



# ENABLING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Research into the role of local authorities in  
supporting local school improvement systems

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Research commissioned by: [Local Government Association](#)

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
<i>Section 1</i> - Introduction .....	4
<i>Section 2</i> - Context .....	6
<i>Section 3</i> – Key messages from our research visits .....	9
<i>Section 4</i> – Conditions for development of effective local school improvement systems .....	18
<i>Section 5</i> – Key challenges .....	26
<i>Section 6</i> – How can LAs support the development of effective local school improvement systems .....	28
<i>Section 7</i> – Learning for local systems .....	32

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Local Government Association commissioned an independent research organisation, Isos Partnership, to undertake this research project into the ongoing role of local authorities in school improvement. The report is informed by fieldwork discussions with a sample of eight local areas (Cumbria, Dorset, Hampshire, Liverpool, Somerset, Tower Hamlets, West Sussex and Wigan). The sample was designed to ensure a mix of local authority areas in terms of size, geography, economic deprivation, and capacity for school-to-school support. Case studies on each of the eight areas are contained within this report.

**Section 2** of this report sets the research project in the context of the current education landscape, and explains how Isos Partnership have built on their two previous national reports on how local systems were evolving in response to the changing education landscape.

**Section 3** summarises the **key issues encountered during fieldwork discussions**, namely that:

- 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 local 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; and
- local authorities have an important role to play in the local school improvement system.

**Section 4** analyses what the research team regard as **nine key conditions** that are important in establishing effective local school improvement systems, based on learning from the fieldwork and discussions with other local areas across the country. The nine key conditions are:

1. A clear and compelling vision for the local school improvement system
2. Trust and high social capital between schools, the local authority, and partners
3. Strong engagement from the majority of schools and academies
4. Leadership from key system leaders
5. A crucial empowering and facilitative role for the local authority
6. Sufficient capacity for school-to-school support
7. Effective links with regional partners
8. Sufficient financial contributions (from schools and the local authority)
9. Structures to enable partnership activity.

**Section 5** reviews the challenges that are being faced in developing local school improvement systems: where the supporting conditions identified in Section 4 are not in place; where a lack of capacity to work with schools is limiting progress; or where a lack of partnership capacity or activity has hindered the ability of key players to work together.

**Section 6** summarises the ways in which **local authorities can support the development of effective local school improvement systems** by developing and nurturing the nine key conditions set out in the report, acting as the convener and helping the local school improvement system to develop:

Local Government Association	Nine key conditions	How can the LA help to develop these conditions?	ISOS
1	<b>Clear and compelling vision</b>	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	<b>Trust and high social capital</b>	LA needs to model effective relationships and partnership working. Local democratic mandate can help to sustain relationships founded on shared desire to find solutions.	
3	<b>Engagement from majority of schools and academies</b>	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	<b>Leadership from key system leaders</b>	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	<b>Crucial convening and facilitative role for the LA</b>	LA able to bring the intelligence from across the local school improvement system, utilise existing expertise and capacity, and support evaluation processes.	
6	<b>Sufficient capacity for school-to-school support</b>	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	<b>Effective links with regional partners</b>	LA needs to engage effectively with regional and sub-regional partners on behalf of and alongside the local school improvement system.	
8	<b>Sufficient financial contributions</b>	LA needs to support the development of the partnership with funding and/or capacity.	
9	<b>Structures to enable partnership activity</b>	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.	

**Section 7** concludes with some messages for local areas, as a way of providing practical learning and questions to help local systems consider future ways of working. They are based around four questions:

- i. *How can local systems work at different levels?* The report considers how local systems are working at the levels of school-level clusters, local area or district-level alliances, and local authority strategic partnerships.
- ii. *How can local authorities develop their ways of working?* The report reflects on some of the key messages for local authorities from Isos Partnership's 2012 report.
- iii. *How should local systems ensure their partnerships are sustainable for the future?* The report considers some of the reasons why some local school/LA partnerships have established themselves as separate, school-owned companies.
- iv. *How should local systems look beyond the local area?* The report reviews some of the opportunities in working beyond the boundaries of the local system.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned an independent research organisation, Isos Partnership ([www.isospartnership.com](http://www.isospartnership.com)), to undertake this research project into the ongoing role of local authorities (LAs) in school improvement. Across England, LAs are responding differently to the challenges facing the education system and are at different points on their journeys in developing effective school improvement systems with their schools and academies. This research project is timely and should have several benefits:

- i. summarising the key issues that were raised during the research team's fieldwork visits;
- ii. describing different approaches to local school improvement and local partnerships;
- iii. explaining the conditions that the research team believe are necessary for local systems to develop effective local school improvement, and how LAs can help to develop them;
- iv. sharing learning with authorities, schools, and academies so they benefit from the evidence gathered about different approaches; and
- v. providing a contribution to the current debate about the future role of LAs in school improvement.

Section 2 of this report sets the research project in the context of the current education landscape, and explains how Isos Partnership have built on their two previous national reports about how local systems were evolving in response to the changing education landscape. Section 3 highlights the key issues that were encountered during fieldwork discussions. Section 4 describes what the research team regard as the key conditions that are necessary for building effective local school improvement systems, based on learning from the fieldwork and discussions with other local areas across the country. Section 5 analyses the challenges that are being faced in developing these local systems and Section 6 summarises the ways in which LAs can support their development. Section 7 concludes with some reflections for local systems.

The research team from Isos Partnership want to thank all the school and academy leaders, local authority officers, and other individuals who made time available to be involved in our research discussions.

### Approach

The research project was undertaken in three broad phases. In Phase 1, we selected and then engaged a sample of local areas. The sample was designed to ensure a mix of local authority areas in terms of size, geography, economic deprivation, and capacity for school-to-school support. The areas selected included rural and urban areas; large shires and small boroughs; areas in the north and south of England; areas with high and low levels of pupils eligible for pupil premium funding; and areas with high and low numbers of teaching schools and national leaders of education compared with other schools. In addition, the sample was designed to capture some of the different approaches being taken to developing local school improvement systems. We have also complemented our in-depth evidence-gathering from these eight local areas with our wider perspectives and knowledge from engagements with other local systems.

Research tools for the study were also developed in Phase 1. In Phase 2, we undertook research visits to the LAs in the sample. These visits included discussions with some or all of the following: LA senior leaders (for example, the Lead Member, Director of Children's Services, Assistant Director for School Improvement or equivalent, and other relevant service heads), school and academy leaders

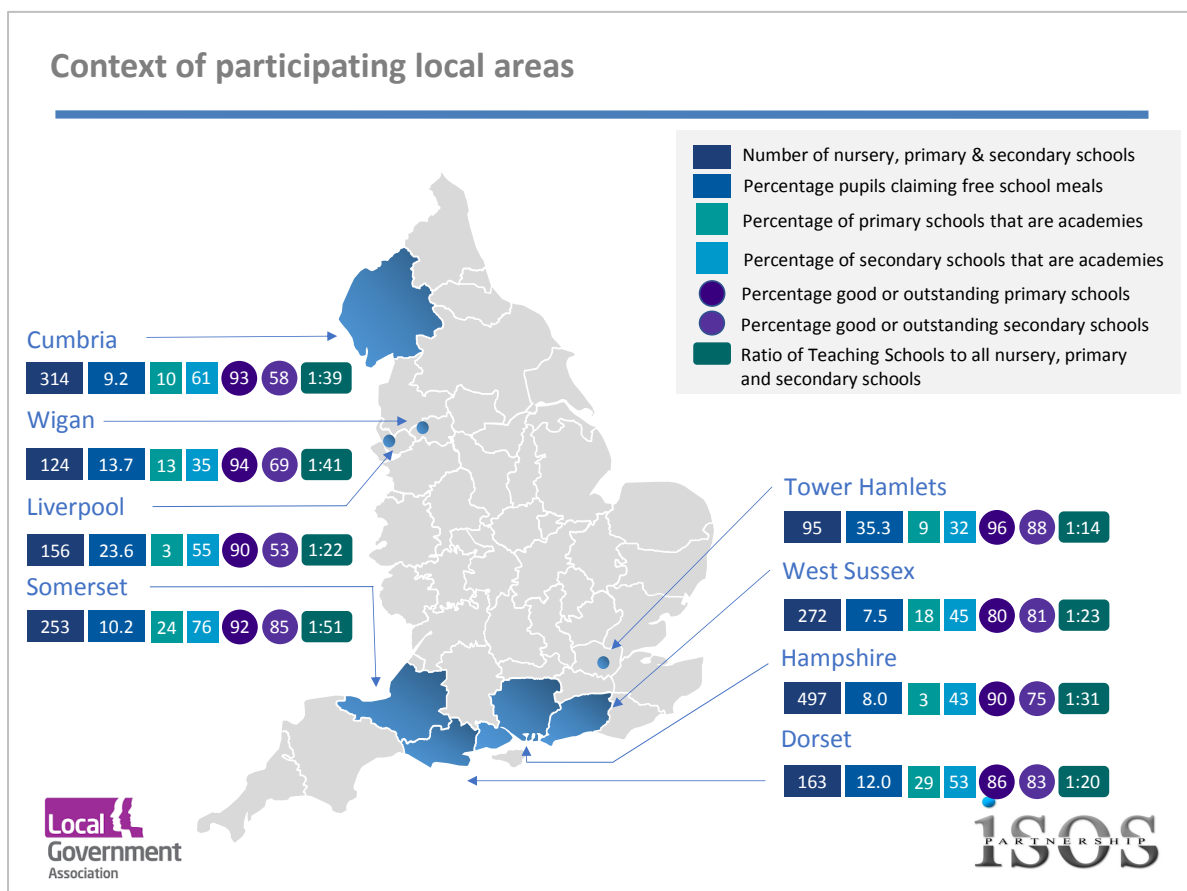
(primary, secondary and special school leaders of both maintained schools and academies, and chief executive officers (CEOs) of multi-academy trusts), and other stakeholders (for example, diocesan representatives). During our visits, the focus of the discussions was to understand:

- the approach to school improvement in the local area, how this was changing and the drivers of those changes;
- the engagement between the LA and schools and academies in school improvement and how they were developing a local school-led system, what partnership structures were in place, and how these were supporting local school-level partnership working;
- successes and challenges in their current approaches, why certain approaches had been adopted, and the impact that had been achieved so far; and
- what this meant in terms of the council role now and in the future.

We then reviewed our learning from all our research visits and checked this against our existing wider knowledge of local systems from other projects, and prepared summary messages that we were able to consider with the local systems on our follow-up visits.

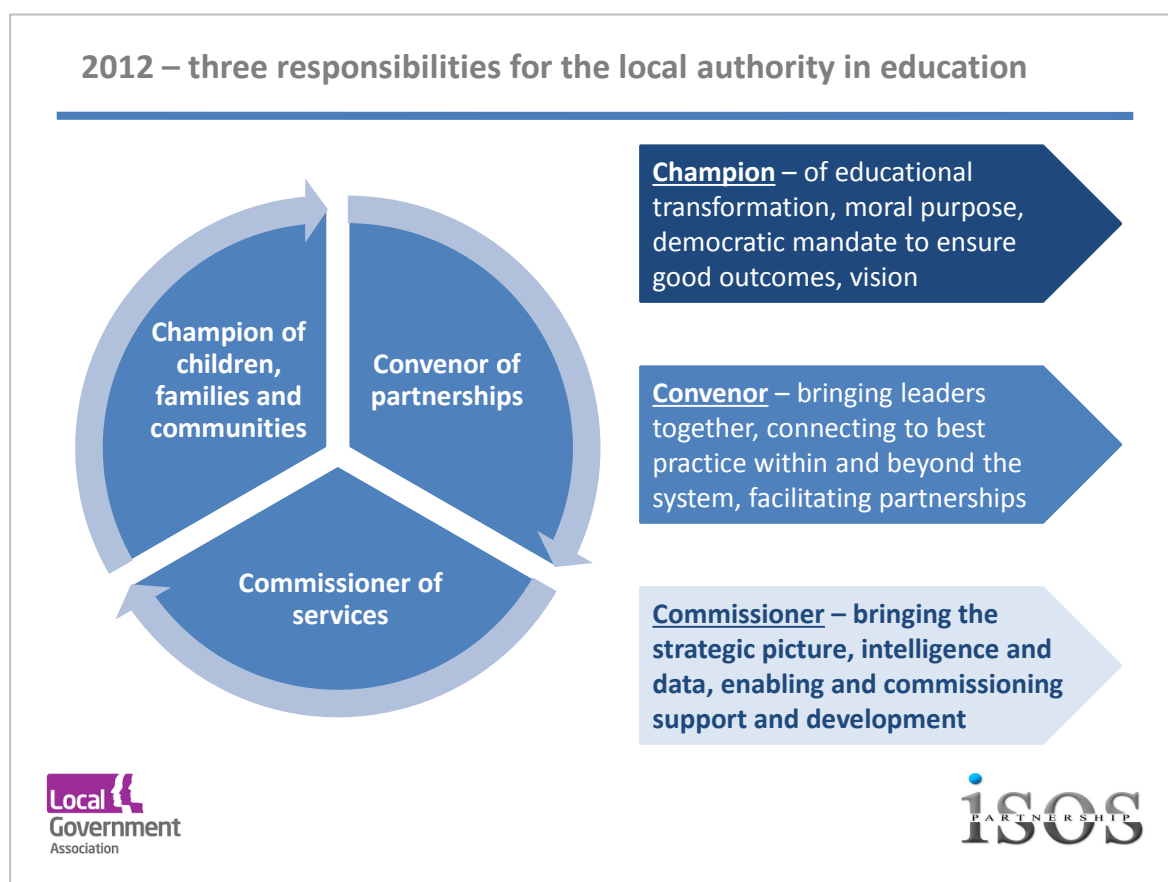
Three of our participating local areas were also featured in the 2013 LGA/Solace publication *The Council Role in School Improvement: case studies of emerging models*.

In this report, “schools” refers to schools of all types: maintained schools, academies, and free schools. We refer specifically to different types of schools when our points relate to them.



## 2. CONTEXT

In 2012, Isos Partnership published a report for the Department for Education (DfE) and LGA that considered the role of the LA in education (Baxter, Parish, Sandals, *Action Research into The Evolving Role of the LA in Education*, DfE/LGA, 2012). The report reflected on how the education system was responding to the 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*, which had stated that “the primary responsibility for improvement rests with schools themselves” and set out an ambition for the “school system to become more effectively self-improving” (DfE, 2010). Isos Partnership’s 2012 report concluded that in response to the extension of school autonomy, the role of the LA in education was evolving to focus on three key areas of responsibility: as a convenor of partnerships; as a champion of children, families and communities; and as a maker and shaper of effective commissioning.

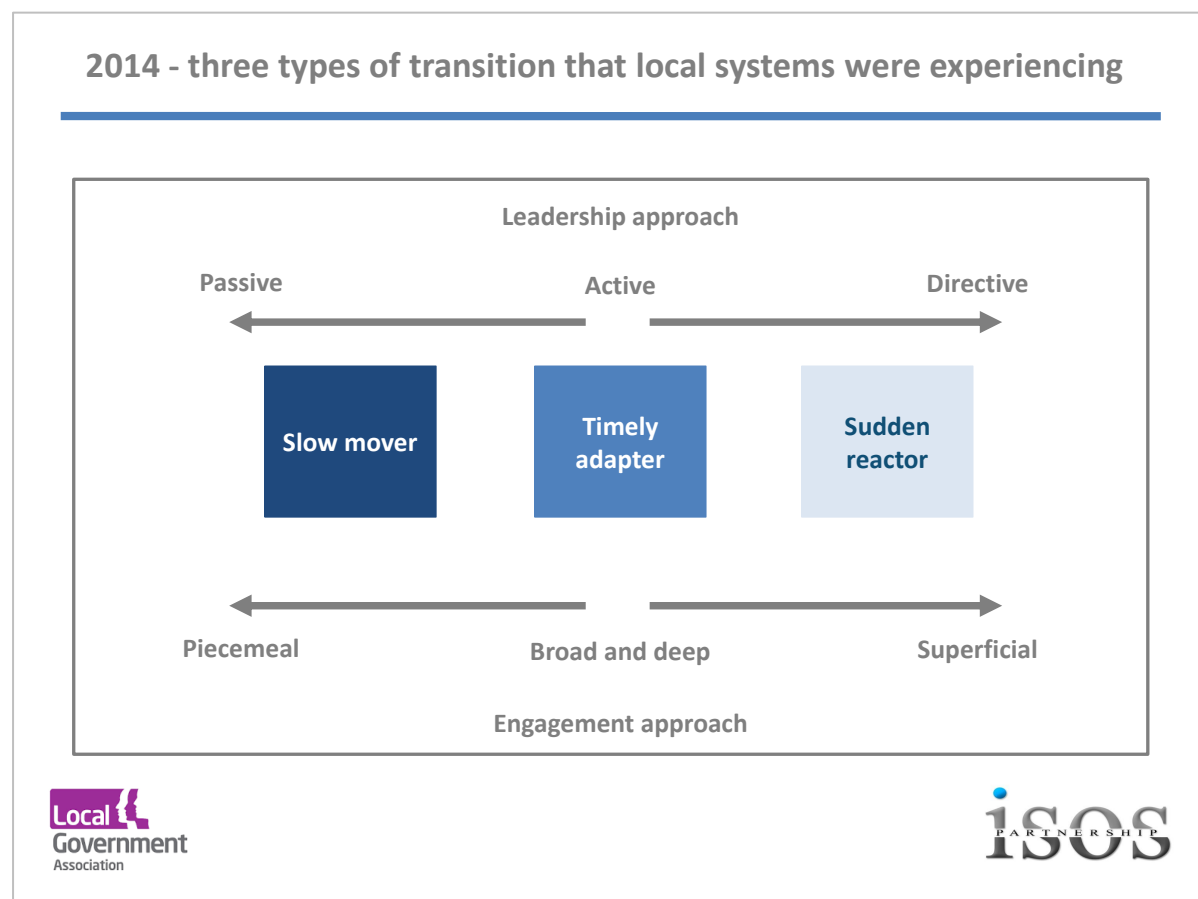


Between 2010 and 2012, David Hargreaves published his influential think-pieces for the National College for School Leadership about the key features of the self-improving school system (for example, *Creating a self-improving school system*, 2010; and *A self-improving school system: Towards maturity*, 2012; National College for School Leadership). The 2010 McKinsey report had emphasised the importance of collaboration between education institutions and the role of the “middle tier” in education (Mourshed, Chijioke, Barber, *How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better*, 2010, McKinsey).

In 2014, Isos Partnership produced a follow-up report for the DfE (Bryant, Sandals, *The Evolving Education System in England: a temperature check*, DfE, 2014). This report looked at the ways in which school improvement, school place-planning and support for vulnerable children were evolving

in 10 local systems. Our 2014 report characterised the ways in which local systems were evolving and summarised three main types:

- **Timely adapters** – systems in which LA services were highly regarded by schools, with a history of encouraging partnership-working, that were mostly high-performing systems, and in which change to a schools-led system was already underway and/or had been led proactively, with LAs and schools working together to create the space and conditions for schools and academies to lead the transition.
- **Slow movers** – systems with historically higher levels of intervention in schools, in which LA services were seen by schools as weak or variable in quality, that were mostly lower-performing systems, and that had been slower in adapting to change or where the leadership of change had been ineffective.
- **Sudden reactors** – systems with different starting points, but the same end goal in mind: namely that LA services should diminish, regardless of quality, and that school partnerships should lead, regardless of their maturity. Change had been dictated and driven quickly, with pace outweighing precision in planning and engagement with school leaders, and without creating the conditions for schools to lead a successful transition.



In 2014, we also described four main factors that had affected the evolution of local systems:

1. Perceived quality of LA education services and access to alternatives. For example, in systems where services were perceived as poor quality, schools felt unleashed and there had been more abrupt changes as schools explored options for connecting to other schools or groups of schools or academies.



2. Strength of connections among schools, and between schools, the LA and other local partners.
3. Past performance of the system.
4. Leadership of change – regardless of performance or perceptions of quality, policy changes provided local systems with a fresh opportunity to demonstrate effective leadership. Those that had been effective had engaged all school types proactively, been open and honest, listened, and ensured schools were driving change within the local system. Those that had been less effective at leading change did the opposite to this by attempting to impose an agenda without first building the conditions for its success, not acting at all or not swiftly enough, or developing the right idea but implementing it badly.

Since 2014, there have been proposals for further reform of the role of LAs in education. In 2016, the White Paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016) proposed that the role of authorities should be focussed on ensuring every child had a school place, ensuring the needs of vulnerable pupils were met, and acting as champions for all parents and families. The White Paper promised that a role for LAs would be established within an education system in which all schools were academies. Since publication of the White Paper, the Government signalled that it would not bring forward legislation to compel all schools to become academies. For the time being, therefore, local education systems are likely to remain a mixture of different types of schools, with a range of different organisations, partnerships and leaders. By February 2017, in its report on the development of multi-academy trusts, the House of Commons Education Committee said about the role of LAs:

*“The Government must clearly define the future role of local authorities, particularly in areas with high numbers of academies. The current uncertainty about their place in the school system is not sustainable and making their role clear should be a priority for the Secretary of State. Their relationship with RSCs [regional schools commissioners] must also form a part of this and formal protocols between local authorities and the RSC structure should be established.”*

House of Commons Education Committee, MATs, HC204, February 2017

In terms of funding for LAs’ duties, the most significant change since 2014 has been the phased removal of the Education Services Grant for LAs. Wide-ranging proposals for a new national funding formula for schools have also been published.

### Defining our terms

In this report, we use the term “effective local school improvement system”. We believe this term has relevance for the local areas with which we have been working, and builds on our learning from our 2012 and 2014 reports. We return to the notion of what constitutes an “effective” system later in the report. We have used the term “local school improvement system” in the following ways in this report:

- **local** – the geographical area based loosely on LA boundaries but not restricted to these boundaries for the purposes of, for example, school-to-school support, activities with other local areas, or work on a sub-regional basis;
- **school improvement** – the activities undertaken within and between schools and academies, and between schools and other key players such as LA officers and advisers, that lead to improved outcomes for children, higher-quality teaching and learning, and strengthened capacity for schools and academies to manage change; and

- **system** – the connections between groups of schools and academies, the LA, teaching school alliances, multi-academy trusts, dioceses, and other local leaders.

### 3. KEY MESSAGES FROM OUR RESEARCH VISITS

During our research visits to participating local systems, we heard about and explored a range of messages. The following section summarises the most significant messages that we discussed about the current role of the LA in school improvement.

#### **Local systems are at different stages and taking different approaches in the transition to becoming more autonomous**

It was apparent from our research visits that local systems were at different points on their journeys. Some already had a clear strategic aim and a genuine direction of travel to bring together schools, academies and the LA to lead the local school improvement system. Some were continuing to successfully maintain the status quo, with schools purchasing school improvement support from LA advisory staff through a core package of support. Even for the most mature systems, with well-established partnerships between the LA and schools that had been operating for a number of years, consideration was being given to how to strengthen the partnership for the future. For other local systems, their strategic direction was less clear; although they perhaps had the key elements, they did not have the coherent vision: one school system leader said ‘it’s like we have the pieces of the jigsaw, but not the picture on the front of the box’. Some systems described a sense of uncertainty: waiting to see what national decisions might be taken about LA statutory responsibilities and funding; or LA officers coming under pressure from council corporate colleagues to generate income from their school improvement activities. One senior LA officer described the danger of people ‘creating their own narratives about the future role of the LA due to a lack of clarity and mixed messages’.

What had caused these differences in approach? The context and challenges of the local area, the recent performance and outcomes of schools, and the existing relationships between schools, academies and the authority were all significant factors. For several systems, there had been a long-standing direction of travel towards their current position: one system described decisions that had been taken 5–10 years ago as instrumental in establishing the current school improvement approach. For other systems, the ways in which school and academy leaders, and multi-academy trust CEOs, had engaged with the LA had been fundamental to the ways in which they were now working; for others, the approach and drive of Lead Members and senior LA officers had been crucial in establishing the current partnership offer. Some systems have been reacting to the immediate funding pressures created by the removal of the Education Services Grant and were both re-modelling their offers to schools and considering collaboratively what the future should look like. We return to many of these points in Section 4 when considering the conditions needed to establish effective local school improvement systems.

What was apparent was the need for capacity from both schools, academies and the LA to help develop local school improvement systems. For several of our systems, there had been a change of direction: one LA, for example, had stepped away from providing school improvement support three years ago and was now re-introducing a ‘school evaluation partner’ role, funded by the LA and with differentiated support based on categorisation decisions. All systems talked about the need for trust and for developments to take time to evolve given their basis in relationships between local players,

schools, academies, and authorities. Finally, several local areas described their approach as “schools and LA-led” or “system-led” – rather than “schools-led” – to explain this requirement for capacity from a number of places rather than just schools.

**In the majority of local areas, strategic partnerships have been formed to facilitate and foster a shared, system-level vision for school improvement**

In many of the systems we visited, the strategic partnership that existed between the LA and local schools had become the fulcrum around which their current school improvement offer revolved. The importance of these partnerships where they were existed was clear: they provided the strategic structure around which schools and the LA could jointly form the vision for local school improvement; they provided a sense of strategic cohesion which mitigated against the risks of fragmentation; and they were providing the opportunities for local school improvement through commissioning, brokering, and evaluating support.

The LAs, in their roles as ‘convenors’, had played an important part in helping to establish and facilitate these structures. The practical support that had been provided by the authorities was through leadership of meetings, providing funding to enable release time for school leaders to chair or lead partnership groups, and providing capacity from existing advisory staff to develop the work of local partnerships by pooling intelligence, brokering support, and co-ordinating activities.

There were differences between the systems we visited in how they were engaging different phases. In some systems, there was primary, secondary and special school representation on the strategic partnership with cross-phase groups sitting underneath the main board. In other systems, both the main boards and subsidiary groupings were organised on a phase-specific basis.

For a number of our systems, there was an important part being played by the small local cluster of schools, particularly in the primary phase. These clusters provided for some of the immediate school improvement needs of schools through shared training and development or peer review. The LA had often played an important role in convening these small clusters of schools across the local area.

**Case study: Cumbria Alliance of System Leaders**

Schools and academies, the LA, and other key partners in Cumbria have been developing their “system-led approach” to school improvement over the last five years. It is based around three tiers of engagement:

- a) school/academy clusters with clear agreements for peer review, sharing data, and providing peer-level support and challenge;
- b) Local Alliances of System Leaders (LASLs) – three across the county – that meet to review the school improvement needs across their area, broker school-to-school support, and review and monitor impact; and
- c) the Cumbria Alliance of System Leaders (CASL) – a company limited by guarantee – that is the county-wide partnership that sets the vision and overall priorities, brings together all key players (including dioceses and headteacher associations), and has the county-wide strategic conversations about priorities and progress.

The goodwill and positive relationships between schools and the LA helped the journey and there has been strong support for the strategic direction through a focus on trust, values, and outcomes

for children. The LA and schools have identified the LASLs and clusters as key – ‘they are at the heart of it’ (Cumbria system leader).

Local elected members in the council have been supportive throughout. The LA has provided funding to release key headteachers to take on the part-time roles of chairs of LASLs and CASL. An LA senior adviser and two learning and improvement advisers work with each LASL: they continue to play important roles in undertaking risk assessments and categorisation, monitoring, and brokering support for vulnerable schools. One system leader said the role of the LASL was to ‘minimise the distance between identifying concerns and making improvements’. Each school cluster has a cluster communication lead that liaises between the cluster and LASL and shares lessons and information. Teaching schools are engaged through the LASLs to offer capacity and support to schools in their region.

Find out more at [www.cumbriaalliance.org.uk](http://www.cumbriaalliance.org.uk)

### **Key learning points**

- A “system-led approach” means the engagement between LA and schools is key. Establishing the vision is important. Start from the strengths in the local area: in Cumbria, the headteacher associations and key school system leaders were vital in joining things up.
- The LA has a critical role to play – ‘we had to be confident enough to say “we have a role”’ – in bringing local intelligence, capacity, and funding. Funding to enable release time for key system leaders helped Cumbria to make progress more quickly than otherwise would have been the case.
- The focus on outcomes for all children has been important in engaging schools and academies, as well as generating pace and demonstrating momentum. There is still a long way to go: the LA said, ‘it will remain a work in progress and we will need to hold our nerve’.
- Aligning all the key players in a “guiding coalition” has helped to sustain progress: these include key system leaders and headteacher associations, the Director of Children’s Services and senior LA officers, and the Lead Member and Chief Executive.

### **Most local areas we visited were continuing – and planned to continue – to offer LA school improvement services**

LAs were continuing to work with their schools and support school improvement needs, even with reduced resources and capacity. There was still an important priority placed on local context, a sense of place, and supporting the needs of local communities with local solutions. However, the availability of school improvement advisory capacity was one of the main differences between the systems we visited. One authority had retained all existing advisers and was recruiting additional capacity. Two systems had most of the costs of their existing advisers paid for through service level agreements with their schools; the advisers then provided a core package either for all schools (where the funding from schools was topped up by the LA) or for those schools that purchased the core package. Other systems had reduced their advisory staff (all significantly so for secondary): some had no advisory staff at all; others had retained a core group of advisers that were able to undertake monitoring and challenge roles for a range of vulnerable schools, or support key strands of activity (literacy, for example) across a local area. One system was re-employing a set of permanent full-time advisers to replace temporary capacity.

## Case study: The Hampshire Inspection & Advisory Service

Hampshire is a large and high-performing local education system. It is made up of almost 500 schools, of which 90% have been judged good or better. Over the last 10 years, the LA and school leaders have worked in partnership to develop a strong and sustainable model for supporting school improvement in Hampshire. The Hampshire Inspection & Advisory Service (HIAS) was established as a traded service, ensuring that it would be shaped by Hampshire's school leaders. Today, HIAS is a large, well-established, and highly respected service across the county and beyond.

- **HIAS is largely funded by schools.** The LA funds a core offer, including an annual leadership and learning visit, for all maintained schools. There is then a wide range of bespoke support that is available for schools to buy in through HIAS, including subject specialists, a highly regarded governor service, and brokerage of school-to-school support.
- **HIAS operates a “blended-model” of support.** This brings together the expertise of staff employed directly by HIAS, teaching schools and other school-to-school support. As one primary headteacher described the support their school had received, ‘the local authority and teaching schools worked together, not in spite of each other, to ensure we got really good help.’ Each of the nine districts across the county has a school improvement manager, whose role is to ensure the rigour and coherence of support, and who helps to facilitate schools coming together to work on shared priorities.
- **An emphasis on proactive support.** HIAS has sought to shift the emphasis from monitoring and reacting to failure towards providing support that schools value and is geared to helping them sustain high-quality leadership, teaching, and learning. As one HIAS leader described it, ‘we moved away from being the people who came up the path when something had gone wrong and instead tried to position ourselves as people who had interesting things to say who could help schools get better.’ School leaders recognise and value this shift. According to one, ‘when people come in, you know they are going to be good people, really knowledgeable, and they are going to work with you.’

At a strategic level, school leaders are engaged in a number of standing committees, working in partnership with LA leaders to shape local practice on themes such as the curriculum, assessment, and resourcing.

The work of HIAS has enabled Hampshire to sustain strong performance, with the proportion of schools judged good or better rising from 84% in 2015 to 90% by the end of 2016. The blended model of support has been noted positively in a number of Ofsted inspection reports, and evidence suggests those schools that have engaged more with HIAS have seen greater improvement. As a headteacher of an improving school said, ‘we would not have come this far without Hampshire and HIAS, I cannot rate them highly enough.’ As an experienced chair of governors put it, ‘I have nothing but good words to say about the HIAS.’ These sentiments were echoed strongly by all of the school leaders and governors we engaged.

Find out more at [www3.hants.gov.uk/hias.htm](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/hias.htm)

### Key learning points

- Establishing a clear vision of a good education system for all children, shared by political, corporate, and school leaders, is a vital prerequisite of a strong local education system.
- Focus on giving schools access to new opportunities and expert support to sustain good performance, not only on monitoring and reacting when things go wrong.
- Make the best of all expertise and skills within the local system using a blended model to combine the best of school-to-school support with ensuring rigour and impact.

### **There was less evidence of local systems establishing approaches to the local development of system leadership capacity**

There were fewer examples of LAs actively supporting the development of local system leadership capacity even where they did see this as part of their role. Some were cautious about this; some did not have sufficient capacity to support this work; others thought it was very much the school system's responsibility to develop its own leadership, either via teaching school alliances (TSAs) or local multi-academy trusts. But in most areas, the need was clear for a critical mass of local system leaders to help provide the energy and momentum to drive the local system forward.

For a number of our systems, the local TSAs were an integral part of the school/LA partnership structures. For example, in one of our systems the strategic partnership board was co-chaired by the Director of Education and the Teaching School Council area lead. Their capacity and support for other schools was an important part of the local school improvement offer. However, for other systems, these were relationships that were still being worked through, and one of the ongoing challenges was how to ensure the TSAs were at the centre of a local approach to system leadership development. For systems where there was a less mature relationship between the TSAs and others, the attitude towards the TSAs could sometimes be seen as 'the TSAs need to be clear what they are bringing to the table', rather than anyone considering how they built capacity and helped the TSAs to play their role. Equally, some TSAs were cautious about taking on additional responsibilities, and some questioned whether they could respond quickly enough to new school improvement needs and had capacity in the right areas. In some places, authorities, TSAs, trusts and others recognised that they were both providers and commissioners of school improvement support and therefore needed to establish secure commissioning arrangements that were fit for purpose in a mixed economy of providers that might also be sat together around the same strategic partnership table. One system was addressing this by separating out a "system leaders group" from the main strategic partnership: this separate group contained the TSAs, national support schools and others that would be providing support. The aim of this separate group was also to attempt to co-ordinate a local approach to staff and leadership development and provide a local overview of professional development opportunities.

### **Most local systems had models of and approaches to school improvement that would be familiar to schools and authority advisers**

Although it is difficult to generalise across our sample of local systems, there were significant similarities in the approaches that were being undertaken to support school improvement. Processes that were being employed included: sharing and reviewing school and pupil-level data; categorisation according to levels of risk; identifying improvement needs; brokering in or providing support and challenge; developing capacity through modelling and observation; moderation and curriculum assessments; leadership coaching and development; monitoring visits and reviewing

progress through peer review; undertaking quality assurance; and evaluation of support and interventions. Support prior to and during Ofsted inspections and responding to crises were both still features of the engagement between LA staff and school (and also some academy) leaders. For most of the systems – and particularly for the primary phase – there was a continuation of what could be regarded as a traditional mode of review, support, challenge, and monitor, rather than any wholesale move to peer or sector-led support. There were, however, a number of systems in which the local school cluster was often providing the first point of school improvement support through shared training and development or peer review.

There were differences across the systems we visited in the extent to which there were universal offers available to all schools: some good and outstanding schools received no monitoring support at all in some areas, while others did receive support (often paid for by the schools) so that the local system could maintain an overview of all of its schools. There were also differences in whether advisers were working directly for the LA advisory service or being commissioned by a local school/LA partnership, or whether the monitoring and intervention work was being undertaken by a traded company.

### **Case study: Somerset Education Partnership Board**

In this large, rural and diverse educational environment, schools and the LA work in partnership through a variety of inter-related structures, operating at county level, locality level and in relation to each phase of education. In recent years, the LA scaled back its school improvement services, but since 2015 it has seen a renewed focus on educational effectiveness, evident in the appointment of a Director of Education, the development of a new strategy and the formation of the Somerset Education Partnership Board (SEPB).

At county level, the SEPB brings together representatives of the LA, schools, teaching schools, phase associations, and employers to share responsibility for driving the delivery of the Education Plan. The SEPB has an increasingly strong connection with the Schools Funding Forum, informing decisions about the allocation of Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), budget-setting, and managing the processes of commissioning and accountability.

At the locality level, schools are members of Collaborative Learning Partnerships (CLPs). The CLPs were established by the County over ten years ago, and since then they have been organised and funded by schools. Through the CLPs, schools identify local improvement priorities, co-construct school-led strategies for improvement, and co-ordinate the planning and delivery of a range of support for schools. The scale and impact of these CLPs is variable. The Team Around the School model of integrated early help is a major initiative involving partnership working across services.

The phase associations (for primary, secondary and special), each with a funded ex-headteacher working as association executive officer, play an important role in ensuring good communication and connectivity between the LA and headteachers at all levels. As a result, headteachers are centrally involved in shaping strategy and implementing it. The sense of shared purpose to improve outcomes for Somerset children that underpin these partnerships are evident in schools' agreement to "pay back" to the LA funding for both retained and general duties amounting to £22 per pupil in 2016/17.

To further develop the effectiveness and coherence of the local education system, current and future priorities include:

- further integrating the LA's traded services unit, Somerset Services for Education, within the school improvement strategy;
- establishing clear systems that enable schools to be at the heart of a commissioning process which defines the need, secures services from the best-quality provider and carefully evaluates impact on outcomes for pupils;
- working through the SEND peer review priorities to ensure all schools and school leaders are providing an exceptional SEND offer; and
- re-visiting and refreshing the educational vision in the light of new government and Ofsted changes.

#### **Key learning points**

- The LA has played a key role in facilitating collaborative involvement in shaping an education strategy and plan. The shared approach has resulted in good levels of engagement from headteachers and a commitment to further co-design of the local system.
- Headteacher associations, with core funding to create executive capacity, have played an important role in securing effective collaboration between schools and with the LA.
- In an increasingly diverse educational environment, in which support for school improvement can be sourced from teaching schools, multi-academy trusts, dioceses, LAs, the Strategic School Improvement Fund etc., it is important to establish coherent commissioning processes that are built around strong analysis of the needs of schools, a clear understanding of the available support, and a rigorous approach to evaluating impact and ensuring the best-quality provision.

#### **Local systems had been planning for reductions in funding and there was uncertainty about the future**

Local authorities had already planned for the reductions to the Education Services Grant in 2017/18 when we undertook our research visits. In some areas, this meant LAs had to reduce the resources and capacity that they provided to support partnership structures, or to further reconfigure advisory support. The Education Services Grant had not been a ring-fenced grant, and councils had not treated it as a separate budget; in some ways this had helped LAs manage the scale of the reductions, because they consequently came from the overall council budget. Some systems reported that planned cuts had already been made in previous years, and in one system the schools had agreed to provide additional funding. The role of elected members had been important in determining how to manage reductions in resources: where they wanted the council to continue in an education role, officers had had to find savings elsewhere. The detailed planning for the further reductions in funding in 2018/19 had not yet taken place. Looking forward, some senior LA officers described the possibility that elected members would continue to support education by finding additional resources to lessen the impact of budget reductions; others talked about asking the schools forum for greater de-delegation of resources; and others talked of considering with schools whether they would be able to pay (more) for services and support. At the time of our visits, all of the systems visited considered that there would be an impact on the ability of the LA to support school improvement and partnership activity come 2018/19.



There was evidence of the significant resources that LAs were deploying to support the establishment of LA/school partnerships – one LA had provided £160,000 to enable school leaders to be released from their schools to undertake part-time roles chairing local partnership groups. Schools in several systems had also provided significant contributions to school improvement costs through service level agreements: in one LA, 75% of its advisory staff were paid for by schools; in another, the figure was more than 90% of the costs of the primary team. A consistent question raised during our discussions was how the school improvement system that currently existed would be affected by the combined challenge of reductions to LA funding and at the same time pressures on school budgets. School leaders in particular questioned the extent to which primary schools would be able to continue to provide this level of support as pressure on budgets continued over the next two to four years.

### **Traded services were both complementing and conflicting with other school improvement offers**

There were three aspects to our discussions about traded services during our research visits. Firstly, there were the buy-back arrangements that schools, in particular primary schools, were using to buy in external advice and support from LA advisory staff. This most often took the form of a core package, with additional time also available. A number of systems described how it was important for them to avoid having a fully traded school improvement team since they felt there were risks that schools could avoid purchasing the challenging external conversation, or advisers' roles as both strategic leads and paid-for advisers could be confused.

Secondly, there were the traded services that sat outside Children's Services related to different aspects of the curriculum or other services (for example, music, outdoor education, human resources or educational psychology support etc.). Thirdly, and potentially most difficult in terms of the alignment with school improvement, there were the systems that had a separate school improvement traded service within the council (perhaps with its own income generation targets) that did not report to the Director of Children's Services. The scope for mixed messages and conflicting communications appeared significant, as well as a doubt about whether these services always provided what schools needed as opposed to what they were willing to purchase. A number of our systems saw that working through these tensions and complexities would be important to the further development of their systems.

### **Case study: Dorset Local Authority**

Dorset's education system includes first (Years 1–4) and middle schools (Years 5–8) in some areas. Without significant disadvantage, the county's education performance in early years and Key Stages 4 and 5 is good, but pupils' outcomes at Key Stage 2 fall significantly below national average and below the performance of the LA's statistical neighbours.

In recent years, and in response to the greater emphasis on the development of a school-led system, the LA reduced the scale and scope of its advisory service and set out to support the developing capacity of the school-led system.

Key features of the local education system from 2014 to 2017 have included:

- a School Evaluation Partnership programme, which is funded for targeted schools causing concern and traded to other schools (bought by approximately 50% of primary schools);

- a growth in the level of traded school improvement services offered by the LA, although this remains limited and largely based on areas of expertise within the LA;
- a shift in the role of the LA towards quality assurance and commissioning and away from direct delivery of school improvement services; and
- increased capacity from teaching schools and a growing maturity in the partnership working between the LA and TSAs as well as in the levels of collaboration between TSAs in Dorset, and as members of the South Coastal Teaching Schools Partnership with Bournemouth and Poole.

At the time of engagement in this research, Dorset LA was embarking on a strategic review of its school improvement strategy driven by a number of factors, including:

- the reduction in LA grant funding for school improvement and the consequent need to increase income from traded services and to secure the effective use of additional targeted funding;
- the need to accelerate the growth in capacity of the school-led system;
- the need to establish and embed effective, systematic, and coherent ways of joint commissioning between the LA, TSAs, multi-academy trusts, and other providers in a mixed economy; and
- a recognition that the percentage of schools with current good or outstanding Ofsted ratings potentially conceals priorities for improvement in pupil attainment, particularly at Key Stage 2.

Early areas of focus for the LA in developing the next phase of its school improvement strategy include:

- the evolution of the Schools Forum towards a more strategic role as an Education and Skills Partnership;
- the introduction of the role of a Lead Member for Education and Skills;
- a review and development of the traded services offer to and from the local education system;
- the potential development of a Dorset Education Trust as a vehicle for establishing coherent commissioning of school support in a mixed economy environment; and
- establishing effective processes to ensure that resources available for school improvement through the Strategic School Improvement Fund are directed to schools in need and that support packages draw on the highest-quality capacity from within the local education system.

### **Key learning points**

- Effective partnership between stakeholders in relation to specific school improvement priorities can result in coherent support for schools that draws on the best quality and expertise from LA and school-led providers. An example is the work undertaken between Dorset LA, Jurassic Maths Hub and South Coastal Teaching Schools Partnership to develop a strategic, system-wide map of support for maths improvement. <http://www.jurassicmaths.com/2016/09/the-wessex-school-improvement-partnership/>
- The LA retains an important role in creating and nurturing the conditions in which capacity for increasingly school-led improvement can be sufficient to meet local need. Changes to the LA's school improvement offer need to be carefully planned in relation to the development of the school-led improvement offer to ensure comprehensive coverage.

### **Importance of the local authority role within the local school improvement system**

From school and academy leaders, local authority officers and other stakeholders, we heard about the importance of the LA's role in being able to bring strategic clarity and coherence to the local system, in its guise as a convenor of partnerships, including reaching out to academies and trusts. The LA could act as an independent and impartial broker and evaluator for school improvement support. The LA was seen as being able to take an objective and independent view on the support that could be provided and whether that support had achieved a positive impact for pupils over time. Headteachers talked about the ways in which LAs could play a crucial role in helping to coordinate school-to-school support, provide the capacity to liaise between providers, and convene local school clusters. In some of the local systems we visited, LA staff were continuing to monitor and support vulnerable schools and academies; in others, they undertook the risk assessments and categorisation to bring to partnership discussions; and in others, LA advisers were being commissioned by school/LA partnerships to provide traditional school improvement partner support or a similar role, particularly for primary schools. LA staff were also providing the capacity and local intelligence to directly help support the work of schools/LA partnerships. In different systems and from different audiences, we heard that there was no-one else currently in the "middle tier" able to play many of these roles.

## **4. CONDITIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE LOCAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS**

We have described earlier in this report the idea of the local school improvement system. We considered during our research visits how such systems might be established and crucially what conditions might be necessary to help establish them. From our research visits and discussions with LA colleagues, school and academy leaders, and other key stakeholders, we have identified nine key conditions that we believe are important to help establish an effective local school improvement system. Why "conditions"? Firstly, we believe that this idea could provide powerful learning for other local systems that are considering how to establish their own local school improvement systems. Secondly, we know that a focus on conditions is likely to be more productive than just a focus on what is working, given the range of different models and approaches that we have observed.

There will of course be differences in emphasis and priority between the conditions, according to the context of the local systems, the existing relationships between schools, academies and the LA, and the stage of transition. But we believe all of the following conditions will have relevance for most systems.

### Nine conditions to develop an effective local school improvement system

1. A clear and compelling vision for the local school improvement system
2. Trust and high social capital between schools, the local authority, and partners
3. Strong engagement from the majority of schools and academies
4. Leadership from key system leaders
5. A crucial empowering and facilitative role for the local authority
6. Sufficient capacity for school-to-school support
7. Effective links with regional partners
8. Sufficient financial contributions (from schools and the local authority)
9. Structures to enable partnership activity



#### 1. A clear and compelling vision for the local school improvement system

From discussions during our research visits, it was clear that a compelling vision was a crucial starting point. The vision needs to be grounded in the local context, mutually developed, and focussed on the impact on teaching and learning and improving outcomes for children. There will need to be clarity about the strategic steps that will be required to achieve the vision and also clarity about respective roles and responsibilities. The vision should convincingly articulate that there is a relentless focus on continuous improvement and providing the best educational opportunities for all children across the local community. In order for the vision to resonate with schools, the LA and others, it needs to demonstrate a clear understanding of the local challenges and context that are driving the vision and “what holds us together”. There is the opportunity for the council to connect the vision to wider local priorities and the role that education can play. We heard in a number of places the desire to maintain a “family of schools” across a local system. Although the vision will need to be developed with local elected members, it will have to be clear that this is a vision for the local system developed and owned by all key players, not just an LA’s vision for the future.

#### Case study: Wigan Partnership

Wigan has a well-developed and mature school improvement system that has been in place for a number of years. It was developed by schools and the LA, working closely together. The model is based on local consortia, which are led by “lead headteachers” who are funded by the LA to

undertake the role. There are five primary consortia covering 94 primary schools and a single secondary consortia covering all 18 secondary schools. The consortia report to two separate Primary and Secondary Improvement Boards, which are currently chaired by the LA and which review the performance of all schools and identify schools needing support. Consortia are then responsible for providing challenge and commissioning and brokering support locally for these schools.

The model has had strong leadership and support both from local headteachers and from the LA at all levels from Council Members to the Chief Executive to the Director of Children's Services to the Assistant Director of Education, who leads work with schools on a day-to-day basis. Education and schools are seen to play a key part in fulfilling the council's "Deal for Children and Young People", which connects to the council's wider vision of how it works with local communities.

The LA has retained a small core team that supports the work on school improvement, including an expert data resource that is used more widely across the north west of England on a traded basis. It no longer has dedicated school improvement adviser capacity within the LA as it looks to the consortia and lead headteachers to undertake this role.

The next stage in the development of Wigan's Partnership model is the creation of an overarching strategic board, which is being designed to give schools and key education partners even greater ownership and responsibility for setting the priorities for improvement and leading the work to deliver them. The new board will also help to provide stronger connections to the work of headteacher associations within Wigan and to other key partners in the region such as the regional schools commissioner, the North West School Improvement Board, and Greater Manchester Learning Partnership.

The LA's long-term vision is of one board overseeing the whole school system and connecting all of the key partners inside and outside Wigan to deliver against the top priorities. The council's role will remain key in continuing to join schools to the wider council agenda on place, people and economic development and at a local level to other critical frontline services, such as GPs, to help meet the wider challenges facing local communities.

#### **Key learning points**

- The strong engagement of headteachers from the beginning in the creation of the new approach to school improvement has generated real buy-in to new ways of working and enabled the consortia and partnership approach to be sustained over a number of years.
- The council has continued to play a key leadership role in the partnership with schools and has helped to connect schools to the wider council vision for improvement in Wigan. This can help schools to see their wider place within the local community.
- The "lead headteachers" have played a critical role in making the system work – having a cadre of willing and trusted leaders who can step in and enact this system leadership role has been critical to the development and sustainability of the partnership approach.
- Continuing to reflect and evolve is important – in Wigan, even when the partnership has reached a level of maturity, the LA and schools are looking for ways to strengthen governance and connections within the local area and to the wider region.

## **2. Trust and high social capital between schools, the local authority, and key partners**

In helping to develop thinking about a self-improving system, David Hargreaves considered the idea of "high social capital" between schools particularly important (*Creating a self-improving school system*, 2010). Trust and high social capital are formed from close working, mutual respect and

credibility, shared common goals, and transparency about challenges. The trust needed to develop the local school improvement system will come from a willingness to act collaboratively to address vulnerabilities with pace and urgency. We heard from a number of the systems we visited about how the historical relationships between schools, academies, and the LA had played an important part; although we also heard how the arrival of individuals could change the atmosphere significantly. Needless to say, trust can easily be eroded. For example, several systems mentioned that when they encountered delays in brokering support or solutions for vulnerable schools, this had resulted in a loss of faith that the schools/LA partnership could deliver appropriate solutions at the speed that was required.

### **Case study: Support for school improvement in Liverpool**

Liverpool's education system is made up of over 150 schools, of which over 80% were judged good or better. There is a strong political commitment to education and to sustaining the Liverpool family of schools, and this ethos of collaboration and collegiality is seen by school leaders, particularly of primary and special schools, as one of the defining characteristics of education in Liverpool. As one primary leader put it, 'I feel fortunate to be working in Liverpool because of strong sense of collegiality'. Two important bodies have been formed to sustain and support the Liverpool family of schools.

- **School Improvement Liverpool (SIL)** – Developed over the last six years, and launched two years ago, SIL is an LA-owned traded company established to maintain a highly regarded school improvement service. SIL is commissioned by Liverpool City Council to carry out its statutory school improvement functions and offers a wide range of support and professional development to over 700 schools across Merseyside, Greater Manchester, and beyond. Liverpool school leaders value the level of support, the rigour of challenge, and the in-depth knowledge of their schools and the city that SIL officers bring. Over the last 18 months, the proportion of primary schools judged good or better has increased from 83% (August 2016) to 92% (December 2016), and the number judged to require improvement has dropped from 27 to 7.
- **The Liverpool Learning Partnership (LLP)** – Formed in September 2016, LLP is a schools-led strategic partnership, 'committed to the idea that we work best if we work together', according to its leaders. Its aim is to enable schools to work together on priorities related to supporting learning and learners, including those who need additional support, and providing an education perspective in shaping city-wide initiatives. The city's primary schools have de-delegated £300,000 to provide a school-to-school support fund to support vulnerable schools. All bar one school in the city are members, with representation and leadership across all phases from early years through to further education.

In addition, Liverpool schools work together in **learning networks**, which are co-ordinated by a headteacher and focus on activities such as peer review. School leaders see this as a means of fostering trust and building system leadership capacity, complementing the more formal support and challenge from SIL. All bar two learning networks include a teaching school. Schools also work together in **local consortia**, focusing on meeting the needs of vulnerable pupils and those with special educational needs and disability.

A common metaphor used to describe support for breadth of school improvement support in Liverpool is that of a “banquet”. Looking ahead, council and school leaders agree on the need to ensure all the parts of local education system have clear and distinct remits and are working together towards the same overall priorities for the city.

Find out more about SIL at [www.schoolimprovementliverpool.co.uk](http://www.schoolimprovementliverpool.co.uk) and about LLP at [www.liverpoollearningpartnership.com](http://www.liverpoollearningpartnership.com).

### Key learning points

- **It takes time to develop the trust necessary for city-wide collaborative partnerships** – SIL was an initiative three to four years in the making. Maintaining the LLP and the learning networks requires the original purpose, vision, and aims to be revisited and refreshed regularly to sustain commitment to collaboration and the confidence to make it work.
- **There needs to be a strong central body to co-ordinate and ensure coherence in the local system** – School leaders see a vital ongoing role for the council as, in the words of one primary leader, ‘the only hub around which everything revolves and which includes everyone.’ As another headteacher put it, ‘if we don’t have a central body, then everything will fragment.’

### 3. Strong engagement from the majority of schools and academies

Our research visits emphasised the risks of fragmentation in the local system. Our local systems recognised the importance of having sufficient numbers of schools and academies engaged in driving improvement. Some talked of a ‘critical mass’, or ‘enough to be able to talk meaningfully about engagement from the majority’. In a number of cases, the representative role played by the headteacher and governor associations was important in promoting that engagement. TSAs were seen as important given their system leadership networks, existing relationships with their alliance of schools or academies, and capacity to provide support. Systems recognised that there would be schools and academies that did not want to engage: for some of these, engaging in their own networks or trusts would provide sufficient capacity; but schools or academies that were isolated were a cause for concern. The engagement from the vast majority would be more likely if they could see the purpose and benefits of having a local school improvement system, were excited by the potential, and could agree on the key priorities for the local system. The LA had an important role in establishing the principle that the local system was open to all local schools and academies, and as one LA senior leader said, ‘successfully navigating between maintained schools and academies’.

### 4. Leadership from key system leaders

Many of our local systems talked about the important role being played by school system leaders in galvanising and engaging their colleagues, and often working closely with local authority officers to develop the school/LA partnerships. They might be influential national or local leaders of education, trust CEOs, or other school leaders willing to take on a wider role. Some of them were being funded to play these roles on a part-time basis; others had been encouraged to help lead partnership or area boards, or other local consortia. Many had already taken on system leader roles in supporting and working with other schools. Their role was also important in terms of their knowledge of the local system and being able to share both intelligence about local schools and expertise in identifying potential solutions.

John Kotter, the influential Professor at Harvard Business School, has argued about the need for a “guiding coalition” of five to ten individuals in key positions who need to be aligned behind an important change programme for it to be successful (Kotter, *Leading Change*, 1988, Harvard). For the development of an effective local school improvement system, we can see the Lead Member, Director of Children’s Services, Assistant Director for School Improvement, leads for the local headteacher associations, and several other influential school system leaders as providing that guiding coalition.

### **Case study: London Borough of Tower Hamlets**

Schools, the LA and other key players have established the Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP) as a “schools-led vehicle for driving continued school improvement and innovation” (THEP members’ pack). THEP arose out of a desire among Tower Hamlets schools to avoid fragmentation and retain the “family of schools”; maintain the school improvement support from the LA; and recognise that previous education success across the borough had been achieved through cohesion and community. The key elements of the approach are:

- THEP is a ‘school company’ (a company limited by guarantee with charitable status), which 90% of schools and academies in the borough have joined as members;
- schools and academies pay £5 per pupil as an annual membership fee – the LA has provided £300,000 of seed-funding over the first three years;
- the approach has been based on the existing strong relationships between schools and the authority;
- the membership fee will entitle schools and academies to a core package of support from THEP, with the options to purchase additional services or additional time from advisers;
- THEP will commission support and challenge for primary schools from the existing LA primary advisory team, utilising the expertise and capacity of primary LA advisers; and
- THEP will have two main approaches: for most schools an offer of CPD, networks, peer review, and coaching; and for vulnerable schools, more targeted support.

Schools and the LA recognise that, for primary schools in Tower Hamlets, the immediate future of school improvement will look very similar to the current position: support and challenge from the existing team of highly experienced and valued primary advisers. 90% of primary schools in Tower Hamlets already buy back the full range of primary advisory support, and the primary team has been virtually fully traded for the last five years – ‘primary schools still want the clout of quality assurance from the LA’ (LA senior adviser). In the secondary phase, support from the LA had been resourced through a top-slice from Dedicated Schools Grant that would not be continuing. THEP would be commissioning individuals, SIPs, and school-to-school support for its school improvement capacity in the secondary phase.

Two of the most significant challenges for school improvement in Tower Hamlets will be resourcing the support for schools at a time of constrained LA and school budgets, and being able to demonstrate the added value of THEP. Schools will need to see that they are receiving value for their membership money. At the same time, THEP will need to establish a vision for growth in terms of the local and regional school improvement offer.

Find out more at [www.the-partnership.org.uk](http://www.the-partnership.org.uk)

#### **Key learning points**



- The Tower Hamlets approach has built on the existing good relationships between schools, academies, and the LA and the desire to retain a collective approach to improvement across the borough.
- LA primary advisers are crucial to the approach in terms of their credibility with schools and the quality of their support.

## **5. A crucial empowering and facilitative role for the local authority**

While there will be differences across the country in the extent to which authorities are able and willing to provide advisory capacity (largely paid for by schools), the LA continues to need to play a crucial role in helping to establish the conditions for an effective local school improvement system. This role is about co-ordinating the roles of different players and convening partnerships (both strategic and local clusters), fulfilling the authority's democratic mandate as a champion for children's outcomes, and contributing resources and capacity to establishing the local school improvement system. Where the LA is playing this role effectively, it is able to bring expertise in the form of advisory staff and local intelligence looking across the whole of the local area. It will be able to provide validation for approaches and interventions, and do this with a degree of impartiality that might be more difficult for others in the system. It is also then in a position to quality assure the impact of the support with a degree of objectivity. From the evidence of our research visits, there was no other player able to fulfil these roles.

## **6. Sufficient capacity in local schools to support other schools**

To develop an effective local school improvement system, most will be looking to school-to-school support as a key way in which schools would seek and gain support for improvement. There must therefore be sufficient capacity in sufficient numbers to be able to meet the most pressing needs. We heard how in some areas there were risks to this support being available, and we will return to this point in Section 5. For the time being, it is important to recognise that having sufficient teaching schools, local, national, and specialist leaders of education, and support from multi-academy trusts will be vital. At the same time, it is also important to recognise that school-to-school support will also take place informally and formally co-ordinated by local clusters of schools that may have been convened by the LA. A number of systems explained how their partnership boards, working with their TSAs, would be looking at the opportunities for support from new funding routes, including the Strategic School Improvement Fund. For some systems, the use of a mixed model of LA advisory support and school-to-school support will meet improvement needs, using the LA's capacity to add support and co-ordinate support from others. The partnership structure that enables support to be brokered will also need to create effective relationships with local TSAs and a collegiate sense of providing support and working with other schools.

## **7. Effective links with regional partners**

This important condition was emphasised to us during our research visits. The local system will sit within a network of regional links to the regional schools commissioners (RSCs) and their headteacher boards, Ofsted, the regional Teaching School Council, and other local areas. There may be important regional and sub-regional links with other areas on improvement (through regional and sub-regional school improvement boards, for example) or around specific themes and needs (adoption and special educational needs are two current examples). There are the potential benefits of partnership working on a broader scale. Local systems talked to us about the importance of regional players working with local systems to develop greater coherence in the current mixed system of schools and providers. For a number of our systems, for example, their relationships with

new RSCs were developing and links were beginning to emerge; for others, these had still to be established. The new Strategic School Improvement Fund was one way in which it was felt that these links might be strengthened further through the collaborative bidding process, “galvanising the system”, securing resources for shared priorities. At the level of the local system, therefore, there is a need for both the LA and the local partnership to be conscious of both building these relationships and strengthening the opportunities for regional working, as well as learning from and being informed by regional priorities and commissioning.

#### **8. Sufficient financial contributions (from schools and the local authority)**

We heard from our visits how both LAs and schools were contributing to the costs of developing local school improvement systems. LAs were providing funding to release school leaders to take on partnership roles, and were also providing time and capacity from advisory staff. Schools had often been contributing either through the de-delegation of funds via the schools forum, or through purchasing school improvement support from other schools or advisory staff. School contributions to new partnership structures or companies were made on a flat rate or per pupil basis. To make the local system work, both schools and the LA need to contribute funding and capacity and ensure that both sides have a stake. Given the current pressures on both school and authority budgets, we return to this point in the following section.

#### **Case study: West Sussex Local Authority**

West Sussex LA has been reviewing and re-developing its approach to school improvement over the last year in light of the changing national picture and conversations between the LA, schools and academies, TSAs, and other key partners. The LA has continued to play a leadership role in developing the local system based on its view that it has a responsibility for outcomes for all children in West Sussex schools regardless of the type of school.

The new approach is based on the creation of four Area Inclusion and Improvement Boards that will manage and co-ordinate the development of school-to-school support and pull together and be responsible for the range of work happening locally on inclusion. The new Area Boards, which have evolved from previous School Improvement Boards, will be co-chaired by existing School Improvement Board chairs and the LA’s area education adviser. Board membership will comprise headteachers representing each phase and type of school, teaching schools, and the LA’s special educational needs and disability/inclusion team.

A single central School Improvement and Inclusion Fund will be allocated to support the work of the Area Boards and will be allocated according to school improvement and inclusion needs in each area. The intention is that this will help to simplify the allocation of funding and support for schools and headteachers. The LA will continue to categorise all schools, and those designated as focused support schools will be ranked into three bands for support: high, medium and low. Funding for support for these schools will be allocated to each Area Board on the basis of a common tariff: High £25,000; Medium £15,000; Low £7,500.

Area Boards will then have the responsibility for identifying a potential supporting school and brokering this support and putting in place the necessary contractual arrangements. They also have the responsibility for evaluating and assessing the impact of any support being provided; and making decisions to continue or remove support as needed. The LA will continue to play a key role

in supporting this process by providing the necessary data and identification of potential support needs and through the area education adviser giving their professional advice to the Area Boards.

The final part of the proposed new arrangements is the accountability of Area Boards to an overarching Governance Board for the impact of their work and funding. It is proposed that this central Governance Board will in future be co-chaired by the Director of Education and the West Sussex Teaching School Council area lead. As well as holding Area Boards to account, the Governance Board would have access to a central pot of funding that could be used to fund release time for headteacher board chairs, provide additional school improvement capacity, and undertake special projects approved by the Governance Board. The Governance Board may also co-ordinate bids for other external funding. The Governance Board will report progress to the West Sussex Standards and Performance Committee sub-group of the Education and Skills Forum. The new arrangements are expected to start in September 2017.

#### **Key learning points**

- Giving responsibility to Area Boards for brokering support helps to ensure a better connection between schools needing support and those able to provide support. Holding Area Boards to account for the impact of support will ensure that both the LA and schools have a clear view about the impact and value for money of any support being provided.
- The LA continues to have a critical role to play in the new system. It is providing both the funding to make the new system work and also playing a vital facilitative role in supporting the work of Area Boards and providing the data and evidence of school performance that will inform the commissioning of support locally.
- Local system leaders are playing a key role by acting as chairs of the Area Boards. Joint chairing arrangements for the central Governance Board help to ensure that both the LA and schools are driving the system forward in partnership together.

### **9. Structures to enable partnership activity**

All of our systems had or were developing their partnership structures for the leadership of school improvement involving school and academy leaders and LA officers. These structures most often took the form of partnership boards to set the vision, co-ordinate and organise partnership activity, consider and broker support, and review the effectiveness of activity. They were also the place to agree a collective set of school improvement priorities for the local system, hold providers to account for delivery, and commission support to meet those needs in a mixed market of providers.

For the systems we visited, the main partnership engagement was at the level of the local area, bringing together the LA and key system leaders. There were a number of systems we visited that also had structures working at other levels: for example, district alliances or area boards supported by advisers; or local clusters or trusts focussed on peer review. We return to these different structures in the final section of this report.

## **5. WHAT ARE THE KEY CHALLENGES WE HAVE SEEN TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE LOCAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS?**

So far in this report, we have set out the positive examples of the roles that LAs can play to help develop effective local school improvement systems. Our research visits also clearly demonstrated the significant challenges facing LAs in fulfilling their duties, and also the challenges to successfully

developing strong partnerships between schools, academies, and LAs. We have organised the key challenges we observed into three broad areas.

#### **a) Supporting conditions not in place**

The first group of challenges are those where the supporting conditions we identified in Section 4 have not been put in place. We know that, in some systems, there has been a lack of confidence from the LA to step forward and claim its new role. This can arise for a number of reasons: an inability to think beyond long-established ways of acting; lack of political or senior officer commitment to a different approach; or conversely an acceptance of the idea by elected members or senior officers that the LA should have no further role in local school improvement. The uncertainties about the future of LAs' statutory duties and the national funding arrangements for schools have for some authorities been additional reasons why they have been unable or unwilling to stake out a new role.

In other systems, there has been a lack of LA leadership or capacity to claim this new role successfully, or the advisory capacity and expertise has already been diminished beyond the point of no return. For some systems, the challenge is that fragmentation has already taken place: schools and academies and the LA have gone separate ways, capacity has become diminished, and key players are looking inwards at their own organisations.

Finally, in some systems there has been a lack of engagement between key system leaders and the LA to develop a new vision for the local system. This often leads to a slow response to the changing landscape, or the local system watching events happen rather than actively taking control of local solutions, ultimately resulting in drift and fragmentation (one head remarked, 'you can sit and watch the garden develop, or you can get out there and be the gardener'). Without this driving force of system leaders, schools and academies can sometimes fail to see the way forward for the local system.

#### **b) Lack of capacity to work with schools**

The second group of challenges is around the capacity to work with and support other schools. For some systems, the school-level capacity is so stretched there is insufficient capacity to work with other schools. This might be due to a genuine lack of school-to-school capacity; a lack of signposting to appropriate support or the capacity not being what the system needed; or it might be due to an uncertainty within some schools that their staff should be working outside of their own school. We heard from school leaders about the challenges of releasing their most able staff when they felt under pressure from an impending Ofsted visit or the need to support staff in their own schools. Most schools recognise that there are costs (financial and human capital) in engaging in partnership activity, and some schools have become less willing to bear these costs as capacity and budgets reduce.

We heard from a number of school leaders who were concerned about where the funding would come from in the future to support some of the vulnerable schools: not only those in special measures, but schools deemed to be "coasting", judged to "require improvement", or vulnerable school previously judged "good". School leaders talked about the "heavy lifting" that might be needed if the school wasn't supported by a trust. For some systems, the pressure on schools has been increased by the way in which the notion of "schools-led improvement" has been interpreted as "schools-only" – with some LAs backing away from school improvement almost entirely.

### **c) Lack of partnership capacity or activity**

The third group of challenges is about the lack of capacity in schools/LA partnerships to drive the local school improvement system forward. This might be due to the lack of finances to co-ordinate support, to provide or broker in support to other schools, or for schools to be able purchase support from the LA. Most of the systems we visited were concerned about the impact of reduced resources over the next two to three years and what this would mean in terms of their abilities to support school improvement and sustain models of improvement.

For some systems, the lack of external quality assurance and evaluation methods will mean that the system is uncertain about what works and why. Some of the school leaders and authority staff we engaged talked about the challenges for some school system leaders in providing tough messages to their peers and also local consortia or alliances taking responsibility for the actions that were needed in response. Finally, the obvious challenge of not having the capacity and time to make the partnership structures work effectively, or that local competition between existing partnerships – or an implicit or explicit hierarchy between partnerships – limits its effectiveness.

## **6. HOW CAN LOCAL AUTHORITIES SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE LOCAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS?**

From our research visits, we built up a perspective about what conditions were needed to develop an “effective” local school improvement system; to be effective, the system was likely to have some or all of the following attributes:

- strong relationships and engagements across schools, academies, the LA, and other local and regional partners, with the LA engaging both maintained schools and academies;
- 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; and
- supporting all children in the local area, including the more vulnerable.

## What do we mean by “effective local school improvement systems”?



In 2012, the Isos Partnership report for the LGA and DfE considered three roles for the LA in education. From our research visits five years later, we believe that two of these roles (champion for children and commissioner) have become firmly established. In our view, the role of “convenor of partnerships” has shifted most significantly in the intervening five years and is now a vital role in establishing effective local school improvement systems.

We have set out in Section 4 what we believe are the important conditions to help establish an effective local school improvement system. From our research visits, we have seen evidence of how important LAs can be in supporting and nurturing these conditions, in acting as the convenor, and helping the local school improvement system to develop. We now explain how we have seen LAs act to support each of our key conditions and the roles they can play to help establish effective local school improvement systems.

Local Government Association		Nine key conditions	How can the LA help to develop these conditions?	ISOS
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 to sustain relationships founded on shared desire to find solutions.		
3	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 LA	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.		

## Vision

The LA is in a strong position to co-ordinate and provide the strategic push that might be necessary. There is also a clear role for the LA to act as an objective facilitator, provide the context on place and the locality both in terms of challenges and priorities for improvement, and link to the council's wider priorities for its community. In its role as convenor of the vision, the LA can also act to ensure that the roles of different players are described clearly, including the place of elected members. The majority of the schools we talked to during our research visits, particularly primary and special schools, wanted to be part of a local system and were looking to the LA to convene them to shape a shared vision.

## Trust

The development of trust and high social capital takes time and is often founded on effective working relationships. There is an opportunity for the LA to model what effective partnership working looks like and also how to work collaboratively with partners, for example by working collaboratively with schools on action research projects or setting up joint task and finish groups. The local democratic mandate of the LA can also help to sustain relationships that have been founded on the shared desire to find local solutions.

## Engagement

Our condition here for the development of an effective local school improvement system is that the vast majority of schools engage over time in its development. The LA has the potential to act as an honest broker. The development of a clear and compelling vision is one of the ways to get schools on

board. The LA is also in a position to reach out to schools, academies and multi-academy trusts in the local area with an offer that can be seen to encompass all local children.

### **System leaders**

If influential school system leaders engage and provide leadership, there is a greater likelihood that other schools and school leaders will engage. The LA is in a position to bring together key leaders and facilitate discussions in its role as convenor of partnerships. The LA is also in a pivotal position to support the development of future system leaders by ensuring this becomes an important priority for the school/LA partnership. The partnership, for example, can then consider commissioning local TSAs to develop system leadership development programmes.

### **Convening and facilitation**

In its convening and facilitating role, the LA can contribute its intelligence from across the local school improvement system. It can also utilise its existing expertise and capacity to support the development of new LA/school partnerships as well as to support the development of smaller local school-based clusters, particularly for small primary schools. LA staff can also actively develop, and where the capacity exists undertake, the quality assurance of interventions and support so that the local system is basing decisions about support to schools on the evidence of what works.

### **Capacity**

The capacity within schools to support and work with other local schools and academies will become the bedrock of most school improvement capacity of the next five years, supported where available by LA advisers. The LA is in a position to support the local school/LA partnership to identify local capacity and broker capacity from outside the local area where this is needed. The LA is also able to help in mapping future capacity, encouraging schools and school leaders to get involved, and commissioning development programmes from TSAs and others to support the growth of system leader capacity.

### **Links**

The opportunity for the LA is to link the understanding of the local context with the regional priorities and the opportunities that might be available on a broader scale. We know that some authorities have been proactive in engaging with regional partners and sub-regional bodies, are working hard to be connected to regional networks, and are also being strategic in working with local schools to develop bids for national funding.

### **Finances**

We have seen on our research visits how LAs have been supporting the development of school/LA partnerships with financial contributions and other resources. The ability of the LA to provide this pump-priming money can be crucial to partnerships' effective development. As resources become more stretched over the next two to three years, it will become necessary for the LA to make hard choices about how it helps to develop the local school improvement system. Unless LAs choose to continue investing in their strategic leadership role, the likelihood is that the partnership structures that have emerged will collapse and the local system is likely to fragment. Schools also need to contribute, but there is a vital role to be played by LAs.

### **Structures**



LAs need to work with schools to develop multi-tiered structures that will work in their local context. For the geographically larger systems, this might mean local clusters of schools or trusts of academies, supported by a district or locality organising group, and with a local authority-wide strategic partnership or board. For smaller boroughs, the combination of local school clusters with an organising/strategic group might be appropriate. We explain our thinking about the purpose and potential activities of these different structures in the final section of this report. The LA can also help to ensure that the local school improvement system provides high-quality support and is credible with school leaders. This will mean having robust commissioning processes that operate through these partnerships and can work through the complexities of multiple providers in a mixed economy. These processes will be vital in moving partnerships from friendly joint planning to harder-edged accountability.

## 7. LEARNING FOR LOCAL SYSTEMS ON WAYS OF WORKING

We conclude this report with some final learning for local systems. Section 4 of this report has set out what we believe to be a set of important conditions to help the development of effective local school improvement systems. Section 6 has summarised how LAs can help these conditions to develop. Our final conclusions are in four areas and are designed to provide practical learning and questions to help local systems consider their future ways of working.

### **i) How can local systems work at different levels?**

As we suggested in the preceding section, there was a degree of similarity in the structures of the partnerships that we encountered during our research visits. They were by no means identical, and there were clear differences in ambition, scale, and maturity. Nevertheless, there were common arrangements of schools, academies and the LA working together at three different levels, and we believe that 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; and
- review how their local system is operating at these three levels and identify where they need to strengthen current arrangements.

### **a) School-level clusters**

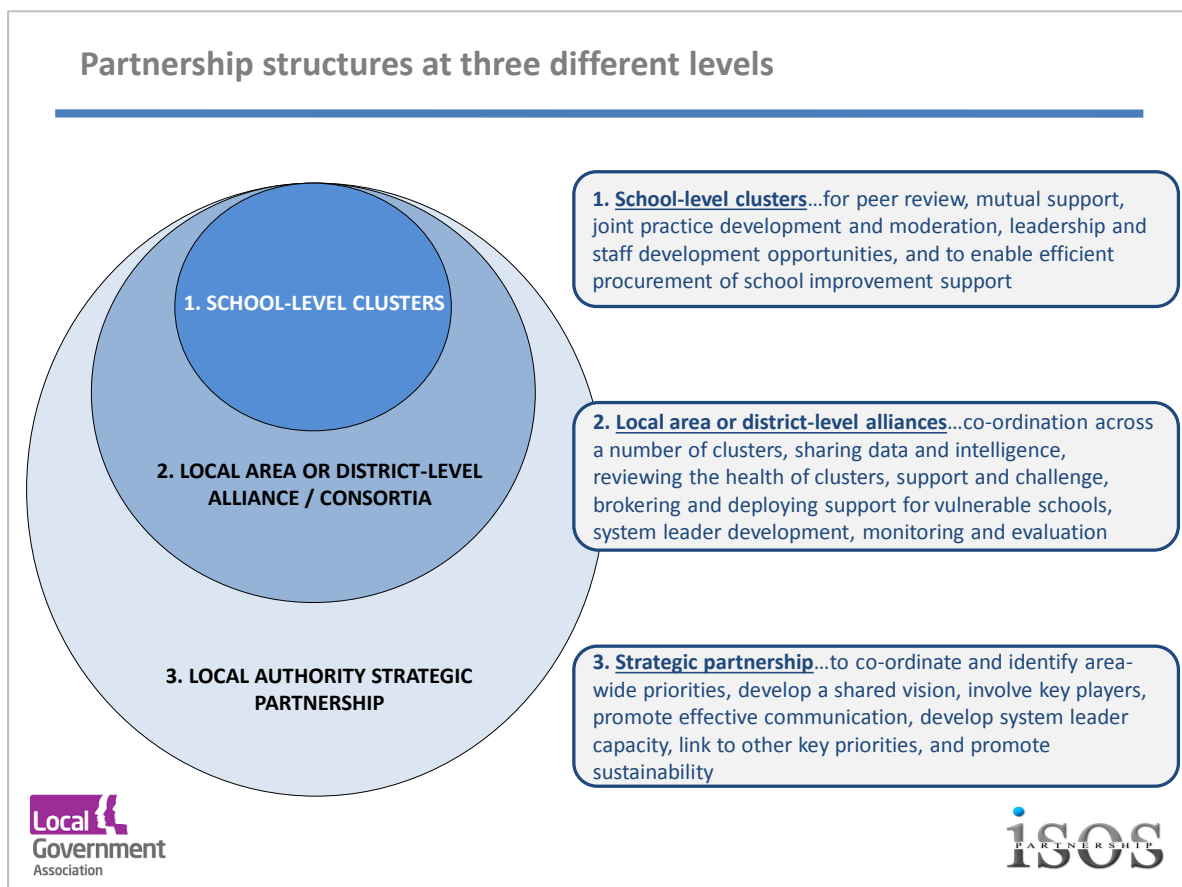
At the micro-level, there is the local school cluster or trust. There are a range of school improvement benefits that we have seen from schools and academies working together in small, often local, clusters. These include staff development opportunities through schools working with each other, jointly commissioning professional development, or the chance to have short-term secondments working with other schools. The same benefits can also be seen across trusts organised around local clusters. School leaders can provide much in the way of informal mutual support, as well as planning more formal leadership development. Peer review provides the opportunity to share data, review performance, and develop the skills to review and challenge peers. Projects can be established – both in the short term and longer term – to enable joint working, moderation of practice and performance, and genuine joint practice development. Clusters of maintained schools will often have been convened by the LA, and some of our systems were actively supporting their development or commissioning external providers to help develop peer review arrangements (for example, the Education Development Trust's Schools Partnership Programme).

## b) Local area or district-level alliances/consortia

Most school-level clusters will be able to offer some development support to schools within the cluster. However, for the opportunity to review needs and for more significant support to be brokered from outside the cluster, a local area or district-level alliance can be powerful. This alliance enables co-ordination to take place across a number of school-level clusters through sharing data and local intelligence about individual schools as well as the clusters themselves. Support for vulnerable schools can be brokered from other clusters or local TSAs. Across a local area, the opportunity to develop the next cadre of system leaders that can step up to lead clusters or groups of schools becomes more feasible.

## c) Local authority strategic partnerships

At this level, there is a strategic partnership board or group that brings together the key players. The LA has an important role in helping the strategic partnership to identify key priorities, develop a shared vision, work with key regional players, and ensure there is effective communication. In addition, the partnership can help to develop a proactive and forward-looking strategy to develop school system leaders; link to other priorities across children's services so that school improvement is not seen in isolation; and maintain a focus on sustainability and ensure relationships and capacity continue to provide strong foundations for an effective local school improvement system in the future.



## ii) How can local authorities develop their ways of working?

In our 2012 report on the role of the LA in education, we included a number of key messages for LAs which were then described as emerging good practice. The essence of these messages remains highly relevant to LAs now, and we include and update five of them below:

### Key messages for local authorities on ways of working

- a) Be systematic in working through, with schools, where the LA can add most value in the new education landscape, prioritise what to focus on and then confidently inhabit the space agreed. **Seize the agenda**, rather than be apologetic and wait for instruction.
- b) **Treat schools as partners and leaders** in the education system, and provide the space for them to develop solutions to community-wide issues that are owned by schools.
- c) **Look for quick wins** to demonstrably contribute to the resolution of new and pressing issues that are emerging as a result of the changing education system. This will help address the concern that there is too much theory and not enough action.
- d) Focus on co-creating, with schools, a **local education culture based on a clear moral purpose and identify the headteacher advocates who can lead that process**. Work with schools to support the conditions in which headteachers are prepared to challenge each other to take decisions which are in the collective interest of pupils in the wider community as well as the interests of pupils and parents at their school.
- e) Find mechanisms to **learn from other LAs** at a point when all LAs are wrestling with a similar set of issues. Look for the opportunities to learn from other LAs about how they are developing their strategic partnerships, for example.

*Source:* Baxter, Parish, Sandals, *Action Research into The Evolving Role of the LA in Education*, DfE/LGA, 2012; page 92 (updated)

## iii) 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/LA partnerships have established themselves as separate, school-owned companies. This will not necessarily be the right approach for all partnerships. We set out some considerations below that might help local systems that are considering this possible future route:

Positive reasons for considering...	Potential challenges to consider...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard-wires partnership working into a formal structure, giving it a greater chance of sustainability</li> <li>• Partnership should endure beyond existing personnel and relationships</li> <li>• Formal status can bring credibility with schools and external partners</li> <li>• Schools have a clear stake in and ownership of the partnership</li> <li>• Creates an entity other than the LA or an individual school that is able to employ staff and enter into contracts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apparent complexity of transition process</li> <li>• Basic infrastructure needed to manage transition</li> <li>• 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</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future costs of school improvement support and whether schools will be willing to pay for support</li> <li>• Whether the local system has the capacity to deliver the support and the credibility with schools</li> </ul>
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**iv) How should local systems look beyond the local area?**

One lesson from our research visits has been for local systems to look for the opportunities beyond their own local area. This might mean identifying neighbouring local systems with similar challenges or where there are the opportunities to share practice or where particular local systems have areas of expertise to share. This might mean looking to TSAs 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 the LA to work together in identifying joint priorities and activities and to make a strategic bid for resources to help develop capacity.