

LAMB INQUIRY: LOCAL AUTHORITIES' LEARNING FROM THE EIGHT PROJECTS

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1. Introduction

Eight LAs were funded to undertake innovative projects that were concerned with improving parent confidence in the SEN process following a request for submissions to which over 50 LAs replied. Requests from the eight LAs were in the region of £20k - £40k for one year, September 2008 – July 2009. LAs were required to select one of five topics for their project: one was not selected by any LA, the other projects represented a good spread, with a preference for i) sharing best practice in developing good relationships between the authority and parents, through effective parent partnership services and other local mechanisms; and ii) effective practice by schools and local authorities in meeting the needs of children at School Action Plus – topics 2 and 3 in Table 1. LAs worked in partnership with other agencies, e.g. parent partnership services and each project was evaluated locally. Parents were required to be involved in each project including the evaluation of changes in parental confidence: most LAs ensured that this was a key factor in their project. LAs were supported by the National Strategies SEN adviser team who acted as critical friends providing both a support and challenge function.

The LAs were required to provide evidence of good capacity for SEN such as a recent Joint Area Review or by annual performance data. The LAs were also required to be willing to share information as their project progressed. In one case the LA (North Tyneside) engaged with a partner (Sunderland); all LAs presented interim findings and reflections at national meetings of all the projects with Brian Lamb and the Inquiry team.

The LAs were also selected to provide a spread of geography and LA type. Of the original 50 expressions of interest, 18 detailed bids were invited from which the eight projects were selected.

The intention was that each project would be monitored to pick up any changes in parental confidence and other benefits, if these were apparent. Again, parents were required to be part of this process. In practice this was variable with not all LAs being able to collect the amount of evidence that would provide a sound basis for evaluation and/or not investigating change in parental confidence. In some cases evaluation reports presented quantitative data (e.g. from a survey) but unfortunately no statistical analysis, conclusions apparently being drawn by visual inspection of the data.

Table 1 Projects undertaken by the eight LAs

	Project focus	LAs
1.	Making the provision of educational psychology advice “arm’s length” from a local authority	-
2.	Sharing best practice in developing good relationships between the authority and parents, through effective parent partnership services and other local mechanisms	Portsmouth, Durham, Kent, Oxfordshire
3.	Effective practice by schools and local authorities in meeting the needs of children at School Action Plus	Blackburn and Darwin, Newham, Durham, Oxfordshire
4.	Developing the ‘team around the child’ approach in the school stages.	Wolverhampton
5.	Other activities: i) Extending the use of provision mapping to increase the capacity of schools to have positive dialogue with parents about how they are making provision to meet children’s SENs ii) Increasing parental confidence in schools’ use of delegated budgets to meet identified need	Durham N. Tyneside,

The present study was conducted in June-July 2009 towards the end of the project. Interviews were undertaken with the LA lead (in some cases more than one person, at the LA’s suggestion) for all eight LAs and with a parent proposed by the LAs in six cases. The other two other LAs considered that a parent would not be able to contribute as their projects comprised evaluations rather than developmental initiatives. There were a total of 17 interviews (10 LA officers, 1 evaluator, and 6 parents).

The focus of the study was primarily to examine LAs’ learning from their project and how they intended to develop the work. In some cases the project was clearly part of a development previously underway. In two LAs the project was essentially an evaluation of the LA practice; in some LAs the project was basically a developmental project of which this was an early phase.

The interviews with both LA officer and parents addressed five main questions:

- To the extent that outcomes were achieved, why they were achieved?

- To the extent that they were not achieved, why they were not achieved?
- Over and above the evaluation of the project against its own aims and objectives, were there wider benefits/drawbacks arising from running the project?
- Is the work transferable? If so, what would need to be in place to make it work elsewhere?
- How sustainable is the project in your LA and, in the light of that, what plans does your authority have for taking the work forward?

These were modified as necessary to fit the project and the interviewee. Given the nature of the study, parents were advised that neither they nor their child would be identified but complete anonymity could not be guaranteed as the LAs would be named.

In addition to the interviews, information was available from the original project proposals; the project summaries presented at the London meeting 12 June 2009; and the evaluation reports produced by local evaluators.

2. What have LAs learned?

This section will discuss the learning from the projects as a series of themes rather than an analysis of each project – the evaluations provide this information. Of course, the fact that LAs undertook projects with different foci resulted in different learning occurring across the eight.

2.1 *The challenge of information exchange*

The SEN system is complex. LAs have statutory duties to provide information and others such as voluntary bodies also provide extensive assistance. But it is apparent from experience as well as other studies that parents are often insufficiently aware of important information, confused or overwhelmed. However, if communication exchange is handled well this can improve parents' confidence as they are treated as real partners with an important contribution. As one parent interviewee said: 'It gives you a sense of input... you feel like you do have some influence'.

It is important to distinguish different aspects of the information collection/dissemination system; various processes are involved. For example, North Tyneside have found that it is possible to engage parents in determining *what* information is necessary and helpful for parents whose child has SEN. What is evident here is that initially parents did not know

what was necessary but that groups of parents could contribute productively to developing a form of information template. Furthermore, the fact that parents contributed to this process, and their views were taken seriously was empowering. The LA is now developing a booklet that will guide parents on questions to ask, for example the teachers' expertise in different SEN domains, the presence of pupils with similar problems to those of a parent's child and the outcomes achieved. The mother interviewed from this LA was very positive about the development and compared it with the situation she had been in herself when she was initially seeking information concerning her own child: 'I would have liked this information when I was going through'.

Developing such a system requires both foundation work and careful cooperative engagement. The LA's experience was that it was important to seek and develop commitment from schools 'so you're not having to twist people's arms'. Parent forums must be real, not tokenistic. Furthermore, as the parent noted, 'involving parents takes quite a lot of work'. The LA and parent also stressed the importance of recognising the shift of powers and responsibilities: the school rather than LA is now in many respects the key organisation although the LA also has important statutory responsibilities as well as a key strategic role.

2.2 *Developing communication*

A frequent message from the projects was the need to develop 2-way communication between parents and the LA and schools, and indeed with other services. This goes beyond the examples of information exchange. A number of examples were given. Kent's project included setting up two types of meeting. Parents were offered an 'initial' meeting at the stage when a request for a statutory assessment had been made, with a Parent Partnership Officer (PPO) from Partnerships with Parents (PwP), funded by Kent LA but with a remit to operate at 'arms length' from the authority. A second part of the Kent project comprised contacting parents and offering a meeting when a statutory assessment request was declined: the 'no decision' meeting. The involvement of PwP was considered positive by the LA interviewee because of its perceived independence and the high parental trust in the organisation, although use of such a service in this way also has the danger of compromising its perceived independence when offering support to individual parents.

Parents were pleased to have early access and an opportunity to discuss their child and the evaluation report suggests improvement in parents' increased their knowledge of and their confidence in the LA's statutory assessment system, including an increased confidence in their views being taken into account. As the parent interviewee noted, the initial meeting's

taking place so early was very helpful: 'these were not people you have to wait 8-10 months to get help from'. The 'no decision' meeting, as in this mother's case, could enable professionals to explain why and how they considered particular provision could meet the child's needs. Importantly, this system also set up the provision, without need of a statement, at this stage so avoiding the need to wait for a statutory assessment and statement *before* provision was put into place. Hence early communication plus appropriate action was positively regarded. In the event, this mother's son was not made the subject of a statement as she had initially sought but her confidence in the decision was enhanced by the opportunity to have the discussion at her 'no decision' meeting with the PPO. Early engagement and communication was also stressed in the project run by Blackburn with Darwen designed to develop an alternative package of support directory and then to develop further this approach. Again, a parent was very positive about early discussion of his child's needs. Interestingly both of these parents also noted how, in their view, so much of the available literature and guidance on the SEN system available to parents was negative: 'If you go on the [name of voluntary body] website they provide material that implies a fight is necessary'. Their experience showed that an alternative outcome was possible.

Parents in other projects also expressed both their wish for *real* communication – not tokenism – and that their confidence in the SEN system had improved as a result of effective communication, even in some cases where they didn't achieve all their originally desired outcomes. The communication process had shown respect for them as parents and provided an opportunity actually to influence decisions. This was the case both for work focussing on their own child and also when parents contributed to wider discussions to develop policy and practice. In Durham, for example, parents of children with SEN contributed to professional development meetings of the SENCOs within the Community of Learning (CoL) schools undertaking the project. These events were judged by participants to be much enhanced by parents' contributions providing personal accounts - the evaluation of school staffs' self perceptions indicated very positive and widespread increases in their own confidence. The decision to use parents from outside the CoL was found to be a success by 'taking the tension out' as no SENCO was directly linked to any parent's narrative.

The third element of Kent's project comprised workshops to improve knowledge of the SEN system and communication. Three workshops were run for parents/carers, school-based staff, LA services staff and other professionals and a further four workshops were run for parents. Overall substantial increases in knowledge and confidence were found but the

numbers of parents involved overall (37), disappointingly, far exceeded the number of professionals (10). If communication is to be productive it must be two-way; it cannot be assumed that the professionals are communicating effectively as these two quotations from parents taken from the evaluation indicate:

- *“Many parents have negative experiences with schools/LA ... communication is the key, but I feel schools are very defensive.”*
- *“There needs to be careful, frequent, accurate, truthful communication ... without communication parents are antagonised and disempowered.”*

These examples, and many others across projects, indicate clearly the central importance of effective and appropriate forms of 2-way communication. Not only is this a fundamental *right*, that parents should have every reason to expect of a service provided, it is also an effective approach to increase their confidence, from which their trust also increased. Furthermore, LAs and schools benefitted as effective communication facilitated their ability to carry out their roles and address the children’s needs. But this requires development for parents and both LA and school staff. Newham identified the importance of effective communication between parents and schools, not only the LA, as schools’ independence made their role increasingly critical. This point was echoed by Kent, a very large LA, whose project included workshops. one designed to improve communication skills while others were planned to improve understanding of the SEN system among both parents and professionals. In both cases, but particularly for the latter workshops, the evaluation found evidence for an increase in parent/carer knowledge of school based provision; however, the numbers of professionals attending were disappointing so limiting the potential impact on school practice.

2.3 Provision

Communication is essential but so too is appropriate provision to meet the needs of individual children and groups/communities. Making provision to meet the needs of children with SEN has been a major challenge conceptually and in practice. Relevant issues concern location (e.g. mainstream or specialist provision), teaching approaches, staff to deliver interventions and support, suitability of physical resources (e.g. access, acoustics) and funding. Some projects focused on aspects of provision including funding models and sought parents’ views on previous development (through an evaluative study) or the further development of an existing approach.

The background to Oxfordshire's project was the decision in 2006 to delegate all centrally held funding for secondary aged pupils with statements to schools. There were positive indicators that this had been successful. The aim of the Oxfordshire project was to review overall levels of delegated funding and share good practice for pupils with higher levels of need as a means to further improve relationships between the LA, secondary schools and parents. In particular the project sought to explore whether, by reducing reliance on statements, pupils' needs could be met appropriately, their outcomes could be as good or better, and parents would be confident that appropriate provision was being made, and that they trusted the LA and school.

The project comprised a number of activities but was essentially an evaluation of practice, drawing mainly on the views of parents of Year 7 pupils with statements or at school action plus. Their main focus was on secondary school practice but it is interesting to note that parents gave more positive judgments of provision in secondary schools than their children's previous primary schools. when interviewed in term 3 of Year 7. Furthermore, levels of satisfaction were similar for parents of pupils with a statements or at school action plus.

A range of approaches to support transition were implemented by different schools, with positive comments from parents whose children experienced different approaches – see Section 2.5 below. Parents also stressed their wish for specialist teaching support (e.g. for dyslexia or speech and language difficulties). The issue has been picked up also by Sir Jim Rose in his recent report on the teaching of pupils with literacy difficulties. Parents also sought intervention that recognised their child's particular needs rather than their being 'fitted into' an existing package. However, the project identified good practice in schools with which parents were satisfied. Furthermore, parents did not seek statements, indeed there had been a substantial reduction in numbers of new statements since 2006, and the LA's approach in this respect had a good degree of parental confidence in its appropriateness. The LA was intent on using the results of their project this year to share good practice across the authority.

Other LAs such as Newham and Blackburn with Darwen also explored models of funding that reduced reliance on statements. Again there was a good deal of parental support where they had confidence that the provision would meet their child's needs: these projects did not find a strong demand, in general, for statements. Newham's survey of parents found that parents of children with statements and those who were subject to exceptional resource funding (ERF) were more likely to consider that the funding had made a positive difference

to their child, across a range of domains including being happier and making progress, than parents whose children had statements. However, there was some evidence that the latter group of parents had a focus on the resources and appeared to have doubts about provision at secondary school, the statement therefore being seen as providing security in this respect.

Blackburn with Darwen had introduced Individual Pupil Resourcing Agreements (IPRAs) in 2004 to provide enhanced funding at School Action Plus and reduce the need for a statement. This funding for IPRAs was delegated to schools and had gained the confidence of schools and parents. This project developed the approach further to fund more flexible packages of support that addressed the five Every Child Matters (ECM) outcomes and addressed training needs (see below). This was positively received by both parents and schools. As a result the LA was moving on to develop this approach further. This included Provision Mapping designed to show clearly the support being received by a child and the costings of the elements of this provision. Other LAs had also found support for provision mapping. This approach acknowledges the concerns of parents, including several of those interviewed, that they were insufficiently aware of the provision package for their child. The inclusion of financial information assists audit but parents were less interested in the *funding* available to a school than the *provision* being made by the school to support their child. Provision mapping may also usefully include details of external services as well as the use of the school's own resources, so providing a comprehensive account for parents.

2.4 Involving parents in SEN panels

Decisions regarding provision to be made by LAs for children with SEN typically involve a panel of LA officers and others including representatives of professionals involved by law in statutory assessments (typically educational psychologists and consultant community paediatricians) and in many cases teachers (heads, SENCOs). Portsmouth's project went further. Parents were recruited and 44 were trained to become members of the authority's Inclusion Support Panel (the panel that advises the LA on whether or not to carry out a statutory assessment or issue a statement), a greater number than originally expected ('vastly oversubscribed' stated the LA officer, a fair judgement as the aim was about 30). Our parent interviewee reported that the 'training was excellent – couldn't fault it' and he was strongly of the view that other parents involved had equally positive views about the initiative.

Since December 2008 at least two parents have sat on every panel. Evaluation of the project indicates very positive findings. These parents/carers reported feeling much more knowledgeable, empowered and enthusiastic to continue on panels. These findings were reinforced by our parent interviewee who was very willing to continue as a panel member as he could see how beneficial the system was for parents whose children were being considered by the panels. Furthermore, he commented that 'I've found the whole thing very rewarding' and compared this with his own experience when his children were going through the SEN system (in another LA) when 'I didn't know the process and I didn't have a lot of confidence in it'. Interestingly he also noted that being involved in this way had other benefits 'also building up your own self esteem and passing on the confidence to other parents'. The evaluation found that almost all parents (those on panels or not) expressed more confidence in ISP decisions once aware that parents had become trained and voting members of the panels.

Interestingly, there has so far been no change in the pattern of decisions made by the ISP. This can be interpreted in different ways, of course, but the parents themselves considered their responses have been broadly in line with the majority, suggesting consensus rather than their views being sidelined. Furthermore, professionals on the panel were also positive and other LAs in the 8- project initiative have expressed great interest in this project. The LA's perspective on the success of this initiative is that it had the benefit of being 'hands on' – not simply a consultation exercise which typically received little interest and engagement. Training is crucial and the initial phase made a higher than expected demand on officer time (but this reflected the 50% over-subscription of parents). Positive spin offs identified by the LA included an increase in the number of parents wishing to attend panels that were considering their own child.

It is also of note that the ISP requires panel members to consider relatively limited amounts of information, avoiding parents being confronted with large files on each child. An e-system was already in place which was also helpful. Running costs are low, just expenses but with a small fund to recompense those parents who lose financially by attending a panel. Our parent interviewee also commented that there was now interest in extending support 'we're looking at different ways to do this for other parents', for example by going out to meet with them.

This model appears to be readily transferable to other LAs at low cost after initial training of the first group of parents. Issues to consider include the existing operation of the panel which should be parent friendly before introducing parents to its meetings, e.g. limited

documentation to read; positive, effective and supportive relationships between panel meetings; effective interpersonal and communication styles; setting up effective training; and a clear system for dealing with confidentiality, including part of the training programme. There is also a benefit in reviewing the system periodically and offering parents the opportunity for feedback and debriefing – some cases may be particularly difficult, even distressing, and support for parents to discuss their own emotional feelings would be useful.

2.5 Supporting parents at transition

Children are subject to a number of significant changes in their school careers. The first and arguably the most significant is the transition from home to their first educational or care setting. The nature of this transition, including age at which it occurs, varies depending on early child care (e.g. at home or with a child minder, playgroup) and the provision available. Later transitions include Key Stage 1 to 2 and Key Stage 2 to 3 (primary to secondary school); finally there is the transition from compulsory schooling (end of Key Stage 4) to post-16 education, employment or training. The Wolverhampton project focused on the transition into school provision at around age five years.

The LA had a well established system, the Team Around the Child (TAC), which included regular meetings of professionals and parent(s) at pre-school to discuss and plan for a child with complex needs. Central to this system was the key worker and Wolverhampton's policy that the key worker should be chosen by the parent(s), not allocated by the LA. This system had run successfully for several years at pre-school and the project focused on extending it into the first year of school, in most cases special schools. The project identified that the extension of the TAC into school continued to enhance parental confidence but also that changes were likely to be appropriate, as the child moved through the school. This was partly driven by the relatively high person-time allocation required but it was also judged appropriate to the child's and parent's changing needs.

However, there continued to be strong support for the parent choosing the key worker, at school as well as pre-school. This required a careful transition process so that the parent could get to know potential key workers and so make an *informed* choice. Initially after transfer the pre-school key worker continued with the child but this was reviewed after TAC meetings in school. Interestingly, many parents have chosen non-teachers, perhaps a teaching assistant or speech and language therapist, for example. At interview, one parent noted she had chosen a nursery nurse as she was 'more a guardian than authority figure' and had both personal and professional experience of children with SEN, as well as

personal characteristics that were similar to those of the mother. This example indicates the range of factors a parent may take into account to gain confidence – ultimately, however, ‘you want somebody who bonds with your child’.

The project in Wolverhampton indicated that the TAC could usefully be amended with a reduction in numbers of meetings and a number of professionals attending as certain inputs were no longer necessary. However, the LA also appreciated that numbers of TACs will increase year on year from this pilot and so sustainability would require careful review in the future in order that parents’ high confidence at present would be maintained. But, the central importance of informed parental selection of the key worker would remain.

The Oxfordshire project was a study of existing practice and included a focus on primary-secondary transition. Parents were generally positive about transition arrangements, although schools did vary, and the evaluation report identified a number of activities found helpful, including:

- secondary school SENCO attendance at year 6 reviews
- personalised packages of visits for children whilst in year 6
- summer school introductions to secondary school
- a transition worker providing individual preparation before transition and individual support for the term following transition
- teaching assistant key workers supporting before and after transition
- lunchtime clubs for vulnerable children
- buddy systems
- staggered school opening and closing for year 7

When asked what advice they would give to other parents about transition, the parents involved in the project focused on effective communication, taking advantage to see and talk with the secondary school and maintaining that dialogue once their child had transferred. The importance of being assertive in discussing their child’s needs was stressed and then monitoring the provision that was provided. One parent interviewed for the evaluation identified a 10 week programme of initiatives in their child’s primary school which, collectively, had clearly been seen as very beneficial.

3. Can LA learning from the projects be generalised

The eight projects were relatively low cost (£20k – 40k) and took various forms. Two were essentially evaluations of existing provision but the other six comprised development

initiatives. Each project has produced interesting and very worthwhile findings but a key issue is whether the learning experienced by the project LAs can be generalised so that other LAs may also produce positive outcomes and, if so, what is necessary?

Discussions with project LAs indicated that all considered their project was indeed generalisable to other LAs. In some cases questions of the relevance of demographic factors was raised, including LA size (population and geographic spread) and ethnic composition. However, these were not seen as inhibitory to generalisation. Neither was finance a very significant factor: the budget was relatively small, although not insignificant, and could be prioritised. Nevertheless, the fact that there was a financial input from the DCSF was welcomed as it indicated both seriousness and importance attributed to the initiative, and reinforced the need for considered bids and accountability for the implementation.

What then are the main issues? These may be summarised as follows.

- *Commitment to and engagement with parents*

All project LAs had a history of parental engagement but this varied in degree and nature. The experience of the project indicated that, even so, LAs developed new learning from their experience, identifying aspects of work with parents that they had not sufficiently recognised in the past. Nevertheless, a fundamental commitment to engage with parents as partners was crucial.

The degree of engagement of parents by the eight projects varied. Two were essentially evaluations of past practice whereas others involved development work with parents. There is certainly a benefit in evaluating past practice but a clear benefit from the developmental projects was where evaluation took place of that project. In these cases parents were involved more comprehensively in the projects rather than only as providers of feedback regarding practice. They were able to comment not only on failings (or successes) of the system but more particularly on attempts to improve it by innovative practice, in which they were involved.

The means whereby parents were engaged will vary with the nature of the project, but a fundamental commitment to parent involvement coupled with active implementation of this value position in the project are keys to success.

- *The project as a vehicle in itself*

It would be unrealistic to expect all LAs to want and be able to run with all of the development projects. Each takes time and resources to organise and implement properly. It is important that each LA considers priorities, among these initiatives or others, but perhaps the key issue is the active engagement with a project. The focus is, of course, important – it needs to be important and manageable - but so too is the nature of the learning from the engagement, for LAs, parents and schools. Experience of these LAs suggests that there were some common experiences and gains from undertaking a project per se, in addition to any project-specific benefits. Furthermore, there seemed to be added value in that engagement in a project aimed at increasing parental confidence on occasion generalised to other LA authorities.

Some key factors to consider for the nature of future projects include:

1. The project should be developmental not just an evaluation of existing practice
 2. Parents must be central in a number of aspects including:
 - a. collaborating with the LA in conceptualising, creating and confirming the project;
 - b. being actively engaged in an element of new practice;
 - c. contributing feedback on their experiences;
 - d. as recipients of feedback and evaluation in order to contribute to the interpretation of findings.
 3. Projects should also include LA and school staff – system development must engage those involved in operating the system, not just parents and their children.
- *Support and challenge*

Also important for the success of the projects, and acknowledged as such by LAs, was the requirement to formulate a bid meeting specific parameters and associated processes and the involvement of the National Strategies SEN Advisers who contributed to the planning, design and analysis of the projects and acted as critical friends, checking that the projects were on target and on timetable. They provided a welcome and respected balance of challenge and support which LAs valued. LAs also had the benefit of national meetings where they presented their interim findings and had the opportunity to learn about each others' work. The association with the Lamb Inquiry, and the presence of Brian Lamb and the Inquiry team, provided an additional benefit that would be more difficult to match in future but regional seminars

could be useful. Furthermore, the presence of both LA staff and parents was both a further opportunity for joint learning and another opportunity for LAs to make clear statements about parental engagement and the value of their involvement.

- *Local authorities and schools*

Several LA officers made the observations that generalisation to other LAs, and indeed sustainability within their own LAs, depended on the relationship between the authority and the schools. As power has shifted from LAs to schools so the relationship has altered. These initiatives had benefited from good LA-school relationships which recognised that LAs needed to work collaboratively and seek schools' engagement, which schools could decline. As one LA officer noted, in their project 'the schools were very, very committed'. Improving parental confidence in the SEN system was not simply a matter of confidence in the LA system: parents needed confidence in schools' contributions. Furthermore, it was at school level where ultimately the main basis for confidence lay, in the day to day experiences of the pupils. One LA officer stressed that 'with [number] of schools, we [LA] don't have the resource. the governing bodies have to take this on'. The evidence from these projects indicates that parents are often lacking knowledge and understanding of and confidence in the school's approach to meeting their child's needs and also that particular effort is necessary to engage schools with the projects – take up/responses were low in some LAs.

However, some aspects of the SEN system are LA issues, not least their statutory responsibilities. Parents who were interviewed recognised the different responsibilities and highlighted specific issues pertinent to schools or LA as relevant – which indicates how they had personally benefitted from the project with which they had been involved. However, they also identified some common factors at school and LA level, perhaps particularly well summed up by this parent's explanation of the benefits of the project with which she was engaged: '.....taking the bureaucracy out of it and putting the human touch back in'. Compare this view with that of the parent who also had very positive views on the project but who commented on the negative information available, for example on the internet: 'every bit of literature tells you to prepare for a fight'.

- *Evaluation of projects*

The evaluation of future projects would benefit from a combination of qualitative (e.g. interviews, group discussion) and quantitative (e.g. surveys with rating scales)

measures. The evaluations undertaken for this initiative were all small scale – all developmental projects had small budgets for their evaluation as the majority of the grant was, appropriately, for the implementation of the innovative project. The use of interviews is time consuming but potentially rewarding for producing richer data, and the evaluation reports of the Lamb projects show the benefits of this method. Surveys have the benefit of larger numbers of respondents to provide breadth and address representativeness but some surveys here had limited numbers of respondents, substantially below expectation at times.

The use of combined methods seeks to gain the benefits and reduce the disadvantages of each. However, to gain these benefits requires an appropriate sample – e.g. in terms of size – and preparation of participants so that they are able to provide as full information as possible. Furthermore, if reasonable sample size is attained for a survey then the use of statistical analysis rather than visual inspection of the data is indicated.

It is also important to consider the most appropriate way of accessing parents, whether through an organisation such as a parent partnership service or directly to individual parents. In the former case there are issues regarding the nature of the organisation, e.g. their independence, pressure group, organisational ability to support the project. In the latter case there are issues of ensuring coverage of the relevant parent population and avoiding overload on small numbers of willing and committed parents.

4. Can the project be sustained?

Local authorities were confident that their initiatives could be sustained after the funding ceased. This was aided by several factors:

- *Part of a developmental process*

The projects could generally be seen as part of an initiative that had started prior to the Lamb Inquiry. Although not necessarily specifically focused on improving parental confidence, all were seen as offering important contributions to improve practice for children with SEN. As such, improving parental confidence in the SEN system was also possible. The LAs were implementing actions as appropriate to maintain and enhance momentum. In some cases this involved making modifications to the original ideas to improve sustainability in the future – e.g.

Wolverhampton's scaling down of the Team Around the Child at school age on the basis of the experience of the project. In some cases proposals for future work had been put forward to the appropriate LA officer or committee; in other cases specific plans had been made to roll out the initial pilot – e.g. Durham which has a conference planned for the autumn to roll out beyond the original Community of Learning group of schools.

- *The degree of embeddedness*

The project could enable an initiative to have achieved its objective and become part of practice – e.g. Portsmouth's inclusion of trained parents on the Inclusion Support Panel where sufficient parents had been trained and the system was established, although, in time new parents would need to be recruited and trained.

The projects concerned with funding for pupils with SEN had reached different stages of development but in each case there was commitment to the approach being taken by the LA in question and increasing consolidation taking place, although Newham discovered that, despite their system of Exceptional Resource Funding at School Action Plus being well established, and evidence for its acceptability, there continued to be parents who were less than fully convinced and sought the 'security' of a statement.

- *Limited financial commitment*

The limited funding of the projects was a plus as LAs had demonstrated success at low cost, so providing support for sustainability, especially in the present financial climate.

- *Commitment*

In addition to such factors a primary consideration was the LAs' commitment to engaging with parents and improving their confidence. This was characterised by the ways projects had been set up, with true partnerships. Of course, this was built into the remit but, even so, the LAs' genuine commitment was confirmed by those parents that were interviewed as well as by the local evaluations of individual projects.

True partnership with parents and a commitment to engage with them also require recognition that parents' responses may not be in line with the ideas, policies and practice of the LA and schools. In the developmental innovative projects parents were engaged and were generally positive, albeit with some caveats. Furthermore, these LAs wanted to develop and improve practice; in the two evaluations of existing practice, some potentially uncomfortable findings were revealed including parents' differential confidence in primary compared with secondary schools – interestingly the results were contradictory in the two LAs - and the continuing concerns of parents for the 'safety/security' of a statement for their child despite prior work attempting to reassure parents by alternative systems. Developmental projects benefit from an ability to tackle these challenging perspectives and attempt to build in responses to the feedback received.

5. Conclusions

The initiative to fund eight projects through the Lamb Inquiry to improve parental confidence in the SEN system may be judged a success. Four of the five original types of project were implemented across the LAs. Most were clearly developmental projects with two focusing on evaluation of previously established procedures concerned with funding. Each project had a local evaluation which provided interesting and generally useful evidence although this varied: in some cases proposed pre- versus post- project comparisons were not carried out and some surveys had very low numbers of respondents; one project had a late deadline for responses and will analyse their findings in the autumn term. Overall impact for future LA practice was enhanced where parents were actively engaged in the projects.

These low cost projects provided very useful vehicles for LAs to work productively with parents and to develop practice that improves parents' confidence in the SEN system. Furthermore, there is evidence both for sustainability and the potential for generalisability to other LAs. Although at this stage there is only limited evidence for the success of any one project, or for its generalisability to other LAs, the aggregated evidence indicates the success of the initiative overall. For a modest financial outlay important improvements in parental confidence can be achieved. Fundamental to success was the commitment of LAs to *true*, not tokenistic or paternalistic parental engagement and a clear aim to improve confidence and work collaboratively with parents. The focus of the project was an issue of importance to the LA and its parents but the specific focus was less important than the manner in which it was carried out, including the commitment of the LA and its engagement with parents.

In taking forward the learning from the Lamb projects there are two issues to consider: whether and, if so, how an initiative from one LA might be implemented by other LAs; and whether and, if so, how a further phase of similar projects might be run.

First, the evidence from the Lamb projects suggests that each could be undertaken by other LAs. The following guidance is proposed to any LA wishing to undertake a project with a similar focus.

- Examine the LA's final report to the Lamb Inquiry, including the results of the local evaluation.
- A project needs to be developed relative to the existing policy and practice in the LA. This requires consideration of the pre-existing situation relevant to the project, for example the current level of parental engagement in the LA's SEN system; the nature of the current funding system for support of students (e.g. where new funding models are under consideration); the LA's system for supporting groups of schools (e.g. area-based, training and development); the existing nature, including membership and procedures, of panels determining provision (e.g. the inclusion of parents on such panels).

Other LAs may prefer to develop a different project. In either case the following factors should be considered for new projects designed to improve the SEN system and parents' confidence:

- Parents should be involved throughout the project. They should be fundamentally engaged in:
 - Identifying the focus and aims of the project
 - The provision of data, providing information and opinions relevant to the topic
 - The evaluation design including the identification of information to collect and sample
 - The interpretation of the findings to provide parent perspectives on the outcomes
 - Identifying the learning for the future and the future planning on the basis of the project's findings
- The project should have a clear parent focus, with parents actively engaged in the project itself. This could include, as appropriate to the project:
 - Providing input e.g. into the training of professional staff

- Developing support for parents e.g. to receive information; opportunities to engage with the school or LA to influence decisions
- The project should be developmental rather than a review of past or existing practice.
- It should address an issue of importance for policy/practice
- Evaluation should be built into the project in order that learning can influence subsequent practice and sustainability

Second, national support for a further phase of projects would provide an important element in a framework to optimise their delivery. The following two points are relevant:

- External support and challenge should be included, and two complementary forms are proposed:
 - Involvement of the National Strategies SEN team as ‘critical friends’ who would be involved in the planning, design and analysis of projects, including regular reporting by the LA (e.g. once a term), so providing support and challenge.
 - Presentations at seminars where practice and learning arising from the projects is presented and shared with other LAs.
 - Parents should be active participants in these seminars
 - They should be relatively small scale to optimise engagement of attendees, suggesting a regional format
 - National contributions should be included to signal their importance and seriousness, and to facilitate further dissemination of practice
- Projects can be successful with relatively modest financial support; however, financial input is an important factor, not only in real terms to enhance resources but also to support commitment and accountability. A similar sum (£20 - £40k) would seem appropriate.

Looking to the future, the use of a low cost project format, as evident here, provides a potentially very useful model for widespread roll out across the country. Ideally a similar initiative with a small budget for a group of LAs should be implemented with increased coverage, possibly by LAs continuing with one or more partners and by the organising of regional rather than national meetings. An evaluation of that further initiative could build on the evidence of the Lamb projects to identify areas of policy and practice that have a high priority and where there projects across several LAs provide strong evidence of success and potential for generalisability to other LAs.