

The Future Role of Local Authorities in School Improvement

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Summary

The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) has published two related research reports on the role of local authorities in an increasingly autonomous school system. This report considers their evolving role as the 'Middle Tier' supporting school improvement; the other (see 'related briefings') is focused on schools causing concern, with an emphasis on local authorities' role.

Overview

The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) has published two related research reports on the role of local authorities (LAs) in an increasingly autonomous school system. This report considers their evolving role as the 'Middle Tier' supporting school improvement; the other (see 'related briefings') is focused on schools causing concern, with an emphasis on local authorities' role. The reports provide an evidence base to help inform ADCS's response to the anticipated consultation on revision of the statutory guidance on schools causing concern, and to inform local authority thinking – and planning – about the changing nature of the 'Middle Tier' (between central government and schools). An additional document, [*The Missing Link: the evolving role of the local authority in school improvement*](#), comprises a foreword by Matt Dunkley (Immediate Past President of ADCS, who initiated the research), a list of recommendations (mainly for LAs and the DfE), and executive summaries of the reports.

These reports are further contributions to the ongoing discussion of the rapid changes taking place in the school system and the implications for LAs (see also related CSN briefings on the National College report [*The growth of Academy Chains*](#) and the LAAR project interim report [*The evolving role of the local authority*](#)). LAs may wish to consider the possible benefit of circulating this briefing to headteachers and chairs of governing bodies.

This report's author (Jonathan Crossley-Holland, who had a long and distinguished career in local government, including 11 years as Executive Director of Sheffield City Council first for Education then for Children and Young People's Services) describes the paper as a 'think piece'. Based on his own knowledge and experience, and interviews with a range of senior colleagues, it is aimed at helping DCSs and others to consider two key questions: what kind of Middle Tier will develop over the next five years, and how will LAs need to change if they want to continue to play that role?

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The paper considers the current national context, the DfE's view of the role of LAs, the development of the Academy programme, the effectiveness of LAs' school improvement, the effective LA of the future and current models of practice to inform this future role, and school-to-school support. It concludes that 'There is a huge opportunity here for local authorities if they can meet schools' needs', and sets out in an annex six case study exemplars of LA good practice suited to the future role.

Briefing in full

The key message of the paper is that 'it is in LAs' hands whether or not they want to play a lead role in the improvement of all their schools.' It argues that the unprecedented pressure on schools means that this role was never more needed; that, in some ways, LAs and schools have more room than usual (albeit with fewer resources) as the DfE 'stands back and waits to see what emerges in the form of a middle tier as a result of the changes they have put in place'; and that the greatest threat lies in LAs failing to meet the needs of their schools. Whilst Academy chains are an alternative middle tier for aspects of the LA role, they cannot undertake it fully.

Russell Hobby, General Secretary of the NAHT (with 23,000, mostly primary, headteachers and deputies in membership) is quoted as describing many LAs as 'shell-shocked' (understandably) and 'on the back foot', often failing to articulate a vision of how they would provide support in a way which recognises the new relationship – but that primary schools in particular would 'bite their hands off' if LAs could do that effectively.

The national context

The Government's position (formally set out in the 2010 Schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*) is summarised as intending 'profound structural change' and 'rigorous attention to standards', with autonomous schools driving the shape of the support they need; it sees the system as seriously underperforming, or even failing (evidenced by England's fall in the OECD's PISA international rankings, the failure to close the gap between the 20% most deprived and the rest, loss of confidence in the secondary curriculum and qualifications, and inequity in current school funding formulae). The paper suggests that Ministers have avoided closer scrutiny because 'everyone feels the force of these arguments after a period in which school funding has been doubled', and '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 key features of the Government's programme are set out as:

- a self-improving school system
- the National College for School Leadership programmes
- initiatives to improve teaching quality
- a transformed school curriculum
- prioritisation of favoured capital projects (eg. Free Schools and University Technical Colleges rather than primary schools with expanding rolls)
- changes to performance tables and floor targets

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- ratchetting up of Ofsted standards, with a much stronger focus on teaching quality and behaviour
- the introduction of a national school funding formula (now deferred until the next spending review period).

'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 paper highlights the unprecedented pressure that the combination of these changes is placing on schools (described by one AD as 'a perfect storm'), with little support other than Academy status, National College programmes, free market providers and LAs with greatly reduced resources – and observes that this is why LAs were never more needed.

The DfE's view on the role of LAs

The White Paper said the Government would '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.' The DfE has yet to make up its mind about which functions should stay with local authorities in the long run, but has established a [Ministerial Advisory Group](#) on the role of LAs, of which the LAAR project (see related briefings) is part; this is due to produce its final report at the end of May, so a more explicit view can be expected later this year.

The paper comments that '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.'

[Questioned about his 'commissioners' idea by the House of Commons Education Select Committee (29 February 2012, Qs 7-8), Sir Michael said, "If there are going to be more academies and more independent, autonomous schools...we need to think about how we are going to manage underperformance. Who is going to do it? Is it going to be the Secretary of State and his officials at the centre or is it going to be another form of intermediary organisation? It seems to me that, if we do not think about this one carefully, we could have a situation where Whitehall is controlling an increasing number of independent and autonomous schools, and finding it very difficult to do so."]

How far has the Academy programme developed?

The paper outlines progress towards the DfE's stated ambition of Academies being the norm: including those currently in the pipeline, approaching half of secondary schools and more than four per cent of primaries will be Academies by the end of this year. '3 in 5 outstanding secondary schools are academies and 1 in 10 outstanding primary schools. This proportion of outstanding

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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... 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.'

Predicting how many schools will become Academies is hard but, apart from those forced to do so because of their performance, many schools, both primary and secondary, are weighing up what will best meet their needs, and the paper lists the likely important factors:

- how quickly a tipping point is reached
- the capacity of sponsored Academy chains to grow (see related briefings)
- schools', especially primaries, confidence in their LA to provide alternative ways of securing support to meet the challenges they face
- how schools, and public opinion more generally, will react as it becomes clear that Academy status is not an instant cure ('The results, now emerging, show a much smaller advantage compared to other types of school, especially for standalone academies.')
- what actions the DfE takes to influence schools' choices and to shape the kind of Middle Tier required – which will be influenced by political as well as practical considerations.

LA view of Academy status

The paper points out that it has been hard for LAs to be positive about schools converting because of the 'excessive financial penalty which LACSEG [the grant in place of central services] imposes, despite its reduction by 40% from 2011'. It also reports concerns about the inability to intervene when Academies underperform, their withdrawal from the wider education community (which appears to have happened in only a minority of cases) and the danger of this increasing under the next generation of school leaders, whose whole career may have been within Academies.

Academy chains vary greatly; whilst some are mostly self-contained, others work with LAs – and all the LAs in the case studies actively embrace Academies as part of their family of schools. The ability of LAs to ensure effective school improvement is key to their ability to meet the needs of schools and to maximise their influence on the local system as a whole, including on Academies.

The effectiveness of LAs' school improvement

According to Ofsted, 26 per cent of LAs are outstanding or good at school improvement and 21 per cent are in need of improvement. The paper cross-refers to the parallel ADCS report, *Schools causing concern* (see related briefings), and observes that it is important that a way is found to tackle the LAs that are ineffective in school improvement, which is undermining the argument for LAs to continue playing a lead role, and comments that '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 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.'

The importance is emphasised of retaining the support of elected members and chief executives, to guard against the temptation, as the next round of budget pressures bites, to (reluctantly) conclude that (in view of the DfE's perceived indifference to LAs) this is an area where costs can be reduced even further.

The effective LA of the future

The paper sets out in a table seven suggested key features and linked activities of the effective LA of the future, focusing on school improvement, but not viewing it in isolation from other functions as they are interdependent. It highlights the features that could also be carried out by an Academy chain, to illustrate the similarities and differences. '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.'

The seven features (summarised) are:

- an inspiring and inspirational vision
- maximise use of influence to shape the system
- building a self-sustaining improving school system for all schools
- ability to use engagement with all schools to strengthen other functions
- securing sustainable funding to deliver the self-improving system
- facilitate partnerships and operational links with local stakeholder agencies
- facilitate communication between schools and government, and understanding of the wider system.

Underpinning 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 on issues like government policy, and providing services at a price that schools can afford.

The paper also observes that the best Academy chains have taken a very different approach to school governance, and suggest that LAs which are not already doing so should look at ways of streamlining governance and increasing the focus on standards.

Current LA practice to inform the future

The six case studies in the annex are set out under three different models:

1. the traditional mode, where LAs commission and provide most of the services from their own teams; most LAs in this category provide services for all their schools, not just those causing concern, and charge to varying degrees
2. where LAs commission services to support schools, in some cases almost entirely from other schools; most seek to provide services for all their schools

3. LAs which have handed commissioning over to an overarching partnership body.

School to school support

Most LAs offer this as an important, and growing, strand of their offer (for some it is the main method). The benefits are listed as:

- promotes school ownership of their own improvement
- develops school capacity, including future leaders
- enables schools to retain high quality staff
- is potentially the most cost effective
- provides a local framework for National College programmes
- promotes values of moral purpose, collaboration and professionalism.

The paper cautions against formulaic approaches, and suggests that LAs are in an unrivalled position to offer a whole range of school-to-school support, depending on the opportunities and needs of their area at a particular time. It outlines the development of such support through four (non-linear) stages: consortia; formal, contracted work for leading heads with selected schools needing intervention; meeting the needs of the whole system through engagement of all schools; and the capacity for unsupported peer-to-peer challenge.

Conclusion

The final paragraph reads: '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.'

Comment

The context in which LAs are working with schools in their area is changing fast. Many schools have become Academies, and more are doing so – though the rate of conversion has slowed, and its extent varies greatly across LAs. This process, and the cuts required in LA expenditure generally, have greatly diminished the capacity of authorities; at the same time, Academy chains and the private sector have developed their school improvement capacity, increasing the market choice available to schools seeking support. Proposals for changes to school funding, including maximum delegation of budgets, currently subject to consultation will further change LAs' relationship with schools.

In this situation, it is inevitable that LAs, individually and collectively, are reflecting on their role in the school system. These reports from ADCS, along with the other two documents linked in 'related briefings', provide a useful resource to inform such reflection. As Matt Dunkley has commented, "local authorities are shaping their role for themselves, in partnership with schools, including academies, who see the benefit of a community working for the benefit of all children in it. They are seeking to mitigate the risks introduced with more autonomy by building constructive,

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challenging relationships with headteachers and governors in maintained schools, in academies and with chains”.

The importance, and urgency, of LAs securing a continuing and effective role in school improvement lies in the notion of ‘a community working for the benefit of all children in it’. It is hard to conceive how this concept could have any real meaning without LAs maintaining an active engagement with all the schools in their area – where children and young people spend such a crucial, and substantial, part of their lives. And such a change would mark an important shift of responsibility from a democratically accountable authority to a diverse range of providers.

External links

[The Future Role of Local Authorities in School Improvement](#)

Related briefings

[Schools causing concern: a research project](#)

[The growth of Academy Chains](#)

[The evolving role of the local authority](#)

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