

# Knowledge transfer

Sharing learning in public service organisations

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- Improves the quality of life for people in communities;
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## Summary

Knowledge transfer is like apple pie: everyone agrees it's a good thing. But just as making great apple pie involves a lot more than simply mixing together a list of ingredients, so sharing new knowledge across different organisations is more complex than it might at first appear.

In this report, Lyndsay Rashman and Jean Hartley draw on insights gained from the Beacon Scheme (set up to disseminate best practice in service delivery across local government) to identify the key components of successful knowledge transfer. 'Adapt not adopt' is their watchword as they unpick the practices that enable bodies to learn from one another.

They find that knowledge transfer is an active process. It's not a matter of just plucking an example of good practice from one organisation and plonking it into another. Practices need to be modified to fit new contexts and cultures. More than that, they find that the very process of transferring knowledge develops and expands that knowledge.

They emphasise the value of face-to-face interactions as one organisation seeks to learn from another. Knowledge that cannot be easily expressed in words can be shared through first-hand experience and through informal exchanges of ideas and stories. An atmosphere of trust is crucial.

Similarly, the learner organisation needs to foster in its ranks an openness to change and a willingness to take risks. Everyone likely to be affected by the changed practices should have the chance to discuss and test them if the new knowledge is to be applied successfully.

*'Making apple pie involves a lot more than simply mixing together a list of ingredients'*



## Introduction and key messages

Knowledge is a major asset. It can be used to generate and support organisational change, exploit innovation and improve performance. In the public services, there are pressures not only to acquire and use knowledge but also to share it with other organisations in order to contribute to wider improvements. But is this as easy as it sounds? How well is knowledge transfer understood and practised?

There is a trend for governments and public services to shift to new forms of

working which are citizen-centred and based on networks and partnerships, both across the public, private and voluntary sectors, and between levels of government. These activities require the creation and use of new knowledge.

Other factors that affect knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer in public services include changes in demography (an ageing population, more single person households and the changing structure of families); increased needs and expectations from service users; and pressure from central and local government to do more with fewer financial and staffing resources.

Innovations in public services are often spread through open, collaborative networks. Some organisations are enthusiastic about sharing their good practice because of the boost it gives to their reputation, both within particular professional groups and also with central government. A strong reputation, they reason, will enhance their influence with central government and increase the likelihood of winning more resources. Rapid and effective knowledge sharing is also important for building corporate capacity

so that the organisation can become more responsive to change generally.

Improving public services is not just about an individual organisation, or even a network of organisations. It is about public services as a whole. Public service organisations are embedded in society. They not only produce benefits for individuals, they also provide public goods and services. Learning from others can help the public sector and its partners to improve governance and service delivery.

On the other hand, there are also pressures to avoid or restrict the sharing of knowledge in the public sector. In the UK, the highly centralised national government has generated some competition between organisations. Its complex regime of inspection and audit has discouraged the sharing of learning. The increasing use of privatisation, contracting-out of services and market-testing of service provision has fuelled this sense of competition so that it risks stifling anything more than a narrow sharing of innovation or good practice. In addition, sharing knowledge between individuals, teams, and organisations can be complex and

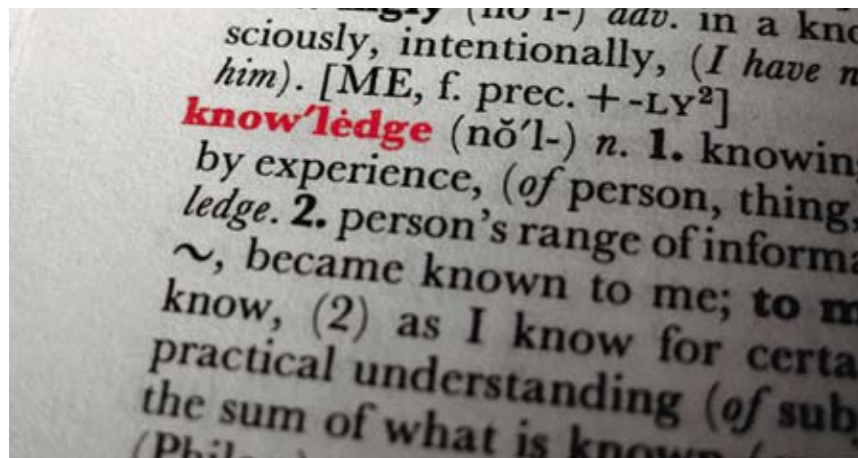
problematic because people and organisations need to be receptive to new knowledge. They need the capacity to put it to effective use.

Some might argue that knowledge transfer is just about writing down good practice and then passing it on, for example in standard operating procedures, manuals or databases. But this paper argues – with a strong evidence base – that there is no simple process that transfers knowledge from A to B. What can be made to work is often heavily dependent on the organisational and local context. Organisations need the flexibility to adapt – rather than merely adopt – others' good practice. This demands complex, context-sensitive interactions between the source and learner organisations.

In this report, we examine different approaches to knowledge sharing, learning and increasing organisational capacity to adapt and innovate. We then present a model that can be used to explain and improve knowledge transfer between organisations, as well as between the different units, services or departments of a single organisation.

We draw particularly from research into the national Beacon Scheme for local public

*There is no simple process that transfers knowledge from A to B. What can be made to work is often heavily dependent on context'*



*'There's no better way of learning what you're doing than teaching it to someone else.'*

SERVICE MANAGER IN A BEACON COUNCIL

services (Hartley and Rashman, 2007<sup>1</sup>; Withers et al 2007<sup>2</sup>; Rashman et al 2008<sup>3</sup>). The quotations in this report are from those interviewed for this research, mainly managers in public services.

The following outline summarises the factors that encourage the use of knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing for organisational change and improvement:

- Knowledge transfer is an active process that includes reading the context and culture, and modifying practices to fit the new context.

- Members of the organisation that is acquiring the knowledge need to have an appreciation of their own local circumstances and their own organisation's capacity and resources, so that ideas can be adapted appropriately.

- Successful knowledge transfer requires matching the type of knowledge to be shared with the method best suited for transferring it.

- Tacit knowledge – know-how which cannot be easily expressed in words – can be shared through first-hand experience and observation of good practice and informal opportunities to explore ideas and stories between practitioners from the source and learner organisations.

- Discussion, interpretation and testing out ideas with colleagues are important for developing, adapting and applying knowledge into a new context.

- Local managers and elected members who act as champions for change; an organisational culture open to learning; and a degree of risk can be critical factors for organisations that seek to align new knowledge with current priorities.



## What is knowledge?

Before we can examine knowledge transfer we need to have a clear understanding of what is meant by knowledge. One helpful distinction suggested by Dixon (2000)<sup>4</sup> can be made between information and knowledge. Information is data that have been sorted, ordered and displayed, for example in books, databases and manuals. It exists separately from the individual, team or organisation that created it.

Knowledge, by contrast, is concerned with the understandings which people develop and is inextricably linked to human behaviour and action: it is part of us. Knowledge is intimately related to both context and practice. It is not something that people have but something that they do. It is widely recognised that context is important for understanding organisational knowledge<sup>5</sup>, but this idea has not been developed in the public sector.

A distinction is often made by authors such as Polanyi<sup>6</sup> and Nonaka<sup>7</sup> between tacit and explicit knowledge<sup>8</sup> (see Figure 1)<sup>9</sup>. Explicit knowledge can be expressed in formal systems, such as language and mathematics,

and captured in language-based records, such as books and databases. A bicycle repair manual is a good example of explicit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge, by contrast, cannot be precisely communicated through formal language systems: it cannot be written down. An example of tacit knowledge is

FIGURE 1

### EXPLICIT AND TACIT KNOWLEDGE

#### EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

- Has been expressed formally, either verbally or in text form

- Takes an individual's knowledge and reproduces it so that someone else can use it

#### Examples

A bicycle repair manual  
A recipe book

#### TACIT KNOWLEDGE

- Cannot be easily or clearly articulated

- Resides in our heads and bodies and in practical skills and actions

- 'Know-how'

#### Examples

How to ride a bike  
How to tell when pasta is perfectly cooked

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM NEWELL ET AL, 2002

*'Sometimes it's easier to take staff there to see it rather than to have to go back and try to explain what we've seen. It wasn't until they [childcare providers] went to the centre that they said they now knew what I meant.'*

MANAGER IN A COUNCIL THAT LEARNED FROM A BEACON (SEE BOX ON PAGE 10)

the knowledge required to ride a bike. Tacit knowledge has some elements that are related to thought processes and physical abilities and it forms the basis of individual skills. The technical elements can include a range of practical skills, such as crafts, political leadership skills, and the skills and judgements of change management.

Tacit knowledge underpins all explicit knowledge, as an understanding of how to use explicit knowledge generally requires an understanding of context and culture if it is to be effective. An experienced cyclist will use a bicycle repair manual more effectively than someone who has never learned to ride a bike.

Traditional good practice reports tend to include explicit knowledge – what we did to get where we are – but will often fail to capture the tacit knowledge of those who brought their individual skills, approaches, judgements, attitudes and beliefs to a given set of circumstances.

Research suggests that tacit knowledge is created in a variety of ways but is shared socially<sup>10,11</sup>. Individuals may group together in formal or informal knowledge networks

and create new collective knowledge by sharing experiences of particular practices (see quotation, left). Means of sharing include informal interaction, story-telling and trading metaphors and anecdotes. For example, one Beacon council described a learning activity where officers and councillors get on a bus and travel round the district together as 'the good, the bad and the ugly tour'. The aim of the activity is to draw attention to and highlight the results of good and bad planning and development decisions.

This means that the creation of new knowledge is not separate from its transfer between individuals, groups and organisations. The processes of knowledge generation and its transfer are intertwined.

This emphasis on knowledge creation through social practice appears to be particularly appropriate to practitioners and professionals in public service organisations. They operate in situations where complex and non-routine knowledge is required to bring about innovation and change and they often work in partnership with colleagues from other organisations (see quotation, right).

## Dissemination

Traditional approaches to the sharing of good or 'best' practices assume that knowledge is transferred through dissemination: a push of information from one group of people to another. This approach can assume that there is one 'best practice' that can be transferred wholesale to a new site, in one easy movement, often with little face-to-face contact between people. It also assumes the 'source' organisation knows both what constitutes their own good practice and what is valuable for the other party.

## Adaptation

Yet in practice, knowledge may be inherently difficult to transfer, because it can be hard to recognise and describe what it is that makes a good practice work. This issue can be illustrated from research into sharing good practice through the Beacon Scheme in local government<sup>12</sup>.

The Beacon Scheme has two main elements for improving local public services:

1. An annual award scheme to give recognition to local authorities that are judged to be models of excellence, innovation

or both, in specific public service themes.

2. The sharing of knowledge and application of good practice so that all councils can improve.

The second element is achieved through a range of events, including learning exchange conferences; open days hosted by a beacon council; web-based materials; and tailored exchanges of knowledge and experience.

In the 2004 survey of learning through the Beacon Scheme<sup>13</sup>, 79% of elected members and managers who had visited a beacon council said they had made changes in their own organisation that were wholly or mainly due to the visit. Crucially, the transfer of learning was an active process of reading the context and culture and modifying practices to fit the new context. Among those implementing changes, most people adapted beacon ideas, some people accelerated

*'Very much a giving and a taking process. It's very important to share what's working, or what's not working.'*

MANAGER FROM A COUNCIL LEARNING FROM A BEACON

### Transfer of learning from beacon councils

Made a change through adapting a beacon council idea	63%
Helped to push through or accelerate an existing idea	29%
Based their change closely on the beacon council	8%

SOURCE: RASHMAN ET AL, 2005

### Adapting learning from a beacon council

#### Early years and childcare

Early years staff, service providers and partners from Council D made repeated visits to children's centres in a northern city council that was an Early Years Beacon. They took numerous photos of the childcare provision, including photos of the environment and childcare activities. These pictures were an important resource for Council D to review and analyse what was learnt from the visits and to develop their own training tool for local childcare providers. Council D developed a unique training handbook, drawing on and adapting the good practice observed in the beacon council.

Council D staff reported that the service was confident in its own direction. They took a range of ideas from the beacon council and adapted them to reflect the particular needs of local parents and children. While learning from others was seen as positive, it was suggested that the 'learners' can be too focused on being like other childcare providers and that it is important to remain aware of the particular context and customers.

*'We didn't replicate it at all. We took out what we thought were very good and very positive elements... We used part of their model to build our own.'*

SOURCE: WITHERS ET AL, 2007

existing ideas for change and only a few people based their change closely on the practice in the beacon council (see chart, page 9).

These findings suggest that adaptation rather than adoption is central to knowledge transfer: innovation continues to occur at all stages in the process, in response to particular circumstances and resources. The term knowledge transfer suggests a one-way process, but in practice learners are not passive recipients and the transfer process is two-way and exploratory.

The learner organisation, for example, will need to think about whether there is a managerial willingness to change, and about whether their organisation has the capacity to acquire, assimilate, transform and apply new knowledge. Barriers to learning may need to be identified.

#### Capacity

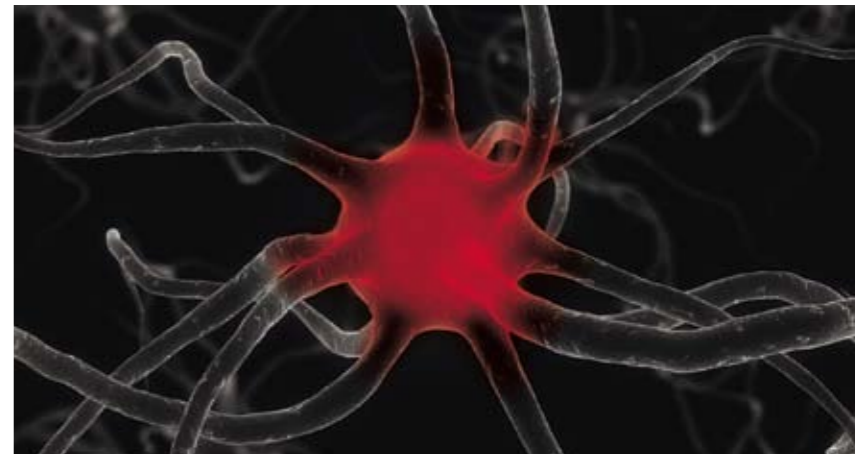
Internal organisational capacity is a major concern of UK policymakers who have emphasised its importance for change and improvement in the public sector. Organisational capacity is likely to support

or prevent the transfer of knowledge to local public services (Greenhalgh et al, 2004).<sup>14</sup> It involves not only the ability to assimilate new knowledge but also the ability to apply such knowledge to lead and manage complex organisational change. An established tradition of participation in inter-organisational networks helps to create knowledge flows, structures and systems, as well as receptivity to change. The members of the learner organisation need to have an appreciation of their own local circumstances and their own organisation's capacity and resources, so that ideas can be adapted appropriately.

### A framework for knowledge transfer

The research team at Warwick Business School has used the Beacon Scheme to develop a framework for understanding and developing knowledge transfer (see Figure 2). This framework comprises a number of elements:

- A focus on knowledge creation and transfer as the means to understand how practices are shared and spread between organisations;

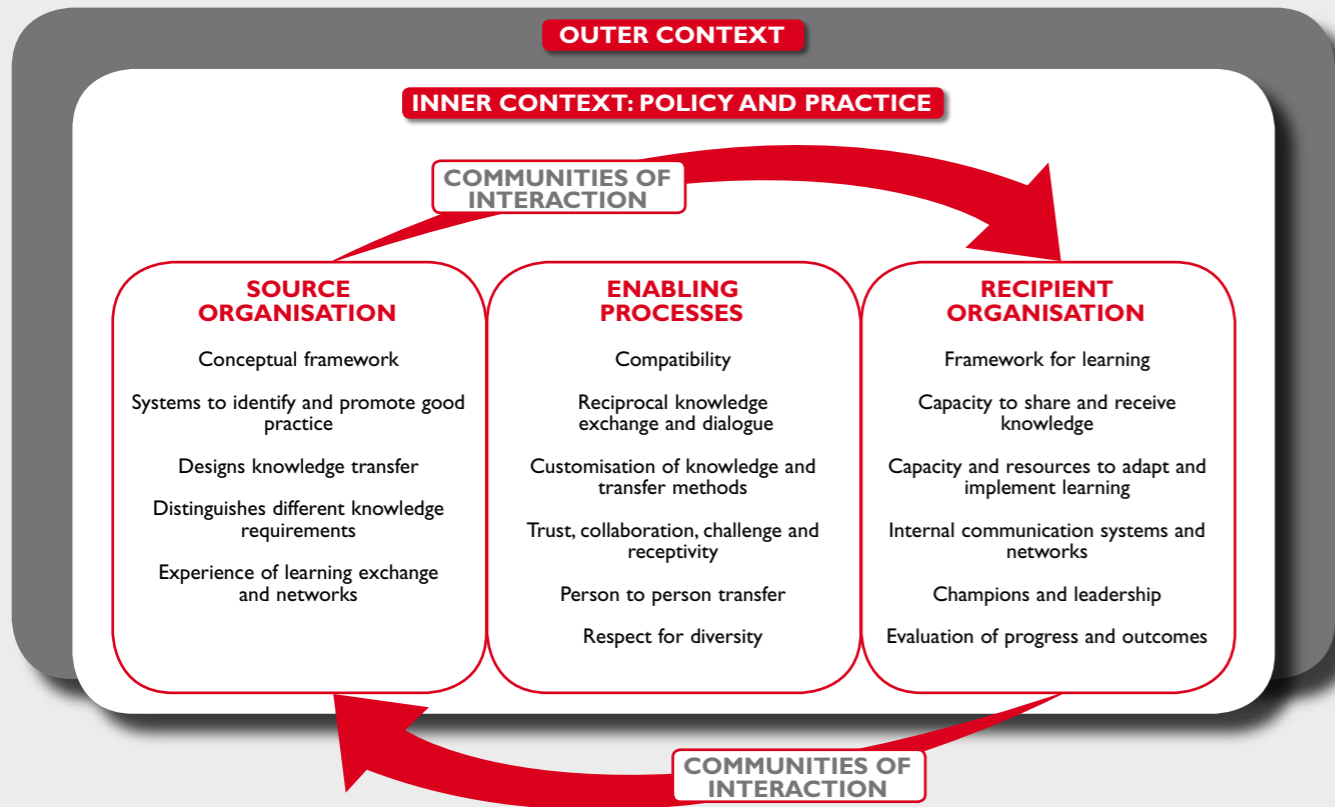


- The interaction of four sets of factors, described below;
- The understanding that all knowledge is situated in a specific context;
- An emphasis on the aims of the learner and the type of knowledge to be transferred.

#### Organisations which already have valuable knowledge

Little attention has been paid to how 'source' organisations, which already have valuable knowledge, are able to share that knowledge with others. It has been assumed that the

FIGURE 2

**Model of inter-organisational knowledge transfer<sup>15</sup>**

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people in an organisation with good practice know how to recognise and explain what makes it interesting or unique to learn from.

However, people in the source organisation may not be aware of everything they do that is innovative. They may take some aspects of their everyday practice for granted. For example, in one beacon council, it was not until visitors came to observe the service, questioning staff practices and assumptions, that the staff realised they were doing something special and started to understand what their good practice was (see quotation, right).

Alternatively, it may be that those in the source organisation are aware of their excellent or innovative practices but are not able to explain them clearly, due to the high levels of tacit knowledge required. Or they may focus on inappropriate aspects of their practice and so point learners in the wrong direction. Those in the source organisation need to be able to share what they have learned from their mistakes, and they need to be able to identify the key factors for success: for example, the creation of a trusting, informal environment.

The beacon research shows that

organisations that transmit knowledge most effectively have specific features:

- A clear framework and systems to identify good practice;
- The ability to design forms of knowledge that others can use in their own situation;
- Expertise in how to get the best from learning exchange and networks;
- Sufficient resources for knowledge transfer.

These are shown in the left-hand side of Figure 2.

**Recipient organisations**

New ideas and practices may be attractive but the take-up of knowledge is not simply about relocating it from one context to another. It involves a number of people who are engaged in the process of adapting ideas to the new context and culture, using their understanding of their own organisation and a combination of experimentation and discussion to discover what works. New knowledge must be adapted to local practices and context: the people in the recipient organisation must select, adapt and integrate it in line with their current priorities. Even relatively straightforward service improvements may be interpreted

*'We don't know what we do differently; they know what we do differently.'*

BEACON COUNCIL  
MANAGER





### Adapting knowledge in a recipient organisation

#### Housing benefits

*A group of managers and elected members from a council housing benefits service learned about working practices that had helped to reduce a backlog of claims work in another council. Managers consulted with the staff group about these new ideas and invited them to discuss and analyse how they could be adapted for their own council. The managers gathered a range of views and the discussion helped to create a sense of shared ownership of the changes from all staff. New measures were introduced, the backlog was reduced, and staff felt they had played a part in the improvement process and were valued by the organisation.*

differently in different organisations.

Research into the Beacon Scheme showed that those managers and organisations most skilled at gaining knowledge to improve services already had a framework of learning that informed their strategies for improvement. They undertook careful preparation, identifying all the gaps in information, knowledge and practice in their organisation. This enabled them to make the best use of both expected and unexpected new knowledge.

It is also important for people in the recipient organisation to have skills in sharing and introducing new knowledge at work. Familiarity with a particular service helps individuals to make links between new knowledge and practice, but curiosity and an open mind are also crucial. Discussion, interpretation, testing out ideas, and consultation with colleagues are important for using knowledge in a new context (see box, left).

It may require a great deal of work to build support for the new practice and to adapt it to local circumstances. The role of champions across the organisation and the contribution

of both political and managerial leadership can be critical to success. This is of particular relevance where resources are required and new knowledge needs to be aligned with improvement strategies. Managers and local politicians play important roles in mobilising support, promoting innovation and providing access to resources. Practitioners can also play a role as champions, using their professional knowledge and diagnostic skills to assist in adapting new knowledge. In this sense, the champions of change are distributed through the organisation (see quotation, right).

Those recipient services or organisations that are better able to share and receive knowledge have specific features:

- A framework for learning;
- Skills and capacity to share and adapt knowledge locally;
- Internal communications systems and networks;
- Champions and leadership throughout the organisation;
- A culture and systems to evaluate the progress and outcomes of changes that result from new knowledge.

These factors are shown on the right-hand side of Figure 2.

### Enabling processes of knowledge sharing

The third factor in the model of knowledge transfer is concerned with the processes and relationships that facilitate knowledge sharing. Face-to-face interaction is important if individuals are to grasp the circumstances, context and processes that led to a particular good practice.

Such contact also helps to develop trust, collaboration and common perspectives – all vitally important when people from different organisational units or from a range of partner organisations come together, and especially when learning about success also involves learning about mistakes on the way.

In general, similarities between organisations help to generate interest in learning, but it is possible to look beyond the surface similarity to examine processes of good practice that can be adapted to very different circumstances. For example, in the Beacon Scheme, learning took place between councils of different political control, different resource levels, and different geographical locations.

*'If you don't tackle the cultural issues, you can't rely on processes, you can't rely on just taking good practice from another council... you've got to have it owned in your own council.'*

MANAGER AT A COUNCIL LEARNING FROM A BEACON

### Central-local collaboration and learning

The Beacon Scheme was identified as a practical opportunity for reciprocal learning between central government departments and local authorities<sup>18</sup>. Knowledge sharing took place between civil servants and local government officers on a range of service themes. Often, valuable working relationships were formed face to face through learning events. Civil servants said they learned a great deal about the role of local government and their good practices. Mutual benefits included an understanding of the processes and relationships of learning as a catalyst for both service improvement and national policy development.

*'There are very important areas where a range of councils have demonstrated good practice. All the beacons showed very robust monitoring mechanisms and very new ways and approaches to embed and assist [specific service] in government decision making.'*

INTERVIEWEE FROM CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Successful knowledge transfer matches the type of knowledge to be shared with the method that transfers it most effectively<sup>16</sup> (Dixon, 2000). For example, a single meeting may be enough to share routine knowledge between individuals who do similar tasks, whereas complex knowledge that affects an entire organisation may require a longer-term

plan involving senior managers, specialist skills and a range of activities (see quotation, right).

Inter-organisational relationships, such as networks and partnerships, have been found to be key drivers of change and innovation (Newman et al, 2000)<sup>17</sup>. Learning networks can help organisations to understand the processes of knowledge creation and transfer. Such networks are likely to include people with complementary skills and roles, who may have identified a specific problem and wish to explore new solutions together. Two-way learning, cross-agency teams and partnerships that cut across organisational boundaries offer the opportunity to explore assumptions and different experiences, and create new knowledge, test out ideas and inspire others to get on board.

The processes that contribute to successful knowledge transfer include:

- Trust, collaboration and receptivity to challenge and new ideas;
- Person to person transfer;
- Compatibility and balance of similarity and diversity between the source and recipient groups;
- Two-way learning;

- Design of knowledge transfer methods. These are shown in the centre of figure 2.

### Policy and practice context

The features of a specific organisation have an impact on its learning, innovation and improvement. Local history, demography and political priorities can be important influences. The internal culture and values of a public service organisation, the effectiveness of its structures and the style of leadership can either enhance learning or act as barriers to it. Research has shown that culture is very significant in enabling local authorities to create a context where new ideas and practices are valued (Newman et al, 2000).

The outer policy context is important too, and can shape a number of influences on inter-organisational knowledge transfer. Individual public organisations are making different choices about which elements of central reform policy they can use to promote learning and innovation and the extent to which they seek new ideas and practices from external sources. Learning between levels of government is also important for developing a context in which

knowledge can be both shared and jointly created.

### Conclusion

Knowledge transfer is an important element of change, innovation and improvement in public services. Creating and sharing knowledge is generally a social process that encompasses both tacit and explicit knowledge. Sharing stories, metaphors and experiences is important for creating meanings and understanding that help to carry ideas and

*'[A number of] authorities have come along and asked: Can you work with us over a period of time and mentor us ...'*

A BEACON COUNCIL  
MANAGER



practices – and, critically, to adapt these ideas and practices – between one context and another. In most cases knowledge is re-created as part of the transfer process.

Making use of new knowledge is not an easy task and it is insufficient simply to provide information and explicit knowledge. Reading a good practice paper might be an initial starting point that inspires further investigation but it is not an end in itself. It is necessary to understand the underlying factors that led to the good practice. People may have to work closely together if they are



to understand those deeper aspects of change that lie beneath the surface.

Attention needs to be paid to the characteristics and readiness to share knowledge of both source and recipient organisations, and to the processes that enable transfer. These principles apply equally to the transfer of knowledge between organisations and to the transfer of knowledge between different sections of a single, complex organisation.

Complex change, by its very nature, cannot be fully planned or controlled. Learning from others is not a one-off exchange of information and no single person or group holds all the answers. We might dream of a blueprint that we can adopt from another organisation but what we really need is experimentation and debate so that knowledge can be adapted to match with local circumstances. Good practice is not something that any organisation can adopt. Instead, it is an approach that relies on developing a culture that is open to learning, listens to ideas, takes risks and develops the capacity and processes for knowledge to be shared (see quotation, left).

*'If you learn from others, if you incorporate best practice, your performance indicators will improve; your service outcomes for local people will improve.'*

MANAGER AT A COUNCIL LEARNING FROM A BEACON

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