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Implementing the London Challenge

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About the authors

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Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

Summary

This case study looks at the implementation of the London Challenge, a secondary school improvement programme that ran in the capital from 2003 to 2011, and was expanded in 2008 to include primary schools and two new areas – Greater Manchester and the Black Country where it was known as the City Challenge. At its peak, the London Challenge programme had a budget of £40 million a year, funding ‘in-kind’ packages of support for underperforming schools, jointly brokered by an expert adviser and officials in the Department for Education. It also invested heavily in school leadership, including development programmes and consultant heads to support leaders of struggling schools, and worked with key boroughs to ensure robust local planning and support for school improvement. During the period of the London Challenge, secondary school performance in London saw a dramatic improvement, and local authorities in inner London went from the worst performing to the best performing nationally. Against a background of wider policy changes it is difficult to isolate the impact of the London Challenge during this period, although several independent evaluations have supported the link.¹

Our analysis shows that the implementation of the London Challenge successfully combined experimentation on the ground, rapid feedback and learning by advisers and officials, with strong project management across different strands of the policy. Over time, the centre of gravity for intervention shifted towards the teaching profession itself, with increasing ownership by senior practitioners driving sustainable improvements. The record is more mixed in both Greater Manchester and the Black Country, in part because they had less time for these practices to properly embed, although some positive developments have been sustained since 2011.

¹ See for instance: Baars, S. et al, *Lessons from London Schools*, Centre for London & CfBT, 2014, retrieved 7 July 2014 from <http://www.cfbt.com/en-GB/Research/Research-library/2014/r-london-schools-2014>; Hutchings, M., Greenwood, C., Hollingworth, S., Mansaray, A., Rose, A., Minty, S., & Glass, K., *Evaluation of the City Challenge programme*, London Metropolitan University & Coffey International Development, 2012, retrieved 2 July 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-the-city-challenge-programme>.

Introduction

Context and origins

Tony Blair's Labour government was elected in 1997 on the back of a famous statement of its priorities for government: 'Education, education, and education'. Its first term was marked by myriad national initiatives to address school standards, including Beacon schools, specialist schools, Education Action Zones, and Excellence in Cities. While school performance improved between 1997 and 2001, as they entered a second term Labour had not delivered the improvements to the worst-performing schools that had been expected. The scale of the remaining challenge was most notable in the London secondary sector, where there was a widening gap between those schools rated 'outstanding' by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the long tail of underperforming schools. This fed into a growing sense of an education crisis in the capital among parents, councillors and MPs – stoked by a strident London media.

The policy model

Working closely together, in 2002 Number 10 and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) decided to focus a new set of policies on London secondary schools. This was developed into a very clear focus with measurable objectives:

- to raise standards in the poorest-performing schools
- to narrow the attainment gap between pupils in London
- to create more good and outstanding schools.

Within the Department for Education and Skills, the London Challenge was the responsibility of the Minister for London Schools, a new position created in May 2002 at Parliamentary Under-Secretary level and first held by Stephen Twigg MP. The policy team that was formed to work on both the development and implementation was headed by Jon Coles, initially a Deputy Director with a team of five Grade 7 civil servants, each leading a small team who worked on different strands of the policy.

Tim Brighouse, the first London Schools Commissioner (later called the Chief Adviser for London Schools), was employed on a part-time basis to provide professional leadership for educators in the capital. He had particular responsibility for a team of directly-contracted London Challenge advisers. These senior practitioners were all retired or semi-retired education professionals, with experience of successfully addressing school failure locally or nationally.

While a range of policy measures were wrapped into the London Challenge there were three core elements in the policy model:

- First, identifying the priority group of schools with the worst performance and assigning each an experienced London Challenge 'adviser' to broker tailored packages of support for each school, working closely with a DfES official.
- Second, the team would work with a set of 'key boroughs' where there were systemic concerns about local school performance, developing a 'vision' for

school improvement that fitted with strong local plans, and lever in additional resources from the department.

- Third, there was a commitment to invest in leadership development and teaching across the city's schools. This pan-London approach included a strand on the 'London Leader' to identify and develop head-teachers from good and outstanding schools to act as 'consultant heads' who could share their expertise with other school leaders. This became the London Leadership Strategy, run by head-teachers and overseen by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), a non-departmental public body that had been set up in 2000. A further strand, the 'London Teacher' covered measures to address problems of supply and retention within the teaching profession in the capital, including Chartered London Teacher status, changes to inner London pay scales and the nascent 'Teach First' initiative.

There was also a 'student pledge' to make London's cultural and sporting assets more available to secondary school students, and some further proposals to improve information for parents about school choices. These elements are not considered in detail by this case study.

The challenges

The aim of breaking decisively with persistently-poor educational outcomes presented ministers and officials with a number of knotty implementation challenges, such as:

- managing the public profile of the policy in the context of media criticism of London schools and a sense of 'crisis' in school standards among parents and politicians
- bringing in and utilising credible professionals to provide underperforming schools with the bespoke support they needed to improve, while ensuring they were accountable to the department
- ensuring that advisers, teachers and school leaders had access to high-quality resources and models for school improvement, drawing on strengths already in the system
- overcoming suspicion or defensiveness from local authorities that might prevent support reaching the schools most in need, particularly in councils with political control that was different to the government
- maintaining the coherence of the policy as it was implemented across a large city and alongside the Department for Education and Skills' other national schooling priorities.

Impact

The performance of London schools over the decade after London Challenge began improved dramatically, with Key Stage 4 results moving from among the worst in the country to the best during the period. By 2010, Ofsted rated 30% of London schools as 'outstanding' compared to 17.5% nationally, and very few London secondaries fell into the bottom Ofsted categories.² The improvement also included the poorest pupils, and London now has the smallest gap between the performance of children in receipt of free school meals (FSM) and

² Ofsted, *London Challenge*, 2010, p.9, retrieved 2 July 2014 from <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/london-challenge>

the average, with the London Challenge ‘key boroughs’ among the most improved.³ There was considerable change in wider education policy and in London as a city between 2003 and 2011, and evaluation of the London Challenge interventions have taken place post facto. Nevertheless, Ofsted concluded in 2013 that ‘one of the key drivers behind the sustained improvement in London schools was the success of the London Challenge programme’.⁴ Similarly, the participants in our research all believed that the policy had made a noteworthy contribution to the results.

The London Challenge was later expanded to include primary schools and extended under the new name ‘City Challenge’ to cover Greater Manchester and the Black Country. There are mixed views about the impact of the two successor City Challenges. Most of our interviewees had doubts about whether the Black Country in particular was the right area to choose, as it lacked the density of schools and the spare capacity from high-performers. In Greater Manchester, it was felt that many of the essential policy elements had bedded down well over the three years of implementation although more could have been achieved if it had been given longer to develop.

The story of implementing the London Challenge

Developing the model

When the broad outline of the London Challenge was announced by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Estelle Morris in a speech to South Camden Community School in July 2002, it was little more than a statement of intent. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair – himself a parent and a Londoner – had already signalled his appetite for a big push on the capital’s schools. As a result, Andrew (now Lord) Adonis, Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit, described himself as being ‘on manoeuvres’ from the time of the 2001 election as he worked up bold reform options.

Morris’ announcement framed the policy as a collective endeavour by a government that was ‘determined to tackle the problems we all face together’. She explicitly invited stakeholders to ‘join with me to set out the next phase’. She was serious; while her speech was the initial policy ‘moment’ for London Challenge, there followed an intensive period of both development and early implementation within the department before the final details were captured in the strategy document published in May 2003. Stephen Twigg told us about the inception: ‘London Challenge as it was envisioned at that embryonic stage was something very different to how it ended up being.’

In part because of the continued interest of Number 10, and the close oversight from a junior minister, development of the London Challenge was not derailed by the departure of Estelle Morris as Secretary of State in October 2002.

³ Ofsted, *Unseen Children*, 2013, p.58, retrieved 2 July 2014 from <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/unseen-children-big-picture>

⁴ *Ibid*, p.62

Bringing in the right people

Stephen Twigg, was appointed Minister for London Schools, in May 2002. It was unusual in the department for a minister to have a geographically-defined remit, but the role was created at the behest of the Prime Minister. This was one of Blair's first actions in the drive on secondary school underperformance in the capital.

In summer 2002, Director General for Schools, Peter Housden approached a young Deputy Director in the department, Jon Coles, about leading the team to work up what would become the London Challenge. Coles was seen as a high-potential civil servant. He was a former teacher whose career in the department had included implementing the government's pledge to end class sizes of over 30 in primary schools. Getting the lead official right was important. Lord Adonis told us 'The department put very good people on to it...because they knew this was a serious prime ministerial priority.'

One concrete announcement in Estelle Morris's speech had been the creation of the London Schools Commissioner post. Morris sounded out Tim Brighouse about the role early on. She knew him both from his time as chief education officer in Birmingham – where she was MP for Yardley – and through his work with the department on the Excellence in Cities programme. Formally appointed following an application process by the department, Brighouse took on the role part time from the end of 2002 and began to feed into the policy process being led by Jon Coles and his initially-small team of officials. He brought a wide-ranging background in education to the role, with a strong track record of school improvement from Birmingham. He was particularly focused on collaboration and actively sharing good practice in school improvement. This provided a counterweight to the structural changes being pushed by Adonis, particularly academies, and resulted in what the former minister describes as 'a very creative and successful combination of radical reform and radical improvement'.

Understanding the problem and its context

As well as initial appointments of civil servants to policy roles within the team, the triumvirate of Twigg, Coles and Brighouse was an important driver of the policy formulation from autumn 2002 to spring 2003.

Jon Coles' first task was to undertake an in-depth analysis of London schools, looking at the situation from scratch to uncover patterns of poor performance that might suggest where to intervene. This went beyond the top-line numbers and made rigorous use of data available to the department to break down attainment by a range of school characteristics, their intakes and their local areas. As one official who worked on it said, they were not just interested in working out where there was underperformance, but in asking 'What exactly are the features of under-performance in London?'

Although there had been some general themes within Estelle Morris's London Challenge speech, as they began to move from analysis to policy options, Coles behaved as if there were no fixed points in working up the outline of the London Challenge model. While doing so, he also tapped into those working in the area. Even before Tim Brighouse was brought in, they were being advised by David Mallen, a former Chief Education Officer in East Sussex who provided a strong practitioner focus to early conversations. Attention to the views and ideas of those working in schools and local authorities continued with Brighouse in post. This guided choices about the model and the way it was implemented.

Links to other government policy priorities

Part of the context for the London Challenge was other government policy on education. Andrew Adonis remained in touch monthly with the London Challenge as details were firmed up, providing helpful challenge to the team and maintaining links with other flagship reforms being championed centrally. In particular, the decision to support the Teach First scheme from 2002 provided a reputational and supply-side boost for London teaching, with many of the early graduates going on to work at the schools in London being targeted by London Challenge. Furthermore, Adonis kept a line of sight between the London Challenge and sponsored academies (formerly ‘city academies’), in which the most persistently-underperforming schools were closed and relaunched with new freedoms from local authorities and a non-government sponsor.⁵ Early academies were heavily concentrated on some of London’s worst-performing boroughs.

While it can be difficult to distinguish these policies from the core components of the London Challenge, their inclusion illustrates the way London Challenge was successfully embedded in the wider policy mix of the department. Such initiatives broadened the range of options that could be drawn on to improve schools, including more drastic measures that were available to ministers in those schools or boroughs that were unable, or unwilling, to improve.

Framing and communicating purpose

One of the distinctive contrasts between London Challenge and other education policies, both before and since, was the deliberate decision not to ‘name and shame’ schools as failing. Such negative language and a tendency to write-off struggling schools as ‘basket cases’ said one official, had been prevalent within the department and was part of the rhetoric around academies.

The London Challenge, however, sought to foster a renewed sense of partnership and shared purpose between schools and the department. A key objective set out by Jon Coles was to break the link between deprivation and low educational attainment. Building on this, Tim Brighouse coined the term ‘keys to success’ for the priority schools that would receive most attention from London Challenge. This captured their importance to the policy by signalling that – in his words – ‘if they could do it, anybody could do it’.

This positive framing is indicative of the attempt under London Challenge to engage teachers and school leaders in a common endeavour. A recurrent factor in our interviews with those involved in London Challenge – at all levels – was the feeling of ‘moral purpose’ that was both tapped into, and reinforced, by the policy. The importance of school leadership and the role of moral purpose had been popularised around the beginning of the decade by education writer, Michael Fullan.⁶ An accessible shared language to communicate policy intent helped bring effort and personal resources to bear from head-teachers. An attendee at our roundtable, herself a teacher, told us, ‘In education, hope is a really powerful motivator.’

But both ministers and officials who worked on London Challenge acknowledge that this positive and motivational approach could only have been credibly harnessed by someone within the profession who could engage the hearts and minds of teachers – traditionally a

⁵ The first city academy opened in September 2002 in Bexley, South East London.

⁶ Fullan’s books, such as *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership* released in 2003, were well known by practitioners like Brighouse and Woods.

difficult task for the department. Hence a Chief Adviser for London Schools, who reported to the minister and lead civil servant but was also well-regarded by teachers, was vital.

Starting to implement

Assembling the wider team

When first in post, Jon Coles had put together a group of three civil servants from different areas of the department to work with him on the early analysis of London schooling. As this analysis began to develop into a clearer policy model in the run-up to May 2003, the team working on London Challenge was expanded and Coles paid careful attention to the type of person that would be required. The choice of civil servants to support this work hinged less on their knowledge or expertise in education policy and more on their ability to adopt a distinctive way of working that was going to be a hallmark of the London Challenge. Jon Coles appointed civil servants to the team who would be open-minded when faced with a challenging policy goal, which resulted in a younger team, including new entrants and ‘fast streamers’. Coles told us,

People who'd been working in the department for a long time did think what we were saying we would do was ridiculous, but we were doing it with a load of young people who didn't have those preconceptions.

Coles also focused on creating the right ethos in his team. He expected a high level of dedication from his officials and the adviser team, and also expected them to share his focus on the job at hand. A major element of this team dynamic was showing confidence in the people that he had recruited. He explained, ‘If you've got really great people who you really trust, then you have to back their judgement.’

Once Tim Brighouse was in post, he and the official team began to recruit the first London Challenge advisers. Some, such as David Woods who had worked with Brighouse as a Birmingham head-teacher, were actively courted for a role on the adviser team, while a formal recruitment process was undertaken to identify the rest. The team encouraged applications from recently retired heads, former school inspectors and others that were known in the profession. Brighouse knew many of them by reputation, commenting: ‘I'd been around a long time, I knew where good practice was. I knew the background of a hell of a lot of people’. He also had a strong sense of the person specification.

They were people who had been round the block, who knew a lot about school improvement, didn't think there was only one answer, and were very, very good at helping schools in difficulty explore the way through problems and come up with their own solutions.

Implementing while policy making

The first of these advisers started before Christmas 2002 and a rapid series of case conferences were convened for the schools which had emerged as priorities from the data analysis. Although the period from autumn 2002 to the launch in May 2003 was primarily focused on problem definition and designing the policy, pressing concerns about some of the schools that were being visited spurred the team to begin some of the tailored support that would become part of the implementation model. As such, while intensive discussions continued on the final details of the policy document – with close interest from Number 10, and Adonis in particular – the policy itself was also emerging through practice. One member

of the team remarked: 'Once we were clear [it] was something we were going to do, we cracked on with it.'

Thanks to this proactivity, when Tony Blair officially launched the London Challenge in May 2003, elements of the policy were already up and running. Coles recalls, 'By the time the strategy document was published it wasn't just we'd done a lot of thinking, we'd done a huge amount of doing.'

The close connection between the actions being taken on the ground and the development of the policy was an enduring feature of the London Challenge over its early years. For the team working in the department, Jon Coles said this preparation work allowed them to 'get ahead of Number 10', who were quick to chase progress on the initiative following the launch. Coles described this as 'silencing the crowd', referring to the tendency for the centre to get involved in the details of priority policies – a habit that could be time-consuming and distracting.

Getting buy-in from local authorities

In the months preceding the launch there were a series of roundtables with local authorities to corroborate the department's judgements about which schools should be classified under 'Keys to Success'. One civil servant involved in these early discussions described how this was 'key to getting into the schools that, in most cases, the local authorities were signed up to and had had a chance to influence' what the London Challenge team were doing.

While not all boroughs were equally enthusiastic, the important thing at this stage was to understand where these critical stakeholders were coming from. The analysis on which the team had based their prioritisation allowed them to have challenging conversations with Keys to Success schools and the local authorities, forcing them, in David Woods' words, to 'confront the brutal facts'. They did not always do this with boroughs separately, instead opening out the conversations across several local authorities to discourage defensiveness or denial.

The further decision to focus intensive support on a number of so-called 'key boroughs' came at the suggestion of Stephen Twigg. In deciding which boroughs would be worked with Twigg said, 'We were looking at raw results, but we were also looking at trends, and if places were on an upward trend then they weren't considered.' This led them to focus their attention on five boroughs where improvement was most needed: Lambeth, Southwark, Hackney, Haringey and Islington. Although they had been well-briefed on the intention to co-produce a bespoke 'vision' shared between the boroughs and DfES, there was a rocky start following the launch in May 2003 when the department identified them in the press release about London Challenge. Having thought initially that the support would be low-key, a former civil servant explained, 'They didn't like that at all.' Nonetheless, during the six months spent drafting these strategies, the same official was confident that 'there was never that sense of this being something that we were imposing on them'. The visions were high-level statements of intent that were signed by Stephen Twigg and a lead council member for the borough, setting out the broad priorities for action, including the establishment of academies, investment in capital projects and plans for workforce development. These were published in November 2003.

Using the assets in the system

To support implementation of the London Challenge, the DfES team were assiduous in drawing on existing assets in the system rather than seeking to recreate or replace them. Jon Coles summed this up as part of the contextual analysis that formed the long run-in for London Challenge:

One of the things that we just explicitly set out to do was really to understand what was happening and what was good, and go and look and really understand it and then make sure we didn't squash it.

The most prominent example of this is in the work undertaken to secure a pipeline of consultant heads and professional development support targeted at the Keys to Success schools. Rather than attempt to deliver this support directly from the department or to establish a new body with responsibility for it, Brighouse and Coles looked to existing institutions. The basis of what would become the London Leadership Strategy was being thrashed out by the end of 2002. It drew on the work of the National College of School Leadership – which is based in Nottingham and the parent organisation for the strategy – and the London Leadership Centre at the Institute of Education. Dr Alan Davison, a successful head-teacher who had overseen improvements at Mill Hill County High School in Barnet, was brought in to the National College as Strategic Director and worked closely with the London Challenge team between 2002 and 2005 to evaluate provision and look at how to tailor it more closely towards the needs of London schools. This subsequently included commissioning research about the distinctive characteristics of teaching and leadership in London in order to build in training on cultural and ethnic diversity, conflict management and other topics, to courses already developed by the National College.

A further example of harnessing the assets in the system was Jon Coles' good relations with a rejuvenated Association of London Chief Education Officers (ALCEO) led by Paul Robinson from Wandsworth. This network had had a variable track record on promoting cross-borough working but through a number of initiatives around ICT and special educational needs (SEN) provision, they had begun to develop strong norms of collaboration. Jon Coles was engaging with this group throughout the development of the London Challenge from summer 2002 and recognised that working well with them would be vital for success. In particular, their advocacy of the approach that was being adopted would prove important for reducing the defensiveness of boroughs about central intervention in their Keys to Success schools. We heard from one of the officials in the London Challenge team that ALCEO 'were massively influential in [gaining support], and they were quite a sort of gung-ho group. They were up for it. They weren't difficult in the main'.

Keeping things on track

Creating space for the policy

Having begun to implement the London Challenge, the leadership team of Twigg, Coles and Brighouse needed to manage the political expectations of Number 10 and the public profile of the policy. This would be a challenge given the backdrop of fierce criticism of London school standards, particularly by the *Evening Standard* newspaper.

The highly-politicised nature of London schooling was not necessarily beneficial for a policy based on working closely and collaboratively with underperforming schools. Tim Brighouse made it clear that he did not want to deal with the media as Chief Adviser for London

Schools, despite having successfully brought them on board in Birmingham. In an atmosphere of tension and blame he felt that having a profile as a lead professional could be counterproductive. He warned ministers, 'If I get high-profile in the media it is all going to end in tears ... because it's the London press. They will get me.'

Instead, de-escalating the cynicism and scrutiny of the London press and creating the space for the professionals, became an important role for the Minister for London Schools. As part of this Twigg ensured the team had a media strategy which largely side-stepped the mainstream press and instead concentrated on raising awareness at borough level, among teachers and through outlets that would reach ethnic minority communities where educational attainment was lowest.

This 'under the radar' approach, as well as helping the team evade media criticism, supported the implementation of the model they had developed in at least two ways.

First, the ethos of the London Challenge was to acknowledge that central government did not have all the answers. The approach was instead to facilitate and support learning across the London school system, particularly building up capacity in the Keys to Success schools and struggling boroughs. Ministerial over-commitment would have put this at risk, because as Coles explained 'it's just much more possible to learn when you haven't got to get into lines to take [and] defending what you last said all the time.'

Second, three of the five key boroughs in which London Challenge worked most intensively were not Labour-controlled.⁷ If there was an expectation among councils that the Government were trying to make political capital from their interventions in schools, this could have undermined the collegial approach that enabled a range of stakeholders to work together. A minister involved later in the development of the policy remarked:

The Challenges were improvement programmes, they were not political programmes, and if we'd turned them into being political we'd have killed them, because that would have created opposition.

Keeping a low profile for the London Challenge strategy, however, negated some of the political capital that ministers were able to make once school standards in London began to show noticeable improvement. Compared with higher-profile policies that offered a single policy solution for problems of school underperformance or failure, explaining – and therefore claiming credit for the London Challenge and its successors – was harder for ministers.

This low profile was most important in the first couple of years of the policy, but as performance in London began to show a marked improvement (particularly after overtaking the national average in 2006), opportunities were created to raise its profile. Notably in 2007, the DfES launched a campaign entitled 'London School's Celebrating Success'. Students designed advertisements to promote London education, including billboard posters and t-shirts with the slogan 'I went to a London state school and all I got was 8 A*s'. There was a series of celebration events for teachers, parents and students in venues such as the Science Museum and the Transport Museum. While Lord Adonis, by then Minister for

⁷ In 2002, political control of the five local authorities broke down as follows: Islington – Liberal Democrat overall control; Haringey – Labour overall control; Hackney – Labour overall control; Lambeth – no overall control, Liberal Democrat/Conservative coalition; Southwark – no overall control, Liberal Democrat minority executive

London Schools, played a role in promoting these messages, the approach remained largely non-partisan, placing schools themselves in the spotlight. This reflected Tim Brighouse's vision that those working in government 'were going to be the storytellers of all [the schools'] great successes'.

Minister as enabler

The nature of Jon Coles' activism as leader of the London Challenge team, with Tim Brighouse providing a professional figurehead, meant that the ministerial role was unusually circumscribed. Our interviewees felt that the details of and experimentation with educational practice at school-level were not a good way for ministers to get involved in this case. Instead, the minister's political clout was most useful in providing a 'bottom line' for the policy to back up the consensual approach deployed by the advisers and officials. Stephen Twigg's focus on the London Challenge, as he described it, 'was more the politics of how we delivered it, and in particular how we got buy-in across the board'. This recognition of different but complementary functions that needed to be performed drove a degree of clarity about roles within the top team that our participants said allowed each person to play to their strengths.

This was helped by a considerable degree of ministerial stability in the crucial early years of the London Challenge implementation. Stephen Twigg was Minister for London Schools from 2002 to 2005. He retained his role in the London Challenge even when he was promoted from Parliamentary Under-Secretary to Minister of State in the DfES. When Twigg was replaced by Lord Adonis in 2005, the latter was already well versed in the policy, having helped shape it from Number 10 since its inception.

Particularly in the early implementation, the way that the ministerial role was undertaken was significant in several respects.

First, Stephen Twigg provided a point of co-ordination with the rest of the department that protected the integrity of what was being done under the London Challenge. It also meant he could help to tailor other policies within the department towards London Challenge to reinforce the work in progress. In particular, the capital funding made available under the Building Schools for the Future programme could be directed to the London schools that Twigg knew would benefit most from investment to supplement the support they were getting under London Challenge. Twigg explains, 'I sometimes had a sense that I was a little bit like a voice for London schools despite being a minister'.

Second, as a London MP with strong links to local politics across the capital, Stephen Twigg was able to take the lead on decisions that would be likely to encounter local opposition. He was a source of political intelligence on whether and when to involve the local MP or the leader of the council in discussions about particular schools – especially where one was being considered for replacement by an academy. He was widely respected by local authority officers as well, who found him – according to one former chief education officer – 'open, straightforward, attentive, supportive' and considered him 'an ally within government'.

Framing his role in terms of holding the political relationships internally and externally, Twigg protected the experimental approach of the London Challenge from many of the political pressures that typically discourage it. He agreed with the team that he need not be consulted on spending for an individual school below £50,000. Jon Coles signed off amounts between

£25,000 and £50,000 and then in turn delegated responsibility in cases of urgent need for junior officials to sign-off support of up to £25,000. These clear decision criteria allowed the minister to focus his own time on those cases where the politics required his involvement, such as decisions to close schools, introduce an academy or federate one or more schools. In turn, the civil servants and advisers avoided bottlenecks created by seeking clearance from the minister on relatively small issues.

These political interventions were important to the London Challenge approach. Lord Adonis, as the minister overseeing the London Challenge from 2005 was not afraid to use such tactical solutions to overcome resistance or to speed up progress within boroughs. His personal commitment to the expansion of academisation and other structural reforms for the hardest cases enhanced the importance of these measures from the middle of the decade.

Learning from experimentation

Implementation of the London Challenge was far from linear and it was established early on that many of the 'keys to success' schools would require bespoke solutions. London Challenge advisers – and the department officials affectionately referred to as their 'minders' – accepted that some options pursued with schools would be dead-ends, while others could be copied and built on. Jon Coles describes their approach as, 'We can do some things. If it doesn't work we'll stop it; if it does work we'll do some more of it.'

Officials and advisers were constantly learning from their interventions with schools. They would meet at least fortnightly as a whole group and reflect on the cases that were most pressing for them. In this space, advisers could request help from their peers, as well as challenge the rationale of each other's actions. Lead advisor David Woods (later Chief Adviser from 2009) was particularly active in pressing the advisers on what they had been doing. Tim Brighouse was interested in the strategic issues and the themes emerging across the group. As a result, they built up detailed understanding. Brighouse explained, 'We knew with every year a lot more about school improvement, very subtle, that's where I thought national governments had gone wrong. They thought you could impose one answer; I think it's terribly context-bound.'

The personal contact and open exchange of views in these regular meetings rapidly built trust between advisers and officials. Civil servants had growing confidence over time that the advisers' judgements on schools were sound, and Jon Coles' had faith in his officials to provide any challenge that might be required. Coles' own assurance processes could therefore be clear but light-touch, further speeding up activity.

This was also a feature of the City Challenges that followed in Greater Manchester and the Black Country, but here it relied on the attitude of the minister. The lead ministers for each of the three Challenges had a different personal tolerance for that kind of variation. One official who worked on the City Challenges after 2008 described how new ministers regarded some of the civil servants working on them as 'maverick', and in one case wanted far more detailed reports on what was being done. The former civil servant reflected on how the change of ministerial attitude 'wrapped more of the departmental bureaucracy back around it, which slowed things down initially'.

Sustaining countercultural ways of working

The clear and empowering authorising environment was closely bound up with the culture that Jon Coles tried to foster in his team. Coles describes having to 'cut a lot of corners' to get support to schools quickly enough to make a difference. In particular, they tried to 'step outside of some of the central government bureaucracy' around procurement when drawing extra capacity from private providers or consultants. One member of the original London Challenge team argued that this kind of internal risk taking was quite important to implementing the London Challenge. But there is a high bar for an official trying to work in faster, more responsive ways.

It is quite difficult to deliver a tailored, innovative policy intervention like that, because you have to break every rule, get a lot of senior civil servants fed up with you ... and I think there is a lot of noise in the Civil Service that would prevent you working in those ways.

Jon Coles consciously made the work his team was doing feel different from the rest of the department and while the enabling role of the Minister for London Schools helped defend this approach politically, it still required a wilful and self-confident civil servant to put the policy first. It also required commitment from, and trust in, the civil servants he was working with. Officials from that original team described themselves as 'on a campaign' and feeling 'a profound sense of personal commitment', with 'high ambition' about what they could achieve. One of them said that 'it's very un-civil service to be so focused and so believing on your project.'

Our interviewees that were still in the team when Jon Coles left London Challenge in late 2005 suggested that it was harder to preserve this ethos without Coles at the helm. Lord Adonis remained an important ministerial advocate and driver of school reform from May 2005, but there was a period of drift and a loss of self-confidence on the civil service side. This particularly affected the nascent City Challenges, as the department sought to export a successful model to new regions. Whereas in London the continuity, of Brighthouse until 2007 and David Woods throughout, accelerated the shift from being practitioners to policy owners.

Mobilising the profession

The sustainability of a practitioner-led model required high levels of trust and a high degree of accountability for the outcomes of the work. For the London Challenge advisers this accountability came increasingly from their peers rather than the department as the policy was developed and became embedded. The space to exercise professional judgement was a crucial element of this. It was important to be able to work with a team in central government that did not leap to intervention but was on hand and aware of what was going on. The aim, Coles said, was 'not micro-managing them, but being close to them'.

The London Leadership Strategy was directed by a small group of experienced head-teachers working closely with the advisers to develop and refine the packages of support on offer. This practice-led approach further linked accountability to the content and outcomes of the intervention rather than to compliance processes. Sir George Berwick, who led the strategy from 2003-08, describes how the advisers 'developed the packages jointly with us, so we were very much responding to them'. The strength of the professional ownership can be seen in the survival of the London Leadership Strategy even after the end of the London Challenge in 2011, when it spun-out from the National College as a not-for-profit

organisation run by some of the head-teachers involved in London Challenge, such as Dame Sue John, and was chaired by David Woods.

The nature of the professional accountability for school improvement in London was also linked to the way teachers and school leaders were mobilised. A former chief education officer said that 'peer accountability felt much stronger for many people rather than the top-down heavy stuff' and as a result those in successful schools were willing to help those facing the greatest challenges. This was felt to be a unique achievement in a centrally-directed education policy. Sir Mike Tomlinson, Chief Adviser for London Schools 2007-09 summed this ethos up. 'I can't think of anything else where literally at the drop of a hat a head-teacher would be contacted the day before and you say "could you go in", and they'd say "yes" and they'd do it.'

Establishing project management disciplines

While shared moral purpose, political cover and professional accountability were all important to implementing tailored support for schools, the London Challenge was backed up with firm programme management and rigorous use of data. This was integral to the 'authorising environment' that allowed professionals discretion over decisions because there was little room to dispute the results of their actions. Victor Burgess, a longstanding London Challenge Adviser emphasised how they 'were absolutely tight on a whole range of things, not least data....after I had done the tight bits, I was free to work more loosely with the individual school'.

The civil servants were further supported by outsourced project management provision from a private firm, including an embedded project manager who pushed the team to clarify milestones and outcome metrics. We were told by one civil servant who worked closely with the contractor that this input was 'really invaluable', in particular because the project manager's distance from the policy intent meant that he could focus on asking hard-headed questions about how it was being implemented.

Similar arrangements were established with a number of the key boroughs, persuading them to take project management support paid for by the department. A former civil servant on the team told us that initially it 'was quite difficult to persuade the local authorities, because they thought the project manager would be a spy', but eventually the extra capacity was judged to be useful by a number of the local authorities. This additional grip on the local implementation kept the key borough strand and the other strands aligned.

Having the data alone would not have driven improvement however, and a key set of additional disciplines was about creating the spaces to interrogate the data and understand the drivers of change. Within the department's team, there were clearly-assigned leads for five different strands of work on London Challenge at Grade 7 level, reporting into Jon Coles as the overall programme manager. Their discipline of weekly meetings to update each other on progress kept a high sense of accountability, but also meant that problems could be addressed quickly and 'in the round'. Face-to-face meetings have been described by our interviewees as crucial to managing the different aspects of the London Challenge programme. One team member remarked, 'These kind of tedious routines were absolutely crucial ... just sitting there, debating it, refining it.'

In addition to the regular adviser get-togethers, there were half-termly meetings with the key boroughs to review progress against the visions. These were a chance to talk about the obstacles arising for the local authorities, and then also to consider how the department might help in unblocking some of them. As well as practical troubleshooting, this soft governance provided another opportunity to realign the work at borough level with the aims of the London Challenge and the work being done by advisers in the Keys to Success schools.

Using data to monitor progress

Having been a prominent feature of the contextual analysis of London schools in 2002, the forensic and constructive use of data continued and grew throughout the implementation of the policy.

The team made more systematic use of data that was already gathered by the department on school performance, but they also went further in gathering data direct from schools. For example, because the DfES did not get the full breakdown of exam results until October, civil servants and advisers working on London Challenge took to contacting schools on results days in August requesting that they send their results data so that any areas of weakness could be identified and addressed before the new school year began in September. While later adopted more widely in the department, interviewees told us that at the time this was felt to be a highly unusual step to take.

Gathering data – not just ‘hard’ data on exam results and Ofsted classifications but also detailed reports from the advisers and what one official described as ‘soft gossip’ about the personnel and challenges of particular schools – gave them a formidable basis on which to evaluate performance in relation to their interventions. Collectively, this data provided a ‘hard edge’ to the London Challenge, which provided the clarity and accountability on which trust was built. Although unusual for the department, we heard from local authorities that the more systematic use of data had been emerging as a trend in schools and local education services prior to this interest from the DfES. They did accept, however, that ‘London Challenge gave an impetus to that’.

Much of this data was made available to schools themselves in a series of products to encourage benchmarking and collaboration, most notably the identification of ‘Families of Schools’, grouping institutions with similar characteristics and providing them with each other’s details. An annual Families of Schools report from the department to London schools allowed them to see their comparators and was intended to drive them to contact and learn from this peer group. These resources were publicly available and particularly aimed at middle and senior leaders in schools. In practice, our participants were unsure about how much of an impact the take-up and use of these resources had. This may have been due to limitations in the data literacy of staff in those schools – something that was flagged as an area to work on but was not fully addressed.

Adapting to success

Over the first couple of years, the London Challenge acquired a positive reputation among school leaders in London. The fact that improvement began to show in the first year of results – and continued year on year for both exam results and Ofsted ratings in most Keys to Success schools – led to an unusual scenario in which schools and local authorities were demanding attention from the department under the programme. The Keys to Success

schools became a more fluid group over this period, and systems had to be put in place to triage the schools being referred to London Challenge based on their current trajectory and perceptions of need. One former adviser told us that some schools even began to deliberately badge themselves as a ‘Keys to Success’ school in public, in stark contrast to reactions to central government ‘naming and shaming’.

The key boroughs strand of London Challenge also changed over this time, losing its salience as areas such as Hackney and Islington underwent dramatic improvements in the performance of their weakest schools. Having kept in touch with plans in place at borough level to strengthen school support, the team’s confidence in the local authority capacity grew and they ceased to single out the five boroughs for special attention by 2007. Lord Adonis, who had become Minister for London Schools in 2005, said there was less need to intervene because ‘the capacity and the drive was there, the results were showing’. Each London Challenge adviser had a cluster of local authorities which they oversaw, and this continued, alongside a less public prioritisation of several other boroughs that were falling behind. Professor David Woods summed up the approach as ‘intervention in proportion to success’.

Further developments

Another consequence of the apparent success of the London Challenge in secondary schools was that appetite grew for extending it to other school ages and new parts of the country. This had been resisted early on, when officials had proposed introducing Challenges simultaneously in several cities or across schools from primary to sixth form.

Primary Challenge

From 2006 the department began to apply some of the principles of London Challenge in a small number of primary schools, scaling up to work with 60 primary schools referred by eight local authorities, until it was broadened further across the city in 2008. Much of the infrastructure for this expansion was already in place from the secondary policy and could be extended to include primary schools, as a distinct but related strand. For example, specialist primary advisers were recruited onto the team, then headed-up by Mike Tomlinson as Chief Adviser, in 2008. Also, a steering group of primary school head-teachers was brought in to the London Leadership Strategy to work up the offer of consultant heads and professional development courses to primaries, alongside the more-established secondary group. Bringing primary schools into the scope of the London Challenge ‘was important’ said Tomlinson, ‘because if primaries weren’t catching up with secondaries then there was a large gap to bridge between the two’. This could have proved a drag on further success.

City Challenges

Around the same period as the initial work was being undertaken with primary schools, the exploratory phase for expanding the Challenge model to new areas of the country got going, with input from Tim Brighouse and David Woods. By this time, not only Jon Coles but also many of the original team of officials had moved on from the London Challenge and Lord Adonis, whose remit went beyond the Challenges, was preoccupied with the growing Academies Programme.

The decision to select Greater Manchester and the Black Country as the successor regions for City Challenge was based on clearly-identified need within their state schools. They had significant proportions of underperforming schools and persistently weak GCSE results that

varied widely across the region. However, the London Challenge had not just relied on need but also on the receptiveness of stakeholders within the system. Lord Adonis told us that in the two new areas ‘there wasn’t the making of a consensus to the same degree, so it was going to be tougher’. The regions also varied considerably compared both to London and to each other, with the Black Country a clear outlier as less urban, with a lower density of schools and a much smaller population spread across its four local authorities. These differences alone limited the direct portability of learning from London.

Among the succession of lead officials on the London and City Challenges following Coles’ departure, one in particular was less keen on the maverick approaches that were seen as marking out the original Challenge. This created tension within the planning for the Greater Manchester and Black Country Challenges, and was reflected in a more directive approach from officials in early meetings in the regions. Professor Mel Ainscow, Chief Adviser for the Greater Manchester Challenge, was at the heart of this tension.

I remember very much, some of those early meetings with the steering group, saying to them afterwards, ‘Look, you must stop saying “We have decided”.’ They would come into meetings and say “We have decided this. We have decided that.” And because people will say, ‘Well, what’s the point of having a steering group?’ all you’re doing is coming up from London to say you’ve decided.

Uncertainty about how the new Challenges would be taken forward was addressed by two events. First, Jon Coles was appointed as Director General for School Standards in March 2008 and quickly made clear within the department that City Challenge should be given the freedom to work innovatively. One official working in the department at the time reflected, ‘Without [Coles’ intervention] the Challenge would have been curtailed and we would’ve been bogged down by civil service conditioning.’

Second, a new deputy director was brought in from outside the Civil Service to lead the City Challenges at an operational level. Inderjit Dehal had experience of systems change from the voluntary sector and local government, but spent time learning about the original London Challenge ethos and how it had been implemented. As a result, Dehal embraced a return to high trust and high accountability within the team. Rather than apply the model from London like a ‘science’, he focused on freeing up the officials below him to apply the principles of school improvement in ways that were sensitive to very different contexts.

The core elements of the policy that were implemented in the new areas were intensive, joined-up support for the weakest schools; the use of ‘challenge advisers’, working closely with local authorities; and the provision of tailored development programmes for schools and leaders under a leadership strategy. While the focus of our case study has been on the implementation of the London Challenge, there are a number of interesting points of comparisons across the Greater Manchester and Black Country Challenges that cast light on the implementation process.

Greater Manchester Challenge

Minister unlocking relationships

Similar to the importance of Stephen Twigg from the outset of London Challenge, the City Challenges each had a dedicated minister within the department. An official involved early in setting up the Greater Manchester Challenge says the ‘short relationship to ministers was important’ for getting local authorities to take notice of the policy. This was seen as

particularly effective under the Minister, Beverley Hughes, who was herself a Manchester MP and well known with key stakeholders in the city. Mel Ainscow elaborated, ‘When we had some really challenging situations with the local authorities, her obvious, direct involvement was quite a lever I think, and quite important. And obviously, you know, this was not just about her status, it was also about her as an individual’.

Aligning local authorities

Despite the minister’s proactivity, Ainscow told us, ‘In many ways the biggest challenge within the [Greater Manchester] Challenge was the local authorities, not the schools.’ This was far more fraught than in the London Challenge, in part because of longstanding tensions in the city about intervention from central government based in London. Ainscow made progress by using the steering group that he chaired as a private forum to thrash out some of the disputed issues – many of which revolved around disagreements as to where decision making should sit between central government and the schools. The latter issue became less tense under Dehal’s leadership however, when some of the controls that had built up were loosened. It was also reinforced by civil servants being willing to engage personally. One explained, ‘They felt I knew them. I knew their schools. I bothered to get to know them.’

Moving knowledge around the system

In the Greater Manchester Challenge, by replicating and building on some models that were successful in London, peer-to-peer networks of support between schools became established very quickly.⁸ For instance, the Leadership Strategy in Greater Manchester developed a network of consultant head-teachers and took forward peer-development programmes that had been developed by Sir George Berwick and others in London. They also went further, introducing ‘hub schools’ to provide specialist support in particular areas, such as English as an additional language and making greater use of Families of Schools – clustered across local authority boundaries – than had taken place in the capital. Ainscow said this was because the data behind Families of Schools was embedded ‘much more as a strategic approach in Greater Manchester, whereas London just used it as a way of establishing links and relationships’. Ainscow encouraged the belief that ‘by helping others, you’re helping yourself’, which he felt teachers and school leaders responded well to, much as Brighouse and Woods had done in London.

Black Country Challenge

Flexibility of the model

In contrast to London and Greater Manchester, the Black Country Challenge was overlaid on a developing plan – the Black Country Education and Skills Strategy – for collaboration between the four local authorities (Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton). The four authorities, acting through the Black Country Consortium, lobbied the Department for Education and Skills to focus one of the new Challenges on the region, seeing it as a chance to channel resources into their own plan. However, it became clear that at least the basic model established in London had to be applied, albeit with local tailoring. As a result, an independent evaluation concluded, ‘Some stakeholders argued that London solutions were

⁸ Ainscow, M., ‘Moving Knowledge Around: Strategies for fostering equity within educational systems,’ *Journal of Educational Change*, vol.13, issue 3, 2012, pp.289-310

being imposed on them, and saw City Challenge as a top-down strategy rather than one that involved local ownership. This was unfortunate, and resulted in some resistance.⁹

A set of concessions were made to create more conspicuous links with the Black Country, focusing mainly on language. For example, 'Keys to Success' was replaced with 'Pathways to Achievement' and from 2010 the programme aimed at improving good schools was named 'Good to Bostin' – incorporating the Midlands dialect.

Lack of consensus on the problem

However, the rocky start meant that different stakeholders in the Black Country were setting off from very different points. Although a clearer framework was developed between central and local government for how the Challenge would be implemented, a civil servant who worked with all three Challenges, believes these tensions played a limiting role compared to what happened in London.

There's not the same alignment. You don't have a senior civil servant, sat alongside the minister of state, sitting alongside a group of leaders, all with a consensus view about how to work based on empirical evidence.

One upshot of this, as the evaluation noted, was that there was less direct capacity-building work between department officials and the local authorities because of 'local sensitivities'. Nonetheless, despite expectations, individual head-teachers in the worst-performing schools were some of the most responsive. Sir Geoff Hampton, the Chief Adviser for the Black Country Challenge recalls, 'The ones that had probably got the most pressure on – that you thought would run a mile – some of them actually do just the opposite and then really became involved and engaged.'

Establishing lines of accountability

Hampton was well-embedded in the local education system, having been a head-teacher of a Black Country school himself. He says that this was important because 'there is something about being real and knowing the patch in every sense of that word'. He also headed up the Black Country School Improvement Partnership, which pooled school support services between the local authorities in the region and was based, like Hampton, in the University of Wolverhampton. Hampton described where he felt his primary responsibility lay. 'I felt very accountable to all of my local stakeholders first and foremost because we'd stood up and said, "This is going to improve your schools".'

It is clear that as chief executive of the Partnership, as well as the Department's Chief Adviser, Hampton was a vital connector, but there was a tension between local responsiveness and the challenge and support that came from Whitehall.

Lessons

The London Challenge provides a distinctive example of public service improvement that is practitioner-focused, highly collaborative and applied across a city-wide system. Despite other factors at play, all our participants felt that the London Challenge made a major

⁹ Hutchings, M., Greenwood, C., Hollingworth, S., Mansaray, A., Rose, A., Minty, S., & Glass, K., *Evaluation of the City Challenge programme*, London Metropolitan University & Coffey International Development, 2012, p. 102-3, retrieved 2 July 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-the-city-challenge-programme>

contribution to the exceptional improvement in the capital's schools. They attributed this to the way credible professionals played a challenge and support role to their peers in underperforming schools; the powerful sense of moral purpose and positive framing; and the close working relationships of officials, advisers and ministers, which centred on a shared, data-led view of where there was strength and weakness in schools across the capital.

Some of the innovations pioneered under the aegis of the City Challenges have survived the formal end of the programme in 2011. The consultant heads that were deployed to support Keys to Success schools have been formalised as Local and National Leaders of Education. The teaching schools model championed by Sir George Berwick as a peer-to-peer approach for professional development took root in London and Greater Manchester, and is now being encouraged nationally by the Department for Education. And teachers themselves – particularly in London – continue to feel that the responsibility for reform is one that should be shared and taken forward by the teaching profession.

Below we outline some of the 'keys to success' in the way the London and City Challenges were implemented – lessons that can be extended to other policy areas.

Understand the existing assets in the system you can work with

While the combination of measures that made up the London Challenge model was novel, those designing and implementing it were not isolated from what was already happening within the London education system. The extensive contextual analysis that was undertaken by Jon Coles and his team, and the early involvement of Tim Brighouse and David Woods, allowed them to shape the policy around some of the strengths that existed in London schools rather than having a narrow deficit focus. This included networks between local authority education officers, the existing development products of the National College, and the policy stock of the department itself.

Keep the policy focused until you have a clear model to implement

The London Challenge was focused only on London secondary schools for almost five years before it was fully extended to primary schools and two new cities. This tightly-defined mission is regarded by many as a necessary condition for having a transformative effect, because – as Lord Adonis claims – 'if you diluted the focus on secondary schools, you would massively dilute the impact'. Having a policy that was aimed at around 400 secondaries in London, and focused most closely on a subset of these, helped to make the problem tractable and to maximise the chances for in-depth learning by the adviser team and consultant heads. Had they gone to scale sooner or more rapidly, it is unlikely that these strengths would have had time to bed down.

Create an 'authorising environment' that supports rapid but accountable decision-making

There was, in the early years, almost complete shared purpose between the leadership team. Relationships between Twigg, Coles and Brighouse were characterised by extremely-high levels of trust, enabled by excellent communication and a sense of each being able to 'play to his strengths'. To make the most of short feedback loops between officials and schools, the minister had to be willing to give officials significant discretion over day-to-day decision making to avoid bottlenecks, while also being brought in for more 'political' decisions. For both officials and the advisers, professional accountability was centred on regular, face-to-face meetings, rigorous analysis of the data, and a learning culture – all

backed up by strong project management routines. Ministers like Twigg and Lord Adonis were interested in the details of progress, but created conditions in which others felt accountable for the more granular choices in implementation.

Give credible people the responsibility and means to move knowledge around the system

The involvement of respected figures such as Tim Brighouse, David Woods, George Berwick, Sue John and many others was crucial to being able to implement a policy that tapped into the expertise of the profession and had credibility with target schools. The London Challenge advisers acted as 'connectors' in a system that joined successful heads to struggling schools and between them shared insights into what was happening in different schools. Over time, the number of leaders working across the system grew, through investment in the London Leadership Strategy, and the connections within the system became denser – facilitating the shift towards a sustainable, practitioner-focused model. The department supported these networks, later extending consultant headship through the Local and National Leaders in Education programmes.

Invest in creating shared purpose and strong relationships

A key characteristic of the way London Challenge was implemented was the proximity of civil servants and advisers. Regular contact, reasonable stability in personnel, and the fostering of mutual respect and humility in these relationships were essential ingredients, and time was taken to develop them. The civil servants who worked on the policy admitted to having an unusual 'project-first' mentality that set them apart from the wider culture of their department. Focusing on getting support to schools rapidly as problems emerged helped to build trust with Keys to Success schools and the attention of the London Challenge team became valued rather than resisted. This system relied on relationships, and in turn those relationships built on a sense of 'moral purpose' among the profession. This was constantly reinforced and tapped into by the positive framing that had been applied to the policy from the outset by Tim Brighouse.