The Allen Consulting Group

Review of the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) Model of Network and Partnership Support

Summary Report

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Summary Report

Introduction

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) commissioned the Allen Consulting Group to review the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) model of network and partnership support.

LLEN organisations (LLENs) have been operating in Victoria since 2001. By 2002 a statewide network of 31 LLENs had been established and this network remains intact today. LLENs were a recommendation of the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways (the Kirby Review). The LLEN model was implemented in 2001, with individual LLEN organisations being established across Victoria.

When first established, LLENs were given two key responsibilities. First, they were required to engage in community building through cooperative approaches to community renewal and coordination of service delivery. Second, they were required to support and build shared responsibility and ownership for post-compulsory education and training for 15–19 year olds. Today, the core objective of the LLENs as stated by DEECD is 'to improve participation, engagement, attainment and transition outcomes for young people 10–19 years old within its geographical boundaries.'

The objectives of the current review were as follows:

- examine the LLEN model of network and partnership support and consider this in light of other theoretical and existing network and partnership models; and

- identify the key contribution of youth transition network and partnership approaches in supporting outcomes for young people in Victoria, including those most at risk.

It is emphasised that the project was not an overall or individual evaluation of LLEN performance, nor was it a benefit-cost analysis.

The project has undertaken an extensive process of evidence gathering and analysis focusing on two elements. The first element focussed on models of networks and partnerships, and options for future reform. The second element focussed on an extensive, statewide consultation process with LLENs and stakeholders.

Methodology

The methodology for this project comprised the steps and activities outlined below.

- A Project Board comprising senior DEECD officers oversaw the project.

- A network and partnership model framework was developed to identify current and alternative models — the framework (see 0) was used to: define the current model, obtain feedback regarding the current model and possible alternatives, and describe alternative models.

- Statewide consultation — the project undertook statewide consultation with representatives of the 31 LLENs and a wide range of related stakeholders.

- Desktop analysis to determine different types of network and partnership models (including actual examples), and the potential benefits of network and partnership approaches.

- Finally, the project was cognisant of the policy environment. Notable features of this environment are the restructuring of DEECD (including changed arrangements for regional offices), a resource constrained budget environment, and related government policy (such as initiatives to provide schools with increased local autonomy).

The review framework

In arriving at the models which were subject to detailed assessment, a network and partnership model framework was developed for the project (see Figure 1). This framework was tested extensively during consultations with LLENs and was found to be both intuitive and robust. The framework assists in identifying alternative models, including how they are distinguished from the current model.

Figure 1

NETWORK AND PARTNERSHIP MODEL FRAMEWORK
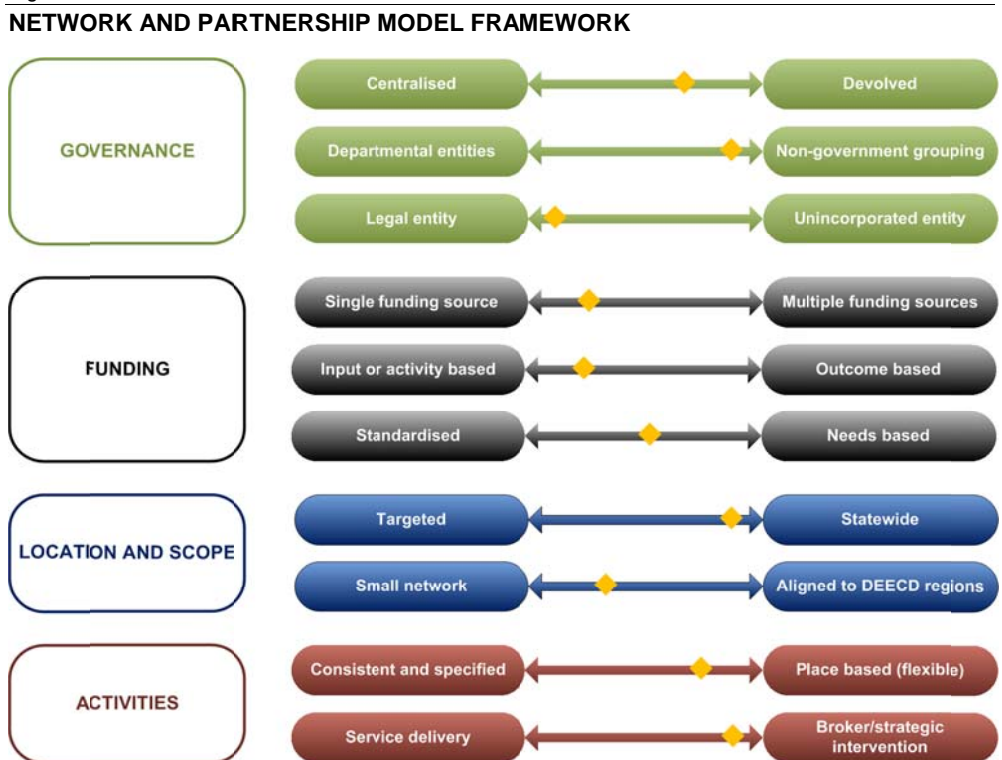
Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012

There was general agreement that the model depicted in the framework diagram accurately reflects the current LLEN model. In addition to confirming our understanding of the operation of the current model, consultation responses to the framework confirmed that it provided a sound basis for guiding the development of alternative models.

Consultation insights

The clear theme emerging from the consultation is that the current model has a high degree of support from stakeholders. It is able to bring to together a wide variety of relevant stakeholders to support the complex process of youth transition into further education, training or work. It also became evident that the benefits of the current model of network and partnership support were not equally realised across the state.

The consultations involved 172 meetings with 218 individuals. The following table summarises the types of organisations involved in these consultations and their location.

Table 1

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS BY ORGANISATION TYPE

Type of organisation	Number of organisations			Number of interviewees
	Metro	**Non Metro**	**Total**	
LLENs	18	13	31	66
Government schools	12	15	27	31
Catholic schools	4	7	11	11
Independent schools	1	0	1	1
Koorie education	1	2	3	3
Business	5	7	12	12
Employment services	3	4	7	8
Community services	4	13	17	17
Workplace Learning Coordinators	1	8	9	10
Registered Training Organisations	1	1	2	2
TAFE	3	3	6	6
University	0	1	1	3
Local government and regional development	6	15	21	22
DEECD Regional Office	4	5	9	10
DEEWR Regional Office	2	4	6	6
DHS Regional Office	1	1	2	2
DPCD	1	0	1	1
Peak bodies	5	0	5	5
Youth Partnerships	0	1	1	2
TOTAL	**72**	**100**	**172**	**218**

Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012

Interviewees were asked to respond to a set of questions contained in a discussion guide. Separate guides were prepared for LLENs and for other stakeholders. These questions related to the need for support for youth transitions in their area, the level of awareness of the LLEN model among stakeholders, and what partnership and network support might occur in the absence of a State Government supported approach. Interviewees were also asked to respond to the appropriateness of current arrangements for governance, funding, location and scope, and the range of activities.

Across metropolitan, regional and rural areas, stakeholders nominated barriers to successful transitions for youth as being high levels of youth unemployment in certain areas, low rates of school retention and completion, and low employability skills. Demand for support was consistently rated as high, although metropolitan stakeholders noted that the geographic spread of demand could vary significantly within a LLEN.

Despite the high level of support encountered during the consultations, there is uneven awareness of LLENs across Victoria. Stakeholders from just more than half of the 31 LLENs reported high awareness of their LLEN and its activities. It was notably strong among schools, local government and youth service stakeholders. Among employers awareness was often weaker. Engaging with small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) poses particular difficulties for LLENs as most SMEs lack dedicated human resources staff and understanding of the benefits of LLEN involvement. LLENs acknowledged this difficulty and noted the importance of personal relationships and clear communication in addressing it.

The consistent view among stakeholders and LLENs is that existing local partnerships would not endure in the medium to long term without the support, information and coordination provided by the LLEN. Stakeholders specifically identified a loss of strategic overview and diminished industry and business linkages with schools. It was commonly noted that the education and youth sectors are complex and that coordinated responses required an organisation whose primary function was strategic planning and identifying the relevant partners to address particular issues.

Associated with these observations were strongly held views that both the independence and incorporated association status of LLENs are critical to the effectiveness of the LLEN model. A particular view that emerged regarding governance was that the roles of LLEN executive officers and chairs are critical to the strength and effectiveness of the LLEN.

Stakeholders valued an executive officer with high capacity in partnership and brokerage, and who has either a business background, or the ability to recruit staff with an appropriate mix of background, skills and expertise. Also critical is the presence of a chair or other committee of management representative who can act as a 'business champion', providing extensive connections to the local business community.

It was also clear that the skills required in executive officer roles are not easily sourced, such as an ability to build robust partnerships and facilitate program development. The dependence of the LLEN model on the effective acquittal of executive officer and chair roles means the model's effectiveness is fragile — a change in either position may have a major impact on performance.

Stakeholders who reported weaker awareness of LLENs, or who felt that LLEN activity was not as effective as it could be, also tended to report a lack of clear, strategic direction for stakeholders and members, LLEN engagement in service delivery without a clear need for doing so, and concentration of LLEN staff expertise in one area (usually in the school or youth sector).

There is strong support for the statewide presence of LLENs. While metropolitan LLENs tended to the view that fewer LLENs may be feasible, rural and regional LLENs felt that LLEN geographic areas could not be increased without a commensurate increase in resources.

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of LLENs' place-based approach — LLENs understand both the particularities of their network area and the differences between communities in their areas. The ability of LLENs to work within communities while bringing a 'big picture' approach to the work was highly valued across stakeholders.

LLENs and stakeholders described the benefits of brokerage as the ability to bring to bear more resources, knowledge and buy-in so an effective response to an issue is framed. This view was closely associated with observations regarding the complexity of the education and youth sectors, and the issues that LLENs and their stakeholders seek to address.

Several stakeholders observed that LLEN independence is undermined when LLENs choose to extend their operations into service delivery. Views are divided among LLEN stakeholders, ranging from prohibition on LLEN involvement in service delivery through to limited involvement. There are also mixed views among LLENs themselves. Some expressed a clear preference for avoiding service delivery so as to preclude competition, or the perception of competition, with their partners. Other LLENs believed that some form of service delivery was particularly appropriate in areas where services did not exist and could not otherwise be delivered.

The consultations explored with LLENs and stakeholders the association between LLENs and related initiatives, such as National Partnership Extended School Hubs, Youth Partnerships, Regional Youth Affairs Networks, School Focused Youth Service, Adult Community and Further Education Regional Councils, and Workplace Learning Coordinators. This exploration revealed that duplication has occurred between aspects of the LLEN role and other initiatives. LLENs are reported to have helped to resolve potential duplication by connecting with other initiatives, ensuring these initiatives and the LLEN operate in a complementary manner.

Characteristics and benefits of networks and partnerships

From time to time, governments recognise and fund non-government agencies to undertake specific activities. However, the LLENs in Victoria represent a unique model in Australian education and training systems, particularly in their statewide nature and in their objective of developing local level networks and partnerships.

The purposes of a network are to address complex issues that demand multilateral coordination and require collective action, and to serve the governance of these activities. Partnerships and networks are a 'joined up' approach to addressing complex social issues. They provide a whole of government and community response that connects cross-government policy initiatives with the social and human capital of community expertise and resources.

A review of the network literature has found four types of networks:

- public management networks — characterised by the direct participation of government, most commonly through public sector agencies. These networks are closely linked to program delivery and policy processes;

- shared governance — these networks are governed by network members themselves, with no separate and unique governance entity;

- lead organisation — a core service provider assumes the role of network leader and governance is highly centralised, with the lead organisation providing administration for the network; and

- network administrative organisation — a separate administrative entity is established to govern the network and its activities. It is a network broker, playing a key role in coordinating and sustaining the network.

The LLENs as they currently operate may be considered a form of network administrative organisation. LLENs work to identify service gaps and to coordinate the appropriate response through forming networks and partnerships that possess the necessary social and economic capital. They are able to undertake the work of networking — information exchange and analysis, strategic planning, identifying opportunities — that are beyond the scope or capacity of individual members.

The project examined other models of networks and partnerships in support of youth transitions operating in Australian and overseas. Table 2 summarises these models and the type of network or partnership they represent. LLENs are included in the table as a point of comparison.

Table 2

SUMMARY OF MODELS OF NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS IN SUPPORT OF YOUTH TRANSITIONS

Model	Governance	Funding	Location & scope	Activities	Network type
LLEN	Incorporated association	Outcomes-based funding from state government	Statewide (31 sites); at risk youth	Network and partnership brokerage	Network administrative organisation
ICANs, South Australia	Within DECD, with advice from local Management Committee	Per capita funding to schools (FLO); small amounts of competitive funding available from each ICAN	Statewide (13 sites); at risk youth	Case management, community flexible learning programs	Public management network
Primary Care Partnerships, Victoria	Decentralised	Outcomes-based funding from state government	Statewide (30); whole community	Partnership brokerage, integrated health promotion & chronic disease management, service coordination	Network administrative organisation
Youth Support Coordinators Initiative, Queensland	Within DET regional offices, with Advisory Committees	State funding to NGOs	Targeted schools; at risk youth	Case management, integrated service delivery	Public management network
Partnership Brokers, Australia	Incorporated association	Competitive grant funding (except Vic, where delivered through LLENs)	Nationwide; youth in post-compulsory phases of education and training	Network and partnership brokerage	Network administrative organisation
Youth Connections, Australia	Decentralised	Competitive grant funding	Nationwide; at risk youth	Case management, integrated service delivery	Shared governance network
Education Action Zones (EAZ) and Education Improvement Partnerships (EIP), United Kingdom	Decentralised	Competitive grant funding	Nationwide; EAZ – areas of high disadvantage; EIP – all schools	School improvement, integrated service delivery	Lead organisation networks
National Network of Partnership Schools, United States	Lead organisation administered	Philanthropic, some federal government	National; school improvement	Professional development, implementation tools	Lead organisation network
Learning Regions and Cities, European Union	Decentralised	Competitive grant funding	European Union	Networks for innovative program and service delivery	Lead organisation network

Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012

Models considered

The project considered many models and options spanning approaches to network and partnership support. Ultimately, three models were considered potentially viable, taking account of the evidence gathered and contextual factors. These were:

1. *Enhanced status quo* — the LLEN network and LLEN model are retained. Enhancements to the model are introduced to address deficiencies identified. These relate primarily to consistency of performance and aspects of LLEN accountability to DEECD.

2. *Network leadership* — state network and partnership approaches are consolidated and the LLEN is designated as a lead network and partnership platform. The lead entity has a level of coordination authority among the initiatives and networks that have been consolidated.

3. *Competitive outcome based funding* — develop a grants program targeting specific issues which networking and partnership brokering can address. Grant funding for projects to address these issues is offered competitively and targeted to areas of need. LLENs are among the bodies able to compete for funding, but the LLEN operating grant is removed or reduced.

Recommended model

Following a detailed assessment of the models based on criteria developed through the project, the preferred option is the *network leadership* model, using the *enhanced status quo* model as a foundation. Considerable preparation is required before the *network leadership* model can be fully implemented. Furthermore, it is considered appropriate that the *network leadership* model be implemented via a staged process that considers, for example, the capability of individual LLENs to move to the new model.

Activities required in the short-term to implement the *network leadership* model incorporate those described under the *enhanced status quo* model — comprising:

- establish a LLEN support entity residing between the LLEN network and DEECD. The body would provide advice and support rather than oversight or direction. It could be established as a new entity with a governance structure similar to a LLEN, or placed within an existing entity. This entity would be accountable to DEECD for the expenditure of appropriated funds in the same way as LLENs themselves; and

- refine LLEN reporting to better reflect the activities of network coordination and brokerage, as well as measure the contribution of these activities to intended outcomes. This is a continuation of recent revisions to the LLEN performance framework.

In the longer term, further implementation of the preferred model will see LLENs having consolidated responsibility for DEECD youth transition initiatives, and in all likelihood for related initiatives presently overseen by other areas and levels of government. To secure an effective transition to the network leadership model, DEECD will need to:

- undertake further analysis regarding the details of the consolidation process; and

- determine the optimal geographic configuration of the lead networks.

It is considered that the *network leadership* model can be implemented from 2014, at the conclusion of the existing agreement with the Commonwealth Government. For implementation to commence from 2014, significant preparatory work will be required from early 2013.

The necessary next steps in moving to this model are:

- affirming the value of the current model of network and partnership support and foreshadowing its potential extension;

- analysing and identifying other programs, initiatives and structures which potentially can be aligned with the current model;

- redefining the scope and geographic coverage of the network;

- agreeing and implementing reforms required to strengthen the model; and

- refining the funding and accountability framework, including the role of DEECD.

At a broad level these points reflect the required actions, and sequence of actions, to move to the recommended model. However, they do not constitute a full implementation strategy, particularly as some elements of the model require decisions outside the scope of this report.

Rationale for the recommended model

The project has identified clear potential benefits from network and partnership models. There are many types of network and partnership models, and a range of examples can be cited. Often such models are formed by government and continue to receive government support, as is the case with the LLENs.

Consultation with a diverse range of stakeholders led to many findings. The findings of particular relevance to the development of models were:

- strong support for the LLEN model; and

- stakeholder endorsement of the role of an independent network operating at the community level.

Stakeholders reported that the primary benefit of an independent entity is its capacity to credibly perform the role of honest broker. Such an entity is viewed as a communication link with government, without being a representative of government. Further, it has the flexibility to be responsive to local needs because it can formulate plans and implement them without requiring third party approvals.

Determining models for detailed assessment

The desktop analysis identified both the benefits of alternative models and examples of other network and partnership approaches in Australia and internationally. The analysis highlighted alternative approaches to the formation, governance, funding and scope of networks. The role of government also varied depending on local circumstances.

The consultation process asked a wide range of stakeholders for their views on both the current and alternative models. The current model is widely supported, and few other models were put forward. When the project discussed with stakeholders related initiatives and networks, it was clear that the LLENs were better established, better recognised and more inclusive.

The current operating context for a network model was also taken into account, including Victorian Government policy settings and priorities. In forming models for assessment, the project was cognisant of the constrained budget environment and the restructuring of DEECD's regional office network. Moreover, the Empowering Local Schools initiative being rolled out in Victorian schools is designed to provide schools with more autonomy and to support more effective local decision making practices and processes.

Assessment of models

Having identified that there is a role for government in supporting a network model, the preferred approach to network and partnership support will be guided by government objectives. A range of specific objectives may be considered; however, objectives are likely to relate to the following considerations, which were developed during this project for use as evaluation criteria for assessing various models:

- ability to achieve local outcomes;

- accountabilities for outcomes achieved; and

- stability and performance across the network.

In assessing the models, against these criteria, the review identified that:

- enhanced status quo contributed to each of the three criteria;

- network leadership contributed to effectiveness and accountability, while being neutral for stability; and

- competitive tendering detracted from effectiveness and stability, but contributed to accountability.

The assessment results are as shown in Table 3, which includes the score given to the three models against each criterion. The lowest score for each criterion is -2 and the highest is +2. The weighting reflects the principal consideration when assessing models: that is, whether a model is effective in being responsive to local needs. It is then appropriate to consider the stability (which includes consistency) of the model, and accountability to the funding agency.

Table 3

ASSESSMENT SUMMARY: BENEFIT CRITERIA

	Effectiveness	Stability	Accountability	Weighted score
Weighting	50%	25%	25%	(Max = 2)
Model 1: Enhanced status quo	+2	+1	+1	1.5
Model 2: Network leadership	+2	0	+1	1.25
Model 3: Competitive outcome based funding	-1	-1	+2	-0.25

Source: The Allen Consulting Group 2012

Recommended model and recommendations

The above assessment supports the enhanced status quo as the recommended model. As the enhanced status quo model is compatible with a longer term transition to the network leadership model, it is recommended that this model be viewed as the overall objective.

It is important that advice on the outcomes of the review is communicated to the LLENs and their stakeholders as soon as possible.

Recommendations

1. *It is recommended that DEECD note and recognise the value of the LLEN network and the strong levels of stakeholder support for LLENs.*

2. *It is recommended that the Minister publicly reaffirm the Government's commitment to local network and partnership support, as a basis for encouraging communities to take ownership of the transition and engagement outcomes of young people.*

3. *It is recommended that DEECD recognise opportunities to build on the LLEN network in moving towards an enhanced state supported platform for networks and partnerships.*

4. *It is recommended that DEECD implement the network leadership model from 2014, with extensive preparatory activity undertaken in 2013.*

5. *It is recommended that the network leadership model incorporate key features of the enhanced status quo model.*

6. *It is recommended that the network leadership model be accompanied by, inter alia, a capability assessment of individual LLENs, as set out in Chapter 8, so as to inform decisions with respect to network configuration and leadership.*