

Kehri Ellis

Chief Executive at North Tyneside Learning Trust



It's just over 12 months since Kehri Ellis became North Tyneside Learning Trust's first CEO. Here she chats to Nigel Wright about her successes to date as well as her grand plans for the Trust locally, nationally and internationally.

It's just over a year since you joined North Tyneside Learning Trust, what is your overall remit as CEO?

As Chief Executive of the Trust, I lead on the development and the delivery of our long term strategy. I work really closely with the Trust Board to ensure their vision is delivered, and we have a shared consensus on all high level decision making about policy, strategy and future direction. I report to the Board, but in many ways I also act as an advisor to them. I hold overall responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the Trust, so, the staff, and all the programmes that we run. I'm also responsible for all internal and external communications. There's a real mix of strategic work and more hands on operational management, to keep me busy.

What impact have you had so far?

The first year has been an incredible journey. Six new schools have actually joined the Trust since I became Chief Executive last October, which is fantastic, and we've got a further five schools consulting over membership, so Trust numbers could grow to forty five by April this year. Although the Trust is a really strong collaborative partnership, one of the things that it didn't do terribly well was communicate its activities and achievements, either among existing members or the wider public. I've helped improve the Trust's communication and raised awareness, which has made a lot of schools realise that there might be something that they're missing out on and also gained the interest of a number of potential employment partners.

How much of a learning process has it been for you? What gaps (if any) are there in your own learning and development?

I'm really keen to gain more direct knowledge and awareness of school governance, the challenges facing schools and how to deal with them. So I'm hoping to actually become a Foundation Trust Governor myself, at a local primary school. I've also joined a number of educational umbrella bodies and networks. I use LinkedIn quite a lot to connect with different individuals that stand out within the education sector. Where possible I'll attend regional events in education, and anywhere that leaders in education are going to congregate.

Specifically, what changes and initiatives have you implemented to help transform North Tyneside Learning Trust into a more professional and corporate organisation?

Certainly, as mentioned before, improving the Trust's communications have transformed the way in which we're perceived and viewed, and I think that's really helped improve our profile, locally, regionally and nationally. The other area that we've worked really hard on over the last year is to develop the vision, mission and values for the Trust. Everyone within the organisation, all of the partner schools and employers, higher and further education partners and have been involved in the development of that, and it has really provided us with a clear sense of common purpose across our diverse network of stakeholders. We'll shortly be launching a new website as well. We've been doing a lot of work behind the scenes on that. It will have a new members' area with lots of virtual learning forums and opportunities for more virtual collaboration and the sharing of knowledge and expertise between schools and between partners, because that's the kind of model on which we're based.

Building relationships with the wider business and education community is obviously a key part of your role. Tell us about some of the key relationships you have developed and why they're so important to North Tyneside Learning Trust?

Since joining the Trust last October, I've secured a number of formal employer partners. They include organisations such as Balfour Beatty, Capita and Tribal, and each of them are making several significant contributions as part of their arrangement with us. That includes anything from the supply of Trust Governors to apprenticeship opportunities for our school leavers. They also do career talks, assembly presentations, work placements and industry site visits. They support our STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering



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and Maths) clubs within schools to really boost our science activity, and they often provide sponsorship for our teams of students to take part in different educational opportunities. We've also developed a number of really successful partnership arrangements with national organisations. Currently, we are working with the National Science Learning Centre, based in York, on the development and delivery of our science strategy. They're also providing us with free high quality CPD for our teachers and our teaching assistants, specifically focused on science. These new relationships have enabled Trust Schools to introduce lots of innovative new approaches to teaching and learning, and generally enhance and enrich the curriculum.

North Tyneside Learning Trust has around 17 employer partners now. Is there a limit to the number you can have or do you intend to keep increasing this number?

The more partners that we have the greater our capacity will be to improve the education and life chances of young people living in North Tyneside. Although we've now got twenty formal employer-partners, we actually work with and receive support from many other organisations. Quick Hydraulics, for instance, is a local engineering company in North Tyneside. They've sponsored a number of our Primary schools to take part in Primary Engineer which is a programme that is delivered in Year Two and Year Six in Primary schools. Their Managing Director, Andrew Esson, also serves as a Trust Governor on one of our schools, so they're heavily involved in the work of the Trust but they're not a formal employer partner. You don't have to be a formal partner to work with us.

Is there a type of organisation that you prefer to work with?

STEM is a huge focus for the Trust because there are a variety of highly skilled, high level jobs available within North Tyneside requiring those skills and as a consequence, we've had a huge push on engaging with engineering and scientific companies that value STEM subjects. We recognise, however, that not all young people are going to go into STEM related industries, so we're also working with lots of arts organisations. For example, Northern Stage is developing a facility in North Tyneside and we're supporting them with that. We also work with an amateur dramatics company called Day8 Productions that puts on productions locally. So, science is an absolutely huge focus but that's not to the detriment of everything else; we work with a really broad range of different companies.



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Can you give us some examples of some of the best initiatives - work experience placements, curriculum development, mentoring and sponsorship opportunities - that have come out of the partnerships you have made with businesses?

One good example is the Engineering Development Trust's 'Engineering Education Scheme', an annual engineering competition which our schools enter. In 2013 Whitley Bay High School won what's known as the 'Nissan Rose bowl prize', beating public and private schools from across the North East, and during the process one student was talent spotted by a major multinational engineering company and offered a work placement during the summer. In terms of sponsorship, there's a really interesting development emerging with 'Vision for Education', a business that provides supply staff to schools. They're sponsoring an awards scheme geared towards celebrating the achievements of children and young people within Trust schools which we're launching in the summer.

Ten years ago Trust Schools didn't exist but now around 15% of secondary schools and 2% of primary schools in the UK are foundation schools, some of which are owned by a trust. Do you anticipate these numbers increasing? What can a trust school offer students that a normal state school can't?

The Trust school model creates a formal collaborative structure that connects schools with higher and further education and employers and enables long term sustainable partnerships between those organisations to develop. Very often, education business partnerships between schools are very much based on individual relationships within school and what the Trust model is trying to do is make the relationship more sustainable over a period of time, so it's not relying on a few individuals, it's a formal partnership arrangement. There's a really strong focus on school to school support. We've got some excellent schools in North Tyneside and

often schools themselves are best placed to drive their own improvement. The Trust's role is to essentially create an environment and opportunities for schools to support each other. It's really about working with schools and others to get them the support that they need to improve. The Trust works in very close partnership with the local authority school improvement service and standards have never been higher with 94% of schools in North Tyneside now rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, which means we are working in one of the best local authority areas in the country for schools. The Trust model is undoubtedly contributing to that success.

Do you anticipate Trust schools to increase over the next few years?

The Trust School model has attracted a lot of attention recently, particularly, in the North East and, in fact, the Trust's been approached by a number of school partnerships locally, to provide information on the Trust model and how to establish a Trust and become a Trust School, and what that means for the school. There's a number of schools working together in Newcastle who are currently looking to establish several smaller trusts that are more geographically defined, so they're smaller than North Tyneside Learning Trust, but they're based on a very, very similar model. There's also about a dozen schools in Redcar at the moment, that are also exploring the Trust's model, so yes, I certainly do anticipate Trust numbers increasing.

What is your vision for North Tyneside Learning Trust? What does the organisation look like to you in five years?

Over the next five years I certainly see continued growth in the number of member schools, employer partnerships and Trust Governors. I'd like to see a lot more long term business partnerships secured, with every Trust School having a specific business partnership link so that the children



have development opportunities from essentially preschool, right the way through to post-sixteen, with companies in their local area. Whilst our commitment will always be to North Tyneside and North Tyneside schools, I think there are some wider business development opportunities that could increase our future sustainability and help grow our reputation regionally, as well as nationally as a really strong, effective collaborative partnership achieving amazing outcomes for our schools. One of the other things that I'd really like to explore over the next five years is the potential for more international links. We've just had a delegation of Trust head teachers spend a week in China to learn about teaching approaches in Chinese Primary schools. Already the messages coming back from those teachers, just in terms of the differences in approaches and some of the things that we could potentially trial here, is phenomenal.

The trust governor network is growing; what qualities do you look for in a trust governor?

Ideally, we try to identify people who have a passion for education and the ability to provide constructive challenges, as well as support, to a governing body. We look to secure people from business and industry with a track record of success in their chosen field. I'd want to see that they had a genuine commitment to school improvement and to tackling disadvantage in education. There's no one size fits all with a Trust Governor, we need a very broad and varied range of expertise and personality types.

As well as your CEO role, you're also a Non Executive Director at Isos Housing; do the two roles complement each other?

The Trust gets an awful lot out of the role that I play with Isos and I'm really keen to establish stronger links between social housing providers and schools in North Tyneside. For example, I've persuaded one of the Executive Directors at ISOS to serve as a Trust Governor. I think organisations like Isos and Gentoo, as well as having a really strong social purpose, are also large businesses that can contribute a lot to our schools. I'm in discussions with both organisations currently about how they can get involved more with the Trust.

You completed an MBA a few years ago. How valuable is an MBA qualification to those seeking senior executive roles? How in particular has it helped you in your career?

While I was completing my MBA, I used to refer to it as Maybe Best Avoided! There's an awful lot of work goes into it, but obviously, it's all really worth it in the end. I think the 'MBA badge' certainly

helped in securing me an interview for my first Director role. It does, in my opinion, still have a high currency value in the job market and I certainly wouldn't put anybody off from completing one. I deliberately chose to do a generalist MBA over a sector specific MBA like Housing, because I think specialist MBA's could limit your options in the longer term.

Gender diversity at board level remains a big issue in the public and private sectors. As a woman, what has helped you get to the very top of your profession? What advice would you pass on to other aspiring female leaders?

My motto has always been network, network, network. I've always worked hard to maintain relationships with people, which has helped me throughout my career. I see everything as a possible learning opportunity; if any developmental opportunities present themselves, take them on and learn from them. I'm a really positive person and I've found being positive is really helpful. Also, getting a mentor is beneficial; someone that you really trust, respect and admire. Always embrace change and learn from it, even if it's taking you outside your comfort zone; set yourself regular challenges to keep things interesting. Learning how to value diversity and learn from the people that are different from you, is also important. Above all else, enjoy the journey.

Where do you look for inspiration?

In my current role, I would say the children and young people in our schools. They're incredible and provide me with ample inspiration.

Outside of work, what keeps you busy?

I've got a six year old daughter, so my social life is her social life! I'm quite into active sports and particularly diving; I've got a Padi Advanced Open Water Diver qualification. I love travelling, too.



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