ESRC SEMINAR SERIES: September 22nd 2010 Chester

“BREAKING THE LINK BETWEEN EDUCATION, DISADVANTAGE AND PLACE”

During the course of the ESRC Seminar Series on Area Based Initiatives (ABI), with a rich and diverse set of contributions from practitioners and researchers, there was some evidence that the boundaries of the theme were shifting – extending themselves rather than allowing for greater focus. In itself this was not seen as problematic but in preparation for the fifth ESRC Seminar each member of the organising group for the Series has agreed to prepare a short paper. Each paper is a personal response, outlining some preliminary thoughts and emerging conclusions in order to facilitate an informed discussion. The fifth seminar will seek to indentify and emphasise possible outcomes for policy and practice as well, perhaps, as some directions for further research.

The papers are written within the context of the questions the series started with: why have ABIs not achieved more in the past... do they have a future... if they do, what form should they take, what can they realistically be expected to achieve and how can they be made most effective. Other questions were also suggested at that stage, so there was no shortage of possible lines of inquiry:

- In what ways do areas matter for education?
- What do we need to know about areas as a basis for intervention?
- What kinds of things should ABIs do (and not do)?
- What do ABIs realistically have the potential to achieve?
- How can central and local concerns be balanced within policy formulation?
- What governance arrangements are needed to support meaningful area based intervention?
- What limits the actions and impacts of ABIs and how can these limitations be overcome?

The following questions provide a framework for the papers to give some focus and shared format.

1. What do you understand by an Area Based Initiative (ABI) and as the Series reaches its conclusion where should the boundaries of the concept be drawn?
2. What are the most important opportunities that ABIs offer for policy and practice?
3. To what extent have ABIs have been effective in responding to or influencing the shape of educational disadvantage – why and where is the evidence?
4. What principles, models or practices are associated with effective ABIs?
5. Why do ABIs matter now and why should we invest in them in our present educational, social, environmental, political and financial context?
1. What is an area-based initiative?

Area-based initiatives (ABIs) fall into two broad categories. The type that is most familiar, perhaps because it is most easily recognised, is a centrally-sponsored local variation of national policy frameworks. That is, national policies are varied in designated places in order to take into account particular local circumstances. Typically, these circumstances are related to the concentration of ‘disadvantage’ in particular places, and the variations include additional resources and flexibilities. Classic examples of this type include Educational Priority Areas (EPAs) in England and Zones d’Éducation Prioritaires (ZEPs) in France.

A second type is slightly less visible because it does not depend on central sponsorship. These are essentially local initiatives that exploit flexibilities within central policy frameworks to create distinctive interventions and forms of provision in response to particular local circumstances. Future Schooling in Knowsley and the New Charter Academy initiative are examples of locally-driven ABIs of this kind.

Underpinning both types of ABI are three fundamental assumptions which may or may not be made explicit:

- The conditions under which public services are delivered are not the same everywhere.
- In order to respond effectively to local conditions, public services have to be configured differently in different places.
- Centrally-determined policy frameworks, therefore, have to facilitate these distinctive configurations either by sponsoring them as variations of otherwise universal policy requirements, or by making those universal requirements sufficiently flexible so that local configurations are possible.

Viewed in this way, there is no sharp distinction between ABIs and other local variations in public services. For instance, LA/LEA management of education has always been based on the assumption that the service needs to be configured differently in different places. I am not certain that there is much to be gained by agonising over criteria for distinguishing between ‘proper ABIs’ and other forms of local configuration. What we can say, however, is that in practice ABIs:

- have tended to pay particular attention to local conditions associated with ‘disadvantage’;
- have therefore tended to be located in places where ‘disadvantage’ is held to be concentrated;
- have assumed that ‘disadvantage’ can be tackled (in part, at least) by doing something different in such places from what is done elsewhere;
- have therefore implied that ‘what is done elsewhere’ is not implicated in the production of disadvantage.

All of these practices and assumptions are problematic.
One final definitional point is that ABIs are not restricted to education, and that those ABIs that have an educational dimension may or may not be focused exclusively on education. Implied here are assumptions about the role education plays in tackling ‘disadvantage’ as a whole, and about the extent to which ‘educational disadvantage’ can be tackled by focusing on education alone. For instance, EPAs and City Challenge seem in practice to have assumed (in very different ways) that educational disadvantage can be tackled by reconfiguring and enhancing schools; the New Charter initiative assumes that educational and wider social issues need to be tackled simultaneously.

2. What opportunities do ABIs offer?

At their best, ABIs:

- embody a recognition that place matters and pay appropriate attention to local conditions;
- facilitate analysis and intervention beyond service silos by focusing on ‘local conditions’ as a dynamic whole, rather than on individual service priorities;
- encourage local innovation and solution-generation that would be difficult to manage from the centre (but from which the centre can learn); and
- offer opportunities for local participation in decision making.

ABIs in practice, of course, are not always ‘at their best’.

3. Have ABIs been effective?

Many ABIs (particularly nationally-sponsored ones) have been evaluated. There is, therefore, no shortage of evidence, though evaluation can be technically complex and not all evaluations have been sufficiently well resourced or well designed to cope with this complexity.

ABIs are of such different kinds, and have such different aims, that blanket statements about effectiveness are difficult. In very general terms, however, the situation seems to be that:

- many ABIs have been able to demonstrate some impacts on the indicators they have targeted;
- many of these impacts have real-life significance for individual beneficiaries; but
- these impacts have not been transformative at the area or population level i.e. existing patterns of disadvantage and inequality have not been disturbed to any great extent by ABIs.

This raises three major issues in relation to effectiveness:

1. How are localised and incremental benefits to be valued? Are they worthwhile in their own right and likely to lead to a more just society, or are they simply distractions from tackling the real inequities of inequality and disadvantage?
2. Can underlying inequalities and disadvantage be tackled by developing smarter ABIs, or is there an inherent contradiction between the socio-structural origins of disadvantage and efforts to combat it at the local level?

3. If the latter is the case, is there any role for ABIs in a more structural approach, or should they simply be discarded?

My own answers to these questions are that incremental change is worthwhile, that there is no contradiction (in principle – though there may be in practice) between area and structural approaches, and that area approaches will continue to be necessary so long as local conditions vary in important ways. However, these conclusions arise only partially out of empirical evidence, and depend as much on argumentation and personal politics.

4. What makes ABIs effective?

Again, the diversity of ABIs makes this difficult to answer. Some things seem to be clear, though, even if the evidence often comes from failure rather than success:

- Some ABIs (EAZs being a case in point) have been poorly designed, with little clarity as to purpose or methods, and therefore with an over-reliance on additional resourcing and local ‘innovation’ as a means of solving hitherto intractable problems. Better design (as in EiC and City Challenge) seems to produce greater impacts. However, there is an issue about how far clarity of design is bought at the cost of narrower aims and ambitions.
- One aspect of clarity of design is some understanding of how the area defined by the ABI and ‘disadvantage’ are related. Many ABIs have operated on rather arbitrary definitions of area, thin understandings of area dynamics, and therefore on hopeful formulations of intervention strategies. ABIs are likely to be most effective where they understand fully what it is they are trying to intervene in, and therefore how the boundaries of the area are to be drawn and what interventions are likely to have an impact.
- The use of (additional) resources seems to be important. The level of additional resource available to ABIs is typically very small in relation both to the size of the issues being faced and the amount of resource already available to public services in the area. Simply throwing additional resource at the problem is therefore likely to have little impact, but using additional resource to facilitate the ‘bending’ of existing resource may be more effective.
- Perseverance seems to be important. ABIs are unlikely to produce rapid, transformative impacts, and typically rely on additional funding. This is a lethal cocktail which makes them highly vulnerable to being discontinued before they have achieved much. Some long term strategy seems important, though the example of ZEPs in France suggests that aims and methods have to remain relatively stable rather than simply the external structure of the initiative.
- Given that the effects of ABIs are relatively weak, they are highly unlikely to be effective if they swim against the tide of other social, economic and policy trends. Some alignment of what happens locally and what is happening centrally and at a societal level seems to be important.
- All of this amounts to saying that ABIs are likely to be most effective where they are based on a robust theory of change, and where implementation is informed by that theory.
5. Why are ABIs important now?

Following the interventionism of New Labour governments, the Coalition Government seems to be withdrawing from the direct management of many social issues. Partly, this is driven by economic imperatives and partly by an ideological view of the proper role of the state. This is likely to create a paradoxical situation in which government withdrawal creates a greater need for local initiatives, but where there is less central funding and guidance to support these initiatives. In this situation, well-thought-out ABIs are likely to be particularly important, and are likely to rely more than hitherto on purely local action.

There are particular reasons why ABIs with educational dimensions or an education focus are likely to be important. New Labour governments achieved something through a school- and system-‘improvement’ approach to education. However, having tied themselves to this approach, they were never quite able to accept its limitations and therefore persevered with it in ways that became counter-productive. The Coalition Government claims an equal commitment to tackling educational inequality, though it may have an even thinner understanding of the relationship between schools and their social contexts. However, it may also be less inclined to drive schools down a prescribed improvement route and may be more willing to accept local solutions. In any event, ABIs offer an opportunity to explore ways in which what happens within schools and what happens beyond their gates can be addressed holistically. They thus offer a way to escape the limitations of an ‘improvement’ approach that has reached the limits of its achievements.
1. What do you understand by an Area Based Initiative (ABI) and as the Series reaches its conclusion where should the boundaries of the concept be drawn?

During the course of the series, I have come to the view that the term Area Based Initiative is not a particularly helpful one for organising debate around policy responses to spatial concentrations of educational disadvantage.

Traditionally, the term has been used to refer to programmes initiated by central governments and targeted towards particular areas. In this sense ABI really means TAI (targeted area intervention). These programmes have varied in their scope. Most have been focused on additional interventions for individuals to compensate for perceived deficits in education capitals in the family, or on school improvement. Some have given rise to services that are Area-Based, as opposed to single school based. However, they have not tended to start from the perspective that place is integral to education: they are not necessarily about area. On the other hand, I would not say that they have really been driven by any other single perspective (e.g. that school improvement is the answer to educational disadvantage). In practice, I think we see a combination of analysis, ideology and pragmatism – politically it is easier and quicker to introduce a new programme in certain areas than to redistribute mainstream funding and to get local authorities and headteachers to spend it on the intended items. Often ABIs have been accompanied by notions of local innovation, participation or partnership.

For this series, we started with a rather different concept that ABIs are: “initiatives which seek to transform educational outcomes in an area by shaping educational conditions in the area (both in policy and practice) in response to what are perceived as the distinct problems and possibilities of the area.”

Here the notion that places matter for education is central, although I would argue that it can be central for many different reasons, which I come to later in this paper. This is the sense in which we mean Area Based. However, the contemporary examples we have seen in the series indicate that such approaches do not need to be ‘initiatives’ in the sense of being new or time-limited and certainly they do need to be initiated by central government or paid for by specific funding streams. They could be very much part of mainstream practice, and they could be everywhere, not targeted to specific areas. Thus they do not resemble in design or practice anything conventionally thought of as an ABI.

To help bring clarification rather than confusion, I suggest that we need a different term to describe the concept under discussion. Perhaps place-oriented education (POE)? Rather than ‘initiative’ which suggests temporariness, perhaps we should talk simply about examples of POE. To deal with POE (concept-based) rather than ABIs (programmes without a unifying concept) I have taken the questions posed in slightly different order to that suggested.

5. Why do ABIs matter now and why should we invest in them in our present educational, social, environmental, political and financial context?
I suggest that there are at least five different propositions about why place matters for education. These would lead to different kinds of POE as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposition</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Key element of POE</th>
<th>Counter argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“School can’t compensate for society”</td>
<td>Poor children are held back from education on many fronts (including poor housing family poverty, conflict, mobility etc). Attainment gaps can’t be closed unless these issues are tackled.</td>
<td>Residents and agencies working in the same area need to work together with schools to tackle wider disadvantages. Community education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Schools are contextualised organisations”</td>
<td>Disadvantaged areas create additional challenges and organisational demands and exert downward pressures on school quality.</td>
<td>Additional funding and organisational designs for schools in disadvantaged areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Learning and identity are spatially situated”</td>
<td>Places help shape the formation of youth identity aspirations and interests. If education ignores place it is likely to pass some disadvantaged young people by</td>
<td>Curriculum and pedagogies tailored to local areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“Different areas need different kinds of educational outcomes”</td>
<td>Education should serve local areas in terms of providing the skills that local employers need and helping build local citizenship</td>
<td>Residents and organisations in an area ‘visioning’ desired futures and working collaboratively towards them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>“Educational outcomes in an area are a shared responsibility”</td>
<td>Local authorities and schools working in the same area have collective responsibility for outcomes in the area</td>
<td>Schools and local authorities working together to share resources and practices that lead to best outcomes overall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Obviously these are not mutually exclusive but it is clear that some focus on schools, others demand partnerships of schools and others multi-agency partnerships. Some focus on curriculum and pedagogy, others on organisation. Some demand targeting and redistribution, others are universal in application.

2,3,4. What are the principles, models or practices that are associated with effective POE, the opportunities that POE offers for policy and practice and the effectiveness of POE in responding to educational disadvantage?

Clearly, answers to these questions do depend on what kind of POE we are talking about. In my view a useful next step would be to review the evidence for the various propositions and the evidence about practice and effectiveness from examples of POE based on each proposition. Clearly proponents of the first three, and maybe the other two, would claim that POE could make a contribution to reducing attainment gaps, but how much? Proponents of 3 and 4 might ask us to consider other kinds of educational outcomes as important (for example citizenship or human dignity), and produce evidence on the impact of POE on these.

I will finish therefore not by attempting to answer these questions in detail but by focusing on the contemporary moment in English education. Large socio-economic gaps in educational attainment remain (although they have closed slightly in the last decade) and these are strongly spatially patterned. Evaluations tend to show that targeted additional spending produces results (e.g. Pupil Learning Credits, Excellence in Cities), and that multi-agency working around area problems and for the most disadvantaged families is effective (e.g. neighbourhood management, family intervention projects), but there is some concern that the more advantaged pupils within schools benefit most from any initiatives, and the net effect on the educational attainment gap has been small. The latter evidence led the last government to conclude that it was important to focus more specifically on disadvantaged individuals, in addition to the existing infrastructure of targeting disadvantaged places.

The Coalition government has made commitments to try to reduce educational inequality, principally through its ‘pupil premium’. It is also committed to increasing the number of independent schools in the state system and reducing the role of local authorities, and emphasises curriculum rigour. Public spending cuts are already affecting schools and other services (such as play and youth centres and mental health services) at a time when demands are likely to rise as families feel the impact of recession and benefit cuts. The funding future for the multi-agency approach therefore looks somewhat bleak and the fragmentation of the school system makes local authority led approaches look more difficult.

On the other hand there is political encouragement for devolution of decisions to local areas and for the involvement of local people in services. The government will also be seeking evidence on the specific practices that support the attainment of disadvantaged young people, to guide spending of the pupil premium. This being the case, it is important that the debate now is not confined to the ‘people versus place interventions’ argument that dominated an era when targeted area interventions (TAI) were a prominent feature of policy. What we need now is some clear thinking about the role(s) that place plays in perpetuating educational disadvantage and how POE, conceived in different ways, might contribute as part of a newly emerging policy mix.
1. What do you understand by an Area Based Initiative (ABI) and as the Series reaches its conclusion where should the boundaries of the concept be drawn?

It has become clear during the seminar series that there are many different formulations of area-based initiatives, and of the areas they target, and that these are not mutually exclusive. In very general terms, there are, for example:

**Compensatory approaches**

During the series we have touched on both:

- top-down compensatory models, which are about targeting (generally administratively defined) areas with additional resources. There are then variations within this; as Jean-Yves Rochex discussed (Seminar 1), ZEPs, as a centrally-formulated ABI, have attempted – at various stages in their development – to ensure a nationally-determined standard of education, and to address nationally determined ‘moral concerns’ e.g. civil unrest in deprived city suburbs.

- a localised-compensatory model, in which initiatives are developed in place (and may be part of larger national initiative). For example, George Smith talked about projects developed within EPAs, including book and toy exchanges in local church halls.

In both of these, areas are effectively ‘containers’ for poor educational outcomes – the response is not generated in ‘dialogue’ with issues in the area, doing little to understand or connect to the areas underlying dynamics.

**Services responding to context**

- taking the issue of street cleaning, in Seminar 2, Annette Hastings explored how different approaches and resources were needed to achieve the same outcome (a clean street) in response to the distinct social and physical conditions presented by different geographical areas. Importantly, in this instance, it is not simply a case of ‘dropping’ additional resources into particular areas (in this case, less clean areas), but of services actively engaging with and responding to the dynamics of the area.

**Approaches which seek to build capacity**

- during the series, we have also explored ABIs which are, to varying extents, seeking not simply to compensate areas, but to build capacity within them to enable sustainable renewal. For example, there is, underpinning Future Schooling Knowsley (FSK) (Seminar 3) a sense of trying to link education to the economic and physical regeneration of the area. In New Charter (Seminar 3) there is a sense of trying to support and empower local residents – through education, through tenancy arrangements, and so on. These ABIs anticipate outcomes which are about changing local cultures and dynamics, and in this sense, do not have a clear end point (whereas a clean street, as in Annette’s example, is a clean street).
There are various other formulations which we have not touched on – e.g. strategies which seek to engineer a change in local dynamics (e.g. attempts to engineer more mixed and integrated communities and school populations).

The purpose and approach which an ABI embodies is likely, I think, to relate to the understanding of ‘area’ it embodies (though each can inform the other). Also, just as ABIs can have multiple purposes or approaches, so they can embody multiple understandings of ‘area’ – e.g. defined administratively, by ‘lived’ identities (i.e. identification of and with certain residential/commercial areas), physical boundaries and characteristics. Different sorts of ABIs – with different purposes may need to operate at different spatial (area) levels. e.g.:

- at a borough level – issues of connectivity between areas (e.g. transport), the distribution of resources across areas, developing the economic and physical infrastructure

- at a neighbourhood – or even street level – e.g. addressing concerns about community cohesion

If it is accepted that there are different areas, and they are interrelated (or nested), then it is necessary to see the boundaries between areas as fluid to some extent – what happens in place X affects place Y. However, it may be that there are also imagined, physical or administrative boundaries, and that it makes sense to act within these bounded areas. There is also an important distinction to be made about the difference between just targeting disadvantaged families or individuals (who happen to be in an area), and having strategies which encompass areas. ABIs need to be about the latter.

I think boundaries are perhaps less important to define than purposes and approaches, and in that sense, my personal take on the future of ABIs is that they must be broadly of the ‘capacity building’ type set out here (though part of building capacity may be bring in extra resources and reconfiguring services). However, that, in itself, doesn’t predetermine the boundaries of area – New Charter and FSK have different area-bases.

2. What are the most important opportunities that ABIs offer for policy and practice?

ABIs have been stymied by national measurement and accountability frameworks – even if trying to be responsive to context. The challenge for policy and practice is to create the circumstances which could support, rather than cut across, emerging capacity-building ABIs like FSK or New Charter. I think there is now an important opportunity for policy and practice to:

- distinguish those things which have to happen nationally, and those things which are necessarily local.

- find ways to work with the private sector / CVS – they have to be brought into ABIs if ABIs of a whole-area, capacity-building nature are to succeed. I think the continuing growth of social enterprise institutions and the different models of corporate social responsibility (and associated accountability frameworks) which are starting to emerge create a real opportunity to harness these resources for area purposes, and create suitably flexible accountability arrangements.
3. To what extent have ABIs have been effective in responding to or influencing the shape of educational disadvantage - why and where is the evidence?

Underlying this, there is a question about how effectiveness is judged. The evidence is that ABIs have made little difference to the areas they have tried to change. This is, perhaps, less a failing of ABIs per se, but of the ways in which specific ABIs have been formulated and evaluated. Often the expectations attached to ABIs are unrealistic, and ABIs have had no clearly articulated sense of how they might achieve their anticipated outcomes. Charging an ABI with transforming outcomes across an area – e.g. when the intervention may itself be very narrowly formulated; the timescale for evaluation is short; and when there is a simplistic assumption of cause and effect (taking action X in the classroom will be transformative for children in area Y) – is simply not feasible.

There is also a policy expectation that improving people’s life changes is a way of enabling them to leave an area. In this sense, area-based initiatives may have an inbuilt contradiction – as they seek to build capacity, the ‘successes’ move on and out of the area. It is possible that the positive impacts they do have are not positive impacts which ultimately contribute to an area’s renewal.

It also has to be appreciated just how vulnerable ABIs are – and again this doesn’t mean that they can’t be transformative, but they often don’t get the stability or longevity needed. e.g. ABIs are vulnerable to: internal pressures such as staff changes; external policy-driven pressures – national interventions, funding arrangements and accountability regimes; demographic vulnerability – changing nature of the population in the area.

To understand the effectiveness of ABIs – and the barriers to their effectiveness – we actually need a better understanding of what ABIs are trying to achieve, how they are trying to achieve this, and what would constitute good evidence of their impacts at different points in their development.

4. What principles, models or practices are associated with effective ABIs?

Where ABIs promise a capacity-building approach, they would seem to be characterised by:

- understandings which go beneath targets and headline figures and relate to area circumstances

- effective brokerage mechanisms which champion ‘the area’ rather than being primarily representative of a service or community group or intervention

- a shared vision of what needs to be achieved in the area and buy-in to that vision which bridges gaps between organisations and lived and professional understandings.

- some flexibility in their use of resources, and a sense of shared responsibility and shared action (they are working together for mutual benefit)
5. Why do ABIs matter now and why should we invest in them in our present educational, social, environmental, political and financial context?

They matter – but in a formulation which is driven by capacity-building – because they:

- are a way of harnessing resources. They offer a new formulation of public-private-VCS partnership which has some dynamism around it, and isn’t necessarily stymied by central control. (It strikes me that New Charter have been able to formulate the vision they have because it’s their own money and they aren’t held to account for examination results)

- can, if they are able to define issues from the ‘bottom up’, bridge the gap between professional and lived understandings. They are a way of getting close and drilling down.

- present, in being ‘local’, a level at which democratic process can be meaningful on a daily basis – connecting people to decisions about how their environments and opportunities are shaped.

If ‘Big Society’ – or other formulations of a broadly communitarian stance – are going to offer a positive direction, it cannot simply do it by shifting responsibility to local people / local areas – there has to be a local infrastructure to support renewal and capacity building and ABIs have the potential to create these. They matter because they are a way of creating structures suited to purpose, with purpose being area-defined.
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Moving knowledge around: an approach to making area-based initiatives work

This seminar series has been timely for me in that it occurred during the period that I have been leading the Greater Manchester Challenge, a particular type of area initiative, imposed by national government. Linking my thoughts to this experience, in this paper I reflect on what I feel I am learning about how to make area-based initiatives work.

Respecting complexity

The overall aims of the Greater Manchester Challenge are to raise the educational achievement of all children and young people, and to narrow the gap in educational achievement between learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. Given my involvement in the project, it follows that I believe that areas matter. For me, the contributions of individual educational institutions can only be understood in relation to their contexts. Having listened to the debates within the seminar series, however, I am now less convinced that the notion of discrete area-based initiatives is the best way to formulate our ideas when it comes to designing improvement efforts. In essence, my worry is that this may set artificial boundaries around any plans that emerge, thus limiting the potential for moving ideas around. Rather, I want to advocate the need to think area. In this way, those involved – professionals, students, community members and policy makers – can respect complexity in respect to area, whilst working together in creating strategies for achieving more equitable forms of education that draw on resources within schools and communities by cutting across traditional borders.

All of this has been confirmed for me during the seminars as we have engaged with the complexities involved in trying to define what is meant by an area. So, for example, when I consider Greater Manchester, I can think about the city region as a whole - home to a population of 2.5 million people, with over 600,000 children and young people; at the same time, I recognize that there are the ten local authorities, some of which represent a series of towns that each have their own identity; and, then, more specifically, I am reminded of the immediate areas surrounding particular schools, where, in some instances, there are high concentrations of families living in relative poverty. This complexity leads to overlapping geographies and competing loyalties that have to be borne in mind when trying to encourage joint efforts to address educational challenges.

Some propositions

My central interest, then, is in finding ways of working within that complexity to break the link between disadvantage, educational outcomes and life chances. Our efforts over the last three years in Greater Manchester have thrown further light on what this involves, whilst at the same time pointing towards possible ways forward. As a contribution to the discussions, therefore, I offer a series of tentative propositions that might be helpful in formulating area improvement activities. Based on an analysis of evidence regarding both successful and less successful aspects of the City Challenge programme, these ideas have been shaped through discussions involving Directors of Children’s Services, Heads of School
Improvement, headteachers, academic colleagues and civil servants. Together they may provide a basis for the development of a strategy that will make more effective use of available resources in order to create area education systems that are self improving.

The six propositions are as follows:

1. **Education systems have untapped potential to improve themselves - new working relationships are needed to mobilise this potential.** Within the Challenge, networking and collaboration are seen as key strategies for strengthening the overall improvement capacity of the system. Significant progress has occurred in Greater Manchester as a result of the creation of various structures that provide new spaces for collective problem solving and enable the horizontal transfer of knowledge. This approach builds on research evidence which suggests that, under appropriate conditions, collaboration between differently-performing schools can reduce polarisation, to the particular benefit of learners who are performing relatively poorly. With this in mind, *Families of Schools* have been set up. These groupings are made up of institutions that serve broadly similar communities. Led by headteachers, they cut across local authority boundaries and are proving to be successful - to various degrees - in strengthening collaborative processes within the city region. In addition, hub school have been created that are proving to be effective in encouraging the development of good practice in specialist areas, such as the improvement of classroom practice, responding to special educational needs and supporting bilingual learners.

2. **A sharp analysis of evidence is needed in order to identify areas of concern and human resources to support improvement efforts in relation to these issues – this has to be responsive to changing circumstances.** Whilst increased collaboration is vital, of itself it is insufficient as a strategy for developing more effective ways of working. The additional necessary ingredient is that of forms of evidence that can bring a critical edge to collaborative processes. With this in mind, in Greater Manchester we have established a city region data management system, using specialists from the ten partner local authorities. This group monitors trends across the city region, pinpointing areas of policy and practice that need collaborative responses, and assesses the impact of these responses. This also assists in identifying effective practices. This largely statistical analysis has to be brought to life through the engagement of stakeholders who are able to bring their up-to-date local knowledge of circumstances that are constantly changing.

3. **School-to-school collaboration is the most powerful means of fostering improvements, particularly in challenging circumstances - this has to be coordinated and monitored sensitively.** Coordinated through the *Key to Success* programme, and supported by a strategy for strengthening leadership at all levels, these interventions have led to striking improvements in the performance of some 150 schools facing the most challenging circumstances. In most cases these improvements have been fostered through carefully orchestrated partnerships of schools that cut cross local authority boundaries. There is increasing evidence that such arrangements are having an impact on the learning of pupils in both of the partner schools. The coordination of these efforts comes from a growing team of outstanding headteachers, who are increasingly taking on system level leadership roles.
4. Cross-border collaboration can provide an effective mechanism for encouraging innovation at various levels of the system - this has not proved to be effective in relation to some policy areas. A series of work strands, each led by a local authority on behalf of the partnership, has attempted to inject innovation and greater pace into the system. These activities focus on educational issues facing all local authorities, linking improvement efforts to broader social and economic agendas. In some instances, they have proved to be effective in facilitating the exchange of expertise, resources, and lessons from innovations across the city region, for example, in areas such as raising aspirations, closing the gap and 14 to 19. In other cases, however, they have led to the creation of ‘talk shops’ that seem to have had little discernable impact.

5. Many successful head teachers are motivated by the idea of taking on system leadership roles - their involvement has to be encouraged, monitored and supported. Within the new policy context, headteachers are increasingly seen as having a central role in leading improvement efforts. This being the case, efforts to move forward on an area basis require their active involvement. The good news is that our experience in Greater Manchester suggests that many headteachers are interested in pursuing this agenda. And, of course, it goes without saying that successful heads are always smart in analyzing the dynamics of the contexts within which their schools exist in order to understand the challenges they need to address and identify external resources they can mobilise. In this sense, the involvement of various new external organisations in trusts and academies offers new possibilities, as well as potential difficulties.

6. Local authority staff have a crucial role in monitoring developments, identifying priorities for action and brokering collaboration – this requires new thinking and practices. Within Greater Manchester, the establishment of the Statutory City Region has provided a timely new local policy context for putting a more effective approach to educational improvement into operation. However, this requires significant structural and cultural changes across the system, with local authorities moving away from a ‘command and control’ perspective, solely focused within their own boundaries, towards one of ‘enabling and facilitating’ collaborative action across the city region. It also requires mechanisms for coordinating the involvement of community partners, such as local businesses, universities, media and other organisations. Inevitably, local authority colleagues have found these changes challenging, particularly at a time of reduced budgets.

A final comment

The key factor in all these activities is that they are designed to fit particular circumstances and mainly led from within schools, with headteachers and other senior school staff having a central role as system leaders. The fundamental idea is that of moving knowledge around. In this context, research suggests that it is important to strengthen social capital within a system so that better use can be made of available expertise and energy. Social capital here represents shared values and assumptions that, because they are commonly ‘owned’, are available for all members of a community to draw on when transferring knowledge and understandings. It involves the development of networks based on mutual trust, within which good practice can spread in natural ways.
1. What do you understand by an Area Based Initiative (ABI) and as the Series reaches its conclusion where should the boundaries of the concept be drawn?

From a practitioner perspective, the definition of ABIs used by the Government Offices for the English Regions might offer a useful starting point – “publicly funded initiatives targeted on areas of social and economic disadvantage which aim to improve the quality of life of residents and/or their future life chances and those of their children”. For this programme we have used the following somewhat cumbersome working definition: “initiatives which seek to transform educational outcomes in an area by shaping educational conditions in the area (both in policy and practice) in response to what are perceived as the distinct problems and possibilities of the area”.

During the course of the seminar series, we have compared and explored different perceptions of what is meant by an “area” and some of the strengths or features of the ABI models might be reflected in the definition we use. ABIs need not be confined to publicly funded initiatives. They have the potential to bring coherence and meaning to policy, practice and service users and so it helps if the shape of the areas chosen relate to local identity or “make sense” in relation to at least some of the boundaries of local agencies or governance structures. Successful ABIs actively engage local people and professionals and may work best through some level of empowerment rather than simply through highly prescriptive central determination. An ABI may have a single institution, such as a school, at its core but the potential benefits of using an ABI to tackle “wicked “ issues which span groups of institutions and involve a mix of agencies and professionals would suggest that this is less helpful to include as a full blown ABI.

Defining the concept is one thing, drawing the physical boundaries of a geographical area for an ABI in such a way as to secure maximum benefit and impact is another. It is important to take account of the permeability or fuzziness of area boundaries and of the relationship between the chosen area and neighbouring areas. What is included implies what is excluded as well – both of which have consequences.

2. What are the most important opportunities that ABIs offer for policy and practice?

The place of ABIs in the big picture of strategies for countering socio-economic and educational disadvantage is sometimes presented largely as local interpretation, tailoring and delivery of prescribed national strategies. What is often forgotten is that many of the national strategies had their roots in local initiatives and this indicates that a purely instrumental view of ABIs is likely to leave local creativity and resources untapped. ABIs gain in power and impact where central prescription is carefully limited.

One of the main priorities in the national drive to reduce under-achievement in the most challenging of settings and narrowing the educational achievement gap has been to promote high quality child care, family support and education in Early Years (0-5). National strategies have built on the best of local practice, international models and systematic research. Contributors to this seminar series have confirmed the vital role that Early Years Education should play in tackling educational under-achievement and have argued for even greater concentration of effort on the learning and life experience of the youngest children and their families. This has a universal individual dimension (and it is acknowledged that 50% of “poor
children” live in “poor wards”) but given the clear influence of geographical concentrations of disadvantage in a relatively small number of areas, ABIs can bring focus, shared expertise, and economies of scale in infrastructure and high quality support services. The network of Children’s Centres, for example, offers local hubs for concerted multi-professional and multi-agency action to counter disadvantage and the mature patterns of provision that have now been developed in many areas respect local variations and locally defined need.

A similar case could be made for Extended Services based on schools – a more recent response which continues to be subject to evaluation. There are already indications that Extended Services provide a useful means of securing the effective engagement of schools in the task of area-associated educational under-achievement. Extended Services are not seen as solely related to individual schools but as a vehicle for collaborative working across an area where there is a degree of shared responsibility across schools. The seminar series recognises the contribution that individual schools make but identifies the collaborative dividend of bringing schools together where joint action makes sense for them, their community or partner agencies. The apparently simple challenge of grouping schools together efficiently and effectively and keeping them together is no easy task, especially where key agencies and governance arrangements work to geographical boundaries that are not coterminous. ABIs have struggled with such issues and found solutions. As other agencies are de-centralised under the Coalition Government, the experience from ABIs will have much to offer. The planned transfer of Health Service commissioning to General Practitioner in the wake of the proposed abolition of Primary Care Trusts is just one example of the opening up of this policy frontier. At a time when resources will be stretched and expectations rising, challenges which were previously met by central government must now be met more locally and so the opportunity for developing the use of ABIs is growing. Experience of using ABIs to develop capacity, increase resilience and produce sustainable outcomes will be invaluable.

3. To what extent have ABIs have been effective in responding to or influencing the shape of educational disadvantage – why and where is the evidence?

A continuing challenge facing any evaluation of the impact and cost-effectiveness of ABIs in tackling educational disadvantage is complexity – complexity of educational disadvantage itself, of the association or link between disadvantage and place and of the interplay between different levels of social action and agency. It is also difficult to know, for example, whether or not we have found the right models but have not yet resourced them appropriately or waited long enough for results to show. Appropriateness depends partly on a clear understanding of the local context and the particular features and identity of the area that is subject to intervention. Schools and local authorities have undoubtedly been influenced by the successive policy drives and investments of the previous Labour governments but some of these were seen as disempowering take-overs rather than energising opportunities for local action. Tracking the historical development and cumulative impact on particular schools and neighbourhoods of, for example, a Sure Start pilot, followed by an Education Action Zone, a Health Action Zone, Excellence in Cities, City Challenge and Extended Services would be important. It is likely to demonstrate improved outcomes and outputs but, perhaps equally important, notable increases in local awareness, capacity, expertise and coherence of response to educational disadvantage. If awareness has been raised and expertise nurtured, the prevailing cultures within education, government and local communities have proved to be more resistant to change. This is partly because of the deeply embedded market- and performance-oriented features of the education system, including for example school admissions, and a lack of attention to local power structures.
ABIs have been caricatured as sticking plaster on an open wound inflicted by the mainstream policy system itself. A more optimistic reading of the influence of ABIs would be to see them as good illustrations of emergent change at work in complex local settings where different principles come into play – more is different, ignorance is useful, random encounters are valuable, emerging patterns matter, and giving attention to the small things your neighbour is doing or learning pays dividends. Let us not reach premature conclusions about the impact of ABIs.

4. What principles, models or practices are associated with effective ABIs?

There are a number of features of successful ABIs that have come through the seminar contributions and these include:

(a) multi-layered analysis - tackling disadvantage and underachievement has implications at the level of the individual, family, neighbourhood and broader community. It is not good enough to tackle each level in isolation and ABIs are a good way of facing up to the complex inter-play between action at each of these levels and in the spaces between. ABIs encourage connectivity.

(b) multi-agency and multi-professional action – the locality dimensions of the Every Child Matters agenda and the moves towards One Workforce for Children have given a strong boost to the development of more integrated responses to the needs of children and families which languished for many years as victims of professional power-play and boundary demarcation disputes. ECM and its associated national initiatives may not survive intact or the branding may change but ABIs have provided vital local test-beds and training arenas for encouraging multi-agency and multi-professional relationships to work more effectively. This collective experience ought not to be lost.

(c) local engagement and empowerment – successful ABIs illustrate principles associated with collaborative advantage such as knowing when to cooperate, collaborate, network, partner or integrate. They can also be powerful in helping to build trust and local leadership capacity - embracing, empowering, involving and mobilising people in the area. Creative adaptation to complex local challenges comes from people feeling a sense of ownership and being able to participate in, shape and control their lives and community. This requires opening up to people’s needs, aspirations and ideas. It is vital to understand and engage the local “energy” and “drivers” for change both that which is already operating and that which is hidden or latent.

(d) development of resilience (individual, family and community) is as important as countering the forces that produce and sustain educational disadvantage and under-achievement. This is partly concerned with the development of social capital and shared identity but also engages with ideas of promoting resilient places and communities. This re-valuing, opening up, meshing and networking of local assets, re-scaling of interventions and avoiding the erosion and loss of local capacity is one expression of a commitment to sustainable change and development.

Introducing ABIs to respond to educational disadvantage and under-achievement needs to take account of the historical legacy and development path of the areas concerned -- not least in the established perceptions of hierarchy and what has and has not been seen to work in the past, for example, in neighbourhoods and school ranking. Community politics and their relationship with national policies and priorities, alongside the shifting patterns of
social networks and the power they convey, exercise a strong influence on the planning, nurturing and achievements of ABIs. Typically there will be frustrations e.g. about failures to engage and empower local organisations and people as well as a sense that local politics sometimes “get in the way”. However, local agencies have often built close working relationships through “serial experiences” of ABIs and although this may not resolve some of the deep seated inequities, it will often produce significant gains and achievements. These may appear to be incidental to the main thrust to counter educational under-achievement (e.g. culture change in relation to the treatment of a minority group in the area) or contribute most to a non-educational programme (e.g. economic regeneration or community safety) but this should not necessarily be seen as a weakness. There is ample evidence of institutional and system-wide complexity that requires sophisticated or tailored responses rather than the blunt instrument of “one size fits all”.

5. Why do ABIs matter now and why should we invest in them in our present educational, social, environmental, political and financial context?

In our narrative of the learning emerging from the Seminar Series, we have identified the period following the election of a new Coalition Government in the UK as an opportunity to test out our growing understanding of the value and limitations of ABIs. This Government has a different set of values and priorities from its predecessor with a shift in political philosophy that, in theory and least, is expected to focus more on reducing the centralised public sector, increasing the role for local engagement and voluntary effort and taking more account of the unique features and identities of localities and communities. From 2010 onwards financial constraint was going to be a limiting factor of increasing significance for ABIs targeted on educational under-achievement, regardless of national political control. Now, however, there may be more, not less, opportunity to deploy what we know about ABIs – not least because power vacuums are already being created with the prospect of the rolling back of the State and ABIs may be one of the few tools of coherent response left for local communities to deploy. Decisions about the role that emerges for local authorities and any centrally based accountability and inspection regimes in countering educational disadvantage is not yet clear but will be significant.

However, the day may have arrived for a significant expansion in area-based action and we should be prepared for this. We do not yet have sufficient local capacity or the necessary culture in central government to accommodate such a change. The short-termist and temporary implications of the word “initiative” in the ABI formula has to give way to a more permanent and sustainable platform for commissioned local services, “for and by the people”. A key investment would be in people – in public, voluntary and private sector people... in service providers and service users.

How should we set about developing capacity - the leaders, managers, front-line workers and volunteers in institutional and political structures that are fit for purpose – for a complex and unpredictable expansion of coherent and efficient ABIs, funded and governed from different and more diverse sources?