing informed and responsible practitioners who put the needs of the child at the centre of their work.

5.6 Concluding points

This report presents an account of **intelligent leadership** which is a logical extension of the notion of **resourceful leadership**. **Intelligent leadership** flags the importance of carefully judged decision-making in situations where there are many options. For a leader to engage in intelligent action, he or she needs to be confident of possessing a clear and realistic understanding of the nature and extent of the particular problem or challenge faced. This means ensuring leaders have the best possible data available in order to be able to recognise that problem. Having the data is not just a matter of ensuring that information management systems are in place, but also ensuring that the channels of communication within and between services allow for the best possible flow of the different perceptions, understandings and meanings that are to be found in complex organisations. Deep understanding is helped by marshalling a variety of different views.

Having recognised the depth of the problem, **intelligent leaders** seek to make intelligent decisions about how to act. In order to have the best possible chance of acting in the most appropriate manner they must ensure that they have the widest possible array of options open to them. **Intelligent leadership** requires an awareness of the available options and accordingly leaders who work in this way seek to continually enrich their repertoire of actions. This requires a constant focus on ensuring that responses and interventions are able to meet areas of identified need. This matching of response with need calls for **intelligent action** that must be subjected to ongoing reflection and appraisal if it is to be improved and enhanced.

Intelligent leaders do not act alone but rather focus on building local capacity to help them take forward their strategic mission of achieving good outcomes for children, young people and families. This report has shown that high-performing leaders attend to learning and create the contexts for learning in their actions as they engage in everyday activities. Their aim is to create self-improving systems shaped by a focus on outcomes. This report shows that self-improving systems are led by **intelligent leaders** who sustain a consistent focus on both systems and outcomes in their interactions with others.

5.7 Summary

- **Intelligent leaders** build capacity through carefully matching their action with the demands of the learning challenges and their strategic priorities.
- What they do is not formulaic; rather it is a thoughtful form of practice in which the best possible responses are made to their interpretations of the learning challenges.
- There is a common repertoire of actions that they draw on to different degrees. These actions are aimed at tackling challenges of systems and cultures and those presented by individuals and groups, and comprise:

Directing	Translating	Coaching
Questioning	Taking the standpoint of the other	Facilitating
Pulling together	Enabling	Collaborating

- High-performing DCSs are highly empathetic in their interactions with others and systematically reflective when reviewing their own actions in relation to strategy.
- Their emphasis on building workforce capacity may offer long-term benefits by creating an evidence-informed workforce able to make child-centred decisions throughout the organisation.

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Appendix A: Template for reflection

Social Protection Committee, 2011, *The social dimensions of the Europe 2020 strategy*, Luxembourg, European Commission

Date	
Activity Very briefly describe one everyday activity this week where you were aware that you were promoting learning (eg chairing a meeting, working with colleagues examining data).	
Action What did you do during the activity, ie what actions did you take? (eg eliciting colleagues' understanding of a complex situation, modelling how to interpret data). You can mention as many actions as you like.	
Strategy What are the long-term strategic goals behind how you worked with colleagues in this activity? How do your actions in this activity relate to these goals?	

The National College exists to develop and support great leaders of schools and children's centres – whatever their context or phase.

- Enabling leaders to work together to lead improvement
- Helping to identify and develop the next generation of leaders
- Improving the quality of leadership so that every child has the best opportunity to succeed

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