

“Set against a challenging background of deprivation, there is a substantial track record of making and sustaining improvements in many priority areas.” CPA 2008.

Halton is a small unitary authority with 68 schools and a population located either side of the Mersey estuary, or in one of the surrounding villages. The Silver Jubilee Bridge may connect Widnes and Runcorn, the two towns that make up Halton, but each town retains its own identity, history and sense of discrete community. Halton’s population profile shows that 27% of the population are 19 years of age or younger.

Halton has a very mixed demographic profile with areas of affluence alongside wards with significant deprivation. It is a relatively green authority,[40% of borough is green space with 10 green flag awards]and in recent years, Halton has been recognised as a high performing¹ authority.

Summary

This is a striking example of how a local authority (LA) can support opportunities, partnerships and infrastructure to **embed cultural planning and development in schools’ culture and vision**. Halton’s ambition to develop and sustain arts and cultural learning in schools has resulted in significant success. This is evidenced by 74% of schools achieving and sustaining an Artsmark award². A third of schools have placed culture as a priority within their school development plans or have developed overarching arts policies through the Artsmark process. Through joint working with ‘Curious Minds’³, a local cultural organisation delivering a Creative Partnerships Change and Enquiry Schools programme⁴, Halton believes that it is supporting the development of confident, sophisticated schools which value and articulate their cultural learning needs independently and through partnership working within the LA.

Description

Much of Halton’s success is due to the development of a **strategic cultural vision**. For example, they have an established BSF cultural stakeholder group. The authority has clear aspirations for delivery and has embedded the vision throughout the LA, school policies and infrastructures. The authority set up a central **Arts and Cultural Entitlement service** to support schools and partners in taking this work forward.

This joined up approach has led to sustained improvements across the whole local authority. One outcome includes all schools developing a Healthy Schools Programme. Strong planning has supported partnership development and the delivery of services to children and young people. Schools have used their own internal budgets to purchase ‘The Arts and Cultural Entitlement Service’ through an annual service level agreement (SLA). Schools are

¹The LA is 4* Star rated by Ofsted

² Artsmark is a national award scheme that recognises schools with a high level of provision in the arts

³ Curious Minds is the Area Delivery Organisation for the Creative Partnerships programme, funded by CCE www.curiousminds.org.uk/

⁴Change Schools - Schools whose development is supported by CCE for three years to bring about significant changes in their ethos, ambition and achievement.

Enquiry Schools - Schools that work with an Area Delivery Organisation for a year on resolving an identified issue within the school.

able to demonstrate their commitment to culture and show how highly they appreciate and value the cultural learning development services by investing in their delivery.

“The Arts and Cultural Entitlement Service has provided tangible support to our school this year, supporting us to successfully achieve Artsmark Gold from baseline. We have also received excellent bespoke training for staff covering a range of arts disciplines and practice. The arts education network for arts leaders has been very helpful and we are always kept informed about arts events and activities taking place locally and regionally.”
Ian Worthington, Headteacher, Castleview Primary School, Runcorn.

Remove this line

Ten years ago, cultural services, **school improvement services**, the Chief Executive’s department and elected members recognised the importance of developing an intergenerational and community arts and cultural infrastructure and invested in Halton’s arts development team. This is located in the **Health & Community Services Directorate**. In 2002, they **in partnership with School Improvement Services**, secured an externally funded arts education post, which was single regeneration budget (SRB) **and ACE** funded until 2005. Part of Halton’s challenge was to overcome obstacles and build a coherent team that could work across silos, resolving differences in terminology, culture and approach. Policies, initiatives and investment have been carefully aligned to support a unified vision and approach. This can be seen through documents and strategies such as Halton’s overarching ‘*Sustainable Communities Strategy*’ leading into the ‘*The Children and Young People’s Plan 2009-2011*’. More recently, the council has invested heavily in its award-winning Brindley Arts Centre⁵ to embed the cultural learning agenda.

In 2002, a decision was made to use the Artsmark award to enable individual schools to develop their arts and cultural learning offer in relation to Every Child Matters (ECM) outcomes. This approach was developed further when Halton decided to work towards achieving the Government’s aspiration for every school to deliver a high quality five-hour cultural offer by 2011⁶.

The arts and cultural provision have been developed through extended schools and across the whole curriculum in Halton’s 45 gold and silver Artsmark schools. As a kite mark award, Artsmark requires a level of core curriculum arts provision at gold and silver level, providing a useful objective measure of the five-hour offer. The majority of Halton’s schools are therefore delivering a five-hour cultural offer to their children and young people through arts and cultural provision. The joint vision and the commitment of all professionals involved has seen the small unitary LA become the lead Artsmark authority in England with the greatest number of schools securing and maintaining Artsmark to date (pro rata) from a baseline of

⁵ Brindley Arts Centre- www.thebrindley.org.uk/ has been awarded Best Arts Project in the UK (National Lottery Awards 2007) and Winner of Best Performance Venue 2008 (Mersey Partnership Tourism Awards).

⁶ Ten areas around the country are piloting the Government’s £25 million Find your Talent programme to give young people the chance to encounter a range of high-quality cultural experiences for five hours a week both in and outside of school. Children in the pilot areas will be able to discover and develop their talents in the cultural sphere. In time, the Government wants all young people to have the right to experience five hours of arts and culture every week.

two schools in 2002 to 47 schools in June 2009. This constitutes a 74% ongoing success rate.

50% of schools have developed successful working relationships with artists through Halton's arts education network and arts development team. These agencies support closer working between cultural partners and between neighbouring schools in addition to supporting the wider networking skills of teachers, artists and cultural professionals, which in turn promotes improved learning experiences for their children.

"It has bought about tangible confidence within schools through proactive school workforces, headteachers and SMT who demonstrate strong cultural leadership, manifest explicitly through their 'Overarching Arts policies'¹ embedded through incrementally improved Artsmark accreditation." Ann Brian, Arts Education and Cultural Entitlement Development Officer, Halton LA.

What this has meant in practice? A case study of Halton's Small Schools Arts Cluster (SSAC).

A range of effective clusters and consortia of Artsmark schools has emerged including Halton's SSAC. The SSAC comprises ten small local primary and infant schools which, as a consortium, have pledged over £180,000 of their own internal budgets to cultural and arts provision over the past twelve years. During this time, the SSAC has developed a sophisticated approach to commissioning, action research and regional networking to bring about creative opportunities for their children.

A recent example was where the SSAC developed a programme to complement activities during Liverpool's 2008 role as 'Capital of Culture'. The project was named 'Ebb and Flow' and described the journey of the River Mersey through film, photography, dance, drama, poetry and original music. 'Ebb and Flow' successfully brought in expertise from local artists and cultural providers through Halton's Arts Development Team with performances and exhibitions shown in the professional setting of the Brindley Arts Centre. Collaborative ventures like 'Ebb and Flow' have inspired the cluster to pursue further regional collaboration with cultural organisations such as FACT and The Bluecoat. In 2009, a digital animation programme involving three regional digital artists was developed. The SSAC have produced a DVD for local and regional dissemination and established a website:

www.digitalartscluster.org.uk

Strategic planning arrangements and the development of Halton's virtual learning platform www.haltonlearning.org.uk have been pivotal in ensuring the SSAC has the technology to track and accredit learner outcomes across Halton schools and beyond. The experiences of their recent digital animation programme have been published in the 'CYP Now' national newsletter and copies of their digital animation DVD have been distributed to every Halton school. A digital animation programme is the SSAC's latest commission, and extends the use of traditional arts forms into a 21st Century digital arena in close partnership with regional digital arts specialists.

Key lessons learned & conditions for success

- One of the key factors in Halton's success has been the ability to build effective working relationships around a series of agreed goals and visions. Having a coherent and consistent strategic commitment to culture has been an essential feature in supporting the LA and schools' efforts, as has the ability to forge effective working relationships across multi-agency and professional boundaries.

- Maintaining effective and sustained relationships between schools and cultural professionals is a key feature of Halton's strategic vision. This is achieved through networks and an excellent understanding of the cultural resources that can be used to achieve a range of social and community outcomes. Halton has pooled resources and expertise on the ground, resulting in good practice for Halton's children and communities, and delivering against the requirement to 'promote community cohesion'.
- Establishing and nurturing local and regional networks has enabled Halton to be well placed to react quickly and maximise the benefits from changes in national agendas, not least the roll out of Creative Partnerships programmes across Halton from a baseline of zero. Since 2007, almost a third of Halton's schools are engaged in Creative Partnerships through 'Curious Minds' action research programmes. Significantly, every one of these schools has achieved Artsmark, is a founder member of the regional arts learning consortium⁷ (ALC), and regularly attends the Arts Education Network. Halton sees this as evidence that the schools in the authority are pro-active and successful. Halton's emphasis on inclusion, enjoyment and achievement has been sustained by their open and flexible approach.

The results:

- 2008 demonstrated that Halton was the most improved LA in England for GCSE Passes A*-C.
- 2009 data shows that Halton achieved the second best CVA (Contextual Value Added) in England, demonstrating improved progress from key stage 2 to key stage 4 (next only to the Isles of Scilly).
- Selected as one of three NW LA's to pilot research on the strategic commissioning of culture through Children's Services through IdEA, MLA and ACE, NW.

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www.haltonlearning.org.uk

⁷ ALC is a member-based sub-regional advocacy group, which Halton buys into. It provides CPD in arts and culture.