



# The Missing Link:

The evolving role  
of the  
local authority  
in  
school improvement



## **THE MISSING LINK – The evolving role of the local authority in school improvement**

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Also available at [www.adcs.org.uk](http://www.adcs.org.uk) are:

- Schools causing concern, a research project (full report)
- The future role of the local authority in education (full report)
- Case studies of effective local authority practice in school improvement
- Survey of local authorities on schools causing concern
- Results of semi-structured interviews

## The missing link – the evolving role of the local authority in education

### Introduction

The two papers published today by ADCS make a significant contribution to one of the most important policy dilemmas facing local authorities – what is the local authority's role with schools, and particularly in ensuring that every child receives a suitable and high-quality education?

More specifically the two researchers explored:

- What are the characteristics of an effective local authority school improvement service?
- What are the implications for school improvement of increased numbers of academies and free schools?
- What kind of middle tier is needed for the next five years?
- How will local authorities need to change if they are to fulfil that role?

The papers contain significant detail about the work of local authorities with schools and how that work is changing in response to national policy drivers and budget restrictions. The full reports will prove useful to senior managers and politicians in local authorities who are considering how the role of their authority in education locally might change. They include case studies of successful authorities and some examples of the different models of school engagement that are emerging.

This foreword provides recommendations for local authorities and for the Department for Education based on the research findings. The findings from this work will be used to provide more detailed recommendations to government on the statutory guidance for schools causing concern and to Ofsted in response to the current consultation '*A Good Education for All*'.

### The policy landscape

Jonathan Crossley-Holland's examination of the policy landscape clearly highlights the scale of change in the system, with 50% of secondary schools having become, or in the process of becoming academies, while maintained schools have increased responsibility for their own improvement. There is no doubt that there will be a mixed economy in school provision, particularly in primaries, for some time to come, and even where all schools are academies, there will be a variety of governance arrangements to take into account when considering school improvement policy, nationally and locally.

The ever-rising bar of school performance, as defined by floor standards and Ofsted inspection frameworks, and the proliferation of changes to funding, curriculum and qualifications require a significant system of school support and improvement for all schools to keep pace with requirements. There is a clear conclusion from these papers that chimes with the wider academic research into improving school systems – schools don't improve alone and where leadership is lacking performance can decline quickly; this is true for **all** schools. All school systems should have a transparent and robust means of dealing with failure in individual schools, and where possible preventing decline from affecting the education of its pupils.

It has been suggested that such a system requires a mediating layer, or middle tier, to

perform particular tasks. This includes the '*bread and butter*' tasks of informative bulletins and policy updates and engagement with stakeholders and parents, as well as less easily defined roles such as the building and active facilitation of a culture of collaboration and professional expertise and the propagation of a vision for education within the community of schools. Also required are the active building and brokering of school-to-school support packages, securing a supply of headteachers and governors and the power to take action when a school goes into decline. Whether it is called a 'middle tier' or a 'mediating layer', and the two researchers use different terminology, what is clear is that these functions are necessary.

Academy chains are successfully performing some of the functions required for schools within their chain but their capacity to expand is limited, as Robert Hill's report for the National College shows<sup>1</sup>. Many converter academies are seeking a framework for collaboration and support in informal or formal agreements with each other, academy chains or the local authority. It is not yet clear how decline will be dealt with in these schools or within academy chains that fail to improve when the supply of new and existing sponsors is limited.

Collaboration is key both to preventing decline and to having the resources and expertise to turn a school around and the most successful school systems draw on the collective expertise of the school community. In England, some elements of a self-sustaining school system are beginning to appear but it is not yet clear how that system will cope with increasing expectations and thus the possibility of increasing numbers of schools failing to meet those expectations.

*The first set of recommendations stemming from these two papers then relate to lines of accountability and to the building of a self-improving school system.*

### **Group 1 – Accountability**

- ✦ *That a clear accountability framework is put in place that encompasses all schools, and complements the statutory guidance for local authorities on schools causing concern, to include:*
  - ✦ *the steps and consequences for governors and sponsors when academy standards decline beyond what is acceptable;*
  - ✦ *who identifies that decline;*
  - ✦ *who has the power to take action; and*
  - ✦ *what resources will be drawn upon to drive improvement.*
- ✦ *That school funding and that to local authorities should reflect their responsibilities within this accountability framework, including recognition of:*
  - ✦ *the importance of monitoring soft intelligence and local information;*
  - ✦ *the resources required to intervene in and improve schools in special measures.*

### **Moral purpose and early intervention**

The funding challenge facing local authorities looms large, as does the reduction in government grants and recoupment of LACSEG funding for administrative costs

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<sup>1</sup> Hill, R, 2012, 'The growth of academy chains: implications for leaders and leadership', National College of School Leadership.

associated with maintaining schools and the related support systems. This raises the question of how far local authorities can continue to provide maintained schools with the same services in the same form as they have done in the past, and what services they will continue to provide to academies.

In reconsidering their relationship with schools, local authorities should have regard to approaches of those local authorities that have been shown to have effectively supported a very large proportion of their schools to be good or outstanding, as identified by Debbie Pritchard's research into schools causing concern. These authorities range in population size, deprivation and staffing capacity in their core school improvement team. What they have in common is the culture of aspiration and the calibre of the staff. They draw on the resources of the local school community to offer tailored packages of support and promote wider collaboration between schools in their area. Local knowledge is key to making the most of the resources available to a school for improvement: many academy chains recognise the need for a local identity, and the National College increasingly calls on the local intelligence of the local authority when arranging support packages through National Leaders of Education.

The survey of local authorities, undertaken to inform Debbie Pritchard's work on schools causing concern, reveals the majority of local authorities have the will and the capacity to sustain some kind of role in monitoring, supporting and challenging schools to improve. This drive comes from a strong sense of moral purpose for all children and their well-being as well as an understanding of schools as parts of the local community that the local authority serves. Jonathan Crossley-Holland's paper identifies other key functions that the local authority performs for all schools, such as overseeing admissions, and services for vulnerable children. Schools recognise the benefits of working with the local authority to pool resources to continue to perform these functions.

Many local authorities are negotiating access to data with all schools, some are continuing to provide or broker school improvement partners, as well as facilitating access to more substantial support packages from other local schools where required. They do so in partnership and with the agreement of schools. There is nothing stopping all local authorities from forming, leading or supporting these partnerships for the benefit of all schools in their area<sup>2</sup>.

The research into effective work with schools causing concern also shows that the quality of governors is key to ensuring the robust accountability that is fundamental to successful autonomous schools. In converter academies, governors hold all the power to act early and challenge and support the school to improve. If all schools are to be supported to improve, whatever their current performance, engaging high quality and well trained governors in school improvement is one ingredient for success.

*The second set of recommendations then relate to local authorities and their future relationships with schools; the role of governors and how national improvement bodies might support these new developments.*

## **Group 2 – Local authorities and their relationship with schools**

- *That all local authorities continue to use all information at their disposal to monitor all school performance, including how they serve the most vulnerable. This should*

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<sup>2</sup> Case studies of local authority school improvement services are provided at [www.adcs.org.uk](http://www.adcs.org.uk)

*all school performance, including how they serve the most vulnerable. This should include:*

- negotiating with all types of schools in their area to have access to up-to-date data for monitoring and challenge purposes;*
  - forming wider partnerships relating to the other functions of a mediating layer fulfilled by the local authority.*
- *That ADCS support these negotiations locally by holding discussions nationally with the leaders of large academy chains.*
- *That local authorities use moral leadership, core funding and the resources of local schools to:*
- challenge heads and governors of all types of schools to explain and improve their own performance; and*
  - encourage all heads to participate in a self-improving school system, drawing down and providing support where appropriate.*
- *That local authorities provide or commission high quality governor training and support services to maintained schools and offer as a traded service to academy governors. Local authorities should consider making governor training a mandatory requirement for **all** governors in maintained schools.*
- *That consideration is given to how best practice in school improvement can be shared more broadly and how those local authorities whose performance is poor can be supported to improve. This might include:*
- the forming of a school improvement best practice forum, made of local authorities and academy chains that have demonstrated effectiveness and impact; and*
  - the provision of support packages from national improvement bodies.*

## **Schools causing concern**

For the most effective local authorities, a satisfactory school has never been good enough and relationships with schools have been built on a shared commitment to improvement within a family of schools. That has not changed as schools become academies, and both papers provide examples of local authorities working with all their schools, academies or not, in chains or not, to support a school-to-school improvement effort. ADCS support the essence of the proposals by HMCI Michael Wilshaw to assume that schools currently graded satisfactory are in need of improvement and to give them a timeframe in which to improve to *good* or face special measures, though we have some concerns about the implementation. We support the principle for the simple reason that this is what the best local authorities already do with schools for which they are accountable.

The self-improving school system can provide a significant element of the collaboration and support required by good schools to become great. They can provide support to improve where that support is requested by the head or governors. But both papers identify limits to what a collaborative system can achieve alone.

- Where the leadership of the school is not open to challenge or assistance – who will recognise the early signs of failure and have the challenging conversations to make the necessary changes?

- As increasing numbers of schools fall into an Ofsted category, does the school system have the capacity to provide support to a rising number of schools?

The collaborative capacity of the local community of schools to work with schools causing concern is key to any effort to build a self-sustaining and improving school system. This is shown in our research to be limited in practice by an artificial division between *outstanding* maintained schools and academies – the former's capacity to work with under-performing schools as a support partner or sponsor is not being recognised by the Department for Education as a suitable alternative to sponsored academy status under the latter. The evidence of converter academies supporting either struggling academies or maintained schools is limited, while our research shows some heads of maintained schools feeling that their skills are not used because they do not run an academy.

The conclusions of the research into schools causing concern should sound a note of caution to policymakers about the supposed efficacy of a “big stick” approach alone. Inspections, warning notices and academy orders alone do not improve a school, though they must be available for any earlier negotiations to be effective. The analysis of the performance of schools in each local authority found no connection with the use of warning notices by the local authority – they were used sparingly in both the best and worst authorities.

Leadership, both of the head and of governors, are what matter in turning a school around when it is in decline. The most effective local authorities take action long before a warning notice is necessary: using data and soft intelligence to challenge schools, heads and governors, on apparent decline in performance, to arrange support and where necessary have the tough conversations about the departure of staff, heads or governors who are hindering change. They appoint additional governors, or replace existing ones with an interim executive board, through negotiation rather than statutory intervention. Such success requires a culture of aspiration and a cohort of high quality staff who command the respect of those being challenged. It must be noted here that of the 90 schools that came out of special measures as good or better, 88 did so while remaining maintained by the local authority – structural change in the form of academisation is not the only effective means of turning around failure. Some of our concerns about the proposals from Ofsted in dealing with satisfactory schools stem from the apparent impossibility of exiting from special measures whilst remaining a maintained school.

The messages from academy chains, and the heads of their schools are similar – the same tools are used to maintain a culture of excellence within the family of schools, whether an academy chain, federation or local authority family of schools. Headteachers who had brought schools out of special measures in the maintained sector tell a similar story to those who take on schools as the sponsors of academies: be prepared to have tough conversations, spot talent and make use of it, draw on the resources of the school community and, vitally, the need for a critical friend outside of the school but with its interests at heart. The lessons from schools that have declined, and then improved, are encapsulated in 5 case studies published alongside this report.

These reports are not just about the practice in the best local authorities, but also where local authorities have not played a strong and effective role in challenging poor performance in schools or in supporting them to improve. Some local authorities have an alarming number of schools in a category of one kind or another, and these numbers might

be expected to grow in the turbulent times ahead. There is a moral imperative for those local authorities who do not have the capacity to effectively support schools who are in difficulty, to work to find alternative solutions for those schools – be that building the capacity of the local community of schools to support each other; commissioning, or persuading the family of schools to commission, external challenge and support services; drawing on national resources such as those of the National College; and, where appropriate, having discussions with potential academy sponsors to explore structural solutions.

Those who fail to do all or any of these things will quickly see the effect of rising floor targets and stricter inspection frameworks as increasing numbers of schools become eligible for intervention through the powers of the Secretary of State – there is little doubt what the proposed solution will be then. Conversely, those local authorities who offer a vision of education for their schools, monitor their progress and offer effective support from whatever source where it is required will find many schools ‘biting their hands off’ as an effective shelter from the pending policy storm.

*The third set of recommendations relate to challenge, support and intervention by the local authority and makes recommendations for the Department for Education.*

### **Group 3 - Schools Causing Concern**

- *That where maintained schools fail to improve, local authorities use their statutory powers robustly, drawing on the most appropriate solutions available in the circumstances, including federations and sponsored academy solutions.*
- *That the statutory guidance for local authorities on schools causing concern is revised to:*
  - *make clear the powers of local authorities to intervene in schools that are deemed to require improvement under the new categorisation;*
  - *emphasise the ability, if not the duty, of local authorities to monitor standards in all schools;*
  - *clarify the use of additional governors and interim executive boards without the use of warning notices, as is common practice in effective local authorities and gives local authorities similar powers to some academy executive trusts;*
  - *be clear that the local authority will be consulted on the contents of any warning notice requested or directed by the Secretary of State.*
- *That all local authorities should adapt the categorisation of their schools to reflect that schools previously rated satisfactory will in future be deemed to require improvement;*
- *That central and local government recognise and plan for:*
  - *the increased resources necessary to intervene effectively in the larger number of schools in a category under the new categorisation; and*
  - *the need to work in partnership to supply sufficient, quality assured improvement partners and sponsors for those who fall into special measures.*
- *That the capacity of all outstanding schools to support schools causing concern should be recognised and where it is offered, that capacity drawn upon, no matter the type of school. This should include drawing on National and Local Leaders in Education when identifying possible support packages, including structural or sponsored solutions for*

*schools in special measures.*

- *That local authorities should support the building and brokering and quality assurance of school-to-school improvement packages for schools causing concern, drawing on wider resources where necessary.*
- *That local authorities, where they continue to directly offer their support services to schools causing concern offer those services beyond their boundaries where there is demand for them. This will require local authorities to consider how far services effectively meet the needs of schools causing concern. In doing so, local authorities may wish to draw upon the characteristics and functions of an effective local authority produced as part of this research*
- *That where intervention or support is required in academies, the relevant accountable body communicates with the relevant local authority and considers:*
  - *taking action based on reports from the local authority of poor performance;*
  - *drawing on the knowledge of the local authority to identify possible support packages or sponsors;*
  - *purchasing support directly from the local authority where it is an effective provider;*
  - *using locally trained and accredited governors as interim governors where required.*

I commend these papers and the recommendations to colleagues in local authorities, in government and to schools.

**Matt Dunkley**  
**Immediate Past President**  
**ADCS**

## **Recommendations**

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- ⤴ *School funding and that to local authorities should reflect their responsibilities within this accountability framework, including recognition of:*
  - ⤴ *the importance of monitoring soft intelligence and local information;*
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### **Group 2 – Local authorities and their relationship with schools**

- *That all local authorities continue to use all information at their disposal to monitor all school performance, including how they serve the most vulnerable. This should include:*
  - *negotiating with all types of schools in their area to have access to up-to-date data for monitoring and challenge purposes;*
  - *forming wider partnerships relating to the other functions of a mediating layer fulfilled by the local authority.*
  
- *That ADCS support these negotiations locally by holding discussions nationally with the leaders of large academy chains.*
  
- *That local authorities use moral leadership, core funding and the resources of local schools to:*
  - *challenge heads and governors of all types of schools to explain and improve their own performance; and*
  - *encourage all heads to participate in a self-improving school system, drawing down and providing support where appropriate.*
  
- *That local authorities provide or commission high quality governor training and support services to maintained schools and offer as a traded service to academy governors. Local authorities should consider making governor training a mandatory requirement for **all** governors in maintained schools.*
  
- *That consideration is given to how best practice in school improvement can be shared more broadly and how those local authorities whose performance is poor can be supported to improve. This might include:*
  - *the forming of a school improvement best practice forum, made of local authorities and academy chains that have demonstrated effectiveness and*

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- *using locally trained and accredited governors as interim governors where required.*

## Schools Causing Concern (Executive Summary)

**Debbie Pritchard, freelance Children's Services professional.**

### Summary

It is a vibrant and exciting time in education. New capacity is being developed through school-to-school support and the growth of chains of schools. They do not have the capacity to replace the roles undertaken by local authorities. The Department for Education cannot manage all schools centrally. A mediating layer is needed.

In order to pre-empt decline, monitoring of academies and free-schools needs to include local intelligence and more than retrospective desk-top examination of exam outcomes and Ofsted reports.

The role of governors is crucial. Ways to ensure governors are effective need thorough consideration.

A minority of local authorities do not have the capacity to make best use of the opportunities and be effective champions for children.

The best local authorities do everything in their power and their sphere of influence to ensure the children in their community attend good and outstanding schools. There is every reason that effective local authorities continue to work with, monitor and challenge **all** schools as the champions of children and young people, irrespective of the type of school.

### Introduction

This research was commissioned by the ADCS in order to inform its response to the anticipated consultation on the statutory guidance to local authorities on schools causing concern. The research is intended to be practical in application. The Department for Education signalled its intention that new statutory guidance should be issued in spring 2012.

The focus is on schools causing concern rather than the many other fascinating aspects of education. Expectations of what pupils and schools can achieve continue to rise. The strategic context is fast changing:

- The Education Act 2011 was passed in November 2011.
- The number of academies and free schools has continued to increase. At 1/2/12: 1607 academies and free schools: (373 primary (2% total), 1188 secondary (approximately 45%), 19 special, 24 free schools and three UTCs).
- Local authorities were subject to funding reductions in their school improvement services with the ending of the school improvement partner (SIP) programme and National Strategies and many have implemented further cuts.
- Floor standards for schools have been raised and will be raised again.
- The revised Ofsted framework commenced in January 2012 and will be revised again with significant changes planned including combining satisfactory and notice to improve to become, 'requires improvement.'
- Significant changes to capability processes in education have been announced.

Further current research in this area includes:

- the National College of School Leadership report on academy chains (Hill, 2012);
- the Ministerial Advisory Group commissioned research on the wider roles of the local authority in education (ISOS, 2012);
- the ADCS commissioned research on the developing models of school improvement used by local authorities (Jonathan Crossley-Holland, 2012)<sup>3</sup>.

## Purpose

The purpose of education, as considered in this research, is to ensure that as far as possible every child achieves the best that they can. Schools provide education. Local authorities have had the duty to monitor schools and intervene if they have concerns. The key triggers for intervention are performance and safety.

Performance is indicated by:

- the standards that the pupils might in all the circumstances reasonably be expected to attain;
- where relevant, the standards previously attained by them; or
- the standards attained by pupils at comparable schools.

These standards are broadly indicated by the floor standards. In addition Ofsted inspections will categorise schools as requiring a *notice to improve* or *special measures* with further potential changes following the current Ofsted consultation.

Local authorities have powers of intervention defined in the guidance including:

- the use of warning notices;
- the appointment of additional governors;
- the removal of delegated budgets; and
- the appointment of an interim executive board (IEB) which would be considered to be the governing body of a school.

It became apparent during this research that the specifics of the current statutory guidance (revised February 2012) were unclear.

The **key questions** of this research were defined as:

- a) How are schools causing concern best supported to improve?*
- b) What are the implications as England moves towards an all academy system?*

## Approach to research: an overview

This research has included:

- data analysis (focussing on Ofsted judgements on schools by local authority);
- a literature review;
- semi structured interviews with local authority officers, headteachers, chairs of governors, academy chain chief officers and others including National College;
- a survey of all local authorities;
- case studies of sample local authorities.

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Crossley-Holland's paper on the future role of the local authority in school improvement is summarised in this document pack. The full report can be found at [www.adcs.org.uk](http://www.adcs.org.uk).

The **literature review** considered the national and international context. PISA judges England's standards as 'middling' in OECD terms. McKinsey (2007 and 2010) describes the English education system as good and improving.

The existence of a mediating layer, or its creation, was acknowledged as a necessary prerequisite of excellent education systems. The mediating layer is defined as providing, *'targeted hands-on support for schools'*, acting *'as a communications buffer between the school and the centre,'* and sharing and integrating *'improvements across schools.'* (McKinsey, 2010).

Andreas Schlieffer (PISA) asked (Observer 22.9.11), *'There has been a change of emphasis by this (the Coalition) government giving schools more discretion – yet what are the levers for these schools? What are you going to do about them?'*

Hopkins et al (2011) helpfully summarised the leadership needed as follows:

**'System leadership at the school level** – with school principals almost as concerned about the success of other schools as they are about their own.

**System leadership at the local level** – with practical principles widely shared and used as a basis for local alignment so that school diversity, collaboration and segmentation – that all schools are at different stages in the performance cycle on a continuum from "leading" to "failing" – are deliberately exploited and specific programmes are developed for the groups most at risk.

**System leadership at the system level** – with social justice, moral purpose and a commitment to the success of every learner providing the focus for transformation.'

This could be another description of the good practice described in English local authorities below.

**Data** was used to indicate good practice as good practice is defined by its effect. Ofsted judgements: the proportion of schools within a category by local authority and the proportion of schools judged good or better, were the key indicators. Table one indicates the pattern across England.

**Table 1:** Distribution of Ofsted judgements on schools, 2009 - 2011 in percentages

	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
31/8/09 (21,845)	16	50	32	2
31/8/10 (22,008)	18	50	30	2
31/8/11 (22,171)	20	50	28	2

Information also considered included:

- warning notices;
- schools which have moved out of an Ofsted category and then back in again;
- schools which moved from *notice to improve* to *special measures*;
- Ofsted annual reviews of children's services;
- HMCI annual inspection of schools and follow up questions from the reports;
- the number of academies (sponsored and converter) and free schools by local authority.

Warning notices:

- 29 local authorities had no schools in a category as of 31/8/11 (31 if City of London and Isles of Scilly with only one school each are included). Only nine of those local authorities have ever used a warning notice.
- Between October 2008 and October 2011, 131 warning notices were issued between 46 authorities.
- No warning notices have been issued by the Secretary of State to an academy, there is use of 'pre-warning' notices.

This supports the view that there is **no correlation** between the use of warning notices and effectiveness in addressing schools causing concern.

### **Comparisons of maintained schools and academies**

Too few academies have been inspected so far and the cohort too skewed to make robust judgements on the overall effectiveness of the academy programme. Evidence does show:

- 90 schools in a category were judged good or outstanding at their re-inspection; two of these were academies.
- Schools can be outstanding working with children from deprived backgrounds whether academies or not.
- Some academies have become outstanding when the school had failed its pupils for years as a local authority maintained school.
- Some academies will fail: of the 75 academies inspected in 2010/11 five (6.6%) were judged inadequate.  
Some local authority schools will fail: 321 (6%) of local authority maintained schools inspected in 2010/11 were judged inadequate (2% of all schools inspected).

**Semi-structured interviews** were held, mainly by telephone, with local authority officers where:

- the data indicated there ought to be good practice (sample selected);
- the data indicated an area of interest to pursue (e.g. high use of warning notices);
- the data indicated high levels of schools causing concern.

The local authority policy on schools causing concern and other relevant papers were provided in most cases.

Semi-structured interviews were held with leaders of academy chains, headteachers and governors.

**Case studies** were developed through visits and discussions. Interviews were held with headteachers and some chairs of governors from schools that had led or supported schools causing concern. This includes headteachers of academies. Details of these are to be found in the full report.

A **survey** of all local authorities was used to assess the will and the capacity of local authorities to be engaged in schools causing concern. 59% responded and expressed a will to continue (92% very definitely). The most common reasons given were:

- It is our moral duty for the children in our area.
- We are the champions for children, particularly vulnerable children.
- We have the skills to do it and what we do works.
- We have a statutory duty.

In terms of capacity:

- Significant confidence was expressed in the capacity to identify concerns (72% very confident and 21% some confidence).
- Less confidence in the ability to commission support (45% very confident and 43% some confidence).
- 52% were very confident to take further steps and 33% had some confidence.

### **Key Messages on local authority practice**

The proportion of schools judged outstanding, good, satisfactory or inadequate by Ofsted is used as a key measure. It is flawed as an approach but Ofsted judgements do take the whole context into consideration and it is a national framework so provides a reasonable base.

Combining the measures (taken 31/8/12) of the proportion of schools which are good or outstanding and the proportion of schools which are inadequate demonstrates that:

- Of the 43 local authorities which have 75% or more schools which are good or outstanding, 30 also have 1% or less in a category. This indicates that in terms of school improvement 20% of local authorities were above average on two key indicators at 31/8/11.
- Of the 35 local authorities which have less than 65% of schools which are good or outstanding, 24 also have 3% or more in a category. This indicates that in terms of school improvement 16% of local authorities were below average on two key indicators at 31/8/11.

The extremes, as one would expect, are dominated by smaller authorities where each school is a larger percentage. However there are four local authorities with over 100 schools, and one with over 500 schools, which had **no** schools in a category and more than 75% of which were good or outstanding.

There is a significant variation in the outcomes for schools by local authority which is not explained by context, size or funding.

### **Process**

In terms of expressed policy, most local authorities have a similar approach. This includes:

- collection of data relating to schools including performance, progress, exclusions, finance, governance and attendance;
- analysis of data to categorise schools and raise any concerns (latter to include soft intelligence on matters such as school leadership e.g. head ill);
- formal letter to school explaining concerns and expectations of school to plan action to address concerns;
- action plan agreed with school which the local authority monitors;
- reviews of progress and next steps agreed including ending of categorisation as school causing concern or escalation if progress not satisfactory.

### **What makes the difference between local authorities?**

The processes for local authorities are similar. Clearly there is a spectrum of skills and capacity. Authorities with poorer practice may have some of the attributes described as

good practice; it is the combination of attributes which is evidenced to be very powerful. The key factors in achieving good practice appear to be culture and calibre. The culture unleashes, or not, the calibre. The culture gives confidence to act, or not. The outcomes are not directly related to capacity.

### **Good practice**

Local authorities which have outcomes which are above average or 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 human resources 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 authorities 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 have been under scrutiny.
- **Hold challenging conversations** with heads and governors which can 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 human resources 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; developing good governors and using them to support weaker schools; and working closely with unions and human resources 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 human resources 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. The one caveat to that would be the moving on of heads where heads from other schools were worried that the authority may be too quick off the mark. Heads going into a school that became inadequate were more likely to criticise the authority for not having acted sooner.

### **Poor practice**

Where local authorities outcomes are below average and less positive there appears to be or have been (things can change fast) elements of:

- Being comfortable and complacent as schools are mainly satisfactory, '*Schools have been allowed to be satisfied with being satisfactory*'.
- More support than challenge in the relationship with schools, being placatory rather than risk challenging the autonomy of schools.
- In some instances challenging without partnership, 'doing to' schools and not working with them.
- Demonstrating insufficient quality, rigour or leadership in its work with schools.
- Unclear processes.
- Poor use of data such as not using pupil progress as a key measure.
- Being insufficiently strategic.

- Being slow to take action and not ensuring the best people are in place when and where required.
- Social deprivation, funding, recruitment challenges (including over stability of heads) and size of authority as explanations or excuses.
- Focusing on other priorities within the local authority.
- Being '*Complicit in disguising poor standards in order to pass inspections but with no sustainable plan to raise standards.*' (from interview).

#### **Methods used by good authorities include:**

- Challenging conversation with the headteacher looking at evidence together: in the majority of cases a change of headteacher or a change in their attitude, unlocked progress. If change is needed, then it is fast-tracked.
- Using the opportunity of a school moving into a category to make radical changes if needed.
- Brokering school-to-school support using known good headteachers including, but not exclusively, NLEs and LLEs; NTS; additional governors; IEBs; outstanding teachers; hard and soft federations; and supporting move to academy status.
- Additional governors, governor development, use of IEB and close engagement with governors.
- Joined up support from the full range of local authority services; good quality human resources is particularly important but also includes educational welfare, capital and governance.
- Monitoring visits (most effective when taken side by side with school leaders) with full reports to leadership team and governors.
- Formal meetings to review progress which provide timescales and lead either to success or escalating intervention.

There appears to be considerable confusion as to the actual powers of local authorities with regard to schools causing concern. The research found examples of authorities appointing Interim Executive Boards (IEBs), paying members of IEBs or automatically removing delegation of budgets when a school went into special measures without use of warning notices. Not all authorities believed that this was possible.

There is debate as to the desirability of local authorities being involved at all, particularly where there is an assumption of an all academy system being developed. There are a mixture of factors and views to take into account. The research demonstrated that drivers for the involvement of the local authority with all schools include:

- The local authority has a **responsibility for all children and young people** with a particular role for the most vulnerable and thus has a moral duty and imperative;

- The local authority undertakes a **range of statutory duties** with regard to children and young people which provide them with **holistic information**, access to soft intelligence and a need to work with partners to benefit children and young people;
- The belief that **strong schools make strong communities** is a key driver for school improvement;
- Local people still hold the local authority to account for schools *'the local authority was named and shamed because academy was underperforming; it was a shock to elected members at their lack of power whilst public hold them accountable'* (interview);
- The local authority is **permanent**, unlike businesses; it can be the safety net. Local authorities are, as a governor experienced with working with schools causing concern said, *'often inefficient but better than alternatives – always there. They are responsible for the community and can't let things fail;'*
- Local members are **directly accountable** to their local communities. As one successful headteacher of a federation said, *'centralist models are not democratically accountable; the local and direct connections from voters to decision makers is key. The Department for Education running all schools is too distant;'*
- Local members bring their knowledge of their communities to the table and can provide challenge, support and communication networks (see case study B).
- A mediating layer is needed; using an existing structure and avoiding duplication is desirable.

In contrast reasons for the non-involvement of the local authority, particularly in academies, include:

- Local authorities have **too many responsibilities** from roads to adult care to schools; they can lose focus.
- The **quality of elected members** is variable. As one officer said, *'I find the lack of understanding and knowledge of elected members incredible.'*
- The **quality** of the work undertaken by local authorities is variable.
- A local authority is always operating at **one remove from schools** as schools are autonomous bodies (compared to academy chains).
- Sometimes local and national **political considerations** override what is right educationally.

## Concerns

A wide range of concerns were raised through the research. The most common and most relevant are considered below.

### Powers and capacity of local authorities:

- The quality of local authority school improvement services is variable and some require significant improvement..
- There are reductions in the capacity of local authorities and the information which will be available as contact with schools reduces with role and resources. This includes potential lack of contact with academies and free schools **and** any reduction in the resources of the local authority.
- Issuing warning notices is a bureaucratic and slow process that gets in the way, although they are recognised as a powerful tool to have in the armoury of school improvement.
- Sometimes local authorities have to await a school going into a category before it has the evidence to act, if a school is resistant.
- The insistence by the Department for Education that a school has to be an academy to support an academy will prevent some effective school-to-school support.
- There is a variable quality of elected member engagement, examples were given of lack of ability to make unpopular decisions, having other priorities, lack of understanding of the data and their lack of ability to maintain confidentiality.
- There is a consensus that school-to-school support will not be mature enough to take on the government's expectations for the system or some years, if then.
- Effective school place planning is at risk as new schools are agreed by the Department for Education.

### **Scrutiny and challenge of academies and free schools**

- The reliance on retrospective data (for academies and free schools) by the Department for Education is a risk. Use of early warning signs should be used to anticipate and address decline. There are particular risks in stand-alone schools, with no other oversight of performance.
- There is a lack of understanding of accountability for academies and free schools; this includes the potential powerlessness of the local authority and the lack of clarity on their role with regard to any accountability framework from the Department for Education.
- The intelligence that local authorities have is not used to inform monitoring of all schools, including academies and free schools. This increases the likelihood of decline being undetected.
- Faith academy chains may lack school improvement capacity and the decline may not be picked up or addressed appropriately (Hill, 2012).
- There were concerns expressed on the rising number of exclusions (based on interviews) from some academies and concerns on what happens to these pupils now and as the number of academies increases.

## Common concerns irrespective of type of school

- Schools will decline and it is picked up too late if monitoring is based on desk top data. As a group of headteachers and chairs of governors agreed, *'Someone needs to be able to identify failure early enough and to stop schools bumping along. Action needs to be bold, brave and early; if left then the capacity is lost which is needed to improve quickly.'*
- Changes, including decline, can happen very fast in schools, particularly small or urban ones.
- Capability processes can be slow and laborious, distracting from the core business of teaching and learning but key to improving educational outcomes.
- Governance quality is key. Concerns include:
  - Chairs of governors can become entrenched and there is difficulty in moving them on.
  - Governors rely on the headteacher as conduit and guide so if they are not good then governance is unlikely to be good.
  - The large size and the potentially limited skill set of governing bodies can limit effectiveness.
  - Many governors are not clear on what their role is and how to apply it.
  - Governors have a tendency to support rather than challenge.
  - Stand-alone academies and free schools will be particularly vulnerable to governing bodies lacking the support, or expertise, to identify and prevent decline.
- The current and planned Ofsted frameworks are anticipated to increase the number of schools in a category.
- There is a lack of clarity about the powers, or otherwise, of the Department for Education to issue academy orders or place pressure on local authorities to do so where schools are not in a category.

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February 2012

## The Future Role of Local Authorities in School Improvement (Executive summary)

Jonathan Crossley-Holland, Independent consultant

*'There is a heap of evidence staring policy makers in the face that it is the collaborative group that accelerates performance. These results occur because day to day pressure and support is built into their work. It is social capital that has the quality and speed essential for whole system reform'* (Michael Fullan: *All Systems Go*, 2010)

The McKinsey report argues that *'The best school systems seemed to have relied increasingly on a Middle Tier'*. (Moushed et al, 2010)

### 1. Scope of the paper

There needs 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. At its simplest, no-one has yet managed to support the improvement of a school system the size of the English one, with 28000 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 and their senior staff to 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.

The main paper assesses briefly: the national context; the government's case for, and 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 view of the role of local authorities in school improvement. In the light of this, the report proposes seven key features for the local authority of the future, and provides six brief case studies from local authorities to illustrate them complete with what those local authorities plan to spend on school improvement next year to show what they plan is sustainable. Finally, the paper examines school-to-school support in more detail as one of the key strands of any kind of middle tier offer 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. 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 and are being given greater freedom to determine what they do, as the Department for Education stands back and waits to see what emerges as a result of the changes they have set in hand. What is very uncomfortable for local authorities, is a sense that they are no longer '*proper partners*' with government in raising standards. The biggest threat, however, is not from central government, but of local authorities failing to serve the needs of their schools. One of the most telling conversations I have had while researching this paper has been with Russell Holby, the General Secretary of NAHT. His views, gleaned from going round the country visiting branches, is that many LAs are '*shell-shocked*', (understandably), and on the '*back foot*'. He said they are too 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. The Department for Education believes they have a solution

to these concerns which will encourage primary schools to go down the academy route. It involves them joining a chain, led by a primary convertor academy, perhaps not initially as an academy, but converting later. They recognise 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 government intends '*profound structural change*' (DfE, 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. The DfE justifies this view by reference to England's fall in the PISA rankings from the top 10 to mid-point, the failure to close the attainment gap for the 20% most deprived children, the loss of confidence in secondary exam standards and curriculum and the unjustifiable differences in funding for schools in different parts of the country. These arguments, broadly, seem to be accepted by all political parties.

#### **The government approach to change**

The government has argued in the *Importance of Teaching* White Paper that the two key lessons from international best practice about what drives the improvement in teaching and learning, are, '*school autonomy and accountability*'. A case can be made for accountability but it is much more debateable, whether increased school autonomy for a school system which already has more autonomy than almost any other is going to drive improvement without the support of a strong middle tier. 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*, 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 it 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.
- A transformed school curriculum supported by rigorous assessment and qualifications. There are already indications that GCSEs are being made more difficult.
- 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. 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 including the robustness of performance management. Coasting schools currently rated satisfactory, and whose performance has been flat

for a number of years are the main target. The Department for Education estimates that of the 38% of schools deemed satisfactory, half are in this category or 5000 schools. Schools currently rated outstanding will also be affected.

Many 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. What is very striking about these government changes is the **unprecedented** pressure this is going to place on schools when they are combined. One DCS described it as a '*perfect storm*'. Whilst somewhat grudgingly recognising the role of local authorities, the offer the Department for Education is actively promoting to schools to help them cope with the above is just: academy or free school status, independently or part of a chain; the National College programmes; and the market of providers. This is why **local authorities were never more needed**.

### **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.*"

It is also clear that the Department for Education has yet to make up its mind about which of the functions, including school improvement and school governance, listed above, should stay with local authorities. It is well understood that Ministers regard local authorities as part of the problem, which has created what they see as 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 on the role of the local authority later in the year.

This stream of national initiatives needs a middle tier to explain and mediate at the most basic level. A recent TES/ASCL survey shows that more than 50% of headteachers, mostly secondary, want to leave the profession and ascribe their concerns to the new policy initiatives (TES, March 2012). As one infant school's 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*'.

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,<sup>4</sup> has assessed local authority effectiveness in school improvement first by percentage of schools in a local authority which are good or outstanding - as of 31<sup>st</sup> August 2011, 28% of LAs had 75% or more such schools. Secondly, by the low number of schools judged to be inadequate in those categories - 40% of LAs 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 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 LAs, with a change in leadership. It is now no mystery what it takes for a local authority to be effective in school improvement. It is important that local government finds a way to give a higher profile to the many LAs that are very effective and finds a way to tackle those that are underperforming.

#### **4. How far has the academy programme developed**

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 secondary and 4% of primary schools are, or are in the process of becoming academies, although most are not yet part of chains.

The National College has just published a report on *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. The National College report also confirms the view that secondary academies improved faster than the average for all secondary schools between 2008/9 and 2010/11 - 12.5% compared to 9.1%; considerably less than the 2008/9 and 2009/10 differential of twice as fast, which some academy enthusiasts have been fond of quoting. The report also notes that the gap has narrowed most recently to 3% (Hill, 2012). What the report also pins down is the views of the academy chains on how fast they can expand. It falls well short of enabling the Department for Education to achieve, through these chains, their objective of academy status becoming the norm.

By choice, most schools will not become academies over the next five years. Many local authorities too are finding that academy schools can be an important part of a whole systems approach, from buying services to sharing good practice and providing school-to-school support. A key question that many local authorities are considering, therefore, is do they go all out to limit the growth of academies or incorporate the programme in their overall approach to school improvement? The prospect of the loss of funding because of LACSEG and fears about the loss of local accountability are making it hard to be anything but defensive. But shrewd local authorities are responding positively to the challenge to raise standards, focussing on the need to prevent schools falling into categories, harnessing the academy programme to help tackle long-standing barriers to raising standards, and having the confidence to make greater use of their influence to achieve their goals.

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<sup>4</sup> The executive summary of Debbie Pritchard's report forms part of this pack of documents. The full report can be found at [www.adcs.org.uk](http://www.adcs.org.uk).

## 5. The effective local authority of the future: seven key features

It is possible to delineate seven 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 authority's 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 has produced a very useful report for ADCS referred to earlier. Her summary of the characteristics of the local authorities which are best at tackling schools causing concern is attached as Annex 2 in the main report. They 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.

## Key features of the local authority of the future in school improvement

1. An inspiring and inspirational educational vision and values for the local authority area developed with schools which is underpinned by the advocacy role for every child.
2. Maximising the use of influence to shape the system.
3. Building a self-sustaining improving school system for all schools, which schools own and drive and which seeks to exceed national standards.
4. An ability to use engagement with all schools to strengthen other functions.
5. Securing sustainable funding to deliver the self-improving system through the successful engagement of key elected members and chief executives.
6. Facilitate partnerships and operational links with local stakeholders and agencies.
7. Facilitate communication between the schools and government and understanding of the wider system.

What underpins all the features is a shift in relationship to one where schools drive the agenda, whilst still ensuring that there is a vision and strategy and culture for improvement including a guarantee of effective challenge from a highly credible team at the local authority. 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 their current tone is likely to be counterproductive. 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. An increasingly sophisticated approach to school-to-school support needs to be a key feature of the school improvement offer. There is a suggested four stages of school-to-school support brokered by the local authority set out in the main report to promote discussion about what that might look like.

### 6. Local authority exemplars

Attached to the full report are six examples of local authorities that display elements of the seven key features as well as having a robust approach to whole system improvement. They are categorised under three models: where the local authority still mainly provides

services; where the local authority commissions; and the third where commissioning is undertaken by a partnership body.

## **7. Conclusions**

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 LAs that can provide the support they need'*, but these schools will look elsewhere if local authorities cannot. The 30,000 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 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 not just good school improvement practice but important for delivering the 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 therefore 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, 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 or about how to develop it.