

DEVELOPING THE SCHOOL-LED IMPROVEMENT SYSTEM IN ESSEX

Establishment of the School-Led Improvement System (SLIS) in Essex

In 2015 the Essex Professional Associations (EPHA, ASHE, ESSET and ESGA) and the Local Authority began work together to develop a “school-led improvement system (SLIS)” in Essex. The vision has been to establish a system in which “schools improve themselves by working in partnership with each other in a school-led improvement system which supports children and young people 0–25 to achieve their highest aspirations in education and employment” (SLIS vision 2016).

The aim was to build on the direction of education policy in England from 2010 onwards that was encouraging schools to work with and support other schools. The approach was underpinned by research, for example the work of Michael Fullan and David Hargreaves, that advocated the benefits of schools working in collaboration and argued that this was the most effective way of securing rapid and sustained improvement.

The primary responsibility of school improvement rests with schools... The wider system should be designed so that the best schools and leaders take on greater responsibility, leading improvement work for the system as a whole. (DfE Importance of Teaching WP, 2010)

Schools should form organic and sustainable improvement clusters which support each other, distribute innovation by sharing costs and transfer professional knowledge through joint mentoring, coaching and professional development. (David Hargreaves, NCTL, 2010)

In May 2015 at a conference for school leaders and chairs of governors, Essex set out the ambition to have a system of local partnerships of schools. These partnerships would rapidly raise outcomes for all children across the partnership at all key stages and would:

- *provide mutual support and challenge to each other*
- *hold each other to account to ensure agreed targets are met*
- *support in challenging circumstances*
- *innovate and provide solutions to locality issues – curriculum, quality of teaching, leadership development, Ofsted preparation, recruitment of teachers, peer reviews, governance*
- *provide robust and effective performance monitoring and scrutiny of outcomes for children*
- *be supported by Teaching School Alliances, Essex Education Services, the LA and other providers*

Essex Conference May 2015

Essex already had significant experience of schools working in partnerships through their teaching school alliances, local delivery groups, ASHE triads, and the work of the Basildon Excellence Panel and the Harlow Education Partnership. Later on, Essex also looked at the work of other local authorities and undertook a learning visit to Cumbria Local Authority to understand how other areas were developing their school-led systems.

Work began by mapping existing school partnerships. Schools were asked to look closely at their existing partnerships to identify both positive practice on which to build and areas for development. Wherever possible schools were encouraged to build on existing structures and relationships.

Engagement sessions with schools were organised to explore the benefits of partnership working, consider challenges, and examine how schools might be able to form new partnerships locally.

Direction from the SLIS Project Board

From 2016 a county-wide Project Board was established to oversee the implementation of the strategy. Membership included the Local Authority, Professional Associations, governors, Essex Teaching School Alliances, and Dioceses. The Project Board is an example of the co-development of the strategy between the LA, schools and other key stakeholders; the chair of the Board was independent of the LA. The Board focussed on developing an initial vision that explained what the Essex school-led improvement system would deliver:

- ✓ *Every child within a partnership to be able to attend a school which is at least good and improving*
- ✓ *Improved outcomes for all children 0–25 years and ensure that there is no ceiling on the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils*
- ✓ *Access to economies of scale through brokering (bought-in services) and bulk purchasing*
- ✓ *A culture in which Headteachers have aspirations for all the children in the partnership and the county of Essex to achieve their highest outcomes*
- ✓ *Ongoing improvement in the quality of teaching and learning through teachers teaching each other and developing new practice together*
- ✓ *Improved practice through informal and formal continuing professional development at all levels, including governors*
- ✓ *An accurate evaluation of its best practice and its areas for improvement with clear plans to bring up its weakest areas*
- ✓ *Clusters that are responsible for their own improvement and that of others by using regular external challenge; leading to cohesion, confidence and skills through networking with colleagues*

SLIS Project Board Vision document 2016

The Board is responsible for the health and sustainability of the school-led improvement system and oversaw the delegation of pump-priming funds to the school-level partnerships. It provided an overview of the issues facing Essex and a link to other key stakeholders. The Board set up Task and Finish Groups to enable Board members to work in smaller groups to develop thinking on specific issues (for example, tools to support partnership working and the design of the system). External capacity was commissioned from the Education Development Trust and Isos Partnership - national research and advisory organisations that were able to share examples of effective practice from other areas. Over time there would be development support for Board members, membership was streamlined to facilitate strategic discussions, and a new chair was appointed with experience of strategic partnerships in other local authorities.

Development of SLIS Partnerships

Following the 2015/16 engagement sessions with schools, 37 SLIS Partnerships were established. Many of these built on existing groups of schools, and some were new groupings established by schools. Each SLIS Partnership was invited to make an initial assessment of their partnership capacity as part of a bid for up to £25,000 to support their development. Assessments were made against criteria agreed by the SLIS Project Board, and a sub-group of the Board then reviewed each

Partnerships' response and allocated funding. Board members then undertook development visits to each of the Partnerships to discuss strengths, areas for development, how the funding would be utilised, levels of engagements from schools, and where support might be required.

SLIS Partnerships each identified a lead from amongst its headteachers. These volunteers stepped forwards for two years and agreed to chair meetings, co-ordinate activity, and support the work of the other school leaders across their Partnership. Essex has invested in developing the skills and capacity of these leads by organising a programme of development meetings to support their roles as Essex system leaders.

One of the key activities undertaken by all the SLIS Partnerships has been a programme of peer review. All Partnerships were invited to be trained in the Education Development Trust's School Partnership Programme to develop peer review skills, provide a structure for engagements, and share a set of tools to facilitate peer reviews. The majority of the SLIS Partnerships have now undertaken at least one cycle of peer review.

Peer review will be crucial to the success of a self-improving school system; it is the key to providing the quality assurance that is required, to assessing the impact of school to school support and to providing clear, precise and honest feedback about progress made, where excellence lies, and identifying where further improvements are required. It is not just about the review itself. The post review support and analysis underpin both the continuous improvement of the impact of the cluster and of the individual schools within the cluster.

Clare Kershaw in ed. Blatchford and Clark, *Self-improving Schools*, 2017

Support from Teaching School Alliances and the Local Authority

Essex Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) have been a key part of the SLIS strategy from its inception. They are represented on the SLIS Project Board. Many of the SLIS Partnerships have engaged their local TSAs for support on professional and leadership development, curriculum training, and other offers of support. The TSAs are now a key part of the new Quadrant meetings that have been established to provide school improvement support to schools in SLIS partnerships.

Essex Local Authority have supported the development of the SLIS strategy by providing funding, designating capacity to co-ordinate the strategy and the work of the Project Board, and re-aligning their advisory capacity. All LA School Effectiveness Partners (SEPs) are working with a SLIS Partnership and have their time allocated to support partnership activity as well as individual schools. The LA has also prepared data packs for each of the Partnerships to show headline data broken down by pupil groups. SEPs have helped to facilitate Partnerships discussions about strengths arising from the data analysis and areas for development.

The SLIS Project Board agreed to establish four Quadrant meetings across Essex during 2018. The key aims of the Quadrant discussions will be to:

- i. Review the health and capacity of the SLIS partnerships within the Quadrant. Identify strengths and agree actions as needed*
- ii. Ensure each partnership has a robust MoU, agreed ways of working and appropriate systems and structures to achieve their aims and objectives*
- iii. Confirm strengths and areas of vulnerability of schools (maintained and academies) within the quadrant*
- iv. Ensure that school improvement needs are identified and addressed within SLIS partnerships (particularly for vulnerable schools) and then broker support where needed from outside schools' SLIS partnerships from TSAs and other sources*

SLIS Project Board paper, January 2018

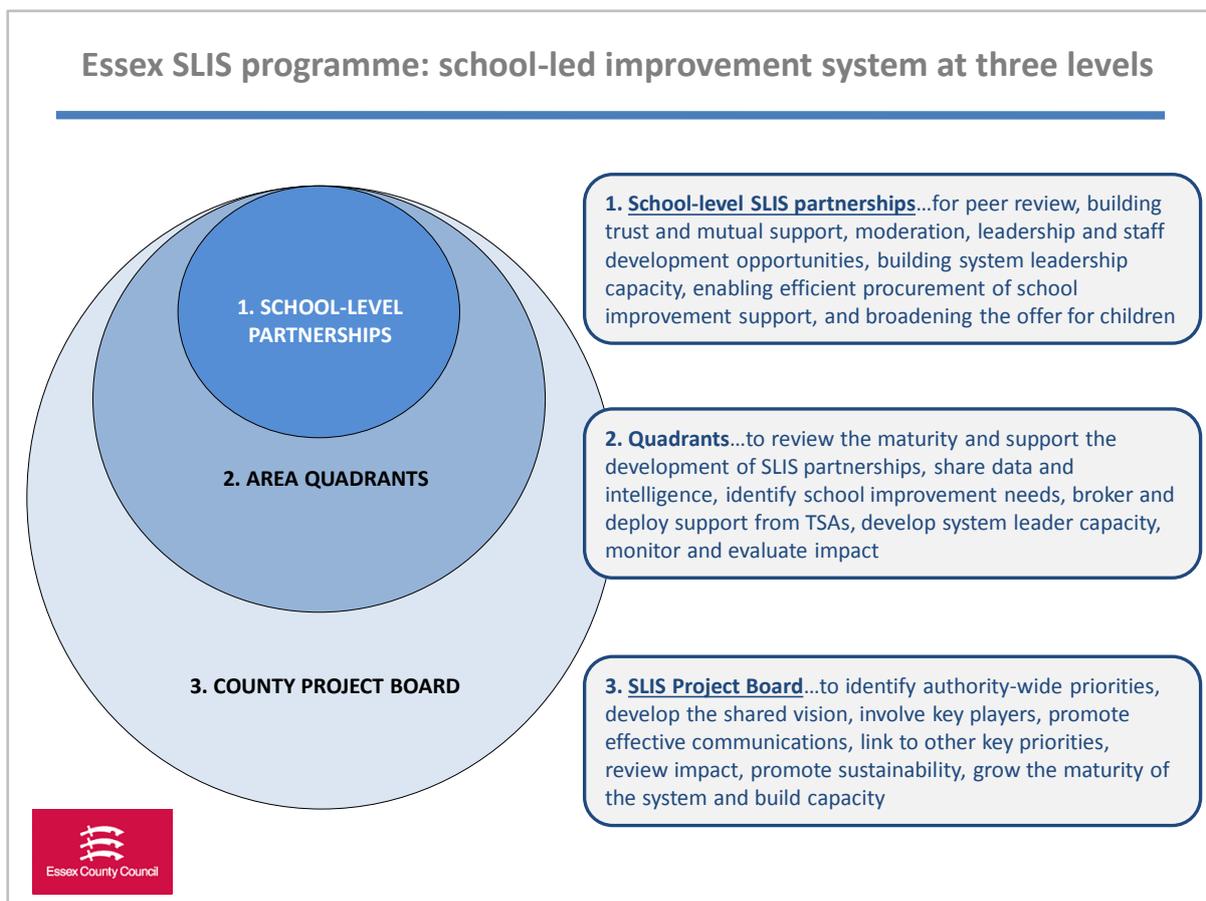
The Quadrant meetings should provide stronger local support for partnerships based on local strengths, leading to more effective and mature partnerships with schools learning from each other. No schools should be isolated within any Quadrant. They should also broaden the opportunities for school-to-school support for vulnerable schools through support from within and outside of their SLIS Partnerships as well as the TSAs. Further opportunities should be available for partnership leads to work and learn together with greater opportunities to develop local system leadership capacity.

Progress and impact

Essex have been consistent in their aims for the SLIS strategy: helping schools to support children to achieve their potential; further improving outcomes and the proportion of ‘good’ schools; developing partnership and system leader capacity; and strengthening school improvement support across Essex and reducing the number of schools that are isolated from engaging each other.

Already the work of Essex school-level partnerships has been recognised in Ofsted inspections (*see attached summary of recent quotes from Ofsted inspections about the positive impact of partnership working*). Christine Gilbert in her recent thinkpiece for the Institute of Education mentioned the development of the SLIS strategy in Essex amongst examples across England of the development of area-based local partnerships (*Optimism of the Will: the development of local area-based education partnerships, 2018*).

By 2018, the SLIS strategy - that has been jointly developed by schools, the Local Authority and other key players across Essex - is maturing into a multi-layered approach to school-led improvement across the County:



Essex have recently commissioned and developed a set of case studies from the SLIS Partnerships. These summarise how each of the Partnerships have developed over time and highlight some of the gains that have already been achieved:

- wider learning opportunities for children
- growing leadership opportunities and capacity for staff
- developing the quality of teaching and learning across the partnership
- strengthening trust between and feelings of responsibility for schools across the Partnerships
- building partnership capacity at different levels including for middle leaders.

In a 2018 survey of Essex school leaders, over 95% of respondents agreed that there were benefits to schools working in partnership, and two thirds said that their SLIS Partnership had improved the quality of teaching and learning in their school. The progress made in developing a school-led improvement system in Essex over the previous three years has been significant. Schools, the Local Authority and education partners across Essex remain committed to partnership working, and the strategy will continue to be strengthened and embedded through 2018/19 and beyond.

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