



The future role of the local authority in education

by

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The Future Role of Local Authorities in School Improvement

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What kind of middle tier will develop over the next five years?

How will local authorities need to change if they want to continue to play that role?

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The McKinsey report argues that *'The best school systems seemed to have relied increasingly on a middle tier'* (Moushed et al, 2010). The question is what kind of middle tier?

1. Scope of the report

There is no doubt that there will continue to be a middle tier or layer to support school improvement in England, because as McKinsey has observed, it is, for good reasons, a feature of all successful education systems regardless of cultural context and history. At its simplest, no-one has yet managed to support the improvement of a school system the size of the English one, with 28,000 schools, without one. This prompts two questions, what kind of middle tier will develop over the next five years and how will local authorities need to change if they want to continue to play that role?

This 'think piece' for ADCS is designed to help directors of children's services (DCSs) and their senior staff think through the answers to these questions. My discussions over the last three weeks with senior colleagues have revealed a great deal of creativity and pragmatism as they wrestle with these questions, some of which I have tried to capture.

This paper, therefore, assesses briefly the national context, the government's case for change, the government's approach to change, the cumulative impact on schools of the proposed changes, the progress towards the government aim of academy schools becoming the norm and the Department for Education's view of the role of local authorities in school improvement. In the light of this, the piece proposes seven key features for the local authority of the future, (see section 7) and provides brief case studies from local authorities to illustrate them. I would not claim that they are the best examples of what is going on, this would have required a more comprehensive survey to make that judgement, but they do provide assistance to the process of thinking through how local authorities can respond to the new environment. There is a particular focus within the case studies on what these local authorities are managing to invest to provide whole system support following the 28% reductions in local authority funding over the last two years and the removal of central government grants. Finally, the paper examines school-to-school support in more detail as one of the key strands of any kind of middle tier before drawing conclusions.

2. The key message

The key message of this 'think piece' is that, at this stage, it is in local authorities' hands whether or not they want to play a lead role in the improvement of all their schools. The unprecedented pressure on schools has meant that it was never more needed. In some ways, both local authorities and schools are being given more room than they have been given for a number of years, albeit with far fewer resources, as the Department for Education stands back and waits to see what emerges in the form of middle tier as a result of the changes they have put in place. What is very uncomfortable for local authorities is a sense that they are no longer 'proper partners' with the Department for Education in raising standards. The biggest threat, however, is not from central government but of local authorities failing to serve the needs of their schools. There is no doubt that this government is determined that academy schools will become the 'norm' and would like to see a situation where school improvement is largely in the hands of robust academy chains - the point has already been reached where about 50% of the secondary sector and 4% of the primary are, or are in the process of, becoming academies. Academy school chains are, of course, an alternative middle tier for aspects of the role of the local authority as, in some ways, are the Teaching Schools, NLE and LLE networks promoted by the National College, but neither can undertake the full middle tier role (see section 7).

One of the most telling conversations I have had while researching this paper has been with Russell Holby, the General Secretary of National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT). NAHT has 28,000 members which include 17,000 heads and 6000 deputies, mostly in primary schools. His view, gleaned from going round the country visiting branches, is that many local authorities are '*shell-shocked*', (understandably), and on the '*back foot*'. He said they are often failing to articulate a vision about how they would provide support in a way which recognised the new relationship. He thought primary schools in particular, would '*bite their hands off*' if local authorities could do that effectively. In his view no more than 20% of primaries over the next three to four years would go down the academy route. Primary schools were put off by the additional administration, the lack of financial incentive, the dislike of going it alone and the possibility of secondary domination as part of an academy chain. As we will see the Department for Education believes it has a solution to these concerns which will encourage primary schools to go down the academy route but recognises that it is much more likely to happen if local authorities actively encourage it.

3. The national context

The government case for change

There is no doubt that the Coalition government intends 'profound structural change' (Department for Education, 2010) and 'rigorous attention to standards' (ibid) underpinned by a fundamentally different approach to whole system change which will look to autonomous schools to drive the shape of support needs. The Department sees the English education system as seriously underperforming. Privately, some would say it has failed. Although they have never said it publicly, they would not accept the McKinsey judgement that the English education system is on the 'good to great' stage of development. They justify this view by reference to:

- England's fall in the PISA rankings for Maths, English and Science from top 10 in 2006 to middle ranking in 2009. This is presented as a critical decline in our ability to compete in this increasingly competitive world. Of course, it was with local authorities operating as the middle tier that the improvements were achieved that enabled England to reach the top 10.
- The failure to close the gap in attainment between the 20% most deprived and the rest. There has been a useful analysis undertaken by the *Financial Times* showing that the real problem is that students from these backgrounds underperform in all secondary schools and that raising floor targets will have little impact because most students from this background do not attend the lowest attaining schools (Financial Times, 2012). The fact that only 80 students in 2009 from this social group gained places in Oxbridge has been endlessly repeated. It underlines the need for a whole system approach.
- The loss of confidence in the secondary school curriculum and qualifications, closely linked to what is seen as the overvaluing of certain vocational qualifications in the league tables.
- Saying that there is obvious inequity in the current school funding formulae.

A key reason why Michael Gove and his Ministers have avoided closer scrutiny is that everyone feels the force of these arguments after a period in which school funding has been doubled. Another reason is that profound changes are being achieved by exploiting existing policies which have cross-party support -namely the move towards establishing academies and free schools, with Ofsted as the enforcer. The key unresolved question is what form of middle tier or middle tiers will manage the market.

The government approach to change

The *Evidence Paper* which accompanied the *Importance of Teaching* White Paper, published in November 2010, picks out two key lessons from international best practice about what drives the improvement in teaching and learning, '*school autonomy and accountability*' (Department for Education, 2010. Para 7.4). A case can certainly be made that school accountability, in its broadest sense, is one of the two most important factors in school improvement, but as Andreas Schleicher, the Director of Pisa, and called by Michael Gove the '*most important man in English education*' made clear, England was already at the extreme end of school autonomy and it was very unlikely that a further increase would drive further school improvement (*Independent*, 22nd Sept 2011). He also, in the same interview questioned whether there were the right levers in place to tackle the number of coasting schools which he saw as England's biggest problem. He was looking for a strong middle tier.

The government set out very clearly in the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* the way in which the government sees standards being raised. So far this has been adhered to. The key features are:

- **A self-improving school system** where autonomous schools - with academies being the norm - individually or as part of chains, are responsible for their own improvement, using processes that they choose, drawing support from wherever they decide. The National College has just published a report, *The Growth of Academy Chains* (Hill, 2012) - which provides clear evidence drawn from the first 103 sponsored academies that academies which are part of chains (i.e. groupings of three or more schools) improve more rapidly than stand-alone academies. This is likely to reinforce, what has been a developing official view that academy school chains are the way forward. This is discussed further in section 9 of this report on school-to-school support. The National College report also confirms the view that secondary academies, generally, improved faster than the average for all secondary schools between 2008/9 and 2010/11 - 12.5% compared to 9.1%, although considerably less than the 2008/9 and 2009/10 differential of twice as fast, which lobbyists for academies have been fond of quoting. The report also notes that the gap has narrowed most recently to 3% (TES, Feb 2012). It does not attempt to quantify the level of investment available to academies, compared to local authorities, which was very high, especially in the early years of the academy programme. The government also sees autonomous schools as being key to improvement in other schools, although the take-up of the role by convertor academies, so far, has been disappointing, with only 1 in 10 taking on a poorly performing school.
- **The National College programmes**, to develop school leaders – school leadership is a ticking time bomb with 1 in 4 heads due to retire in two to three years - NLEs, LLEs, and Teaching Schools.
- **Initiatives to improve teaching quality** that emphasise school-based learning delivered through Teaching Schools - 121 in place by September to be followed by a further 100 in April 2012 with a target of 500 by 2014. Each school to be serving 40-50 schools. This is a kind of middle tier.
- **A transformed school curriculum** supported by rigorous assessment and qualifications. There are already indications that GCSEs are being made more difficult.
- **The prioritisation of favoured capital projects;** free schools and University Technical Colleges (UTCs)(allocated £600m) from scarce capital funding of £1bn, when primary rolls are set to increase by 8% between 2010 and 2014, which must put pressure on class sizes and the quality of provision.
- **Changes to performance tables and floor targets** - for GCSE 5A*-C moving up from 35% to 40% to 50% and for KS2, from 55% to 60%. When combined with the reduced ability to deploy vocational qualifications, this will be very challenging. Mike Treadaway, of the Fischer Family Trust, has re-calculated the school performance tables for 2011 applying the new requirements. The impact is dramatic. Schools only have until September 2012 to put the new courses in place to hit the 2014 deadline.

- **The ratchetting up of Ofsted standards** to give a much stronger focus on teaching quality and pupil behaviour. Coasting schools currently rated satisfactory, and whose performance has been flat for a number of years are the target. The Department for Education estimates that of the 38% of schools deemed satisfactory half are in this category or 5000 schools. There is strong anecdotal evidence from Ofsted and from DCSs, two months into the application of the new framework, that significant numbers of schools are going into the *Requiring Improvement* categories for the first time. On top of that is the requirement that teaching has to be outstanding for a school to be rated *Outstanding*, this will also see many schools losing that status. In addition, there is the prospect that the rigorousness of heads' approach to performance-related pay will be included in Ofsted's assessment of leadership effectiveness. There is an argument that the pay aspect of performance management has not been well managed but in any case this will produce significant new tensions in many schools.
- **The introduction of national school funding formula** . Although not now imminent, when this is introduced it will be a huge step towards centralising responsibility for schools; the implementation is likely to be a nightmare, especially given the shortage of funding to cushion the losers. This is another ticking time bomb.

Many in education have come to realise, increasingly, that for all the talk of school autonomy, this is a top down change process, demonstrated by the very detailed accountability framework, the tone and in the way it is being enforced through Ofsted and Department for Education field forces.

The cumulative impact of the changes

ADCS would clearly want to welcome the drive to raise standards and return England to the top 10 in the PISA rankings. However, what is very striking about these government changes is the **unprecedented** pressure this is going to place on schools when they are combined: the increase in floor targets; the reduced flexibility in 14-16 qualifications; the tougher Ofsted standards which will threaten the majority of schools' current rating; the tight funding regime compounded by the introduction of a new funding formula producing many losers; questions to consider about whether to be an academy or not; the challenge of coping with a new curriculum; as well as the prospect of inadequate capital funding to meet rising primary numbers; and the possibility of regional pay for teachers. One Assistant Director for a large county authority described this rather aptly as a '*perfect storm*'. Extremely worrying for everyone who wants to see schools achieve higher standards are the signs that heads and teachers are becoming increasingly alienated. A survey conducted by the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) of 1800, mostly secondary school leaders, (commissioned jointly by the TES/ASCL), revealed that more than 50% of them want to leave the profession and 61% describing these policy initiatives, labelled '*detrimental*', as a major part of their concerns (TES, March 2012).

All the Department for Education is offering, of any significance, to schools to help them cope with these unprecedented changes, is: free school or academy status (independently

or as part of a chain); the National College programmes; the free market providers and, rather grudgingly, local authorities, with 30% - 50% less resources. This is why **local authorities were never more needed.**

4. The Department for Education's view on the role of local authorities

The Department for Education's formal position can be summarised in the words of the White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*. Our approach will, '*give local authorities a strong strategic role as champions for parents, families and vulnerable pupils. They will promote educational excellence by ensuring a good supply of high quality places, coordinating admissions and developing their school improvement strategies to support local schools.*'(Department for Education, 2010. Para 16)

The role is developed in some detail in the White Paper which gives considerably more space to the role of local authorities than many of its predecessors. This is because the Department for Education knows that at present it needs all these functions including school improvement and school governance, to be carried out by a traditional middle tier, in what they regard as a transitional period. It is also clear that the Department for Education has yet to make up its mind about which of the other functions, apart from school improvement and school governance, listed above, should stay with local authorities in the long run. It is well understood that Ministers regard local authorities as part of the problem, which has created the low standards culture, along with other parts of the educational establishment like Universities' Teacher Training Institutions, the Department for Education and also Ofsted itself, for which they are relying upon Michael Wilshaw to provide a new direction. Ministers are keen, therefore, to see what will emerge if they place schools in the driving seat. They have commissioned the ISOS Partnership to undertake some action research with nine local authorities to look at the four interrelated roles of, school improvement, places planning, vulnerable students (including SEN) and equity, within which they would include pupil admissions. ISOS will report in May and it can be expected that a view will be reached by the Department for Education later in the year. The unprecedented demands upon schools are likely to hasten a decision if anything. This is, of course, a coalition government and the Liberal Democrats are well known to favour a strong role for local authorities as commissioners, so the decision is likely to be high profile and politically informed. The government's position is that they are against top-down solutions and want schools to make decisions, but this needs to be seen alongside the number of areas where the government itself is driving top-down solutions:

- Performance requirement enforced by league tables and inspection.
- Specification of a new core curriculum and standards.
- Requirement for low performing schools to join academy chains.
- Encouragement of the growth of academy-led federations by Department for Education field forces, especially for primary schools: This responds to primary wishes to collaborate, avoids their concern about secondary domination and could provide the capacity that the Department for Education needs.
- Encouragement to converter academies to adopt an underperforming school. The Department for Education estimate that only 1 in 10 has done so. The pressures on

schools, listed above, are likely to make schools even more resistant to risk diverting resources to help other schools.

This stream of national initiatives needs a middle tier to explain and mediate. As one infants school head put it to me, *'I have absolutely no idea where the government is on its review of pupil behaviour, they have launched a consultation, but what stance should we take if Ofsted challenge what we are doing here - excellent, as I think it is'*. Brian Lightman, General Secretary of ASCL, says his members are experiencing the government approach as *'an endless barrage of negativity'* (TES, 23rd March).

There is no solid evidence that the HMCI Michael Wilshaw's kite flying for a network of Regional Commissioners, run by the Department for Education, is taking hold, but he has put his finger on a serious problem for the Department, which is how to prevent academy failure. This will become more acute with the implementation of the changes listed above. **It provides another opportunity for local authorities to provide a service.**

5. How far has the academy programme developed

The Department for Education has stated that it wants academy schools to become the norm. The latest figures as of February 1st 2012 are, out of 28,000 schools:

- 1607 open academies and free schools coming through the sponsored or convertor routes: 373 primary (2% of the sector), 1188 secondary (36% of the sector), 19 special schools (under 1%), 24 Free Schools and 3 University Technical Colleges.
- The Department for Education says that if you add the numbers in the pipeline, then approaching 50% of secondary schools will be academies by later this year and more than 4% of primary.
- 3 in 5 outstanding secondary schools are academies and 1 in 10 outstanding primary schools. This proportion of outstanding schools reflects the criteria for successful application for convertor status but it will not be lost on local authorities that very significant numbers of schools that provide leadership to the system are already academies or on route to becoming one, without any additional incentives. This and the rapid increases in the number of primaries opting for the academy route, whether forced or by choice, ought to give pause for thought to those who think that primaries will not go for academy status.
- 200 underperforming primary schools have been targeted to join academy chains and a further 500 primaries are potentially in the frame for failing to meet floor targets.

Figure 1: Number of academies, Feb 2012

Predicting the growth of academies

It is hard to predict how many schools will become academies. What needs to be

acknowledged is that the programme has developed some outstanding practice and real enthusiasm amongst schools who have become part of it, as the National College report, on *The Growth of Academy Chains*, highlights. Apart from those schools that will be forced to become academies because of their performance, it is clear that many schools, both primary and secondary, are weighing up what will best meet the needs of their schools, as they face unprecedented challenges. The factors that are likely to be important are:

- How quickly a tipping point is reached in the number of schools becoming academies, which might persuade schools that academies are the norm for their sector and, therefore, bow to the inevitable.
- The capacity of the sponsored academy chains to grow. A survey of the CEOs of those chains, reproduced in the National College report on *The Growth of Academy Chains*, reports that they think they have the capacity to take on around 158 secondary and 264 primary schools, taking the mid points of the range they offer. This falls well below the ambition that academies ‘become the norm’ in the primary sector,(Hill, 2012). This is why the model of chains led by converter academies, referred to earlier, is so important as a means of filling the gap to meet the needs of low performing schools.
- Schools’, especially primaries’, confidence in their local authority to provide alternative ways of securing support to meet the challenges they face.
- How schools, and public opinion more generally, will respond, as it becomes clear that academy status is not an instant cure, that performance is mixed. The results, now emerging, show a much smaller advantage compared to other types of school, especially for standalone academies.
- What actions the Department for Education takes to influence schools’ choices and to shape the kind of middle tier required, as we have discussed, this will be influenced by political as well practical considerations.

Local authority view of academy status

Of course, for local authorities, the excessive financial penalty which LACSEG (Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant) transfers impose, despite its reduction by 40% from 2011, makes it very difficult to be positive about schools converting to academy status. Some differential makes sense, to reflect the shift in responsibilities but, at current levels, this looks more like an added incentive, rather than attempt to reflect the real additional costs of greater autonomy. There are also real concerns about being unable to intervene when academies underperform and about their withdrawal from the wider educational community, as has happened in some, but it appears a minority, of cases. As some have pointed out, this is less of a danger with the first generation of school leaders, who were brought up in the old system and instinctively look to retaining their links, than with the next generation, whose whole careers may have been within academies.

Academy engagement with local authorities

The ISOS Partnership Interim report states that in their nine local authorities, academies are keen to be part of effective local authority school improvement strategies and in many local

authorities they buy services. This is certainly the picture that emerges from discussions with DCSs, other senior local authority colleagues and former CEOs of academy chains. The academy chains vary enormously, some are mostly self-contained, like ARK or Harris or the Mercers, whilst others join the local authority school improvement networks, as AET does in Richmond. All the local authorities featured in the case studies in this report for ADCS actively embrace academies as part of the family of schools, involving them in strategic discussions and decision-making as well as offering them services.

The ability of the local authority to ensure effective school improvement is key to their ability to meet the needs of their schools and to maximise their influence on the local system as a whole, including on academies. The next section sets out for debate, what are likely to be the key features of the local authority role in effective school improvement in this new world and then gives examples of local authorities that exemplify aspects of them.

6. *The effectiveness of local authorities' school improvement*

There is strong evidence that many local authorities are effective in tackling schools causing concern. Debbie Pritchard in her companion report on local authorities and schools causing concern (Pritchard, 2012)¹ has assessed local authority effectiveness in school improvement first by percentage of schools in a local authority which are good or outstanding, as of 31st August 2011 28% of local authorities had 75% or more such schools. Secondly, by the low number of schools judged to be inadequate in those categories - 40% of local authorities on the same date had 1% or fewer inadequate schools. Debbie Pritchard makes clear that these are very crude measures and do not do justice, for example, to the fact that the change in status of one school in a small local authority can change the percentages dramatically and nor does it take account of the rapid improvement in some local authorities with a change in leadership. Her report on schools causing concern for ADCS, has examined this in more detail and is very clear about what distinguishes the local authorities that are effective in tackling schools causing concern, from those that are not (see Appendix 2).

There is no doubt that the local authority can be a very effective middle tier, and this is confirmed by international experience. Local authorities that are struggling with the school improvement agenda are very like schools which are in difficulties, namely, that they are doing many of the right things, but not doing them with sufficient rigour or effective prioritisation, or with staff who command the respect of schools. What is striking from her work is how rapidly a number of local authorities have improved in their effectiveness. One of the characteristics of local authorities that have been less effective is that they have not engaged, successfully, with their coasting schools, rated satisfactory, thus, reducing the number of good or outstanding schools and failing to prevent the slide into a poor Ofsted category. The removal of the satisfactory category and replacing it with a notice to improve should help those local authorities, sending an unmistakable message that intervention is required. In fact, contrary to common belief, local authorities already have the statutory right

¹ Debbie Pritchard's report on schools causing concern is published as a companion document to this think piece. It can be found at www.adcs.org.uk.

to intervene where a school is underperforming. It is important that a way is found to tackle the local authorities that are ineffective in school improvement because it is, undoubtedly, undermining the argument for local authorities to continue to play a lead role. It is a bit disappointing that the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) has not prioritised this area by allocating some of its national resources. It would make a lot of sense if it did, not least because of the knock on effect on some of the areas it has prioritised. There are a number of successful models from the past, including, at the extreme, of outsourcing the function to another local authority or alternative provider, as Sir Michael Barber pointed out in his Fordson Lecture (Barber, 2012).

There would be real benefit in enabling the good and outstanding local authorities to be identified to provide some much needed profile for the good work that local authorities do and to give them some organisational form so that they can support other local authorities, hopefully with the support of the Children's Improvement Board and contribute to the debate.

It is very important to retain the support of elected members and chief executives . There will be a strong temptation, as the next round of budget pressures begin to bite, for them to conclude, albeit very reluctantly, that because of the Department for Education's perceived indifference to local authorities, this is an area where they can reduce costs even further.

The next section sets out for debate what are likely to be the key features of the local authority role in effective school improvement in this new world and then gives examples of local authorities that exemplify a particular feature.

7. The effective local authority of the future

The table below sets out seven suggested key features of the effective local authority of the future (the main report identifies the linked activities), focussing on the school improvement role, but not seeing that role in isolation from the local authorities' other functions. They are interdependent. Highlighted, in **yellow**, are the key features that could also be carried out by an academy chain, to demonstrate the similarities and the differences between the roles each can play in school improvement. Key potential advantages that the local authority has over the academy chain, is in setting a vision and priorities for the area, in being able to use influence to shape the system, in identifying and filling gaps in provision both of schools and services, securing additional funding, and in facilitating partnerships with stakeholders and agencies. The importance of local knowledge and connection to a particular place, with a particular history, is often underestimated by Westminster. Personal relationships, soft data and influence are often critical, especially in dealing, efficiently and cost effectively, with difficult issues involving schools.

Debbie Pritchard's report for ADCS on tackling schools causing concern has a summary of the characteristics of the local authorities which are best at tackling schools causing concern. It is attached as Annex 2 and should be read alongside these key features.

It is clear that the successful local authorities seek to work with all the schools in their area, including academies and free schools, to help them all improve. This is the best way to prevent school failure, to maximise Michael Fullan's 'social capital' to improve the system

and to support the discharge of other local authority functions.

What underpins all the features, is a shift in relationship to one where schools drive the agenda. This means continuing to pay attention to schools' bread and butter needs, particularly primary schools, and for giving basic information such as '*what is the Department for Education position on behaviour policies now?*' and providing services at a price that schools can afford. One of the worrying facts as local authorities increasingly look to schools to buy their services, is the very high day rates in some local authorities. One southern local authority charges out its maths advisers at £600 a day. If local authorities want to continue to sell services, this is an area where private sector expertise may need to be used to take a ruthless approach to overheads, so that services are competitive as the market develops. Alternatively, a decision needs to be taken not to offer the services but to ensure they are available from other providers. Schools need to choose structural solutions, such as federations, or consortia, in addition to the choice about adopting academy or free school status. As John Harris, former DCS for Hertfordshire put it, the local authority needs to stifle the '*inner bureaucrat*' tendency to dictate neat top down solutions. Nevertheless, local authorities still need to provide a vision and strategy and the right culture for improvement, including a guarantee of effective challenge from a highly credible local authority team. There is also a need to recognise that there will never be sustained school improvement unless schools - not just heads, but the whole school community - own the change journey. Not least of the problems that the Department for Education faces is that its current tone is likely to be counterproductive. We are already seeing signs of that. Despite the emphasis upon school autonomy, the Department for Education is perceived as having little time for what schools and teachers have achieved and being out to impose an agenda, which Ofsted will enforce. There is a need to draw a clear distinction between the approach required to tackle failure, which is often intervention of some kind, and the school driven change for the rest of the system. This will require an increasingly sophisticated approach to school-to-school support needs to be a key feature of the school improvement offer (See Section 9).

Table 1: The effective local authority of the future: seven key features

	Key feature	Linked activities	Local authority exemplars <i>(italics indicates case study included as part of this report)</i>
1	<p>An inspiring and inspirational educational vision.</p> <p>Values for the local authority area developed with schools.</p> <p>Underpinned by the advocacy role for every child.</p>	<p>To inspire schools and build on their desire to work for their broader community. As Camden say: ‘<i>Collective ambition aids individual ambition</i>’.</p> <p>To energise, provide focus and mobilise resources (formal and informal). Fullan et al, 2010 have highlighted the importance of adopting a few priorities (about 3).</p> <p>To strengthen the links with other key local authority functions- school provision, support for vulnerable pupils, admissions and championing parents.</p>	<p><i>Camden Partnership for Educational Excellence</i></p> <p>Sheffield</p> <p><i>York Education Partnership</i></p> <p><i>Hertfordshire Learning Trust</i></p> <p>Lambeth</p>
2	<p>Maximise use of influence to shape the system.</p>	<p>Through ensuring an “owned” educational vision. Probably, reinforced by a governance structure/partnership body.</p> <p>Through exploiting democratic legitimacy and the use of information, hard and soft about schools including academies/free schools.</p> <p>Through engagement with parents and other key stakeholders.</p>	<p><i>Wandsworth Academies and Free Schools Commission</i></p> <p><i>York Education Partnership</i></p> <p><i>Camden Partnership for Educational Excellence</i></p>

		<p>To achieve a collective approach to the treatment of vulnerable pupils.</p> <p>To shape sponsorship, brokerage of academies and free schools.</p>	
3	<p>Building a self-sustaining improving school system for all schools, which schools own and drive and which seeks to exceed national standards.</p>	<p>Sets a standard of excellence above and broader than national requirements and is focussed on improving teaching and learning.</p> <p>Has a small client side.</p> <p>Adopts a model where school ownership of support services is captured in governance arrangements with local authority as key supporting partner.</p> <p>Is relaxed about whether schools are academies/free schools but strong on them being part of and accountable to the local educational community.</p> <p>Has a strong core of professionalised school-to-school support.</p> <p>Draws on support from outside the local authority possibly with the exception of large counties.</p> <p>Has a programme for all governing bodies strengthening structures and support and linked closely to school improvement.</p> <p>Has a strong and distinct offer for primary schools.</p> <p>Takes an overview of the school improvement provision for schools and ensures it meets the needs of all schools keeping</p>	<p><i>Hertfordshire Learning Trust</i></p> <p><i>York Education Partnership</i></p> <p>All case study local authorities</p> <p><i>Wandsworth</i></p> <p>Most case study local authorities</p>

		<p>them under review as personnel change including - national programmes, Teaching Schools, NLEs ,LLEs, school chains, including those academy-led.</p> <p>Puts use of pupil performance data at the heart of what teachers, schools and the local authority do.</p> <p>Where challenge is effective. A key part of the self-sustaining system of improvement. Ideally, schools should challenge each other in system of school-to-school support. Some chains and local authorities have achieved this. The best local authorities and chains are able to challenge to prevent the slide into poor performance. Most do this through retaining a core team of highly credible inspectors operating a robust but flexible version of the old SIP model. These will only be able to survive if schools continue to buy.</p>	<p>All case study local authorities and most local authorities do this. <i>Hertfordshire's</i> proposed Learning Trust and <i>Wigan</i> particularly strong on school-to-school challenge.</p>
4	<p>Are able to use engagement with all schools to strengthen other functions.</p>	<p>Drive to educational excellence.</p> <p>Securing quality schools, including brokering academies/free schools where necessary.</p> <p>Protection of vulnerable pupils.</p> <p>Ensuring fair admissions.</p>	
5	<p>Securing sustainable funding to deliver the self-improving system.</p>	<p>Securing political will to sustain investment in whole system improvement. Acceptance despite the cuts that it can be afforded.</p> <p>Acceptance that the local authority is accountable in a sense for all schools.</p>	<p>All case study local authorities</p>

		<p>Fund the core from the local authority.</p> <p>Pump-prime school-led companies.</p> <p>Buy in from schools.</p>	
6	Facilitate partnerships and operational links with local stakeholders agencies.	<p>Key role which local authority is best placed to provide.</p> <p>Stakeholders include school governor organisations, Trades Unions, further and higher education, local businesses etc.</p> <p>Agencies: health services, other service providers etc.</p>	
7	Facilitate communication between the schools and government and understanding of the wider system.	This is a role much valued by schools. It can cover ' <i>bread and butter</i> ' issues about what has happened to particular government policies on pupil behaviour, for example, and strategic shifts in national local policies.	All good local authorities and effective chains do this. Schools are reporting in many local authorities that as staffing is cut and the sources of expertise leave, they do not know where to go for advice on many issues. This needs resolving.

Both local authorities and academy chains are a form of middle tier. The table with the features and activities highlighted in **yellow** illustrate, rather crudely, where the local authority and the academy chain overlap and where they seem to differ. The local authority meets the additional requirements providing an educational vision and priorities for the local authority area, shaping the system by influence, having an overview of the support service and school provision needs and the ability to broker solutions and to manage relationships

with stakeholders and agencies. Of course, it is recognised that an academy chain will undertake a certain amount of influence in an area and seek to engage with key stakeholders and agencies, but they are not in a position to do so, anything like as effectively, or with the same authority, as a local authority.

As we have noted, the National College programmes provide important elements of a middle tier but need the local knowledge, connections, quality assurance and challenge capacity which the better local authorities provide very successfully.

It is clear that most local authorities have a distinct approach to their primary sector, often separate consultative forums, a distinct service offer (usually much more comprehensive), whereas secondary schools like to pick and mix more. This reflects primaries' different needs that have been referred to earlier. Local authorities will want to continue to respond to primaries' particular needs, but not to reinforce what can be an unhealthy dependency culture which can inhibit primaries' ability to drive their school forward.

The best academy chains have taken a very different approach to school governance and it should prompt local authorities, who are not already doing so, to look hard at ways of streamlining governance, for example, by setting up school chains and increasing their ability to focus on standards.

8. Current local authority practice to inform the future

Current local authority practice in school improvement, which can inform the future, is set out in Annex 1, grouped under the three different Model categories.

Model 1 – The traditional mode, where local authorities commission and provide most of the services from their own teams, although all local authorities commission from their schools and other providers to some extent. Most local authorities in this category provide services for all their schools, and not just those causing concern, although they charge to varying degrees, for their services.

Model 2 - Where local authorities commission services to support schools. For some local authorities this commissioning is almost entirely from their own schools. Most of these local authorities seek to provide for all their schools, not just those causing concern.

Model 3 - Those local authorities, three in the set of returns, that have handed the commissioning role to an overarching partnership body.

9. School-to-school support

Most local authorities include school-to-school support as an important and growing strand of their offer. Wigan local authority, which is one of the case studies (see Annex 1), uses it as its main method. The benefits are well understood:

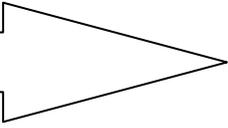
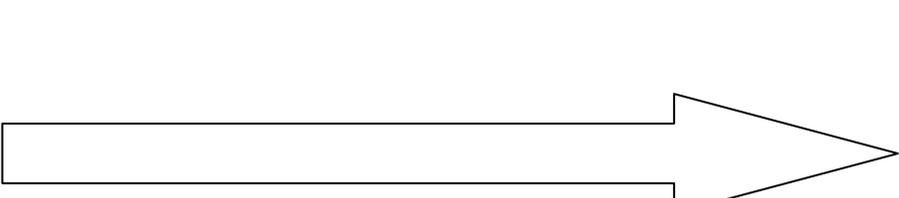
- It can promote school ownership of its own improvement.

- It develops school capacity, including future leaders.
- It enables schools to retain high quality staff.
- It could be the most cost effective, short-term as well as long-term.
- It provides a local framework for National College programmes.
- It promotes values of moral purpose, collaboration and professionalism, which as Fullan noted, are so important for the wider success of the system.

There are a number of vehicles for school-to-school support from school networks, to federations often involving executive heads, to academy chains. It needs to be remembered when considering the merits of different school models, that Ofsted identified, in HMCI's 2009/10 Annual Report, the effectiveness of the partnering arrangements of outstanding heads with failing schools brokered by local authorities, as the most effective method of tackling failing schools. There is a growing view that school-to-school support works best with more formal structures (Chapman, 2011 and Hill, 2012). Robert Hill et al, in the report on *The Growth of Academy Chains* cite, favourably, those academy chains that are able to specify a whole range of processes for all their chain schools, including pedagogy, but do go on to say that academy chains are not a panacea.

Colleagues will want to treat with caution, proposals about formulaic approaches as a way of finding a quick route to embedding sustained improvement in a school, or group of schools. Local authorities, as a middle tier, are in an unrivalled position to promote a whole range of school-to-school support, depending on the opportunities and needs of their area, at any particular time. We have learnt that there is a difference in approach required, when intervention is needed, in cases of serious school failure, compared to schools at the next stage, where it is essential that the schools drive their own improvement. This needs further elaboration, but it would be worth the local authority of the future charting what an increasingly sophisticated system of school-to-school support might be. It is noticeable that studies that have been undertaken here and in the U.S. tend to focus on schools and groups of schools, rather than local authorities, which, because of their wider role, are uniquely placed, when working well, to ensure an effective middle tier. The development of school-to-school improvement might be separated into the four stages, which are not linear, set out in the table below, beginning with consortia, often formed on the initiative of schools focussed on CPD; being supplemented at stage two, by formal contracted work for leading heads with selected schools that require intervention, brokered by the local authority; to stage three, when there is the ambition to meet the needs of the whole system, engaging all schools; and moving to stage four, where there is the capacity for unsupported peer-to-peer challenge. This draws on the experience of leading English local authorities and work in the U.S. in New York and Nashville. It is a development, therefore, from localised examples of school-to-school support, to whole system support and a model of increasing professionalism in the services offered, brokered and contracted.

LOCAL AUTHORITY AS MIDDLE TIER ENABLING SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL SUPPORT

MOVING TO WHOLE SYSTEM	INCREASING PROFESSIONALISM	STAGE	DESCRIPTION OF STAGE	MIDDLE TIER BROKERAGE/SERVICE DEVELOPMENT	MIDDLE TIER PERFORMANCE MONITORING - QA
		1	Supporting setting up networks for CPD usually initiated by schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource, refine objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor performance Categorise schools Quality assurance
		2	Establishment of federations/Executive Heads as part of intervention for a limited number of schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource Broker to ensure effective challenge, exploit NLEs and LLEs. 	
		3	Establish whole system school support	<p>Incorporate NLEs, LLEs, Teaching Schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in capacity in key schools? Ensure range of services developed and marketed, including from other local authorities Set up contracting For schools in receipt of intervention, give funding earmarked for buying in services of choice-see New York 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor performance Categorise schools Quality assurance
		4	Challenge embedded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Back stop for challenge Continue service development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor Quality assurance

10. Conclusions and Recommendations

A strong middle tier is needed as schools face unprecedented pressure to raise their standards, coupled with rapidly changing requirements which have to be communicated. The NAHT General Secretary Russell Holby said primary schools would *'bite off the hand of local authorities that can provide the support they need'*, but these schools will look elsewhere if local authorities cannot provide it. The 30,000 plus governors who are now central to school inspection are also desperate for the support that local authorities can offer. Local authorities, when they perform well, have demonstrated that they can be that necessary middle tier. Academy chains and to a lesser extent, the National College programmes, can meet some of the requirements but they cannot meet the whole range of functions (see above) and their capacity is strictly limited. It is, therefore, perverse not to see local authorities as key, for the next five years, as one of the central providers of this effective middle tier. It is important that these arguments are properly understood as the future role of local authorities is considered by government later this year.

The effective local authority needs to ensure there is engagement with all the schools in the area to support whole system improvement, including academies and free schools and avoid the temptation, at a time of limited resources, just to focus on those already in a category. This is good school improvement practice but important for delivering their other statutory functions.

School-to-school support, incorporating the National College programmes, is a major way of promoting a whole system school improvement programme, of reinforcing a positive collaborative culture and releasing capacity. Local authorities, either by undertaking it themselves, or through commissioning, are ideally placed to provide it.

There is a huge opportunity here for local authorities if they can meet schools' needs. The local authorities that are already rising to the challenge of raising standards, with much fewer resources, seeking to work closely with academies and free schools, should receive more recognition and profile, and be enabled to support the rest of the system. Local authorities that are not effective need to improve. There is no mystery about what effective practice looks like.

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(Independent Consultant)

Annex 1 - Exemplars of local authority of the future

Model 1 – The traditional model, where local authorities commission and provide most of the services from their own teams, although all local authorities commission from their schools and other providers to some extent. Most local authorities in this category provide services for all their schools, and not just those causing concern, although they charge to varying degrees for their services.

Case Study 1 : Wandsworth : 81 Schools

Brief description of approach to school improvement:

A strong local authority with an inspection team, highly regarded by schools, that can demonstrate the impact of their work and with a relatively low cost (see below). Clear about their role, setting vision and expectations, monitoring school performance (gathering intelligence from hard and soft data) and acting promptly to commission, broker or provide support before problems become too serious. To ensure this, it plans to retain a SIP type structure, though much more flexibly operated, available to all schools including academies. Further, the local authority intends to ensure effective succession planning, continue to challenge good schools as well as satisfactory and at-risk schools, brokering in support from Wandsworth schools incorporating National College programmes, and from other providers and supporting other schools in maintaining an '*upward trajectory*'. The local authority is clear, that with increasing school autonomy, arrangements need to have the support of schools. Wandsworth also seeks to strongly influence future school provision through its academies and free schools commission. See the key feature below.

Cost of provision (excluding National College programmes):

- £1.1m for a core team, halved from 2010/11.
- Additional Intervention funding of £165k.

All funded by the local authority.

Key Feature:

Wandsworth has set up an academies and free schools commission with elected member, school and parent representation, chaired by Baroness Perry, to take a strategic view of school provision, including proposed academy and free school sponsors. A good example of maximising community influence in a very sensitive area and seeking to ensure that quality of educational provision and the local democratic process strongly influence any Department for Education decisions.

Case Study 2 : Stockton : 74 schools

Brief description of approach to school improvement:

Key to Stockton's success, as with other local authorities, has been a highly regarded local authority Education Improvement Service supplemented with equally highly regarded externally commissioned school improvement advisers. The offer is based upon a pragmatic and innovative use of school advisers which is described below. This is complemented by the use of National and Local Leaders in Education and the development of school-to-school support. The Campus Stockton partnership brand and ideal is key to the approach of Stockton. This is led by a Campus Stockton Board, a representative group of headteachers who work with the local authority officers to define services to schools and provide robust monitoring and challenge to local authority services. It has the potential to develop into a formal school-led model if that is what the partners want. The Board embodies the shared belief that Stockton will only be successful if partners work together as articulated by the Chief Executive: *'We are committed to developing and strengthening 'Campus Stockton' because we believe we will have the greatest impact on our children and young people through a strong and dynamic partnership.'*

Cost of provision 2011-2012:

- School Improvement Service and support across the local authority, as per Section 251 statement, line 2.1.9, £1.192 million funding.
- Additional Intervention funding from DSG granted through School's Forum, £136k.

Key Feature: An innovative School Improvement Adviser programme

The Education Improvement Service (EIS) has developed a very focussed programme of support for schools that are underperforming; this involves collaborative reviews of the schools to identify the strategies needed to raise standards and a short, intense intervention plan, to provide urgent support for school improvement. A further collaborative review benchmarks progress and most schools then go into short exit plans or become self-sustaining in their school improvement

EIS has taken the opportunity to tailor a flexible service around the provision of School Improvement Advisers. Each school has access to at least three sessions which they can shape to best meet their needs. In doing so, schools (through leadership teams and governing bodies) can take ownership of the programme of professional support and commission a bespoke package to reflect:

- their own school improvement priorities;
- the changing profile of the school;

- the timing of their school self-evaluation cycle; and
- the changing face of staff development needs.

The programme that is devised draws on best practice from other schools and providers so that the School Improvement Adviser is often accompanied by additional support and expertise on visits to share and disseminate successful practice. The consequent analysis is used for corroboration of the school's self-evaluation against the Ofsted framework and provides evidence for performance management and data for the governing body and local authority scrutiny.

Headteachers recognise the success of this approach and all but one have requested support to move them forward in their school improvement regardless of their current judgement, i.e. supporting satisfactory schools to good, good to outstanding and maintaining the excellence of outstanding schools.

Model 2 - Where local authorities commission services to support schools. For some local authorities this commissioning is almost entirely from their own schools. Most of these local authorities seek to provide for all their schools, not just those causing concern.

Case Study 3 : Hertfordshire : 519 Schools

Brief Description of approach to school improvement:

Hertfordshire's school improvement approach has built upon a longstanding emphasis on school autonomy (going back to the 1950s); a focus in Hertfordshire on the self-improving school (assess, plan and do), peer-to-peer support and challenge for over 10 years. The local authority believes that peer-to-peer challenge is effective because they broker the schools involved and act as a back-up if it is needed. There is a strong tradition of schools buying services from the local authority (£20m's worth in 2010/11). 90% of primaries buy back the full offer and all secondary schools buy at least some of the 'HIP' offer, (Hertfordshire's version of the School Improvement Partner). This has meant that the move to set up a social enterprise company The Hertfordshire Learning Trust, owned 80% by schools and with the local authority as a 20% partner, has been a fairly natural step with school-to-school support and challenge as the main method of ensuring a self-improving system. The core team which provides a refined HIP type offer enables the local authority to engage with all schools including academies. See below the key feature for more detail.

Cost of provision (excluding National College programmes):

Core Team cost funded by the local authority has been reduced from £9m to £6m for next year. This has been topped up for intervention work by DSG funding of £600k.

Key Feature: The Hertfordshire Learning Trust

'The Hertfordshire Learning Trust' which is planned to go into operation on 1st September 2013, will be owned by all schools, including academies. It is responsible for:

- setting the vision and strategy for the education service;
- delivering all the local authority statutory school improvement functions, including categorisation of where schools are, undertaking interventions, ensuring effective challenge and support with local authority continuing to enable;
- supporting a self-improving system incorporating National College programmes;
- selling services to schools; and
- is able to sponsor free schools or academies.

The local authority is planning to provide significant pump-priming for the company.

Case Study 4 : Warrington (87 schools) and Halton (63 schools)

Brief Description of approach to school improvement:

Warrington and Halton have formed a joint venture company with SERCO called 'Aspire' to take over some local authority staff and offer services to all their schools. Aspire has been operational since September 2011. Any profits are split three ways. The local authorities have committed to ploughing profits back into Children's Services priorities. With little money, in particular the loss of National strategy funding for consultants, they saw this as the best way to provide schools with the high level and quality of services that they were used to. The two local authorities only have three academies between them and services are highly valued. Aspire is based in Warrington. The partnership with SERCO has had the benefit of bringing in an experienced provider and preserving jobs of valued local authority staff who would otherwise have faced redundancy. It is hoped that Aspire will be able to part fund these posts by selling services within Halton and Warrington and to other local authorities and schools and discussions have begun. More details of the offer are set out below. Warrington believes that it is working well with 65% of schools choosing to buy into SERCO.

Both local authorities retain a core team which provides the core local authority functions of commissioning, including monitoring Aspire's service quality, monitoring school performance especially those at-risk or only satisfactory and statutory support and intervention. They undertake some intervention work themselves and commission the rest from Aspire. The relationship with Aspire is overseen by Operational and Strategic Management Boards supplemented by the Aspire Director attending the half termly school support meeting.

Cost of provision (excluding National College programmes):

- Core Team:
 - Warrington: A core team of 5 FTE Senior Advisers. This is funded by the local authority. They receive re-imburement from Aspire via credits with the Learning Bank if they provide services through them, for example, advising on headteacher performance management.
 - Halton: A core team of 6FTE. This is funded by the local authority.
- Additional Intervention funding:
 - a) Warrington retains a small budget for “schools causing concern”.
 - b) Halton has deposited some intervention funds into the partnership. This money will be used to support schools and settings in adverse categories or schools experiencing temporary difficulties.

Key Feature: Setting Up a Joint Venture Company

Schools have the option whether or not to use Aspire. Warrington and Halton feel that this is very important that the schools take responsibility for who they choose to provide services even if they are subject to intervention. Like the New York district model, schools are given the earmarked funding to spend on the provider they choose. Each school has a nominated link with Aspire and they can subscribe at three levels; bronze, silver or gold. Schools causing concern are expected to buy at the gold level. School-to-school support was an important part of the planning for the offer, with schools being given credits for services they offer. This is in its early days. Price and service offer flexibility have been critical as schools get used to paying for what was free before and Aspire have needed to make adjustments. A simpler subscription model for 2012-13 is proposed. The joint procurement of SERCO by the two local authorities has not yet led to other kinds of joint commissioning.

Warrington and Halton clearly feel that this has worked well for them and for their schools, enabling the retention of experienced staff and providing an additional choice for them. That is the most important point. School-to-school support which was intended to be a key feature is in its early days, as is further joint commissioning by Warrington and Halton. One of the key questions is whether Aspire are successful in persuading other local authorities and schools to buy into this approach to ensure viability.

Case Study 5 : Wigan : 134 schools

Brief description of approach to school improvement:

Another very striking model. School-to-school support is the model adopted by Wigan to meet both the statutory local authority functions and to enable a self-sustaining school system. A very small, highly valued local authority core of two plus the head of service who has other responsibilities beyond school improvement. They work through eight consortia: five primary and three secondary (note that the phases are treated separately) who are responsible for the performance of their schools. The focus of the local authority team is:

- monitoring school performance largely based on data;
- production of annual school performance profiles based on methods agreed with schools and discussed with them. On this basis schools are categorised to identify low performing/underperforming schools which support a school- to- school approach driven through primary and secondary consortia;
- co-ordinating communication across eight consortia;
- contracting with consortia and providing additional funding to undertake interventions for schools jointly identified as in need;
- as a fallback, to provide challenge where a consortium feels unable to do so effectively or procure someone else to do it on their behalf as some do;
- quality assuring consortia services and help develop school -to-school support system;
- helping to broker academy sponsors/ primary federations;
- maintaining a directory of good practice.

Cost of provision: (Excluding National College Programmes)

- Core Team of two plus part a Head of service (pro rated).
- Additional intervention funding of £300k (£200k primary and £100k secondary).

Key Feature: School consortia-led self-improving system

The School Improvement Consortia are responsible for the improvement of all member schools and for delivering interventions. They can draw on NLEs, LLEs and Wigan Leaders of Education and the intervention budget. A consortia representative sits on the School Improvement Board which holds the consortia to account, agrees the school categorisation, identifies areas of strength and weakness and disseminates the success. The local authority is responsible for running the Board, but would only overrule the heads if there was a disagreement over their statutory responsibilities. Otherwise it would be up to the heads. It is therefore quite close to Model 3 with heads leading. The local authority reports that the model has developed rapidly and there is great enthusiasm for it. What is striking is its simplicity and radicalism - it really puts heads at the heart and it is very low in cost. Wigan would also say that the contribution through the National College programmes and 'From Schools For Schools' pump-primed by the Department for Education, are critical to making the system work.

Model 3 – A local authority that has handed the commissioning role to an overarching partnership body.

Case Study 6 : York : 68 schools

Brief description of approach to school improvement:

The York Education Partnership (YEP) - discussed further below -oversees school based education policy and commissions all school improvement. It is a whole system approach for all schools including academies. Key to delivery is the 'Hub' made up of highly regarded local authority staff which is responsible for: monitoring; school performance; the impact of interventions in school, (incl. academies where Department for Education agree); for providing support for maintained schools below floor targets and those at-risk; for allocation of resources to vulnerable schools from the commissioning budget; for development of school-to-school support; and for the deployment of the City of York partners, NLEs, LLEs and SLEs. The role of the Teaching Schools can be accommodated and add value in this arrangement but precise processes as to how, are still being explored. York is clearly Model 3. There are links to all schools that want it, in addition to the schools causing concern. 95% of schools bought in in 2011/12 and this has given confidence for the YEP to top-slice the Dedicated Schools Grant to establish an enhanced commissioning budget without an individual subscription route being necessary for 2012/13.

Cost of provision: (Excluding National College Programmes)

- Core Team, the 'Hub', currently costs £1.2m reducing to £750k. Funded by the local authority.
- Additional commissioning funding of £320k to support intervention and wider system support funded from the DSG in agreement with schools. Other funding comes through NLEs etc.

Key Feature: York Education Partnership

York, following a thorough consultation with schools, set up York Education Partnership to provide a collective vision for education in York and to respond to the desire amongst schools for a sector led approach to running a self-sustaining system. It is in the early days (two meetings) but it is generating a lot of enthusiasm. Schools are in the majority.

Secondary schools have six seats and primary eight (reflecting their relative share of the school population) representing clusters. There is an independent chair, a highly respected former Director Education from Scotland which the DCS regards as very important. Further and higher education institutions are also represented. An elected member and local authority officers are present but do not have a vote. It strengthens coherence and reduces bureaucracy by subsuming the Schools Forum, the 14-19 Partnership and the Admissions Forum. The YEP is responsible for the York education vision, the school improvement

strategies, including intervention and school provision issues.

It is early days but York is articulating an educational vision for the City, maintaining a collective and integrated approach, owned by all schools including two academies, to the key challenges of providing a financially sustainable whole system approach to school improvement, school admissions and school provision. They have recognised the need to engage education leaders more directly in strategic decision-making. They have recognised that decisions about funding, previously the preserve of the Schools' Forum, cannot be dealt with in isolation from the city's vision and strategy for education. Camden and Sheffield have followed a similar approach.

Annex 2 - Extract from 'Schools Causing Concern', Report for ADCS Debbie Pritchard, April 2012:

So what makes the difference between local authorities?

The processes for local authorities are similar. Local authorities which have good outcomes demonstrate some common features. Good practice features are:

- A passion for all the children and young people in their area; this is a moral imperative and makes the local authority ambitious and unflinching in challenging schools.
- Good use of data, hard and soft. The term forensic analysis was commonly used for progress data. Regular meetings are held with a wide range of people and all available information considered; from HR and parental complaints to the progress of particular groups of children, attendance, exclusions and governance.
- Good quality research is used with partners to spur thought into action to make a difference to children. This has been particularly effective for groupings such as Portuguese or disadvantaged children. This includes making good use of benchmarking to raise expectations and identify gaps.
- Good knowledge of schools, frequent visits and meetings: many still have monitoring visits similar to those of a SIP each term. In many cases this was achieved by joint investment by schools and the local authority or solely by buy in (including academies).
- The local authority plays a significant brokerage role between the potential players in school improvement, most noticeably in persuading good and outstanding schools to use their staff and strengths to support other schools.
- Good relationships with schools, strong collaborative approaches where schools, all schools, are partners to meet common aims. Personal relationships with honest conversations, based on mutual trust and respect are key. As one head of a successful federation said, 'C is supportive but I am under no illusion, if things slipped then hard conversations would be held to call me to account quickly.' Most academies have continued to work closely with the local authority and local schools as part of the family of schools
- Early intervention and swift action these local authorities are always seeking to improve education for their children and start discussions as soon as possible. They do not want to wait for an Ofsted judgement although are sometimes forced to do so. Satisfactory schools are under scrutiny.

- Hold difficult conversations with heads and governors which often lead to heads quickly moving on, but there is always a caveat about dignity being preserved.
- Good quality of staff: those working with schools are Ofsted and SIP trained, normally from a successful headship themselves and with ambition for all children and their education. The quality of staff includes that for HR and governor services. There is ongoing professional development and quality assurance in place.
- School leadership is the key so finding ways of growing your own; attracting people to the area; developing skills and engaging successful heads (such as executive headteachers); engagement in the recruitment of headteachers; and working closely with unions and HR to facilitate swift removal of inappropriate staff.
- Thinking forward strategically, developing new approaches for the future in partnership with schools including developing leadership; improving teaching from satisfactory to good and good to outstanding; and compacts of schools and local authority to give capacity to support and drive school improvement.
- The local authority informs schools of key developments locally and nationally that help schools keep their finger on the pulse.
- Holistic approach with many support aspects to call on such as HR and consider all the tools at their disposal and use the one most likely to get a good and sustainable job done.

Most authorities will demonstrate elements of the characteristics above. It is the consistent application that really achieves results. It may be the nature of this research but there was little evidence that the good authorities were over active, the concerns were where action had not been taken.

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