



Enabling school improvement

Research undertaken by Isos Partnership

Research commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA)

The ongoing role of councils in school improvement

While the council role in education continues to evolve, one thing that has remained constant is the vital role that councils play in driving school improvement to ensure that children, young people and their families all have access to a good school place.

Bringing strategic clarity and coherence to local education systems, councils act as independent and impartial brokers and evaluators for school improvement support, resulting in stronger support for schools.

In their efforts to drive up school standards, councils have taken a variety of different approaches to developing effective school improvement systems, responding differently to the challenges facing the education system.

Our research, informed by fieldwork discussions with a sample of eight local areas (Cumbria, Dorset, Hampshire, Liverpool, Somerset, Tower Hamlets, West Sussex and Wigan) and supported by discussions with other areas across the country, shows that there are eight key issues:

- local systems are at different stages and taking different approaches in the transition to becoming more autonomous
- in the majority of local areas, strategic partnerships have been formed to facilitate and foster a shared, system-level vision for school improvement
- most local areas we visited were continuing

 and planned to continue to offer local authority school improvement services
- there was less evidence of local systems establishing approaches to the development of system leadership capacity

- most local systems had models of and approaches to school improvement that would be familiar to schools and local authority advisers
- local systems had been planning for reductions in funding and there was uncertainty about the future
- traded services were both complementing and conflicting with other school improvement offers
- local authorities have an important role to play in the local school improvement system.

Although councils are at different points on their journeys there are a number of key themes that can be found across all effective school improvement systems.

The conditions needed to establish effective local school improvement systems

An effective local school improvement system will have a range of features including:

- strong relationships between schools, academies, the LA, and other local and regional partners
- being focussed on context and place, and taking account of these contextual factors in developing an effective local vision
- clear local priorities and clarity about roles and responsibilities
- high-quality school improvement capacity, utilising school and other capacity, and effectively marshalling limited resources

- evidence of impact in improving outcomes, developing school leadership and capacity, and strengthening partnership working
- supporting all children in the local area, including the more vulnerable.

We believe there are nine key conditions that are important in helping to establish such systems. There will of course be differences in emphasis and priority between the conditions, according to the context of the local system, the existing relationships between schools, academies and the council, and the stage of transition. But we believe all of the following conditions will have relevance for most systems.

9 KEY CONDITIONS	How can the local authority help these conditions?
1 clear and compelling vision	LA needs to co-ordinate and provide strategic push. Role for the LA as objective facilitator. Opportunity to focus on place and local context. LA can help to get roles clear.
2 trust and high social capital	LA needs to model effective relationships and partnership working. Local democratic mandate can help sustain relationships founded on shared desire to find solutions.
g engagement from majority of schools and academies	LA needs to be the honest broker. Compelling vision can get schools on board. LA role to reach out to schools, academies and MATs with offer for all local children.
4 leadership from key system leaders	LA has opportunity to engage key leaders and facilitate discussions. Development of system leadership capacity can be a key purpose of local school improvement system.
5 crucial convening and facilitative role for the local authority	LA able to bring the intelligence from across the local school improvement system, utilise existing expertise and capacity, and support evaluation processes.
6 sufficient capacity for school-to-school support	LA needs to support the local partnership to identify local capacity and broker from outside where needed. LA can help map future capacity, encourage school leaders, and commission system leader development programmes.
7 effective links with regional partners	LA needs to engage effectively with regional and sub-regional partners on behalf of and alongside the local school improvement system.
8 sufficient financial contributions	LA needs to support the development of the partnership with funding and/or capacity.
9 structures to enable partnership activity	LA needs to work with schools to develop a multi-tiered structure that will work in their local context. LA can ensure that local school improvement system is high quality and credible.

Key learning

How should local systems ensure their partnerships are sustainable for the future?

One risk for the sustainability of current partnership arrangements is that they are founded on effective working between individuals. When those individuals move on, the basis of the partnership changes and possibly weakens.

That is one of the reasons why some school/ council partnerships have established themselves as separate, school-owned companies. There are positive reasons for this approach but it is not necessarily the right approach for all partnerships.

Positive considerations	Potential challenges	
Hard-wires partnership working into a formal structure, giving it a greater chance of sustainability	Apparent complexity of transition process	
	Basic infrastructure needed to manage transition	
Partnership should endure beyond existing personnel and relationships	Whether the new formal structure will be able to deliver a transformation in the nature of school improvement support or whether it will end up being more of the same, with a slight reshuffling of responsibilities	
Formal status can bring credibility with schools and external partners		
Schools have a clear stake in and ownership of the partnership		
	Future costs of school improvement support and whether schools will be willing to pay for support	
Creates an entity other than the LA or an individual school that is able to employ		
staff and enter into contracts	Whether the local system has the capacity to	
Enables more transparent conversation with schools about what it costs to deliver certain services, what they are willing to buy and what they are not	deliver the support and the credibility with schools	

How can local systems work at different levels?

Local systems often work at three levels: school-level clusters, local area or district-level alliances, and local authority strategic partnerships. Between areas there are clear differences in ambition, scale, and maturity. Nevertheless, local systems will want to:

- compare their own arrangements with these structures
- review their current strategic partnership with schools and establish one if this does not currently exist
- review how their local system is operating at these three levels and identify where they need to strengthen current arrangements.

promote effective

communication, develop

system leader capacity,

link to other key priorities,

and promote sustainability



and challenge, brokering

and deploying support for

evaluation

development, monitoring and

vulnerable schools, system leader

and staff development

procurement of school

improvement support

opportunities, and

to enable efficient

How should local systems look beyond the local area?

To be sustainable in the long term local systems must look for opportunities beyond their own local area. This might mean identifying neighbouring local systems with similar challenges, finding opportunities to share practice, or establishing where particular local systems have areas of expertise to share. This might mean looking to teaching school alliances that work beyond the boundaries of one local system. It should mean looking for sources of support and funding to help develop the local partnership further, or perhaps to work and trade across boundaries.

The use of the new £140 million Strategic School Improvement Fund is an opportunity for schools and their council to work together to identify joint priorities and activities and to make a strategic bid for resources to help develop capacity.

For the full report, including the eight fieldwork case studies, visit:

www.local.gov.uk/enabling-school-improvement



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