

Summary Report

Developing a new Locality Model for English Schools

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Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Abbreviations	4
Executive Summary	5
Summary of Recommendations	8
Research Purpose and Strategy	10
Context	11
Section One: Principles for a Successful School System	14
Section Two: The Role of the Middle Tier	20
F1 Teacher recruitment, initial teacher education (ITE), and retention	21
F2 Support for vulnerable pupils	23
F3 The curriculum	25
F4 School improvement	26
F5 Accountability and quality assurance	28
F6 Admissions and place-planning	30
F7 Building the system for the future	31
Section Three: Models of Locality Working	33
References	40
Figures	
Figure 1: Principles of effective system design	14
Figure 2: Ratings of English education system against principles of effective system design.....	15
Figure 3: Levels at which decisions should be made for 7 functions	20
Appendix One: Organisations providing middle tier functions	45

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Sir Jon Coles, Chief Executive United Learning; Former Director General of Schools DfE and Director of London Challenge

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This report represents the summary of the three phases of the study, reporting the areas of common agreement. Individual involvement, as a researcher, interviewee or member of a focus group, does not necessarily equate to full support for, or endorsement of, all statements and recommendations made.

The reports from each phase are available here:

- [Phase One: Literature review](#)
- [Phase Two: Analysis of Interviews](#)
- [Phase Three: Stakeholder Consultation](#)

Abbreviations

AEP	Area-based Education Partnerships
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DfE	Department for Education
ECF	Early Careers Framework
EEF	Education Endowment Fund
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LA	Local Authority
LftM	Leading from the Middle
MAT	Multi-academy trust
NCETM	National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics
NLE	National Leader of Education
NLG	National Leader of Governance
NPQ	National Professional Qualification
NSS	National Support Schools
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RQ	Research Question
RS	Research School
RSC	Regional Schools Commissioner
SAT	Single Academy Trust
SEND	Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities
TS	Teaching School
TSA	Teaching Schools Alliance

Executive Summary

Since 2010, England has pioneered the move towards a self-improving school system where school partnerships lead improvement by sharing expertise and building capacity. However, evaluations have found that the government-supported infrastructure to support school-led improvement has not benefitted all schools equally, with those most in need the most poorly served. The Covid-19 pandemic during which the latter part of the research was conducted has highlighted the challenges of responding rapidly to local need in a system which lacks a robust infrastructure.

The research was commissioned to investigate how high-performing education systems operate, in order to develop a set of criteria by which any revised governance model for the English education system can be judged and to outline clearly the role(s) of a middle tier. Four systems were explored: Estonia, Finland, Ontario (Canada) and Singapore. These high-performing jurisdictions strive for both excellence and equity and have taken evidence-based steps to deliver both. A single reform strategy was cited in literature on all four high-performing jurisdictions: 'Leadership from the Middle', defined as *"a deliberate strategy that increases the capacity and internal coherence of the middle as it becomes a more effective partner upward to the state and downward to its schools and communities, in pursuit of greater system performance"* (Fullan, 2015: 24). Top-down leadership does not last due to lack of sustainable



What the English system lacks are clear shared goals and a strategy to unify the system so that it works for all children.

buy-in from professionals; bottom-up change does not result in overall system improvement: some schools improve, others do not and the gap between high and low performers increases. A strong message from the study is that, as systems become more decentralised, to maintain equity as well as excellence, there needs to be a coordinating mechanism across a locality or region. Greany (2020) suggests that local coherence may be associated with improvements in student outcomes.

Section One outlines five principles of a successful school system derived from the literature:

- alignment;
- subsidiarity;
- a focus on collaborative learning;
- a positive ethos with shared moral purpose;
- a whole-system focus to ensure efficiency, equality of access, cost-effectiveness and economies of scale.

Respondents were asked to rate each principle for importance and to give a judgement on how well the English system performs against the principle. In each case, the rating for importance was stronger than for performance. There is a clear appetite for reform. The need to rebuild in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic is seen as an opportune moment to reset for the future.

Many features common to high performing systems can be found in England, but only in pockets of provision. What the English system lacks are clear shared goals and a strategy to unify the system so that it works for all children. In interviews and focus groups, there was overall a recognition of the need to rebuild capacity at the middle-tier level to achieve a more managed system.



There was a strong view that the accountability system needs to be recalibrated, away from a focus on ‘proving’ towards ‘improving’.

High-performing systems have clear alignment of purpose between politicians, policy-makers and practitioners and clearly defined roles. The research highlights the interdependence of different elements of the system: the accountability system affects the recruitment and retention of teachers and leaders; admissions policies can lead to the marginalisation of disadvantaged pupils; overcentralisation disempowers parents and communities; and a fragmented system with overlapping responsibilities leads to the inefficient use of resources. At the heart of the problem lie the twin issues of a lack of shared vision for education and a lack of clarity about where decision-making power lies for key governance functions.

Section Two takes a governance approach to conceptualise the role of the middle tier. It considers the optimum level for responsibility to lie for seven key governance functions: 1) teacher supply, 2) support for vulnerable pupils, 3) the curriculum, 4) school improvement, 5) accountability and quality assurance, 6) admissions and place planning, and 7) preparing young people for the future. The research recommends strengthening the middle tier with greater integration, collaborative decision-making between the centre, the middle tier and schools; and better coordination of services across an area. It supports calls for a more clearly defined set of roles for the middle tier including local authorities (LAs).

A large majority of respondents felt that LAs should be given greater authority to fulfil their roles in relation to: oversight of pupil admissions, including the enforcement of Fair Access Protocols; place-planning; and coordination

of support for pupils with SEND or other disadvantage where support is needed beyond the school. There was strong support for unifying school improvement for academies and maintained schools, on a locality basis, led by school leaders. Different views were expressed, however, about what the basis for the locality should be, with advocates of all current arrangements: LA, area-based partnerships (AEPs), Combined Unitary Authority, Regional or sub-regional (e.g. Opportunity Areas). Many, but not all, favoured moving away from LAs as the basis for school improvement, to sub-regional or regional structures, in order to widen access to good practice and for economies of scale.

There was a strong view that the accountability system needs to be recalibrated, away from a focus on ‘proving’ towards ‘improving’. There was support for the idea of area-based accountability, of using district data to derive a measure of local accountability for all schools, primary, secondary and further education, so that schools’ successes were mutually dependent, stressing that all are part of a local service.

The Covid-19 pandemic has both made the need to build a robust system more urgent and provided examples of what the future might look like, in terms of increased collaboration and multi-agency working. The potential of technology to motivate pupils and enhance teacher collaboration has brought into focus the urgent need to ensure internet access for all pupils. Many practitioners, as well as the charities and parent groups consulted, argued for a greater voice for parents and pupils, seen as crucial for social justice and social mobility.

Section Three looks at current approaches to place-based working, which is rooted in localities but looks outward, drawing on wider expertise and resource. It is seen by interviewees to provide clear benefits: essential “glue” or coordination of activities; a collective sense of responsibility and pride, to reduce local competition which drives local hierarchies and increases the effects of disadvantage; and a

focus on contextual factors which can provide barriers to achievement or offer solutions. In addition, it has the potential to increase cost-efficiencies, provide external quality assurance and prevent ‘reinvention of the wheel’.

Government and professionals have recognized the potential of place-based approaches to reduce the social attainment gap which is beginning to widen again as Covid-19 exposes societal inequalities. Opportunity Areas and AEPs demonstrate the value of collaboration between LAs, early years providers, schools, multi-academy trusts, dioceses, colleges, universities, businesses, health professionals and voluntary and community organisations, working beyond organisational boundaries towards a shared aim. It is recommended that a national evaluation of existing place-based models is commissioned, to draw together good practice to inform system learning.

England’s middle tier has been variously described as ‘missing’ or ‘muddled’. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for a strong middle tier to fulfil a coordinating role. Now is a good time to reset and take to scale the benefits of the place-based approaches described in this report. Claims that over-centralisation of decision-making has contributed, in some regions, to poor economic growth and a sense of being ‘left behind’, have

led to the government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda. The government intends to develop a ‘more thoughtful’ (Gove, 2020) approach to local leadership, to allow communities to take control of the policies that matter to them through a devolution of power to combined and unitary authorities overseen by elected regional mayors. The potential advantages of strengthening links between education and other Combined Authority strategic roles were welcomed by several members of the focus groups.

The OECD are clear that: *“the way education systems are designed has an impact on student performance”* (OECD, 2012: 25). The design of the education system is a national responsibility. There is a strong case for a review of the role of the middle tier with the aim of reducing fragmentation and improving support for disadvantaged pupils. The recommendations in the report are intended to be helpful in making progress towards the best practice principles derived from high-performing systems. The research offers examples where progress is already being made in delivering some of the recommendations by voluntary agreement across a locality: monitoring of vulnerable pupils in Warwickshire; admissions protocols across Sheffield; School Improvement by some Area-based Education Partnerships. It is hoped this report will encourage more such initiatives.

Summary of Recommendations

System Design

1. A review of the current system is needed to reduce the fragmentation, duplication and anomalies of the present system if England is to be as successful as high-performing systems in giving equal weight to performance and tackling disadvantage.
2. The five principles of system design should be used as a guide to system reform.
3. The future role of the middle tier should be clarified in terms of the following functions.

Support for Vulnerable pupils

The research illuminates how weaknesses in teacher recruitment, training and retention and a narrow curriculum monitored by a punitive accountability system, combine to disadvantage learners who are vulnerable.

4. The government should allocate adequate funding to services (including youth, mental health, family) that support vulnerable pupils.
5. Mainstream schools should introduce, if not already in place, more inclusive policies for SEND pupils (including CPD for all teachers and enhanced roles for special needs teachers and SENCOs).
6. The LA should be granted the powers to fulfil their statutory duty to ensure places and services for vulnerable children, including the right to intervene if Fair Admissions Protocols are not followed or to challenge a school's pupil data if they have concerns.
7. Recognise the progress of disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils as a collective responsibility of all schools and agencies in a locality by setting a metric against which LAs report. LAs, working with schools, should produce data termly on their progress and placement in schools and an annual action plan. All schools should be required to provide LAs with the relevant data and support the implementation of the plan.

School Improvement

8. Unify the governance of the system by bringing together LA and RSC responsibilities for school improvement into a single locality governance structure. The DfE should support each locality to establish a School Partnership Board (sub-regional or local, depending on the area). The Board to be responsible and accountable jointly to the LA and RSC and be held to account for performance. The locality could be based on AEPs, Combined Authorities, LAs or Opportunity Areas but need to include all schools in the area.
9. School improvement should focus on the ambition for *all* schools to improve on their previous best. Outstanding practice should be accredited and openly shared.

Accountability

10. All schools should complete a robust, externally-moderated self-assessment to agreed national and local metrics and an action plan to deliver against these, monitored by the local School Partnership Board.
11. Revise the role of Ofsted to provide national validation of the processes of self-assessments and peer moderation in each locality.
12. Britain is the only country in Europe to retain examinations at age 16; we should follow other systems' examples of moderating standards across a system without testing every child every year, by representative national sampling. The money saved on examinations should be reinvested into schools to provide students at 18 with digital passports of the whole range of skills.

Pupil admissions and place-planning

13. Every school should have the right to propose an admissions policy to be translated by the LA into a formal set of arrangements for all local schools; this local body should administer the arrangements and deal with appeals, including for pupil admissions outside the main transition points. In the absence of national action, localities should follow this approach through voluntary agreements as a number already do.
14. DfE to set out a coherent framework for the planning and commissioning of school places which acknowledges a) the central role of the LA in planning and commissioning sufficient school places to meet local need and b) stipulates full consultation with parents, staff and local stakeholders. In the absence of national actions, LAs, Dioceses, MATs and SATs should adopt such an approach.

Research Purpose and Strategy

The research was commissioned in 2019 to develop proposals for a set of criteria by which any revised governance model for the English education system can be judged and which outlines clearly the role(s) of the ‘middle tier’. The ‘middle tier’ is defined as ‘the system of support and accountability connecting publicly-funded local authority (LA) maintained schools and Academies with the DfE’ (Bubb et al., 2019: 8).

The study takes a governance approach to conceptualise the role of the middle tier in a successful school system, using a functional analysis to identify challenges and solutions to resolving the tensions between decentralisation and standardisation, excellence and equity. It aims to answer three research questions (RQs):

- RQ1 How do we define a ‘successful school system’?
- RQ2 What is the role of the ‘middle tier’ in a successful system?
- RQ3 What solutions and challenges exist for resolving the tensions between decentralisation and standardisation, excellence and equity?

The research was organised in three phases:

Phase 1: June 2020

A literature review summarising governance models in four high-performing school systems, which identified five principles of system design common to all four (available [http://www.belmas.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/Phase_1_The_Role_of_the_Middle_Tier_Lessons_from_four_high-performing_education_systems_\(1\).pdf](http://www.belmas.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/Phase_1_The_Role_of_the_Middle_Tier_Lessons_from_four_high-performing_education_systems_(1).pdf)).

Phase 2: July 2020

Questionnaires and interviews with key stakeholders to seek a range of perspectives on how far the English system satisfies these principles and where in the system responsibility should lie for seven key governance functions, namely:

- F1) teacher recruitment and retention
- F2) support for vulnerable pupils
- F3) the curriculum
- F4) school improvement
- F5) accountability and quality assurance
- F6) admissions and place-planning
- F7) building the system for the future.

Phase 2 report available (http://www.belmas.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/Phase_2_Analysis_of_Interviews.pdf)

Phase 3: October 2020

On-line focus group discussions to seek views on recommendations arising from the previous two phases that could be implemented within the current system, relying on voluntary agreements between stakeholders locally (report available [http://www.belmas.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/Phase_3_Report_Final_\(1\).pdf](http://www.belmas.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/Phase_3_Report_Final_(1).pdf)).

This summary report presents the findings and recommendations, structured into three sections each covering one of the research questions.

Context

There has been a global trend since the early 2000s away from hierarchical ‘control/command’ governance of public services towards less bureaucratic, more open, integrated forms of governance, as the growing complexity of social systems demands greater reliance on public engagement and co-production (Cousin, 2019: 6). England has been a world-leader in the move towards a self-improving school system (Earley and Greany, 2017: xviii) where school partnerships lead improvement by sharing expertise and resources and building capacity (Hargreaves, 2012). A government-supported infrastructure to support school-led improvement includes National Leaders of Education (NLEs), National Support Schools (NSSs), National Leaders of Governance (NLGs), Teaching Schools (TSs), Teaching Schools Alliances (TSAs) and Teaching School hubs; most of the published evaluation of school-led collaborations has been of such formal partnerships (Greatbatch and Tate, 2019). Evaluations have found that these support mechanisms have not been accessed equally by all schools, with those most in need the most poorly served (Gu et al., 2016).

International research suggests that, as systems become more decentralised, to maintain equity as well as excellence, there needs to be a coordinating influence across a locality or region: *“The more flexibility in the system, the stronger public policy needs to be”* (Schleicher, 2018: 183) and *“we don’t want the inadequacies of tightly controlled centralization being replaced with the equal flaws of school and community autonomy”* (Fullan, 2006: 96). For choice to benefit all learners, it is argued, there needs to be a concerted and consistent coordinating effort at a local level.



As systems become more decentralised, to maintain equity as well as excellence, there needs to be a coordinating influence across a locality or region.

In some countries, however, system reform has resulted in a weakening of the middle tier. Lubienski (2014) has applied the term ‘disintermediation’¹ to the diminishing of intermediate-level institutions in the USA and New Zealand. His review of specific policies suggests that, rather than devolving power to local agents, many such reforms have been more successful in creating conditions in which new, non-state actors are able to move into the space left by receding meso-level institutions. In England, there have been concerns that the ‘hollowing out’ (Stoker, 1998) of local government, from the combined increases in the power of the State over curriculum and standards and of individual schools over finances and management, has diminished the capacity of Local Authorities (LAs) to intervene in the organization, delivery and monitoring of education services, resulting in a ‘missing middle tier’ (Hill, 2012). Muijs and Romyantseva (2014) found that local coordination of the school system is one of the most worrying aspects of the current policy context, as the emphasis on school autonomy combined with competition often discourages schools from working together and the reduction in the power and influence of LAs have reduced their scope to fulfil a coordinating role. Structural reform since 2010 has resulted in 35% of primary schools and

¹ from the field of economics, defined as the removal of intermediaries from a supply chain (Oxford English dictionary)

77% of secondaries (in total 42% of all schools) becoming academies, operating outside of LA control (DfE, 2021: 3). The majority (84%) of academies are part of Multi Academy Trusts, of which 70% run six or fewer schools (Ofsted, 2020: 54). However, MATs are “corporate bodies, providing contracted educational services to the government, and hence not regarded as part of the overall governance framework” (Glatter, 2020: 14).

The Conservative government’s social mobility plan recognised the limitation of a demand-led, quasi-market approach to managing school improvement: “significant regional variation in both school outcomes and the existing capacity for improvement” (DfE, 2017: 16). Accreditation as an NLE or a Teaching School has remained closely tied to a school’s Ofsted grade, despite revisions to the criteria; and Ofsted status is related to the socio-economic composition of a school’s student body: “in the wealthiest quintile of areas, 93% of secondary schools are rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted; in the most disadvantaged quintile it is 67%” (DfE, 2017: 17). A two-year mixed methods study of teaching schools and their alliances (Gu, et al., 2016) reported that schools most in need are the least likely to engage with TSAs and that the geographical supply of TSAs did not match demand.

Place-based reform

A DfE-commissioned synthesis of evidence on the use of inter-school collaboration as a vehicle for school improvement concludes: “there is an increasing recognition of the need to establish place-based school improvement networks to counter the variation in provision and improve social mobility in disadvantaged areas” (Greatbach and Tate, 2019: 4). A scoping exercise conducted in Phase 1 found the following examples of what might be termed place-based reform:

- Opportunity Areas
- Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs)
- Area-based Education Partnerships (AEPs)
- Combined Authorities overseen by elected regional mayors
- Regional hubs (e.g. Teaching School hubs; the Education Endowment Fund (EEF²) Research School hubs; Subject hubs including for English, Maths and Science).

However, several researchers have pointed to the drawbacks of a crowded middle tier which lacks coordination: Gilbert (2017) and Cruddas (2018) each identify the risk of confusion and duplication and suggest the need for greater coordination of initiatives at a local level; Gu et al. (2016) found that schools who most need support do not always recognise it without LA monitoring and support; Greany and Higham (2018) note that the responsibilities of RSCs and local government can result in tensions about priorities within local areas. They also found issues such as competition/balkanisation between TSAs and MATs and the commodification of knowledge. Greany (2020) examines developments in five localities and suggests that local coherence may be associated with improvements in pupil outcomes. The current study has found that at the heart of the debate are the twin issues of a lack of shared vision for education and a lack of clarity about where decision-making power lies for key governance functions.

The Devolution debate

These concerns are emerging against a wider backdrop of what might be termed the English ‘devolution debate’. Claims that over-centralisation of decision-making has contributed to poor economic growth in some regions and a sense of being ‘left behind’ (Raikes and Giovannini, 2020) have led to the ‘levelling up’ agenda outlined in the Queen’s Speech, 2019

² The EEF was established in 2011 by the Sutton Trust as lead charity in partnership with Impetus Trust (now part of Impetus - Private Equity Foundation) and received a founding £125m grant from the Department for Education. Together, the EEF and Sutton Trust are the government-designated What Works Centre for improving education outcomes for school-aged children.

and articulated by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, in the Ditchley Lecture, July, 2020:

We need to look at how we can develop an even more thoughtful approach to urban leadership and allowing communities to take control of the policies that matter to them. One of the glories of the United States is that they have 50 governors, all of whom can be policy innovators. (Gove, 2020)

A White Paper setting out the Government's proposed local government reorganisation has been postponed from autumn 2020 to early 2021: the then Minister of State for Regional Growth and Local Government outlined the government's intentions at the Northern Powerhouse Education, Skills and Employment Summit in July 2020:

The debate on skills, education, and employment has clearly never been so important.... As we deliver the recovery from Covid-19, it is imperative that we continue improving local communities by devolving money, resources and controls away from Westminster.... the Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper... will provide a roadmap for establishing a series of new mayors within the next ten years - representing the greatest decentralisation of power in our modern history... putting local people in the driving seat by giving them greater influence over the services that matter most to them. The White Paper establishes the framework to fundamentally rewire the role of the state at all levels. (Clarke, 2020)

Tim Brighouse noted the importance of distinguishing between 'decentralisation', defined as the dispersal of power (where power is retained at the centre and pushed out for those at other levels to deliver government policy); and 'devolution', giving power away to other levels of the system. While the terms are often used inter-changeably, the above ministerial

quotations appear to be arguing for devolution. In December 2020, the Labour party committed to a similar devolution of power to local communities (Starmer, 2020). The proposed new local government constitution consists of two types of authorities, each led by elected mayors: *combined authorities*, organised around cities and *unitary authorities*, based on county councils (with the abolition of district councils).

Current Devolved Powers

Currently, the eight combined authorities in England³ have devolved powers for the planning and strategy for regional transport, skills training and economic development. Each devolution deal includes a capital investment fund of between £59 – £250m (Sandford, 2020: 13) which can be used to fund transport, housing and development projects, HS2, adult education and skills training for 19+. Greater Manchester has responsibility for integrating health and social care. The devolution is tightly constrained: the budgets for each area are decided by central government and cannot be vired to other headings. Performance is assessed against government-set targets. The school system, apart from Opportunity Areas (OAs), has not been part of the discussion, although one respondent suggested RSC teams are a step in this direction. For a more detailed discussion of devolution, see [Appendix One, Phase 3 report](#).

The Covid-19 Pandemic

Respondents describe challenges thrown up by the pandemic: the coordination of services for children and families; provision for vulnerable children; the use of technology and ensuring access for all children; and young people's mental health and well-being. [Appendix Two, Phase 3 report](#) summarises published research on the Covid-19 crisis.

³ Liverpool City Region, West of England including Bristol, Greater Manchester, Sheffield City Region, Cambridge and Peterborough, Tees Valley, North of Tyne and West Midlands.

Section One: Principles for a Successful School System

The research aimed to establish criteria against which any system might be measured in terms of success. The Phase 1 literature review looked at four high-performing jurisdictions: Ontario (Canada), Estonia, Finland and Singapore, to identify any common features of system design across the different cultures. Choice of jurisdiction was based on sustained high performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); high levels of equity; and to ensure a range of governance models (including each of Sahlberg’s 2007 models: Anglo-Saxon, Pacific and Nordic).

The review found that the sustained improvement in the four jurisdictions followed a government drive to invest in education as a means of building social and economic success, using international learning about system design. A single reform strategy was cited in literature on each system: Fullan’s (2015) ‘Leading from

the Middle’ (LftM). External evaluations of what has been called England’s most successful school improvement strategy, the London Challenge (Greany, 2015: 7), also cite the use of Fullan’s systems thinking as instrumental in its success (Cousin, 2019; Kidson and Norris, 2014). Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015: 44) and Munby and Fullan (2016) have argued that leading from the middle approaches can provide a valuable focus for system improvement in England, in order to ensure efficient and effective use of research evidence and analysis of data across schools; to provide support to enable schools to respond coherently to multiple external reform demands; and to be champions for families and students, making sure everybody gets a fair deal.

The following five principles (Figure 1) summarise the common features of successful international systems.

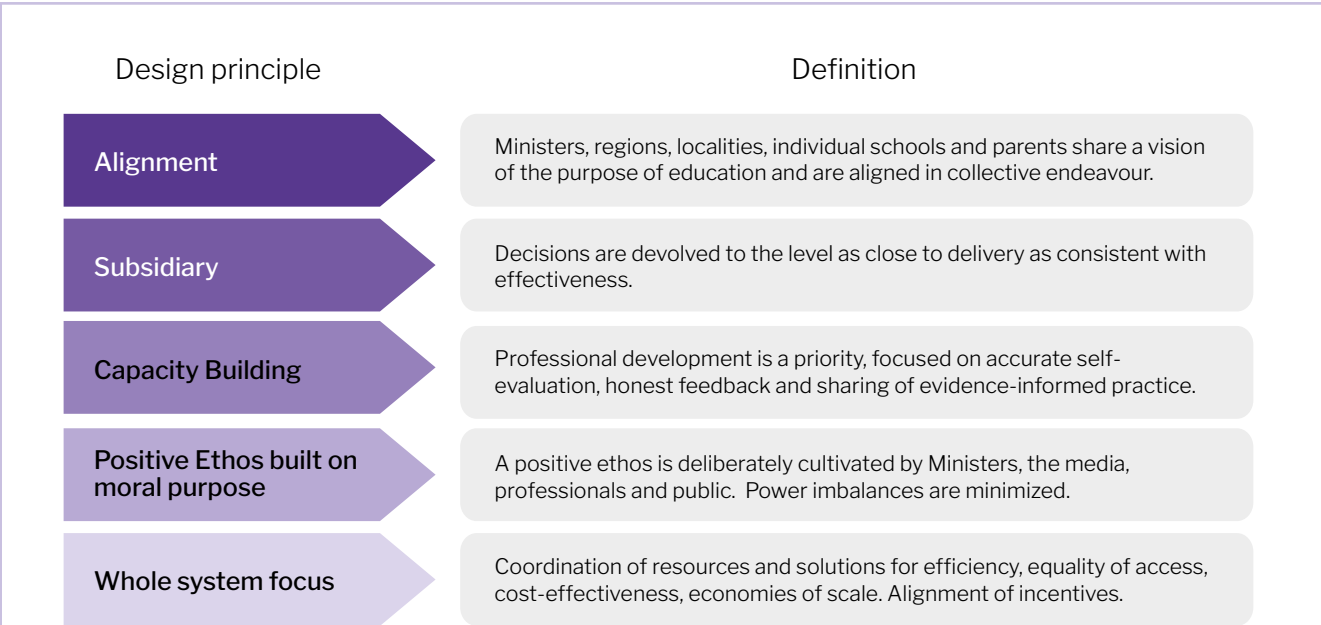


Figure 1: Principles of effective system design

Interviewees were asked to rate each principle as 'essential', 'desirable' or 'not important' and to rate the current English system, indicating whether they feel the system performs 'well', 'partially' or 'not at all' against each principle.

Figure 2 summarises the responses of 17 respondents who returned questionnaires. For each principle, the degree of importance exceeds current performance.

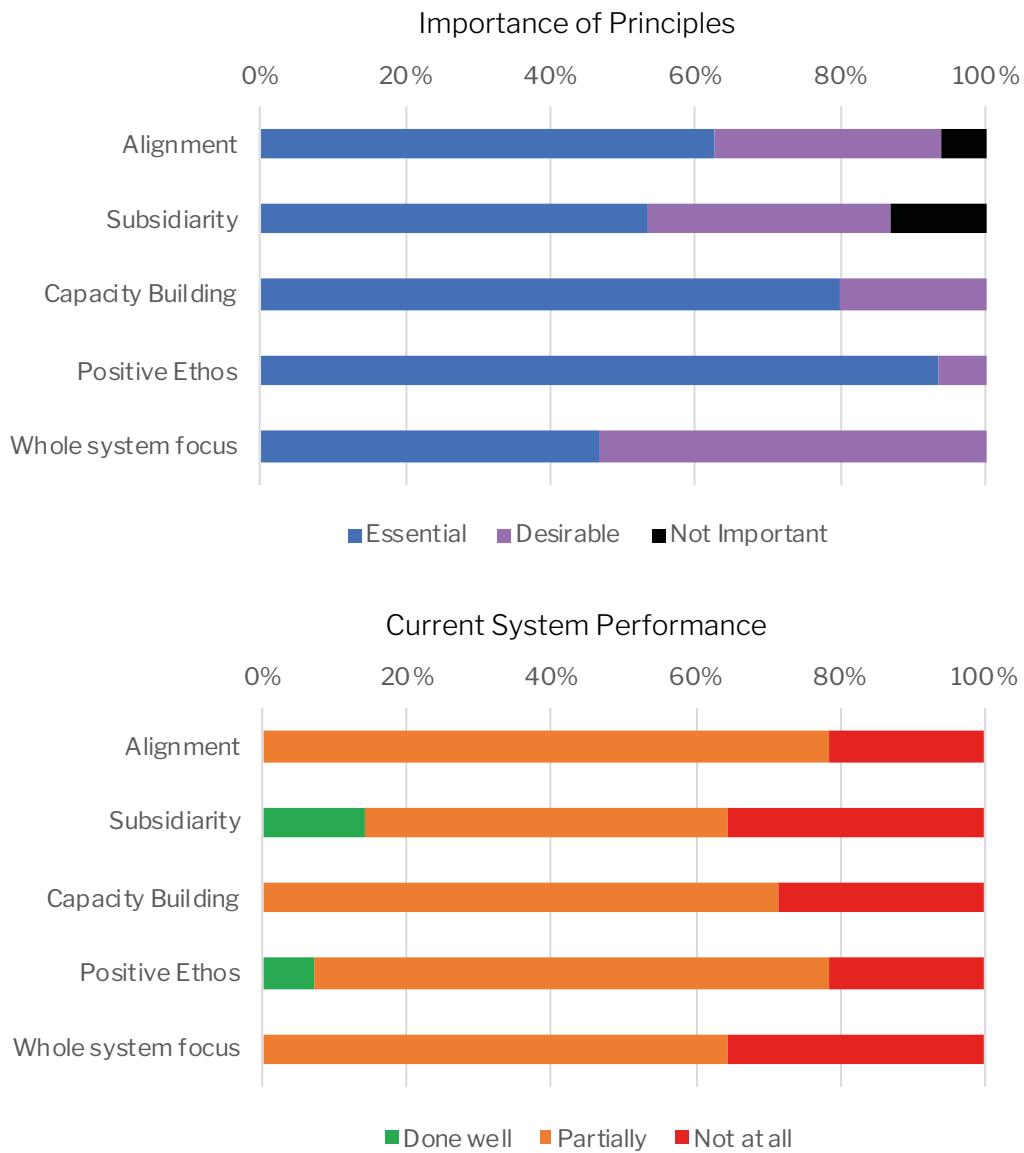


Figure 2: Ratings of English education system against principles of effective system design

1. Alignment

The four jurisdictions examined for this research have different cultures and values, from Singapore's competitive approach to Finland's collaborative one. However, all four demonstrate a strong alignment of vision and practices aligned with the dominant culture. All four have a strong middle tier. The role of the middle tier is to provide leadership in supporting culture change, bringing coordination and ensuring equity across local systems. No respondent in this study believed that alignment was done well in the English system, with a consequential lack of focus and parts of the system working against each other. Greater vertical and horizontal alignment was recommended, with the need for more coordination of provision across an area, to reduce disadvantage and increase empowerment to drive improvement. The need for stronger feedback loops between government and all parts of the system was seen as critical to tackling barriers to achievement, by enabling targeted, local action:

My voice isn't important, no-one cares about the real issues (Sahreen Siddiqui)

Greater alignment could be achieved by a reduction of local competition and agreement on a coordinating level, which needs to be close enough to be in touch with local needs and externally facing, to avoid becoming insular or reinforcing disadvantage:

The sense of competition and market-driven ethos acts against an ethos of collaboration... in a competitive environment, it can be a benefit for one school if another gains poor results. There needs to be a coordinating layer above the MAT (Sam Twiselton)

2. Subsidiarity and autonomy with the right form of accountability

There was consensus that decisions should be made at the lowest level that can effectively make those decisions and that a functional approach enables a useful discussion to reflect

the complexity of the system in a jurisdiction as large as England, with just over 22,000 schools (DfE, 2020a). Oversight at different levels for different functions was recommended. Given the clear link between 'place' and performance, cohesion across an area can reduce performance gaps by overcoming local hierarchies, sharing resources and learning and adapting evidence-based practice to local contexts. For vulnerable pupils, working across services can provide more effective support for children and families. There was overall recognition of the need to rebuild capacity at the middle-tier level, to bring the benefits of coordination highlighted in the literature review. A rebalancing was recommended, from the current high-stakes accountability system to a medium-stakes one with a greater focus on 'improving' than 'proving'.

3. Learning and capacity building

There is strong evidence that high quality continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers can significantly improve pupils' attainment (OECD, 2020; Fletcher-Wood and Zuccollo, 2020; Cordingley et al., 2015). However, teachers in England, unlike many other professionals, including educators in the high-performing jurisdictions and teachers in Scotland, have no entitlement to CPD. Deloitte (2019: 5) conclude that the number 1 reason people leave their job is "the inability to learn and grow".

This principle was rated highly in terms of importance, particularly due to its link with teacher retention; however, no respondent rated it as being done well in the English system. Barriers to be addressed include reduced school and LA budgets; a lack of time for teachers to



The number 1 reason people leave their job is 'the inability to learn and grow'.

participate in structured collaboration; and an accountability system which militates against open discussion of weaknesses. Recommendations include: a common entitlement to CPD for all teachers; training in specific skills of evaluation and feedback; and implementation to be structured within a coherent improvement strategy. There also needs to be a focus on system learning, with a sharing of effective regional leadership practices to level up provision in challenging areas.

4. Positive framing and shared moral purpose: equity and respect

A *positive ethos* was rated the most important principle but considered to be ‘*not done well at all*’, with responsibility for creating a positive narrative around education deemed to lie at every level of the system, particularly with the government and the media. The OECD (2020: 79) report a positive correlation between the high prestige of the teaching profession and the educational achievement of students. To increase teachers’ perceptions of being valued in society and thereby increase recruitment and retention, the OECD (2020: 76) advise government to allocate adequate resources, ensure career progression and enable collaborative, supportive working environments. Professional ethics of collaboration and joint purpose are openly expressed and reinforced in daily interactions in the high-performing jurisdictions. Parents and community feel invested in schools. Mechanisms are in place to ensure all children succeed. A positive ethos is deliberately cultivated and power imbalances minimized. For example, accountability is focused on improvement and providing support and teachers are awarded a degree of professional autonomy in recognition of their expertise. In England, too often, the opposite is the case:

Teachers leave, partly, because we are measuring the wrong thing. It is hugely unrewarding to go to work each day and to be told off for not doing the things the system would not allow you to do. (Kiran Gill)

5. Whole system focus

Darling-Hammond and Rothman (2011) suggest the strong performance of Ontario, Finland and Singapore is partly due to the recognition that all policies need to work in harmony or the system will become unbalanced. For example, placing too strong an emphasis on teacher recruitment without concomitant attention on development and retention could result in a continual churn within the profession. There has been increasing recognition, heightened during the pandemic, that attention to the ways that different elements of the system are mutually dependent has the potential to reduce some of the perverse incentives currently working against whole system improvement. There was acknowledgement that a whole system focus does not fit with complete autonomy for schools, but **the weaknesses of the “autonomy experiment” was felt to have been exposed by the COVID-19 crisis** and these need to be addressed before improvements to cohesion, clarity and equity can be achieved. A significant number of interviewees advocated greater clarity and coherence in terms of the flow of money to schools, the delivery infrastructure, and **collective responsibility to ensure high-quality provision for vulnerable young people**. A strong theme running through the research was the need to consider the inter-relationships between the seven functions and to increase awareness of the impact that decisions on one function has on the others. This was most often raised in discussions of **how the accountability system negatively impacts other functions, particularly teacher retention, vulnerable children, school improvement and admissions**. Shared accountability measures were recommended to replace published league tables and inspection grades:

If we were all held accountable for the weakest schools and every child’s capacity to learn, we would have drivers in the system to work together. (Alison Peacock)

Devolution

There was wide support for ‘real’ devolution, seen to be less about taking power from one level to another than about collaboration within a framework. Respondents came from a range of roles and positions in the system, but there was a common desire to share perspectives and work together for the benefit of greater numbers of learners.

For devolution to be successful, it was suggested, the following principles need to be observed:

1. authority aligned with responsibility

Most respondents said that LAs need to be responsible for admissions, vulnerable children and transport, as the level that is close enough to coordinate these functions. They should oversee fixed term and permanent exclusions and be enabled to deliver their responsibilities for vulnerable children.

“LAs should have enough authority invested in them to deliver their responsibility to be the champion of vulnerable children.”

(David Carter)

2. balance a concern for individual school autonomy with the need to ensure expertise and alignment of purpose

Several interviewees recommended a rebalancing, citing the risks involved in granting too much autonomy without ensuring expertise or alignment of purpose.

We’ve been through a period where school autonomy was sacrosanct and all that was needed was to devolve responsibility to school leaders. What I discovered in my national role was that you could not assume that they would make good decisions. In fact, I found some very poor decisions and judgements which had a very detrimental impact on some children’s lives. (David Carter)

Many respondents, including Jon Coles, Matt Hood and Samira Sadeghi, linked autonomy to expertise:

I don’t think the issue is how close to the pupil the decision is made – it is much more a question of “who has the expertise required to make the decision or solve the problem?” This requires knowledge and practice at solving it. Some places in the system are more likely to have that knowledge and they should be given responsibility for using it, e.g. Place planning is best done by LAs because they have the local demographic data so are better placed than anybody else to make those decisions.

(Matt Hood)

3. integration not fragmentation

Interviewees expressed a strong desire for increased integration in the system, to maximise resources and reduce attainment gaps:

In Ontario, the Boards consist of people who are mainly seconded principals, in rotation – as they move jobs every 3 years – so they are more in touch with practice and go back into a school if they don’t move upwards. It is a more integrated system. Insularity is a big problem in our system. (Sam Twiselton)

Recommendations

The five principles provide a useful framework for the review of system governance. Respondents believed that greater cohesion and alignment would reduce fragmentation and duplication. Roles and responsibilities of middle tier bodies should be clarified and the middle tier strengthened and simplified.

Consequences of failing to design the education system using these principles

Many features common to high performing systems can be found in England, but only in pockets of provision. The English system lacks clear shared goals and a strategy to unify the system. Covid-19 has highlighted the importance of a coherent infrastructure that can respond to the needs of different localities and take advantage of local resources and relationships. The multiple disbenefits of treating governance functions in isolation rather than taking a whole system approach include:

- ***the recruitment and retention of teachers***

is negatively impacted by the high-stakes accountability system. Shortages disproportionately affect schools serving disadvantaged areas (Lynch et al., 2016: 5; Allen and Sims, 2018).

- ***the marginalisation of disadvantaged pupils***

arising from the proliferation of admission authorities and the high stakes accountability system. A lack of alignment leads to multiple government departments, agencies and bodies having oversight of children and family related policies, with no single forum to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable children. 28% of schools serving more advantaged areas were able to provide lap tops compared to only 15% of those serving disadvantaged areas; 44% of pupils in middle-class families managed four hours studying a day compared to only 33% of working-class families (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020: 1).

- ***disempowerment of parents***

the number of parents achieving their first preference of school in 2019 (DfE, 2019a: 3) was the lowest on record, despite a small (8300) increase in applications in the same period.

- ***competition is a barrier to collaboration***

The accountability system drives local hierarchies of schools. Intervention has focused on tackling failure rather than on continuous improvement. There is no authoritative mechanism, except in opportunity areas, for combining resources across an area to meet local priorities or address place-based issues.

- ***a costly and inefficient system***

Running two parallel, overlapping systems is inefficient at a time when education cuts are impacting on schools. Bubb et al. (2019) estimated that oversight of the academy system costs 44% more than that for the maintained system. Sibieta (2020) identified an 8% reduction in school funding since 2010 and Ofsted (SEND reviews in the annual reports, Ofsted, 2018, 2019, 2020) highlighted cuts in LA services for vulnerable pupils. The ADCS (2020) identified a shortage of placements for children in care; an increase in school exclusions and insufficient access to children's mental health services. Of the 311 Free Schools established by January 2018, 40 had to be closed and 15 re-brokered (Whittaker, 2018).



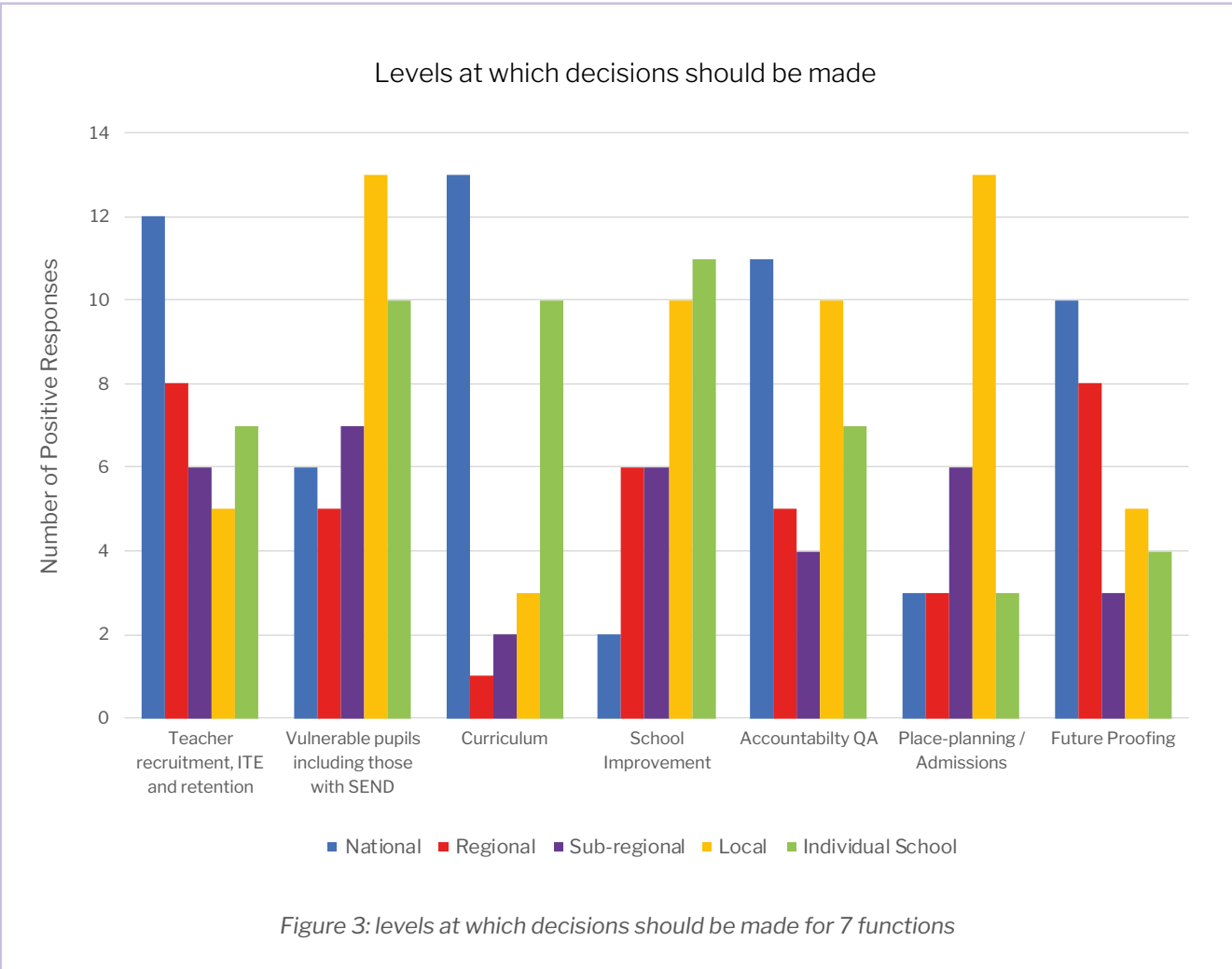
The recruitment and retention of teachers is negatively impacted by the high-stakes accountability system.

Section Two: The Role of the Middle Tier. A functional analysis of seven governance responsibilities.

This section considers the level at which responsibility for each of seven functions might best lie in the English system, summarising, for each function, features of the high-performing jurisdictions and views of the study's respondents. Most respondents advocated collaborative decision-making between levels for most decisions, supporting an approach of vertical alignment with strong feedback loops

between levels; together with stronger horizontal alignment across a locality to reduce current inequities.

Figure 3 summarises respondents' responses to the question 'at which level of the system should decision-making be devolved for each of seven governance functions?'



F1 Teacher recruitment, initial teacher education (ITE), and retention

High-performing jurisdictions

All four high-performing jurisdictions place a premium on the quality of the teaching profession and have undertaken a programme of teacher professionalisation, defined (OECD, 2020) in terms of five pillars: knowledge and skills; career opportunities; a collaborative culture among teachers; responsibility and autonomy; and high status in society. The recruitment and training of teachers is managed at national level, with a focus on attracting the best graduates, training them extensively and preparing them to be able to teach with professional autonomy. Support for participation in CPD is positively and significantly related to teachers' satisfaction with their terms of employment and with pupil attainment. High-performing systems value their teachers and reward them not only with levels of remuneration equivalent to those of other tertiary educated workers, but with support and professional development throughout their career. *"Retaining teachers and principals is crucial to the success of an education system and its schools. Experienced teachers tend to be more effective than novice teachers"*. Experience, particularly in the same school, contributes to the effectiveness of mentoring colleagues (OECD, 2020: 133).

The English system

England is facing a serious shortfall in the number of teachers needed in publicly funded schools, against a projected rise of 11% in secondary pupil numbers from 2018 to 2023 (DfE, 2020a). A third (32.3%) of newly qualified entrants entering the profession in 2013 were not recorded as working in the state sector five years later, the highest wastage rate since records began in 1997 (Foster, 2019: 5). A large NFER mixed methods study

(Worth, et al., 2018) found an increasing rate of experienced teachers leaving the profession: the percentage of teachers older than 50 in both primary and secondary schools decreased from 23% in 2010 to 17% in 2016. Secondary schools face recruitment problems in the English Baccalaureate subjects. Shortages disproportionately affect schools serving disadvantaged areas (Lynch et al., 2016: 5). The latest available data, for the period 2011-2016 (DfE, 2018a), show that 22% of primary heads and 35% of secondary heads appointed in 2011 left within five years. The turnover was higher for heads of schools serving disadvantaged areas. Headteachers in England earn more than twice the salary of teachers and other tertiary educated workers, the highest premium for school headteachers across the OECD. However, teachers in the UK earn less than the OECD average at all levels of education. In contrast to the trend across the OECD, teachers' statutory salaries in England fell in real terms by 10% between 2005 and 2017 (OECD, 2018a, UK Country note, p. 6). In addition, while English schools are granted relatively high levels of autonomy, their teachers enjoy much lower levels of professional autonomy than is the case in Ontario or Finland. Respondents felt that *"schools are often hugely hierarchical because of the accountability system and there is too little devolved responsibility to teachers"* (Phase 2 report, p.36); whereas studies point to the need for leaders to respond to millennials' dislike of hierarchy (Deloitte, 2019).



High-performing systems value their teachers and reward them not only with levels of remuneration ... but with support and professional development throughout their career.

The main reasons given for leaving teaching are: increasing administrative workload and excessive monitoring (Worth, et al., 2018; Foster, 2019; OECD, 2020). Schleicher (2019) suggests the key problem in the English system is lack of trust in teachers (TES, 6 December, 2019). Long-term trends follow economic cycles, where teacher numbers rise during economic slumps and decrease in booms. Covid-19 has increased ITE applications by an estimated 15% and decreased loss from the profession; however, this churn is wasteful and fails to provide the stable teaching population enjoyed by high-performing countries (Worth and Dawson, 2020).

Recommendations:

1. Extend the length of initial teacher education (ITE) to ensure teachers are as highly skilled as international peers in both subject content and the science of learning.
2. Support the NAHT (2020) calls for a national, annual entitlement to CPD for all teachers, linked to the CPD standards and the work of the Teacher Development Trust: this should focus on subject pedagogy and professional collaborative learning.
3. Revise the accountability framework to reduce its contribution to a negative ethos and stress on teachers and headteachers.

F2 Support for vulnerable pupils

There was consensus on the priority that should be given to address current weaknesses of the system in ensuring the success of pupils who are vulnerable due to special needs or disadvantage. This is seen as a key responsibility of the LA.

High-performing jurisdictions

UNESCO's World Forum on Education 2015 led to the publication in 2016 of the Education 2030 Framework for Action (OECD, 2018b), which emphasises inclusion and equity as the foundations of a quality education system. International literature captures some of the challenges of achieving both excellence and equity, a goal which, as Ainscow, Chapman and Hadfield (2020) point out, is more difficult to achieve the more unequal a society is. The four high-performing systems have all adapted their approaches over the last two decades in attempts to achieve the right balance by working to a philosophy of 'levelling up', where early intervention and additional support are given to enable all children to be successful (rather than giving those struggling a less demanding offer). In Finland, for example, 59.6% of pupils received some form of additional support in 2018 (OSF, 2018). SEND is part of all teacher training curricula.

England

Bryant and Swords (2018: 17) in a detailed summary of good practice in developing and sustaining an effective local SEND system in England recommend:

Ensure that there is a clear strategy for building inclusive capacity in mainstream schools and settings, built on shared expectations and a clear offer of capacity-building support. The vast majority of children with SEND will be



Respondents stated that parents and carers do not feel the current system is working for them or their children.

supported in mainstream settings... effective practice in identifying young people's needs and putting in place the right support is at the foundation of the local SEND system. Getting this wrong can create unsustainable pressure on more targeted and specialist forms of provision, and can close off opportunities for young people and choices for parents.

Respondents stated that parents and carers do not feel the current system is working for them or their children. The aim is to have a child-centered system but pupils often fall through the cracks of people with different responsibilities in the local area. The design and operation, by some schools, of admissions criteria and the oversubscription process have combined to exclude disadvantaged pupils from some high performing schools (Van den Brande, et al., 2019: 4). Once in a school, a disadvantaged pupil is disproportionately likely to be 'off-rolled'⁴. An EPI report following one secondary cohort (Years 7-11) estimated the numbers 'off-rolled' to be 1 in 10 or 69299 pupils (Hutchinson and Renna-Jennings, 2019: 8). The number of pupils permanently excluded rose 40% between 2014/15 and 2017/18 (DfE, 2019b: 1).

Pressure on provision is felt from the combination of the following factors:

1. the severe reduction in support for schools and vulnerable pupils: "budget cuts in local resources, youth clubs, mental health and family services support have created a massive vacuum" (Nicola McCleod)

⁴ the practice of removing pupils from the school roll without using permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than the best interest of the pupil (Ofsted, 2018: 50).

2. an increasing number of children being identified with special needs, incentivised by both the accountability system and changes to funding
3. the increased complexity of children's needs
4. the growing complexity of the current admissions and governance arrangements and lack of power of an LA to intervene if Fair Admissions Protocols are not followed, or to challenge school's pupil data if they have concerns

Changes to the curriculum and the accountability system since 2010 were seen as a barrier: "if accountability measures were not around Progress 8, this would reduce off-rolling" (Samira Sadeghi).

Most respondents called for a more managed system for vulnerable pupils, with stronger vertical and horizontal alignment:

There has to be a model of national standards, expectations, regulations and guidance for dealing with vulnerable pupils, with local organisation and sufficiency of provision to ensure that vulnerable pupils receive the right support. The quality has to come from the individual provider. (Jon Coles)

Education and Health are not sufficiently aligned. There is not enough cohesion in the education system when working with vulnerable learners. This is compounded when working with vulnerable adults when the organization of the service is based on chronology rather than on their developmental needs. (Nicola McCleod)

One of the problems is that there are not enough incentives to prevent schools excluding and not enough credit for working with the children you started with irrespective of the challenges they face. Schools should be responsible for children that they exclude but, at the moment, once the child is excluded there is no expectation that the school should take any further responsibility. We also have

to ensure that the Alternative Provision is of sufficient quantity and quality and they are well supported. I have also been concerned that Free School/AP provision that has become part of MATs is often not a community resource but filled largely by pupils from the Trust. (David Carter)

The incentives for schools to support disadvantaged pupils are misaligned; currently, if a pupil is excluded from a school the LA picks up most of the cost. We should try to provide more incentives for schools to take challenging pupils and celebrate them when they do. (Ian Keating)

Recommendations

A reversal of cuts to support services for vulnerable students was advocated. Schools should be supported to develop more inclusive practice, with specific training in ITE and enhanced roles for special needs teachers. LAs should be given stronger enforcement powers to fulfil their duties in the areas of safeguarding, vulnerable children and SEND. The definition of 'vulnerable' children should be extended, to include all those who have been involved with social services, as this is a strong predictor of school failure. A recommendation for the LA to monitor termly the progress of disadvantaged children received wide support and was seen as an important step forward in developing collective responsibility for disadvantaged children. It was argued that the data need to be followed by an action plan. As the Warwickshire Case Study (Phase 3 report, p12) illustrates, this approach is being taken in at least one locality.

F3 The curriculum

As in the high-performing jurisdictions, the curriculum was considered to be a national rather than a middle tier responsibility, so is not covered in detail in this summary report (for detail, see [Phase 2 report](#)). It was felt a national curriculum gives clarity about the purpose of education and should be more strongly enforced.

Schools can make their curriculum as diverse or as non-diverse as they want, almost as if it doesn't matter. If you live in an area that's more diverse your curriculum offer is more diverse. That doesn't reflect our country as a whole and these decisions need to be made by the country as a whole – they are too important to be made by individual schools – they impact on the whole of society and how far people feel like we do or we don't belong. (Sahreen Siddiqui)

There needs to be a better balance struck between the DfE stance of mandating largely academic education up to 16 and developing students' soft skills, such as working in groups, problem solving etc., qualities much valued by employers. (Luke Raikes)

Respondents were satisfied that the most recent version of the National Curriculum allows adequate local flexibility. The relative youth of the teaching workforce was suggested as an argument against teacher autonomy in the



Many (interviewees) felt more attention needs to be paid to well-being, and to the 'future' skills of problem-solving, application of knowledge, team work, critical thinking, communication, information skills, and being a good citizen.

current system, as teachers lack training and experience in curriculum design: this should be reinstated into the ITE curriculum.

Many felt more attention needs to be paid to well-being, and to the 'future' skills of problem-solving, application of knowledge, team work, critical thinking, communication, information skills, and being a good citizen.

Several interviewees advocated taking the national curriculum away from political control: *"Ministers being amateurs"* (Tim Brighouse); *"I support the curriculum being decided at a national level, but it should be taken out of the hands of politicians who constantly change it, demoralizing everybody"* (Samira Sadeghi).

Have a standard national advisory council on the curriculum: include reps from the local government association which would incorporate the regions, teachers, CBI, universities, regionally designated universities and change the assessment system. Aims, purposes, an agreement on what sort of character we want, what sort of knowledge and skills we need. Devolve power to the regions and start a competition between the regions on how quickly they can improve the performance of our schooling system. (Tim Brighouse)

Recommendations:

1. The government and the teaching profession should agree a shared vision for education which encompasses the whole person and well-being, as well as future skills of problem solving, experiential learning and global awareness.
2. High-quality vocational and technical education should be a priority.

F4 School improvement

Most of the systems I work with have some form of middle tier and school improvement is a key part of what they do. (Steve Munby).

School improvement is, foremost, a school's responsibility, supported by the middle tier.

There was less appetite for national input here than for any other function. The high-performing systems have moved to a school excellence or self-evaluation model, whereby a school's improvement plan is agreed with the middle tier and monitored throughout the year. The middle tier is considered in much of the literature to be the most effective level of the system to be responsible, with schools, for school improvement: *"tackling school improvement at area level (rather than national level or individual school level) has considerable benefits"* (Hutchings et al., 2012: 109). Locality approaches ensure school improvement is focused on all schools and is a continuous activity rather than an intervention after failure, with resources devoted to improving rather than 'proving'.

Effective self-evaluation requires evaluation skills and an external perspective to provide challenge. One mechanism for such externality, in which England is considered to be a world-leader (Matthews and Ehren, 2018: 48), is peer review, advocated by the OECD (2013: 468-70) as a priority for school improvement, especially in high-autonomy systems. The most established system for peer review (Matthews and Ehren, *ibid*) is the annual review used by Challenge Partners, which an external evaluation (Matthews and Headon, 2015: xiii-xv) found to be *"exceptional in its conception, rigour, quality and developmental power ... Reviews are no less objective or rooted in evidence than Ofsted inspections"*. Respondents found it more useful than external inspection as people could openly explore areas for improvement and, as reports are not in the public domain, the incentive for 'gaming' is avoided. There are a range of

models internationally (Godfrey, 2020). Our case studies show that peer review needs to be implemented with expertise into a system robust enough to enable it. With adequate resources, including Ofsted-trained lead evaluators, peer review provides objective feedback to inform improvement priorities and a low-cost means of both professional development and sharing expertise around the system. Without these, it is less likely to move schools forward.

A repeated mantra in the interviews was *"the knowledge is in the system"* with frustration that not enough use is made of the extensive evidence and experience in school improvement. Principles for effective school improvement include:

a. focus on improvement rather than intervention

The need for improvement to be seen as important for all schools:

A lot of Trusts think that they do not need an improvement strategy for schools that have been deemed good by Ofsted, but all schools need an improvement trajectory and, once they are 'stable' they need to be ready to help the rest of the system. (David Carter).

b. capacity

Several interviewees pointed to practical considerations of releasing those with expertise from their 'day job' to work with other schools; this is an approach upon which England's school-led improvement depends, so an adequate funding model needs to be found.



With adequate resources... peer review provides objective feedback to inform improvement priorities and a low-cost means of both professional development and sharing expertise around the system.

c. funding

There is not yet a sustainable model for funding the collaborative learning activities which were widely felt to be effective. Funding in the form of grants take up time and staff resource in bidding and reporting back and is usually short-term, bringing sustainability issues.

d. an understanding of how partnerships deliver lasting impact

Cousin and Gu (forthcoming) present a four-step guide to making partnerships work, including the need for “negotiating power relationships; navigating tensions in conflicted governance environments; finding an appropriate funding model; and sustainability”. They conclude that “many partnerships have an under-developed, in-articulated or missing theory of change, which limits their effectiveness in bringing about sustainable improvement”.

e. the skills to facilitate learning of other professionals

People don't learn by telling – they have to have a need to learn, invest in it and make it their own. That's why practitioners are really important to get some on the ground sharing of practice because people learn by doing. (Christine Gilbert)

f. whole area approaches

A culture of competitiveness was frequently mentioned as a barrier to professional collaboration. Additionally, challenges to improvement in some areas lie outside of the school. Both of these issues can be resolved by 'place-based' approaches which depend upon coordination across an area.

g. alignment with the accountability system

The accountability system was frequently cited as “part of the problem”, incentivising a focus on short-term, shallow measures or local competitiveness. Many providers of school improvement are not accountable for the impact of their support and a deregulated market of providers has led to a “bewildering” supply



Many partnerships have an under-developed, in-articulated or missing theory of change, which limits their effectiveness in bringing about sustainable improvement.

(Cousin and Gu, forthcoming)

of support and a lack of quality assurance: “Identifying high quality CPD from external providers has been one of the most difficult responsibilities to fulfil” (Wellcome Trust, 2020: 16). Intervention can sometimes result in a school being overwhelmed by too many uncoordinated support initiatives.

Recommendations:

1. Unify the governance of the system by bringing together LA and RSC accountabilities for school improvement into a single locality governance structure. The DfE should support each locality to establish a School Partnership Board (sub-regional or local, depending on the area). The Board to be responsible and accountable jointly to the LA and RSC and be held to account for performance. The locality could be based on AEPs, Combined Authorities, LAs or Opportunity Areas; all schools would be part of the partnership.
2. School improvement should focus on the ambition for all schools to improve on their previous best. Outstanding practice should be accredited and openly shared.

F5 Accountability and quality assurance

In the high-performing jurisdictions, the middle tier forms a critical part of the accountability regime. Local officials know their schools well, from regular visits to schools by Superintendents (Ontario), the Director of Education (Finland) and the cluster lead (Singapore). Superintendents are headteachers who often return to that role, in systems which are integrated. National school inspections and the use of data to rank schools have been abolished: quality assurance is based on steering through information, support and funding. All four systems pay attention to data collection which allows state, local government and schools to have an overview of performance (including of the whole population and identified groups), analyse them and make informed decisions. The system is monitored via sampling rather than testing every student and each school; schools receive their own results to be used for development purposes. There are no sanctions or ranking lists. The systems are rigorous: all have annual teacher performance appraisal involving the locality or district level to monitor performance against the school's annual plan. Where a school is underperforming, additional support is given to build professional capacity to meet students' learning needs.

England: Move from high-stakes to medium-stakes accountability

There is a clear appetite to follow the high-performing jurisdictions in managing quality assurance locally and across whole areas, to reduce confusion, increase morale and rebalance incentives towards supporting all students.

It is a huge problem that if your school is judged less than 'Good', you are judged less than Good – and what is the incentive to work in a school where you will be labelled as underperforming?... The approach for many decades has been to "tell people off" rather than support them. The accountability

system fails to recognise that judgements on schools are also made on teachers – teachers really care about their school and it is always a risk that schools can lose hope and optimism.
(Alison Peacock)

Accountability should be more local. I draw on my experience of being a senior HMI and my DfE experience. I think that one of the non-helpful issues in this country is top-down accountability which is inevitably a blunt tool... and has led to schools being penalized for the number of disadvantaged children they have, or some schools becoming less inclusive. It is at a local level that you know your schools and we need to be driving towards a system where we have groups of schools that work together to hold themselves and each other to account... It is about looking at that locality and ensuring no school is left behind. The DfE in a national accountability system can only ever hold the worst performers to account.
(Maria Dawes)

Respondents stressed the need to recalibrate towards a medium-stakes accountability system, in terms of the use made of inspection and exam results, and for a removal of the punitive consequences that currently impact negatively on morale and public perception. A reduction in testing was recommended, to alleviate pupil stress, especially at primary level, although in-school assessment is recognised as useful if its aim is diagnostic. Britain is the only country in Europe to retain examinations at age 16; digital passports of the whole range of pupils' skills might be more suited to the 21st century. It was suggested that we follow other systems' examples of moderating standards across a system without testing every child every year, by representative national sampling, and reinvest the money saved on examinations into schools.

A national framework with strong horizontal and vertical accountability

Increasing alignment and cohesion would enable stronger accountability by bringing clarity to roles and strengthening capacity for holding people

to account. “People working together to improve expertise is not accountability” (Matt Hood); “teachers are accountable to line managers, and heads are accountable to their employer, e.g. their local governing body; the rest is just information” (Jon Coles).

The majority of respondents agreed there is a need to strengthen the unification of the governance of the system by bringing together LA and RSC accountabilities into a single locality governance structure. It was felt a sub-regional or local (depending on the area) School Partnership Board would work well, particularly if vertical alignment were strengthened. In this model, the Board would be responsible and accountable jointly to the LA and RSC and be held to account for performance.

It might be helpful to ensure the soft intelligence comes through to supplement the quantitative data and exam information. In this country you might not have a formal superintendent role but there are enough bodies to ensure the local knowledge is there – MATs, LAs, dioceses, the RSC and regional delivery teams - if they can work together effectively. They [can] highlight areas of vulnerability far sooner than an Ofsted inspection. Greater focus should be put on the middle tier to create the capacity and knowledge and ensure it is effectively shared. (Richard Gill)

In areas where education becomes devolved to the regional mayor, the mayor, via the combined authority, would hold the local area partnership to account for continued improvement and the partnership would hold schools to account. Accountability would be strictly in relation to where power has been devolved and how that agency is responsible to the one above. It was felt that schools and MATs should be responsible to the region through the locality, not directly to the Secretary of State, because some of the challenges faced by schools are locality issues. The role of the state would be to agree a framework within which vertical and horizontal accountabilities would work.

Several respondents made the point that no-one is ‘accountable’ to Ofsted; however, they described the intense pressure on schools to meet Ofsted’s expectations, with unhelpful consequences for accountability:

What I’ve learned is that even though I am the person who makes hire and fire decisions, heads make decisions in line with what they think Ofsted want, which is not helpful. (Jon Coles)

The recommendation to revise the role of Ofsted and remove the system’s bias against disadvantaged schools was strongly supported.

The more that inspection goes back to informing poorly-informed parents, the better it gets; the more it turns inward into highly technical detail and is seen as an accountability vehicle with consequences for leaders, it’s a much less desirable system. (Jon Coles)

Robust self-assessment, externally moderated

A nationally agreed framework would support schools in their annual self-assessment; local priorities could be added by the Partnership Board. Wider accountability measures might include, as well as a range of academic results, destinations, employment, mental health, well-being and non-cognitive attributes “which are better predictors of long-term success” (Kiran Gill). It was suggested the framework should include student commitment, well-being, extra-curricular activity, as well as academic performance. A national agency such as Ofsted could validate the self-assessments, on a sampling basis. No grades would be needed. A continuously monitored, supportive system would prevent headteachers and teachers leaving the profession by reducing what many believe has become a ‘toxic’ culture. Importantly, it would be no less rigorous and provide regular, robust feedback for timely improvement.

F6 Admissions and place-planning

The majority of interviewees felt that place-planning and admissions should be managed locally, for practical reasons such as local knowledge and fairness:

[because of] the impact that one academy increasing its PAN will have on another school in terms of funding, school improvement, the whole context, I would have some sort of locality-based admissions authority that would oversee the admissions and would not allow individual MATs or schools the autonomy to be their own admissions authority. (Maria Dawes)

There was broad agreement that the local authority should be responsible for these functions, for which they have a statutory duty; and many argued that they should be given adequate powers to carry them out. Local oversight of admissions and place planning should be consistent, with strict regulation of oversubscription criteria; every school should be part of the same system. [Case studies from Sheffield and Warwickshire](#) provide examples of where these recommendations are already being implemented voluntarily.

Recommendations

1. Every school should have the right to propose an admissions policy to be translated by the LA into a formal set of arrangements for all local schools; this local body should administer the arrangements and deal with appeals, including for pupil admissions outside the main transition points. In the absence of national action, localities should follow this approach through voluntary agreements as a number already do.
2. DfE to set out a coherent framework for the planning and commissioning of school places which acknowledges a) the central role of the LA in planning and commissioning sufficient school places to meet local need and b) stipulates full consultation with parents, staff and local stakeholders. In the absence of national actions, LAs, Dioceses, MATs and SATs should adopt such an approach.



The majority of interviewees felt that place-planning and admissions should be managed locally.

F7 Building the system for the future

Ensuring an education is strong and flexible enough to provide young people with the skills and attributes for a healthy and successful future is a national responsibility. The high-performing jurisdictions have invested in education as part of an explicit strategy for nation-building. In England, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted areas we need to invest in for the future. These include:

- **a modern digital infrastructure**

We need to follow the high-performing jurisdictions in ensuring universal internet access to improve equity and support the learning of teachers and students. Curricula, ITE and CPD should be revised to deliver this strategy, including giving all parents on-line access to information and support.

- **a strong local system**

An ISOS review of the LA response to Covid-19 in 10 LAs (Bryant, 2020) highlighted the coordinating strengths of LAs, including convening partners, communicating key messages and coordinating systems. The Communities Secretary has stated:

With the vaccine roll-out we're trying to ensure local councils are as involved as possible. They're the ones on the ground who know the harder to reach communities. In the early stages of the pandemic, there was legitimate criticism we could have used local councils more. (Jenrick, 2021)



There is an increasing awareness that skills and social welfare need to be coordinated and of the link between schools and families and communities.

There is an increasing awareness that skills and social welfare need to be coordinated and of the link between schools and families and communities. Future challenges will be easier to meet with a less fragmented, more integrated system: “We need to look again at how we break down some of the barriers between LA and academy”. (Steve Munby)

The voluntary partnerships described in Section Three were thought to offer potential to move the system forward: **evaluation of the range of models of area-based improvement in each region is recommended, in order to map provision in a region, identify the strengths and weaknesses of each model and recommend a new locality model.**

- **focus on priorities**

It is recommended that Ofsted inspections continue to be suspended to allow schools and LAs to focus on supporting pupils to make up for lost learning once schools return.

- **mental health and well-being**

Both are priorities for parents, whose engagement in education was seen in the focus groups as ‘neglected’ (Fair Education Alliance; Parentkind, [Phase 3 report](#)). In the high-performing systems, above average percentages of pupils report being satisfied with life and experiencing less fear of failure than the average. The UK was one of the lowest scorers on the measure of life satisfaction and one of the highest on percentages of pupils experiencing fear of failure (OECD, 2019).

- **consistency of standards**

The Yidan Prize Foundation releases an annual Worldwide Educating for the Future Index (WEFFI) which assesses the extent to which education systems are equipping young people with ‘future’ skills (critical thinking – in relation to application of knowledge, problem solving, leadership, collaboration, creativity, as well as technical and digital skills). The index scores 50 economies on three dimensions, including

Worldwide Educating for the Future Index (WEFFI) rankings: Yidan Prize

	WEFFI Ranking	
	2018	2019
Singapore	7	4
Canada	5	6
Finland	1	1
UK	10	15

policy environment, teaching environment and socio-economic environment. It claims to account for 81.3% of global youth aged 15 to 24 and 88.3% of the world's population overall and that the economies represent 93% of global GDP (Yidan, 2019). The high-performing jurisdictions in this study score well: Finland topped the index in 2018 and 2019.

In accounting for this success, the authors find that Finland has the “*best teachers in the world*” and has the advantage of consistency of standards – “*wherever in the country, the quality of experience and opportunity is the same*” (Yidan, 2019: 5).

Recommendations

1. The government must ensure zero-rated internet access and provision of laptops for all children.
2. Establish a role for parents and pupil voice in a new paradigm for engaging stakeholders in education: this is important in terms of social justice and social mobility.

Section Three: Solutions and Challenges – Models of Locality Working

The research found a wealth of innovative practice where professionals strive to make a success of devolved responsibilities for governing the English education system. However, unlike the high-performing systems considered in Phase 1, which feature strong system alignment and ‘policy connectedness’, there remain tensions in a system which is seen as fragmented and incoherent. A recent study (Bubb et al., 2019) identified the plethora of agencies working in the ‘middle tier’ space, to deliver often over-lapping functions (see Appendix One). Headteachers in the focus groups suggested there was “a bewildering range of current structures to navigate” (Sacha Schofield).

Many examples were offered of how a place-based approach was beneficial during the first wave of Covid-19.

I do think awareness of ‘place’ is very important. My views have been influenced by being a Trustee of Centrepoint which has shelters in Manchester, Birmingham and Bradford. For them it is all about place. The goal is the same in all 4 which is to find people a job and a place to live. In the South West, Bristol and Cornwall are completely different: both have significant pockets of poverty, but rural poverty is very different from urban. Wrestling with ‘Black Lives Matters’ would be very different in the two places as well.
(David Carter)

Identity is crucial... we need to do more and think of schools as helping to grow the citizens of the future, change-makers, with impact in their communities. In urban areas, schools are

seen much more than they ever were as a key factor in community cohesion. They are at the heart of their communities. There is a sense of belonging to a place, however big the problems, there is still pride in a place. Partnerships have to have a community dimension and feed in and out of the communities ... understanding the place, the communities, how they work, and where the levers are in the locality, is very important. Families are a very important part of this too and we’ve seen that in the Pandemic.
(Christine Gilbert)

Place is very important to governors; it is what motivates them to take part. (Emma Knights)

Place is very important. The Covid-19 experience has highlighted this. I think it is fair to say that many schools wouldn’t have re-opened on time without LA support. Examples of good coordination within an area have shot up as a result of the working together. LAs have been recognized by the DfE as playing a central role in the response. (Jenny Coles)

The real importance of devolution is that it enables local areas to be much more agile in responding to changing circumstances. From this it is possible to work out the 16+ skills policy and to meet the aspirations of young people themselves and the ambitions of schools and colleges. (Luke Raikes)

Effective place-based working is rooted in localities to maximize the benefits of local knowledge and engagement; but is outward-looking, drawing on wider expertise and resource, so avoids insularity or entrenching disadvantage.

Two types of place-based reform currently co-exist: the first is centrally-driven; the second locally-led. This section discusses 4 examples of each.

A: centrally-led coordination, dissemination or roll-out of evidence-based practice

The following government-appointed agencies (1–4 below) have a role in the dissemination of knowledge in a particular field or are responsible for a decentralized approach to one or more governance functions. While many are described as ‘place-based’ they do not meet the definition of ‘place-based’ used in this study, to describe a *holistic approach to education across a local area*. They are, in the main, not local; they are part of the governance landscape at regional or sub-regional level. Their role does not include the provision of the coordinating ‘glue’ described above.

1. Regional Schools Commissioners

In 2016/17 eight regional commissioners were introduced, with the following responsibilities (DfE, 2020b):

- **For the academy system**

taking action where academies and free schools are underperforming, intervening in academies where governance is inadequate, encouraging and deciding on applications from sponsors to operate in a region, increasing the number of sponsors and taking action to improve poorly performing ones, advising on proposals for new free schools, advising on whether to cancel, defer or enter into funding agreements with free school projects, deciding upon applications to make significant changes to academies and free schools.

- **For the LA-maintained school system**

deciding on applications from LA schools to convert to academy status, improving underperforming LA schools by providing them with support from a strong sponsor.

The RSC role does not cover the whole range of middle tier functions, a position supported by the study’s respondents who believe this is not the right level to provide coordination of services across local areas:

When I was a member of a Headteacher Board⁵, we found the Board didn’t have enough local knowledge because the regions are too large. (Alison Peacock)

Subsidiarity is essential but not done well at all. I worry the government are coming out of the Covid crisis with a centralisation agenda. I am more in favour of a localised approach and I say this from having worked in different places, the RSC, deputy RSC, an Executive Director – I don’t think central government is the right place for huge amounts of key decision making – to be directing over 22,000 state schools, whether from Sanctuary Buildings or from 8 RSC regions is not doable in any way, shape or form. (Maria Dawes)

2. Teaching School hubs

Teaching Schools operate across eight regions, matched to those of the RSC. Each region holds its own strategy board meetings attended by representatives of each LA area where key priorities for the Teaching Schools Council are shared and discussed. These representatives meet in turn with other Teaching Schools from their sub-region to ensure there is engagement with all Teaching Schools nationally (Teaching Schools Council website). The first round of six Teaching School hubs devolves responsibility for teacher recruitment, ITE and retention, to identify gaps in subjects and ensure more focused recruitment strategies within a locality. Respondents were optimistic about the revised suite of national professional qualifications (NPQs) and the Early Careers Framework (ECF) to provide an evidence-based development programme from ITE to headship.

⁵ Eight Headteacher boards (HTBs) are responsible for advising and challenging regional schools commissioners (RSCs) on academy-related decisions Headteacher boards - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Hubs will have a lead school to recognise strengths and capacity in a local area, draw in that capacity and bring about softer impacts, e.g. improve relationships, communication, collaborations - you can't take for granted that it is there already. That collective capacity within the teaching school hub areas can be used to impact on the quality of teaching, quality of recruitment and the quality of development as part of our drive to create a world class system. (Richard Gill)

However, there are challenges to the model, in terms of funding and capacity:

Improvement in an area not matching the supply of the main mechanisms for support (NLEs, MATs, teaching schools) is a fair criticism of the last 10 years. Hubs won't address that because the school improvement function has been taken away from teaching schools. But many hubs also have directors who are NLEs or MAT CEOs – it is the same people who will be taking off the teaching school hat and putting the MAT hat on. So, the capacity will come from where it has been coming from and the challenges we've experienced will still be there. (Richard Gill)

3. EEF Regional Directors and the Research Schools Network

Following a pilot begun in 2018 in two regions, the EEF have introduced 'Regional Directors' to "coordinate and support evidence-informed school improvement activity" (educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk, 2020). The EEF has partnered with the Institute for Effective Education, based at the University of York, to launch a national network of Research Schools (RS), which will become a focal point for evidence-based practice in their region, building affiliations with large numbers of schools and supporting the use of evidence at scale. (<https://researchschool.org.uk>)

A three-year mixed methods evaluation described the 'vital role' of research schools in a "systemic shift towards the use of evidence"

and found the local hubs were a positive move to support local school improvement priorities, enabling them to engage schools in most need who had previously been the least frequent users. They conclude:

There remain concerns about the long-term financial affordability of the RS model. This is because, at least in part, the school system is already populated with competing CPD and school improvement offers. Connecting their RS activity with existing regional school-to-school support work and projects has been pivotal in securing capacity and efficacy, and addressing real concerns over the long-term sustainability of the RS model.

(Gu et al., 2020: 6)

4. Subject centre hubs

Hubs for the teaching of Mathematics, English and STEM subjects were established in the mid-2000s. The government's Social Mobility Plan (DfE, 2017) announced an investment of £33 million to expand the Teaching for Mastery maths programme to 3,000 more primary and secondary schools, targeting take-up in more challenging areas and schools. The government funds 34 English hubs, schools selected for their expertise, to support local schools in reading in Reception and Year 1.

The above hubs are included in the government's national support programmes which can be accessed at www.gov.uk/government/collections/school-improvement-support and provide a valuable source of evidence-based practice. However, respondents warned against the "reification" of practice which can result from capturing "what works" in one setting and imposing it in another, the "drag and drop" approach to school improvement described by the NAHT School Improvement Commission whereby an "external expert imposes pre-approved solutions" onto a school without adequate diagnosis of the issues or developing professionally owned bespoke solutions which are necessary for sustained improvement (NAHT, 2020: 17).

B: Locally-led place-based partnerships

These partnerships can be government incentivised (example 5); government enabled (example 6) or professionally-led (examples 7 and 8). All depend upon voluntary participation and collective moral purpose. A number of studies show how, in the spaces for professional agency that remain following the ‘hollowing out’ of the middle tier from the twin pressures of increased centralisation and school autonomy, new forms of localism are emerging. Crawford et al (2020: 6) suggest that a range of local actors have the opportunity to work together in conditions of potential ‘co-opetition’ in a heterarchical context. They suggest: *“In particular, LAs may seek to find ways of maintaining what Hodgson and Spours (2012) define as “democratic localism” where public value is the driving force, rather than the uneasy mix of ‘laissez-faire localism’ and ‘centrally managed localism’ where competitive values dominate (Woods & Simkins, 2014).”*

5. Opportunity Areas

The government’s social mobility plan (DfE, 2017) recognised the importance of ‘place’ and community and acknowledged that the main mechanisms of school improvement such as Teaching Schools, NLEs and high-quality multi-academy trusts (MATs) were not evenly distributed throughout the country, with deprived, rural and coastal areas having inadequate provision. Between 2017 – 2020, the government has invested £90 million in 12 Opportunity Areas⁶ (OAs) to help young people overcome the barriers to academically flourishing (Clarke, 2020). An implementation review commissioned by the DfE (Easton et al., 2018) noted the vital importance of partnerships between LAs, early years providers, schools, colleges, universities, businesses, health professionals and voluntary and community organisations, working beyond organisational boundaries towards a shared aim. It found:

- partnership boards which were too strongly led by DfE failed to enhance adequate engagement with struggling schools and communities and parents
- lack of local knowledge led to poor alignment of activity and resources with other programmes such as the Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund and the Strategic School Innovation Fund
- having dedicated LA-link officers were a “*facilitating factor*” in making faster progress (Easton et al., 2018: 7).

As the initiative has bedded-down, OAs are achieving a greater collective impact than is possible for individual organisations:

When schools and social workers are able to work more closely together, they can identify families that need help earlier and better support the education and wellbeing of children... [to] ensure that every primary and secondary school in the area is linked with a social worker and educational psychologist to identify children and families at risk of running into difficulties. (Stoke-on-Trent case study, DfE, undated: 22)

There can be powerful change in bringing different players together. In Doncaster, [the OA] has shown that people can benefit each other more if they work together. At the beginning there was a great deal of distrust between the headteachers and others – there were local hierarchies. This was gradually broken down as heads realised the scope of the LA responsibilities and the reductions in funding they were coping with. (Sam Twiselton)

The OAs have used the national support programmes and funding to address specific priorities in an area, in an example of how a strong central drive coupled with local motivation can make a difference in disadvantaged areas, where the challenges faced by young people outside of school need a collective response

⁶ West Somerset, Norwich, Blackpool, North Yorkshire Coast, Derby, Oldham, Bradford, Doncaster, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, Hastings, Ipswich and Stoke-on-Trent.



Respondents ... noted the importance of expert leadership, the need for training in leading at middle tier level and the sharing of practice across OAs.

across services. Respondents with experience of more than one OA noted the importance of expert leadership, the need for training in leading at middle tier level and the sharing of practice across OAs. It was suggested that all 'system leaders' (including Executive Headteachers, NLEs and those who lead at middle tier level) should be offered a shared development programme for leading at this level.

6. Combined Authorities

Proposals to develop services for children and schools on the basis of Combined Authorities are at an early stage. There is no evidence that the DfE are planning to devolve or delegate additional functions to these new bodies, but this is being explored on the ground. North of Tyne Combined Authority is planning to provide one unified school improvement service, seeing advantages to greater efficiency and strengthening links with the other Combined Authority strategic roles. Focus Group participants were interested in exploring the role of Combined Authorities as a potential basis for alternative models of school improvement and accountability. Mark Patton, Assistant Director: Education and Skills Newcastle, speaking in a personal capacity, saw this as a way forward to enable the LA to deliver their statutory responsibilities for school improvement:

Collaboration is the only way forward. I feel very much part of the new joint school improvement service being developed to support schools in North of Tyne.

(Mark Patton)

7. Challenge Partners

The longest established school-led partnership programme, Challenge Partners, grew from the London Challenge because headteachers did not want to lose the gains they had made from working collaboratively when the funded programme ended in 2011 (Cousin, 2019). There are, in 2020, 480 member schools in 43 hubs (Challenge Partners, 2020). Berwick and John (2018) provide a detailed description of its operation including an explicit theory of action: 'upwards convergence': the principle of 'growing the top' while 'reducing disparity'. This encourages a collective approach to improvement emphasizing that all schools can improve on their previous best. A 'hub' model operates organically, on a membership basis where schools opt in, agree to a member's pledge to work together and pay a subscription fee. The hubs are locally or regionally based and are required to have at their centre an outstanding school, to ensure capacity to support others.

It is unclear how far the collaboratives, based on relationships, are fully inclusive: "selection and induction of both new hubs and new members is rigorous as considerable valuable energy can be lost focusing on the disaffected" (2018: 205). Berwick and John warn (2018: 210) that such partnerships "need nurturing, are relatively unpredictable in their configuration and are threatened by insularity and lack of succession planning". Also, they need skilled leadership operated in a collaborative style grounded in a strong and articulated moral purpose. External reviews (Matthews and Headon, 2015: xiii) find that the annual quality assurance reviews provide "a potent mechanism for sharing issues and finding new solutions through disseminating knowledge of what works in other schools. They also confirm where there is excellent practice". This knowledge is captured and made accessible to all Challenge Partner schools.

8. Local education partnerships (AEPs)

The Area-based Education Partnerships Association defines education partnerships as:

school-led, local organisations that include all types of schools with the central purpose of raising standards. They take responsibility for the quality of education in a local area; bridge the divide between different types of schools; provide a framework to allow schools to work together and encompass LAs and schools across all phases and types. Member organisations define themselves by locality. There are different models in operation but all must be commercially sustainable.
(<https://aepa.org.uk/>)

Partnerships are underway in over 30 local areas and are varied in terms of remit and governance - some are LA-majority control, some are complete private companies or charities, some a mixture of the two. They include areas small enough for people to know faces and engage in depth (e.g. Ealing, Tower Hamlets, Camden), and larger areas (e.g., Herts for Learning or Surrey with 400-500 schools). The latter, Surrey, is organised in hubs, which have some freedom of decision-making, where schools do some things within the hub and some things coordinated across the whole (see case study in [Phase 2 report, p27](#)).

AEPs were mainly established to fulfil the School Improvement function, with some developing to include other functions; almost all have a commission for school improvement from the LA. Advocates argue that they are effective due to the mix of democratic accountability, from the LA's "legitimate right to assess needs and priorities across an area" and the blend of professional and moral accountability of school leaders who voluntarily come together for the good of all young people in an area (Christine Gilbert).

Interviewees spoke favourably of the promise of these partnerships as a holistic solution to local issues. Questions on the degree of formalization

and the size of the area covered need further debate, but two important features of the partnerships are:

1. their explicit attempt to learn from each other, and
2. their inclusivity: they are open to all schools in the local area.

Summary

A major benefit of effective 'place-based' reform is seen as the provision of essential "glue" or coordination, by mobilising a collective sense of responsibility to reduce competition which drives local hierarchies and increases the effects of disadvantage. It also places a focus on contextual factors which can provide barriers to achievement or offer solutions. In addition, it has the potential to increase cost-efficiencies, provide external quality assurance and prevent 'reinvention of the wheel'. The eight examples above testify to the expertise and commitment in the English education system. Different locality models attempt to bring all schools in a locality together, but face similar challenges. All report issues of resource (both staff and funds). None achieve the engagement of all schools in an area, which means any locality approach remains a partial one. The lack of formal power limits AEPs' ability to engage every school in an area, but lack of engagement is also a challenge for OAs and RSCs, where those schools that most need support often lack the capacity to look outwards. The moral purpose uniting schools in some AEPs, however, results in a high opt-in: for example, 100% of schools in Camden and 94% in Tower Hamlets ([Phase 2 report, p.28](#)). A more formal structure and government support would give AEPs the power to support challenging schools and allow both LA and RSC school improvement responsibilities to be devolved to AEPs, with the advantages of scale, expertise and the drive that comes from commitment to place. The Phase 2 report offers examples of where this solution is working well ([SAFE case study, p.27](#)).



A major benefit of effective ‘place-based’ reform is the provision of essential “glue” or coordination, by mobilising a collective sense of responsibility. It also has the potential to increase cost-efficiencies.

A number of studies highlight common challenges relating to equity and coherence where market-based reforms disrupt existing cultures (Greany, 2020: 4). Evidence from this study reinforces the consequences of an unregulated school improvement market and the need for coordination across a locality to shield schools from those consequences.

National evaluation of the different models of place-based working is recommended, in order to share learning across the system about what works well to address the challenges described above. It is recommended that a locality partnership is supported in each local authority area: this could be based on AEPs, OAs or Combined Authorities, according to context. Most LA areas already have a form of school networks in place, so it is suggested they start with an audit and seek to learn the lessons from how to develop successful AEPs or other partnership arrangement: then build on this to ensure that all schools benefit.



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Appendix One: The main organisations providing middle tier functions (2019)

Finance	Accountability	Access	People
Allocating finances – ESFA, LA, MAT Accounting – ESFA, LA, MAT Financial monitoring – ESFA, LA, MAT, Dioceses Finance returns – ESFA, LA, MAT Intervening in financial issues – ESFA, LA, Diocese Audit – LA, MAT Allocating grants – ESFA Bidding for grants – LA, MAT	Monitoring standards – RSC, LA, Dioceses, MAT School improvement – NCTL, LA, MAT, Complaints – LA, ESFA, Dioceses External Reviews – ESFA, RSC, LA, MAT, Dioceses Governance support – LA, MAT, NCTL, Dioceses Intervention – LA, RSC, Dioceses Liaison with DfE agencies – MAT, LA, Diocese	Admissions & appeals – LA, MAT, Dioceses Curriculum – MAT, LA, Dioceses SEN – LA Educational welfare – LA Place planning – LA Buildings & grounds – MAT, LA, Dioceses	ReRecruitment – NCTL, MAT, LA Training and development – NCTL, MAT, LA Initial teacher training – NCTL NQT induction – NCTL, MAT, LA, Dioceses HR – LA, MAT, Dioceses

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