The evolving education system in England: a "temperature check"

Research report

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The growth of school autonomy is one of the defining features of the recent history of the English education system. In recent years, it has been given a considerable boost by the coalition government. A range of reforms have been introduced that have dramatically increased the autonomy schools can exercise over aspects of the education system in England, and have aimed to create a self-improving school system led by networks of schools. These reforms have transformed the role of schools and local authorities, and stimulated a set of lively debates about the conditions necessary to encourage and sustain a self-improving school system.

Ten local education systems

In the spring term of 2013, we started following 10 local education systems to understand the ways in which they were evolving in response to extensions of school autonomy. By local education systems, we mean:

- **system** – the connections between groups of schools, teaching school alliances, academy sponsors, dioceses, the local authority and other local leaders;

- **local** – the geographical area based on local authority boundaries; and

- **education** – we focused specifically on three functions: (i) school improvement and intervention, (ii) school place-planning, and (iii) supporting vulnerable children.

Ten systems were selected to ensure our study covered a range of geographical areas, different local authority structures, sizes, political control, system performance (measured by Ofsted inspection outcomes), and school types and phases. Four local systems had taken part in our previous study (Parish et al 2012), which enabled changes since then to be identified.

The aim of the study was not to judge the performance of the 10 local systems, nor to second-guess national policy, nor to offer our own solutions to the debates about the self-improving system. Instead, the purpose of the study was to take a "temperature check" of the way the 10 local education systems were evolving, focusing on the changing roles of school, local authority and other leaders, the factors influencing these changes, and any challenges encountered along the way.

The evolution of the three key functions of a local education system

At the time of our previous study, we found that, while local systems were excited about the potential for schools leading school improvement, they were anxious and uncertain about how place-planning and provision for vulnerable children would operate in a more autonomous landscape.

Since then, we found that there has been a decisive shift towards school partnerships leading local school improvement, local place-planning has adapted to conditions of greater school autonomy, while support for vulnerable children is evolving more gradually. Many of the anxieties about potential new scenarios expressed at the time of our previous study have not materialised. Instead, in many systems, new schools-led approaches to discharging these key functions have emerged, underpinned by mature relationships and partnerships between school leaders, local authorities and other partners.

School improvement and intervention

- **There has been a decisive shift towards schools-led partnerships leading local school improvement**. School leaders have welcomed the encouragement to lead local school improvement through partnerships. The role, size and shape of these partnerships differ across the 10 local systems, reflecting the specific local context. They include schools-owned and schools-led not-for-profit companies, local strategic partnerships, teaching school alliances, sponsor-led academy chains, federations, diocesan networks and national education organisations. The locus of strategic decision-making in relation to school improvement services has shifted to these networks of schools.

- **School leaders are confident that they can access the high-quality support they need**. We found consistently high levels of confidence across all school phases: in our previous study, primary school leaders had been less confident than peers in other sectors. This finding reflects school leaders' belief that the support that they are able to access is high quality. It was beyond the scope of this study to seek evidence to confirm whether this was the case, or that all schools were making the most effective use of available support.

- **School leaders see both the attractions and necessity of being connected to at least one formal network**. The attractions to school leaders include being able to access and share practice across regional and national groups of like-minded schools, and being able to shape deeper forms of school-to-school support locally. Primary school and some special school leaders particularly saw the necessity of being connected due to the diminution of local authority services. Forming multi-academy trusts is an increasingly common form of connection among primary, special and faith schools.

- **School improvement provision has evolved and is increasingly characterised by joint practice development and peer evaluation**. School leaders welcomed the sharper challenge and more focused support they were able to access from their peers. They did not feel that peer evaluation was leading to cosiness between schools or that external challenge was becoming blunter. In addition, local systems have begun to develop ways of signposting school improvement provision to make it easier for schools to identify the right support.

- **Local authorities have developed new ways of working with all local schools and academies**. In some systems, Ofsted's inspection of school improvement arrangements has prompted local authorities to rethink the way they engage local schools, gather intelligence on school performance, and challenge and broker support for schools that are at risk of falling into a category.

School place-planning

- **Local systems have developed ways of planning places to meet demand in the primary phase**. Levels of anxiety about schools not co-operating in local place-planning were high at the time of our previous study: this time, we found that the worst of these fears and scenarios have not materialised. Instead, we found that the local systems have begun to adapt to planning places in a more autonomous landscape and have coped with the initial challenge of increasing primary places. In some systems, the adaptation has been smoother than in others.

- **We found examples of new approaches in which schools are playing a leading role in local place-planning**. These local systems have convened decision-making fora for schools, empowered school leaders to develop collective solutions, and used their expertise and strategic oversight to support schools-led decision-making. The scenario that local systems feared of widespread school resistance to planned expansions of places does not appear to have materialised.

- **Local systems should be better equipped to plan places at secondary level, but the challenge remains**. School and local authority leaders consider that the combination of past experience, good data about numbers in primary schools, and early engagement with secondary leaders is a good starting point for the discussions about secondary places. In addition, local systems will also need to develop new ways of planning places in special schools, where school leaders were less confident about place-planning than their mainstream counterparts. In local systems in which place-planning lacked transparency, strategic leadership and collective co-ordination, school leaders were less likely to be confident about meeting these challenges successfully.

- **We found examples of local systems that are working pro-actively with free school proposers to complement local provision**. Some local systems are

exploring the opportunities offered by free schools and finding ways of negotiating the potential challenges of incorporating free schools into local planning. For other local systems, working with a free school is a new experience for which there are no precedents within the local system.

Supporting vulnerable children

- **Approaches to supporting vulnerable children are evolving more gradually than school improvement and place-planning**. While there are innovative examples of schools-led approaches, there has not yet been a decisive shift to partnerships leading local support for vulnerable children.

- **Local systems have begun to develop schools-led approaches in areas where the national policy has been set**. For example, local systems have developed new approaches to arranging funding for pupils with high needs, commissioning schools to deliver behaviour support, and offering support to boost the progress of pupils eligible for the pupil premium. Confidence about readiness for the forthcoming special educational needs (SEN) reforms varied across the 10 systems.

- **School leaders are less certain and confident about the future evolution of support for vulnerable children than school improvement and place-planning**. This uncertainty reflects the timescales for national reforms, but also school leaders' perception of increasing need, greater scrutiny and diminishing local services. In the long term, this may result in support for vulnerable children becoming part of mainstream school improvement provision. In the short term, however, some school leaders appear less certain of how and from where to access the support they need.

- **Many schools have developed expertise in supporting vulnerable pupils, and local systems are exploring partnerships to make the best use of that expertise**. In the local systems, we found examples of local SEN hubs and special schools leading partnerships and offering commissioned services. School leaders acknowledged that there was further to go to make best use of the expertise within local systems for supporting vulnerable pupils.

The evolution of the 10 local education systems

Changes in the make-up of school types within local systems largely reflect how effectively the transition to a more autonomous, schools-led local education system has been led. There are four main factors that have shaped this transition and the resulting changes to the make-up of the local system:

- perceived quality of local authority education services and access to alternatives;

- strength of connections among schools, and between schools, the local authority and other local partners;

- past performance of the system; and

- leadership of change.

These factors feature differently in the local systems that we have followed, and can be used to classify three types of transition.

- **Timely adapters** – systems in which local authority services are highly regarded by schools, with a history of encouraging partnership-working, that are mostly high-performing systems, and in which change to a schools-led system was already underway and/or has been led pro-actively, with local authorities and schools working together to create the space and conditions for schools to lead the transition.

- **Slow movers** – systems with historically higher levels of intervention in schools, in which local authority services are seen by schools as weak or variable in quality, that are mostly lower-performing systems, and that have been slower in adapting to change or where the leadership of change has been ineffective.

- **Sudden reactors** – systems with different starting points, but the same end goal in mind: namely that local authority services should diminish, regardless of quality, and that school partnerships should lead, regardless of their maturity. Change has been dictated and driven quickly, with pace outweighing precision in planning and engagement with school leaders, and without creating the conditions for schools to lead a successful transition.
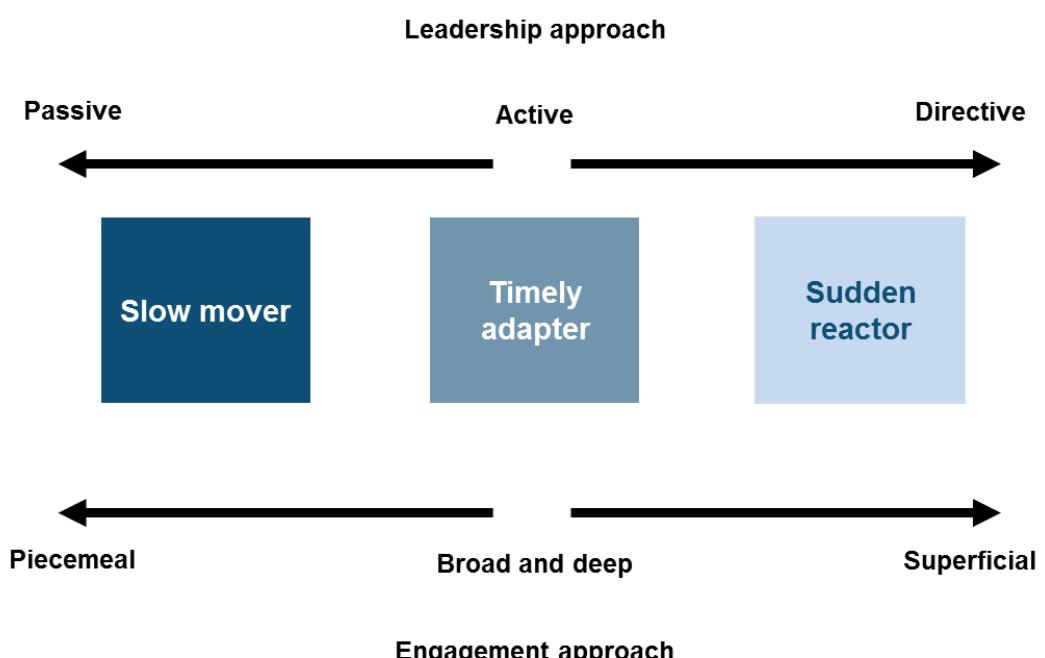
Leadership approach

Passive   Active   Directive

| Slow mover | Timely adapter | Sudden reactor |

Piecemeal   Broad and deep   Superficial

Engagement approach

Few of the local systems can be pigeon-holed into a single type, and most straddle the boundaries of two transitions. Indeed, different aspects of, or localities within, one local system can be experiencing different types of transition at the same time.

At this stage, it is too early to judge the impact of the different types of transition on pupil and school outcomes. The local systems that anticipated change and adapted with reasonable pace, however, have had the smoothest transition and feel most confident that there will be a positive impact on pupils and schools.

The next stage of evolution

Based on our findings, we have identified seven lessons for leading change effectively in a local education system. These lessons can be applied by those leading an individual school, a teaching school alliance, a MAT, a diocesan network, or a local authority service.

1. **Look out for each other** – keep an eye out for those who are isolated or at risk of becoming so within your partnerships, networks and the wider local system. Timely adapters are pro-active in identifying those at risk and reconnecting them with the local system.

2. **Signpost support** – make it easy and quick to find high-quality support through clear signposting. Slow movers and sudden reactors can often leave leaders having to navigate their local system on their own.

3. **Maintain the dialogue** – keep engaging in meaningful dialogue about the transition, its successes, and the next step towards the long-term vision. Timely adapters achieve successful transitions because they strike the right tone that keeps all partners engaged.

4. **Foster innovation** – encourage meaningful engagements that give others the opportunity to lead the transition and to innovate. Sudden reactors often jump straight to what they see as the right answer and instruct others to follow, while slow movers can frustrate innovation by not seizing the opportunity.

5. **Inspire trust** – consistently role-model effective behaviour in order to build trust, openness and honesty, which are the foundations of effective partnerships. Sudden reactors and slow movers risk damaging relationships and undermining trust by misjudging local leaders' desire for change.

6. **Follow through with action** – timely adapters make changes happen and stick through high-quality implementation, investing time and resources in sustaining change and demonstrating impact.

7. **Empower others** – judge the right time to let others take the lead. Timely adapters do this by building capacity, responsibility and associated accountability among their partners. Sudden reactors do so too quickly, while slow movers do so too late or not at all.

While some of the 10 local systems have already undergone significant change, there are some systems or parts of systems where the major transformative work is only just beginning. As these and other local systems continue to evolve, we hope that the learning captured in this report may be of use to their leaders.

Part 1: context

Supporting the school system to become more effectively self-improving

The growth of school autonomy is one of the defining features of the recent history of the English education system. In recent years, it has been given a considerable boost by the coalition government. In one of its first acts, the government passed legislation that enabled all publicly-funded schools to become independent, state-funded academies, and allowed for the creation of new free schools. In the schools white paper that followed, *The importance of teaching*, the government declared that 'the primary responsibility for improvement rests with schools themselves' (DfE 2010). Since then, a range of reforms have been introduced that have dramatically increased the autonomy schools can exercise over aspects of the education system in England.

Evidence suggests that increasing school autonomy, when combined with sharper accountability, is linked to higher standards (Hanushek 2011, OECD 2011). The government's aim, however, was not only to extend school autonomy for its own sake, but to do so in order to 'support the school system to become more effectively self-improving' (DfE 2010). Within this vision for reform, system-wide improvements would be led by 'a self-improving network of schools' (Gove 2012).

The reference to the *network of schools* is highly significant: it is the networks, clusters and partnerships of schools, and, more precisely, the collaborative activities that occur between them, that distinguishes the idea of a *self-improving school system* from what has been termed the *self-managing school* (Hargreaves 2010).

In recent years, a number of influential studies have highlighted the important role that collaboration between educators and educating institutions can play in generating innovation and sustaining improvement in school systems (Mourshed et al 2010, Fullan 2010, OECD 2011, Hargreaves 2012a, 2012b).

Most discussions of the self-improving school system in England take as their starting point the four thinkpieces written by David Hargreaves. These gave the concept of the self-improving system its fullest articulation, and explained that creating a self-improving school system required a shift of both:

- **structure** – so that clusters of schools, rather than standalone schools, become the norm across the system; and

- **culture** – so that educators develop a sense of collective responsibility, not only for the pupils in their own schools, but for the pupils in the schools within their clusters and beyond.

In other words, the shape and ethos of the education system in England would become characterised by a series of networks of schools, rather than a collection of standalone, self-managing schools.

Collaborative practices within clusters, such as joint practice development between educators and peer-to-peer evaluation, would foster both deeper trust between schools and educators, and a greater sense of collective responsibility for pupils, not just in one school, but across all schools within the cluster. In turn, this would create the capacity, or *collaborative capital*, that would sustain ongoing improvements and encourage innovation (Hargreaves 2012b). Collaboration is, however, a discipline: if it is to foster significant improvements in schools, mutual challenge, scrutiny of evidence and a focus on developing solutions needs to be at its heart (Ainscow 2012, Coles 2014).

Like autonomy, however, collaboration is not seen as an end in itself: whether a network is effective or not depends on what its members want it to do (Ofsted 2011, Ainscow 2012). Indeed, debates about the self-improving system in England consider a range of ways in which educators may collaborate, and a range of partners with whom they may do so.

School-to-school networks may form in order to achieve a range of different aims. For example, they may focus on improving the pathway of a child through all phases of their education, in which case they are likely to be made up of early years settings, schools of all phases, further education colleges, higher education institutions and local employers. They may, alternatively, focus on improving children's well-being by aligning the education agenda with other services, such as social care, immigration, housing, transport or health, in which case the activities, shape and membership of the partnership would reflect these aims. Other forms of collaborative networks involving schools may bring together families of schools serving similar local communities in different geographical areas to focus on improving pedagogy and progress. Again, the focus and make-up of these networks will be different. Indeed, some schools may be involved in a series of overlapping networks that bridge all of these types of partnerships, and indeed others (Ainscow 2012, Banfield et al 2013, Hill et al 2014).

Likewise, collaborative networks may be formed not only *laterally*, between professionals and schools, but also *vertically* between the different levels of leadership within an education system. This latter form of collaboration may involve schools, district or local government education officers, and central government, to develop and test new policy approaches, build capacity for their implementation, or maintain communication and feedback loops to sustain system-wide improvement (Fullan 2010).

Towards a schools-led system

During the first half of the twentieth century, local authorities were seen as the indispensable partners of central government (Hill 2012). In 1902, elected school boards

were abolished and replaced with local education authorities, which would be responsible for building schools, employing teachers, dispensing funding and shaping the curriculum.

Over the last 40 years, the responsibility for many of these functions has been transferred to schools. These changes have extended school autonomy, increased schools' responsibilities and reshaped the role of local authorities. As Figure 1 illustrates, during this period, successive governments have each introduced new structures for more autonomous schools, given schools greater responsibility for aspects of the education system, and extended schools' control over funding, while simultaneously sharpening accountability for results.

These administrations also created a range of models of school partnerships. These have included those relating to specific policies, geographical location (Ainscow 2012), subject-based networks, formal chains of academies led by a single sponsor (Hill et al 2012), national leaders of education and national support schools supporting other schools (Hill and Matthews 2008, 2010), and federations of two or more schools under a single governance structure (Chapman and Mujis 2013).

Figure 1: Historical timeline of increasing school autonomy

	Conservative government (1979 to 1997)	Labour government (1997 to 2010)	Coalition government (2010 to the present)
School autonomy	1988 – grant maintained schools established 1988 – schools gain control over curriculum, staffing and discipline	1999 – Excellence in Cities (later London Challenge) launched 2002 – the first sponsored academies open 2006 – the first national leaders of education are appointed	2010 – the Academies Act is passed 2011 – the first cohort of teaching schools are designated 2012 – schools take responsibility for initial teacher training through School Direct
School funding	1988 – local management of schools	1999 to 2001 – greater delegation to schools 2006 – ring-fenced dedicated schools grant introduced	2013 – preparation for a national funding formula begins 2013 – changes to school funding formula, increased delegation
School accountability	1988 – new assessment framework introduced 1992 – Ofsted established, performance tables launched	1998 – School Standards and Framework Act	2010 – white paper describes local authority role as champion and commissioner 2012 – new inspection framework introduced 2013 – changes to floor standards measures announced
Role of local authorities	1979-81 – greater restrictions placed on local authority education spending	2004 – Children Act 2005 – local authorities required to hold a competition for new schools 2009 – local authorities gain responsibility for 16 to 19 education and training	2011 – new schools opened by local authorities must be academies 2011 to 2014 – changes to local authority commissioning for children with SEN

Extending school autonomy and responsibility

During the 1980s and 1990s, the administrations of Margaret Thatcher and John Major introduced reforms that created in England the concept of the *self-managing school* (Hargreaves 2010). New grant-maintained schools, independent of local authority control, were created. Schools gained new responsibilities over funding and the curriculum. At the same time, a new accountability framework was introduced, based around

assessment, published performance tables and inspection by the newly-established Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

The administrations of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown built on these foundations. Reforms were introduced that protected schools' budgets through the introduction of the ring-fenced dedicated schools grant, while new powers were introduced to intervene in underperforming schools. The Excellence in Cities programme, and later the London Challenge and other challenge programmes, sought to foster collaboration between schools to improve standards across a locality (Ainscow 2012, Hutchings et al 2012).

The emergence of the role of the *system leader* (Hopkins 2007), credible school leaders with a track record of supporting other schools, was formalised when the National College was commissioned to create the roles of national and local leaders of education (NLEs and LLEs) and national support schools (Hill and Matthews 2008, 2010). Between October 2006 and May 2010, 431 NLEs were designated.

Sponsor-led academies were created as a new form of independent, state-funded school, operating free from local authority control, to replace chronically under-performing schools. The first academies opened in 2002 and by May 2010 there were 203 academies in England.

The expansion of system leadership and the academies programme are key planks of the coalition government's education reform agenda. The passage of the Academies Act is mentioned in Figure 1: it is seen as the fullest manifestation of the growth of school autonomy in English education (Hill et al 2012). On 1 May 2014 there were 3,879 academies. These included 1,084 sponsor-led academies and 2,795 converter academies (DfE 2014).

Many academies, including both sponsor-led and converters, are part of multi-academy trusts (MATs) – groupings of more than one academy under a single funding agreement with the Secretary of State for Education. According to Ofsted's 2012 to 2013 annual report, there were 413 academy chains, of which 91% were MATs. Of these MATs, 55% were sponsor-led academies and 45% converter academies (Ofsted 2013). Recent studies have examined the role of MATs and other formal school improvement collaborations such as federations to understand the opportunities, challenges and impact on pupils' learning (Hill et al 2012, Chapman and Mujis 2013, 2014, Hill et al 2014).

In addition to sponsor-led and converter academies, the coalition government has also established new free schools. Most free schools are new academies, established without a predecessor school and in response to local demand from parents, teachers and other groups. Some free schools have been established when schools from the independent sector have become state-funded academies. By September 2013, 174 free schools had opened. They are currently providing education to 24,000 pupils, and will cater for 82,000 pupils once they reach their full capacity (NAO 2013).

Turning to the growth of the system leadership movement, the National College has now designated 870 NLEs and more than 2,000 LLEs (Ofsted 2013). These system leaders are involved in a range of different forms of school-to-school support to improve teaching and learning and to close gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers (Rea et al 2013). Through the introduction of School Direct and teaching school alliances, schools have been able to take on greater responsibility for teacher recruitment, initial teacher training, continuing professional development (CPD) and school-to-school improvement support (Taylor 2014).

The coalition government has also embarked on significant reforms of school funding and provision for vulnerable children, such as those with SEN. These changes will see greater delegation of funding to schools and extend schools' responsibility for commissioning services for vulnerable pupils. The introduction of the pupil premium gives schools additional resources for narrowing gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers, matched by greater accountability for their progress.

At the same time, the performance bar for schools has been raised through reforms of school inspection and the introduction of new accountability measures.

Transforming the role of local authorities

If the role of schools is unrecognisable from what it was 35 years ago, the reforms introduced by the Conservative, Labour and coalition administrations have similarly transformed the role of local authorities. While responsibility for many aspects of local education has been transferred to schools, local authorities have gained new responsibilities. For example, in 2004 they became responsible for bringing together all children's services and for commissioning education and training for 16- to 19-year-olds.

Local authorities have also been made more accountable for local education standards: for example, in 1998 the Labour government introduced powers whereby central government could intervene in instances where local authority performance was weak.

The ways in which local authorities discharge their functions have also undergone significant change. In relation to school improvement, where local authorities continue to offer services, they are now expected to do so on a traded basis as one option among an increasingly diverse range of school improvement support (DfE 2010). Local authorities are, however, expected to maintain oversight of local education provision, champion the interests of children, and commission school improvement from their local system-leading schools (Wilshaw 2013).

In relation to planning school places, successive governments have introduced changes to the way in which local authorities establish new schools. The creation of free schools has further altered the way in which school places are planned within local systems. In relation to vulnerable children, recent reforms of provision for children with SEN and

disabilities have cast the local authority's role as that of a strategic commissioner (DfE 2011).

The study that we carried out in 2012 showed that, in response to the extension of school autonomy, the role of local authorities in education was evolving to focus on three key functions: as a champion of children and families, as a convener of partnerships and as a commissioner of services (Parish et al 2012). Recent debates have recognised the changes this requires to the role of local authorities in education, and have sought to articulate the components of that new role (Thraves et al 2012, Pritchard and Crossley-Holland 2012, Rogers 2013).

More recent policy changes promise to stimulate further evolution of the role of local authorities. These include the new Ofsted inspection framework for local authority school improvement arrangements, and the introduction of eight new regional school commissioners with responsibility for the academy system.

These new developments have taken place within the context of debates about the structure and governance in education systems around the world. Within these debates, there has been a specific focus on the role of a 'mediating layer' in enabling and sustaining system-wide improvements, through, for example:

- providing targeted support to schools;

- acting as an information channel and communications buffer between the centre and schools; and

- facilitating the sharing of innovation and practices across schools (Mourshed et al 2010, Barber et al 2010, Barber 2011).

Towards a self-improving school system

While there is broad consensus about the desirability of creating a self-improving school system in England, and its defining characteristics, there is considerable debate about the way in which this is to be achieved.

One set of debates concerns the diversification of the English education landscape and the need for coherent commissioning and brokerage.

While in the 1980s the mediating role between schools and central government was held by local authorities, it is now held by 'a mixture of chains, teaching schools and national or local structures' (Dunford 2012). In many cases, these connections overlap, with the result that schools are connected to several different forms of network. For example, an academy may be connected to a national sponsor or a local MAT, they may be a partner or member of a teaching school alliance, they may work with local schools on a particular

issue, and at the same time be part of a national organisation like Challenge Partners or EdisonLearning.

This diversity has given schools greater choice over their connections and partnerships. There is a growing body of evidence about the impact of some of these forms of partnerships. In terms of sponsor-led academies, studies have concluded that these are associated with improvements in standards (NAO 2010, Machin and Vernoit 2011). Sponsor-led academy chains and MATs can offer opportunities to develop innovative and effective new approaches to teaching, leadership, staff development and school improvement. Evidence suggests that being part of a chain or MAT is linked to faster rates of improvement (Hill et al 2012). Other studies have identified a relationship between the degree of centralisation within a chain and school improvement (Chapman and Mujis 2014). Similar findings have been reported in studies of chartered management organisations in the United States (Leschley 2004, Lake et al 2010, CREDO 2013) and school federations in England (Chapman and Mujis 2013).

Other studies have explored the way academies have made use of their freedoms within their schools and in terms of their role in their local systems. One recent study found that the majority of academies reported that their relationships with local schools and local authorities had been maintained or had improved since they became academies (Finch et al 2014).

Teaching schools are seen as having enormous potential to drive school improvement by building leadership capacity, commissioning school improvement and brokering school-to-school support (Hill 2012, House of Commons Education Committee 2013, Aston et al 2013). Evidence also suggests that schools supported by NLEs make faster gains in student outcomes than the national average (Hill and Matthews 2010).

These new forms of partnership offer exciting opportunities for schools to form different kinds of connections. There are concerns, however, that teaching schools and academy chains do not have national coverage, and, as a result, there are areas of the country, such as parts of western England and coastal areas, in which schools do not have access to these forms of support (Thraves et al 2012, House of Commons Education Committee 2013, Ofsted 2013).

In addition to coverage, questions have also been raised about the capacity of system-leading schools, such as teaching schools and MATs, to meet the demand to support under-performing schools (Pritchard and Crossley-Holland 2012, Aston et al 2013). Recent research in England and the United States has focused on the growth of academy chains and chartered management organisations respectively (Lake et al 2010, Hill et al 2012). While initial research on the impact of teaching schools shows the benefits of schools-led models of school improvement, recruitment and teacher training, it has also highlighted the concerns of some teaching schools regarding financial sustainability and leadership continuity within their alliances (Gu et al 2014).

Some have argued that uneven coverage and capacity for school-to-school support could pose challenges for the commissioning and brokering of support for weaker schools that may be less confident about asking for help or may not be able to access support locally. Without oversight and access to support, the risk is that these schools could become isolated and that, consequently, the indicators of declining performance would not be identified early enough for problems to be put right. Without a coherent approach to brokering and commissioning school-to-school support, be it local or regional, the self-improving school system may not develop as fast as it could (Gilbert 2012, Dunford 2012, Hill 2012, Pritchard and Crossley-Holland 2012, Ainscow 2012, Rogers 2013, House of Commons Education Committee 2013).

A second set of debates relates to the co-ordination of functions such as place-planning and support for vulnerable children.

Some studies have suggested that particular aspects of local education systems require a more planned and co-ordinated approach, for example where incentives for schools may pull in different directions (Waslander et al 2010).

In relation to place-planning, there is a lively debate about how to balance, on the one hand, the potential benefits of free schools to provide extra school places and improve choice for parents with, on the other, local planning of school places (Hill 2012, Rogers 2013). Recent studies suggest that local authorities have developed new approaches to place-planning, but challenges in integrating free schools into local planning of provision remain in some areas (LGA 2014).

Likewise, it has been argued that provision for vulnerable pupils requires oversight and often the co-ordination of contributions from a range of partners and services (SOLACE 2012, Thraves et al 2012, Academies Commission 2013). In our 2012 study, we found many local authorities were uncertain about how to manage the supply of school places in this new landscape, and were not confident that there was sufficient expertise and provision locally for schools to take on greater responsibility for commissioning support for vulnerable pupils.

Finally, a third set of debates concerns the way schools are held accountable for performance and incentivised to collaborate.

It has been argued that there is a potential tension between, on the one hand, encouraging school autonomy, public accountability and parental choice, and, on the other, encouraging system leadership and school-to-school collaboration (Hill 2012, Greany 2014). The risk, some see, is that competition could undermine trust and transparency, with the system becoming characterised by competitive isolation rather than purposeful collaboration (Rogers 2013). Some have argued that the overall goal should be for a form of *competitive collaboration* in which 'people self-consciously collaborate and they compete for the betterment of all' (Fullan 2010).

The accountability framework is seen as central to this debate. It has been argued that the accountability framework appropriate to the previous era of the self-managing school needs to be updated and re-balanced to facilitate the development of the self-improving system. This re-balancing, it is proposed, would place a greater emphasis on formative accountability to peers and partners, as opposed to summative accountability to an external regulator alone (OECD 2011, Gilbert 2012, Hill 2012, Ainscow 2012, Waldegrave and Simons 2014, Coles 2014).

Debates about the self-improving school system look set to continue. Alongside them, however, school and local authority leaders have been grappling with these same questions and developing their own approaches to creating local self-improving school systems.

Part 2: the 10 local education systems

Our previous study (Parish et al 2012) focused primarily on changes in the role of local authorities in the evolving education system. Other studies have considered the development of academies (Machin and Vernoit 2011, Hill et al 2012, Academies Commission 2013) and of teaching school alliances (Gu et al 2014). This present study builds on our previous work and these other studies to understand the way in which local education systems in the round are evolving.

The focus of the present study is, therefore, on the role of schools, groups of schools, teaching school alliances, academy sponsors, dioceses, local authorities and other leaders driving change. This is the "system" bit: the connections, interdependencies and relationships between these roles. The "local" bit relates to the geographical area covered by the system and is based on local authority boundaries. Since education has such a broad scope, we narrowed our focus to three main education functions:

1. **school improvement and intervention** to promote high standards and tackle underperformance;

2. **school place-planning** in order to ensure sufficient supply; and

3. **supporting vulnerable children** to ensure every child receives a high-quality education.

Part I one of this report sets the scene for looking at local education systems. Part II describes the starting-points and characteristics of each of the 10 local education systems we followed. Part III explores the evolution of the 10 local systems in terms of changes in the three core functions. Part IV analyses the transitions that each system has made during this period. Part V concludes the report with a summary of the key lessons about leading change in a local education system we learned from following the 10 local systems.

Characteristics of the local education systems

In the spring term of 2013, we started following 10 local education systems to understand the ways in which they were evolving in response to extensions of school autonomy. The aim was not to judge their performance, nor to second-guess national policy intentions, nor propose our own solutions to debates about the self-improving system. Instead, it was to take a "temperature check" of the way the 10 systems were evolving, including:

- the ways in which the roles of schools, groups of schools, local authorities and dioceses were changing over time;

- reasons why these roles might be changing in different ways and at varying speeds between systems;

- underlying conditions that influence the smoothness of the transition; and

- opportunities and risks encountered along the way.

The following criteria were used to identify the 10 local education systems that agreed to take part, which are shown in Figure 2:

- geographical spread across England, covering both urban and rural areas;

- coverage of different local authority structures, (current) political control and size in terms of school numbers;

- range of school performance against Ofsted inspection outcomes;

- inclusion of some local systems from our previous study to allow changes to be traced from further back in time;

- balance of school types (community, faith, sponsored academy and converter academy) and school phase (primary, secondary and special); and

- representation of established groups of schools such as teaching school alliances, local or national MATs, and other partnerships.

Figure 2: The 10 local education systems

	Political control	
Conservative	●
Labour	●
Liberal Democrat	●
No overall control	●

Pupils in good or outstanding primary schools	Top 30 LA	31-60	61-90	91-120	Bottom 30
Pupils in good or outstanding secondary schools	Top 30 LA	31-60	61-90	91-120	Bottom 30
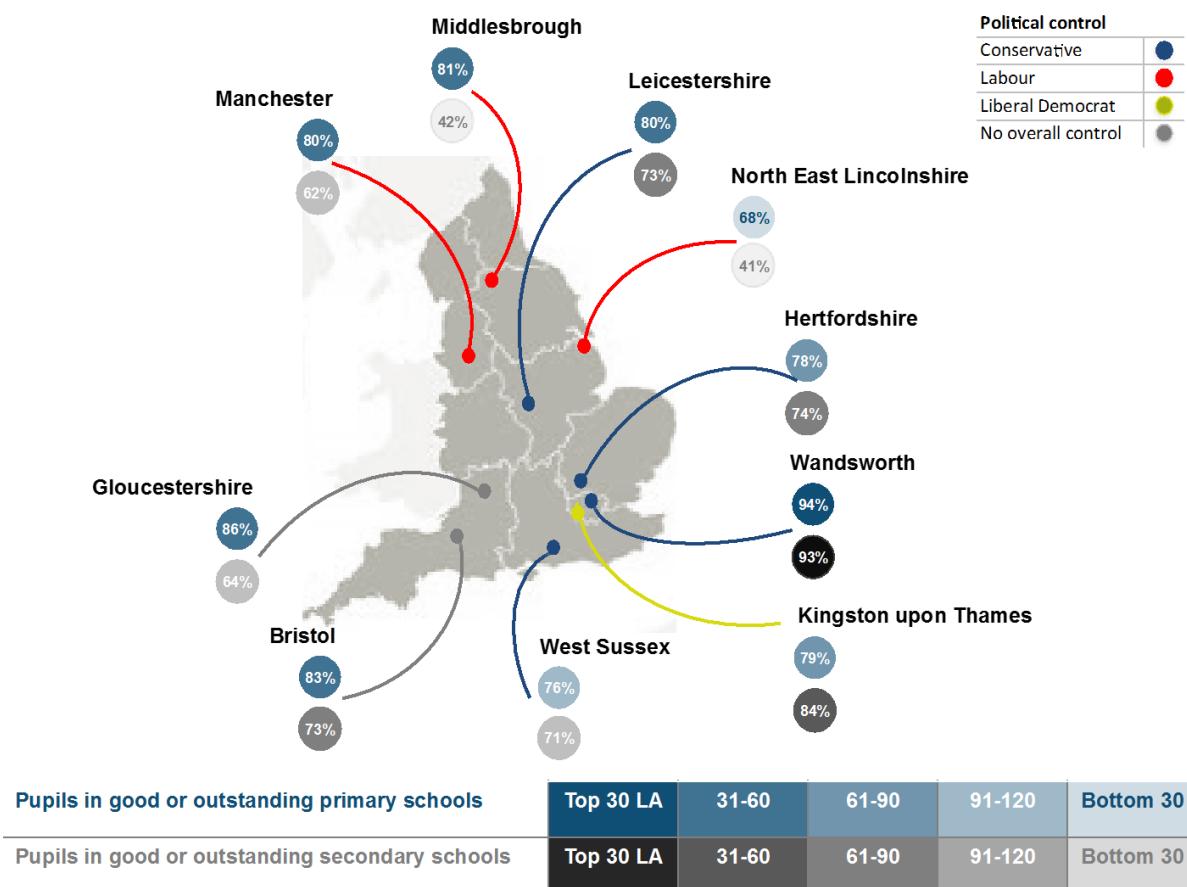
Source: Ofsted 2013

The balance of school types within and between the 10 local systems was an important factor in understanding the points at which we started following them. Indeed, the 10 local systems had different starting points in terms of overall levels of school autonomy and the make-up of the local system by school type. The characteristics of each local system at the outset of our study in terms of the numbers of schools by different type and phase are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Schools by type and phase in each local system

Community
Voluntary-aided/-controlled
Foundation
Free school, UTC or studio
Sponsored academy
Converter academy
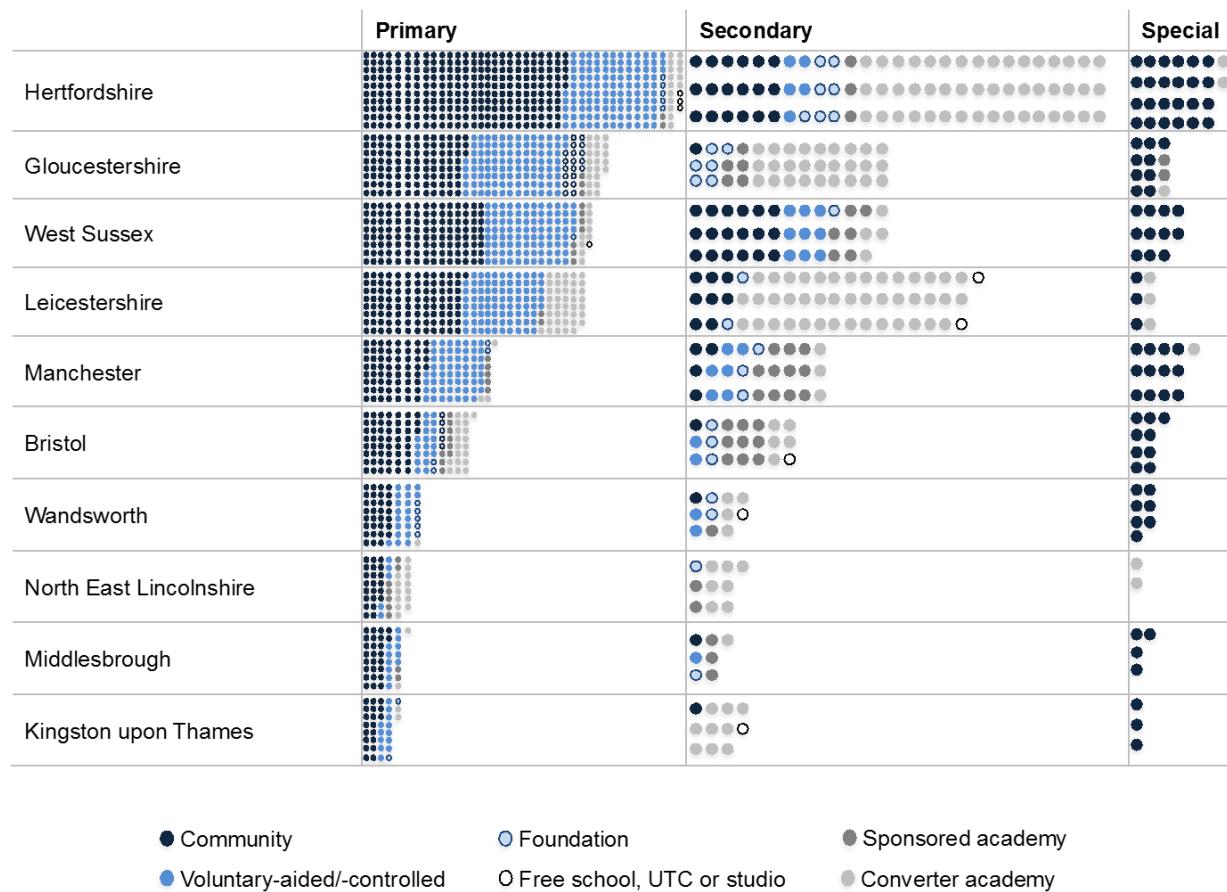
Nationally, academies accounted for fewer than one in 10 primary pupils enrolled at school, with the majority enrolled in community (six in 10) or voluntary-aided or voluntary-controlled (three in 10) primary schools. The landscape for secondary pupils was different, with half of secondary pupils enrolled at academies and the remaining half almost evenly split between community and voluntary-aided or voluntary-controlled secondary schools. As shown in Figure 4, the 10 local systems each provided a mix of school types to help us understand how the make-up of a local system might influence its evolution over time. Each local system had at least one teaching school alliance, with half having three or more alliances each. Overall, the 10 local systems accounted for 9% of all primary and secondary school pupils in England.

In the academic year 2012 to 2013, when we started following the local systems, there were two local systems nationally (Bexley and Rutland) that had evolved to become "all academy" at secondary level. Within our 10 local systems, North East Lincolnshire and

Kingston upon Thames were the closest to being all secondary academy, with academies accounting for 95% and 92% pupils respectively. Conversely, three local systems nationally had no secondary academies at all (Bury, Knowsley, and Dagenham and Redbridge). Of our 10 local systems, West Sussex had the lowest percentage of secondary pupils enrolled in academies (28%).

One in five local systems across England had no primary academies. By contrast, in England and within our 10 local systems, the highest percentage of pupils enrolled at primary academies was in North East Lincolnshire (46%). Of our 10 local systems, three were below the national average for the percentage of pupils in primary academies, with Wandsworth the lowest (4%). The 10 local systems also had contrasting landscapes between primary and secondary school types within their system:

- North East Lincolnshire had the highest percentage of academies at both phases;

- West Sussex was relatively low on the percentage of academies at both phases; and

- Kingston upon Thames had the largest disparity in academies between the two phases.

Figure 4: Percentage of pupils by type of school and by local system
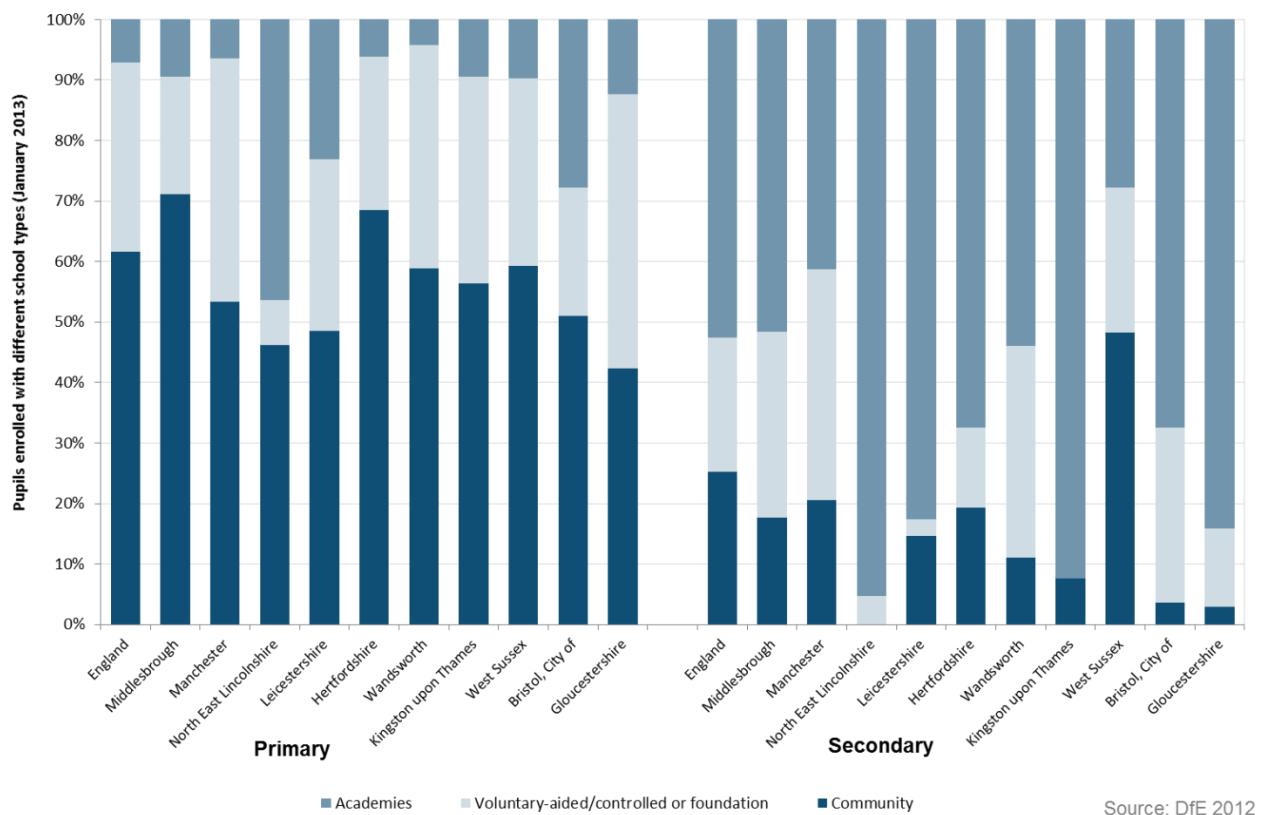
Half of the local systems had special schools that had become academies. There were 11 special academies in total in these five local systems, while the other five local systems had no special academies. North East Lincolnshire's special school sector was

"all academy", with its two special schools having converted to academy status in September 2011. Three quarters of the special academies were converters.

We followed the 10 local systems by undertaking two phases of fieldwork starting in the spring term of the academic year 2012 to 2013, and then again in the autumn and spring terms of 2013 to 2014. Based on our previous study, we also had an understanding of four local systems (Middlesbrough, Bristol, Gloucestershire and Hertfordshire) dating back to 2011. In both phases we engaged a range of leaders from each local system through one-to-one interviews and small-group workshops, including:

- school leaders and governors;

- elected members, senior local authority officers and heads of service; and

- diocese education officers.

Schools were selected randomly, in line with our criteria for each local system, in order to ensure the make-up of schools selected was representative of the make-up of the local system. In phase one, 107 schools (33% of our sample) took part, while 116 schools (36%) took part in phase two. Sixty-four schools took part in both phases one and two. A list of the schools, local authorities and other organisations that took part in this study can be found at Annex B.

In addition, during phase two we carried out a survey with the participating schools, which we had developed during the earlier phase of fieldwork. The scope of the survey was limited in that its primary intention was to provide some quantifiable evidence of the perceptions of school leaders within the 10 local education systems to help validate the other sources of evidence. It was not designed to identify wider national trends, nor would it be appropriate to use it in this way. The survey can be found at Annex A.

Evidence of changes in outcomes or quality of the systems as a result of how local systems have evolved is limited. Therefore, judgements about the effectiveness of the transitions made by different local systems are not possible yet. This report is intended as a prompt for discussion and reflection for leaders of local education systems, whether they are leading individual schools, networks of schools, local authorities or other local organisations.

As we explain throughout the report, while some of the 10 local systems have already undergone significant change, there are some systems or parts of systems where the major transformative work is only just beginning. As these and other local systems continue to evolve, we hope that the learning captured in this report may be of use to their leaders.

Part 3: the evolution of the three key functions of a local education system

There has been a decisive shift towards school improvement led by schools themselves, local place-planning has adapted, while support for vulnerable children is evolving more gradually.

At the time of our previous study, we found that local systems were:

- excited about the potential for schools to lead school improvement;

- concerned about how to plan places in a more autonomous system; and

- uncertain about the future of local services for vulnerable children.

In this study, we have found that each of these three functions has evolved in a different way and at a different pace. As Figure 5 shows, school leaders are confident in being able to access school improvement provision, reflecting a significant shift in the role of schools-led partnerships in leading local school improvement. Responses about place-planning and support for vulnerable pupils reflect the different ways in which these functions are evolving.

Figure 5: Survey responses from school leaders

n = 116
Numbers rounded to nearest %

25
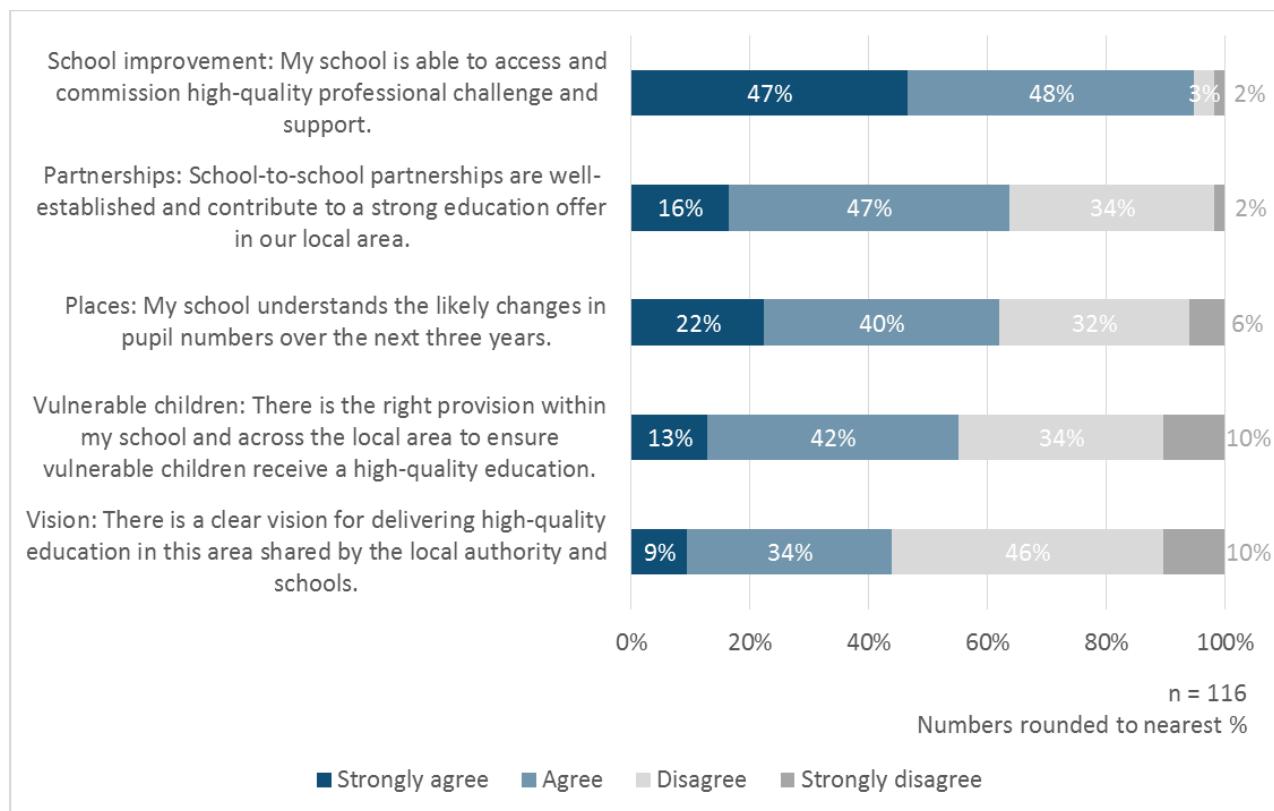
A. School improvement and intervention

There has been a rapid and decisive shift towards schools-led partnerships leading local school improvement.

When our previous report was published, the mood in the participating local systems was one of cautious excitement. In seeking to respond to the vision for a more autonomous and self-improving school system, school and local authority leaders were excited about the potential for schools-led connections to generate innovative approaches to school improvement.

School improvement is now the area of their local education systems about which school leaders are most confident. Our survey data show that 95% of school leaders agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to access the high-quality support and challenge that they need. These levels of confidence were found across primary, secondary and special phases: previously, we found that primary schools were less confident about school improvement support than their peers in other phases. They were also consistent across different types of schools – academies, voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled schools and community schools – and across the 10 local systems.

School leaders have welcomed the encouragement to lead local school improvement through partnerships such as teaching school alliances, MATs and federations, as well as system-wide strategic partnerships. These schools-led partnerships, some involving schools of all phases, are playing an increasingly prominent role in shaping, commissioning, brokering and delivering local school improvement services in these 10 local systems.

This is not to say that the transition to a fully schools-led self-improving system is complete. Nor is it to conclude that all schools are accessing support and making the most effective use of it. It was beyond the scope of this study to seek evidence to confirm whether this was the case. Rather, our findings reflect the relative levels of confidence of school leaders in being able to access school improvement support that they see as high quality. Responses to our survey showed that, while almost two in three (63%) school leaders were confident that local partnerships were well-established and driving improvements in local education, those who felt less confident explained that local partnerships were not yet embedded or did not yet have consistent coverage. In all of the 10 local systems, there is still some way to go to embed the partnerships that have been created, and to gather the evidence of their impact in the classroom.

Within some systems, such as the larger rural counties, we found marked differences in responses from school leaders about the strength of local school partnerships. This suggested that partnerships were well established in some localities, but coverage was not consistent across the whole of the local system. There were also differences in responses according to the stage schools were at in their own improvement processes.

This reflected the fact that a well-connected outstanding school is in a better position to take advantage of a diverse, schools-led school improvement landscape than an isolated school or a school receiving intensive support as a result of concerns over performance.

What our evidence does show, however, is that, compared to the findings of our previous study, school and local authority leaders perceive there to have been a decisive shift *towards* a confident, mature, schools-led, self-improving system, within which schools-led partnerships are playing a key role.

The role, size and shape of school partnerships differ across the 10 systems, reflecting the specific local context they have been designed to serve.

In some local systems, school improvement services are provided by companies owned by schools themselves.

One common theme that we identified in just over half of the local systems was the creation of a vehicle to allow schools to lead and manage local school improvement services collectively. In Hertfordshire and, at secondary level, Gloucestershire, not-for-profit companies owned by schools have been created to provide school improvement services and CPD across and beyond the local system.

Case study: Herts for Learning, Hertfordshire

Based on a mature relationship between the local authority and schools, and a long-standing commitment to encourage school autonomy, a new model for governing local services begun to be considered four years ago. Herts for Learning has now been established as a not-for-profit company providing a wide range of school improvement and business support services. Schools lead the company, with 96% of schools (486) owning shares in the company, and elect six school leaders to be directors. The local authority has supported the development of the company, and has two nominated directors and a 20% shareholding. Learn more at www.hertsforlearning.co.uk.

Key learning points

- It took four years to turn the idea into action – partnership approaches take time to build.
- The conditions were right for this model, but it may not work everywhere.

In other local systems, schools are leading local decision-making through local strategic partnerships.

Kingston upon Thames has created a governance model, EducationKingston, whereby a board comprising headteacher representatives, elected by their peers, alongside local authority officers, are the strategic decision-makers for local school improvement services. Indeed, as Kingston and Richmond upon Thames have worked to bring together their education services, they have retained and re-formed the model of peer-elected, headteacher-led governance: EducationKingston has become SPARK (the School Performance Alliance for Richmond and Kingston Schools).

In Leicestershire, the Leicestershire Education Excellence Partnership (LEEP) is a local strategic partnership that aims to create opportunities to strengthen the existing network of support available. Its membership includes headteacher representatives, local authority officers, the lead member for children and family services, as well as representatives of the local dioceses and teaching school alliances. Supported by the local authority, LEEP provides a platform to discuss collectively the commissioning and brokerage of school improvement across Leicestershire.

Strategic governance models and partnerships in, for example, Kingston, Leicestershire and Middlesbrough have enabled school leaders to play a key role at a strategic level in shaping and commissioning a range of local school improvement provision.

Case study: The Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership (MAP)

MAP is a strategic partnership between schools and the local authority that aims to tackle barriers to achievement and commission services jointly. Now in its second year, it is enabling schools collectively to develop approaches to, for example, place-planning and the SEN reforms. MAP has been commissioned to lead a programme to improve emotional wellbeing and resilience, and to lead the children and young people's strand of the local Health and Wellbeing Board's work.

MAP provides the governance structure to monitor progress against the action plan following the Ofsted inspection of the local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement. MAP works closely with the Middlesbrough Schools' Teaching Alliance (MSTA), an independent, borough-wide teaching school alliance. For example, MAP has commissioned MSTA to review primary-secondary transition. Learn more at www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=7413.

Key learning points

- Empower school leaders to lead and shape a collective strategic vision.
- Support school leaders to understand complex problems and develop collective solutions by sharing the right information and expertise.

In some systems, the local authority and local strategic partnership have encouraged the development of locality-wide teaching school alliances. The work of these alliances in brokering school-to-school support, as well as providing a range of other CPD, research and training opportunities, complements the overarching strategic work of the local strategic partnership. In Middlesbrough, for example, the work of the Middlesbrough Schools' Teaching Alliance (MSTA) complements that of MAP.

Case study: The Middlesbrough Schools' Teaching Alliance (MSTA)

MSTA is a borough-wide teaching school alliance in Middlesbrough. Now in its second year, nearly all schools in Middlesbrough are signed up to and engaged in the work of MSTA. MSTA has a broad remit encompassing school-to-school support, initial teacher training, CPD, and research and development. MSTA brokers school-to-school support through, for example, LLEs, specialist leaders of education (SLEs), lead practitioners and other external professionals. As one strategic partner said, 'MSTA has helped to formalise school-to-school support, and has given us the freedom and the power to request support.'

As an independent alliance, MSTA's work complements that of the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership (MAP), for example by supporting work to improve the quality of teaching and succession planning within Middlesbrough. Learn more at http://www.sbcschools.org.uk/pallisterparkteachingschool/.

Key learning points

- MSTA is a genuinely collective enterprise – this has been crucial to securing initial engagement and ongoing buy-in from school leaders.
- Make it the norm to ask for support from other school leaders.

In Manchester, a similar approach has been adopted through the creation of the Manchester Schools Alliance. In other systems, such as Wandsworth and Leicestershire, teaching school alliances that are operating within and across local systems are playing a key role in providing school improvement support within the local system.

These alliances are offering a range of school improvement provision such as CPD, brokering system leadership and school-to-school support, providing peer-to-peer accountability, supporting school governors and carrying out reviews of governance, and recruiting and training teachers.

Case study: The Manchester Schools Alliance

The Manchester Schools Alliance (MSA) is a not-for-profit partnership body open to all Manchester schools. Schools pay a subscription based on their size (number of pupils) up to a maximum amount for the largest settings. In return, MSA provides a network for school-to-school support, CPD, School Direct, mentoring, governor development and data analysis. The local authority supported the establishment of MSA, but MSA is now a fully autonomous, schools-led cooperative, limited by guarantee. The local authority remains an active partner of MSA.

A seconded secondary headteacher and a business manager co-ordinate MSA's work. The National College for Teaching and Leadership has approved a bid for a teaching school alliance to be established, linked to MSA. The teaching school alliance will be led by Loreto College and Piper Hill Specialist Support School, and will enable MSA to expand its work on school-to-school support, succession planning, system leadership, and research. Learn more at www.manchesterschoolsalliance.co.uk.

Key learning points

- Offer high-quality services and value for money to secure buy-in from schools.
- Ensure the business model is viable and self-sustaining.

Teaching schools alliances are becoming one of the "go-to" places for local school improvement.

Since our previous study, existing teaching school alliances have become stronger and more mature partnerships, while new alliances have been created and are establishing themselves. These alliances are increasingly seen as one of the "go-to" places for school improvement among an increasing range of school improvement provision within the local system by school leaders.

As leaders of alliances explained to us, part of the long-term success of partnerships such as teaching school alliances will depend on them being able to meet the increasing demand for school-to-school support and to become financially self-sustaining. Some alliances have developed novel ways of addressing the last point: the Millais Alliance in West Sussex promotes its offer through a not-for-profit company, e-PD, which uses a credits system so schools can exchange the development opportunities they put in and take out.

Case study: enabling Professional Development (e-PD), West Sussex

Inspired by the leadership at the Millais Alliance, e-PD is an initiative that enables schools to work for and with each other to drive continuous improvement. It is a schools-led not-for-profit company, supported by the local authority, with seven school leaders, an education advisor, and representatives of local universities and the local business community as directors. About 175 schools subscribe to e-PD and in return they promote their own development opportunities and expertise, which other schools can access. No money changes hands between schools for individual transactions. Instead, a credits system is used, whereby schools can buy credits or earn them through take-up of their development opportunities. This helps to minimise administration. Effective use is made of online technology to ensure ease of access. Learn more at www.e-pd.org.uk.

Key learning points

- Low overheads, which means the model almost runs itself – this minimises bureaucracy and does not distract from core business.
- Using webinars, fora and other e-learning technology enables easy access in a large geographical area.

Sponsor-led academy chains are enabling schools to access the best school improvement locally, regionally and nationally.

Academy principals described the benefits of joining sponsor-led chains and local trusts, such as being able to access and share a wider range of school improvement support.

Case study: Garden City Academy, Hertfordshire

Garden City in Hertfordshire became a sponsored academy in September 2012. They are part of a local REAch2 cluster along with Wilshere-Dacre Junior Academy. REAch2 has 10 local geographical clusters in total. The academy highlights the significant impact REAch2 has had in accelerating progress in the academy. The focus on primary education along with a strong emphasis on leadership development, shared values, a positive can-do culture, and access to best practice across all of the academies in REAch2 have been key highlights. Learn more at http://reach2.org/.

Key learning points

- Partnerships can combine local and national benefits – the REAch2 model of local clusters within the overall trust helps to achieve this.
- Having a shared focus helps bind the partnership – in this case it was a primary focus and the underpinning leadership vision.

Other academies within sponsor-led networks spoke to us about the scope they had to focus on the transition to secondary school, to become a hub of expertise for local schools, and to form partnerships with organisations like Teach First in order to recruit dynamic young teachers to their academies. For example, one academy leader working in a largely rural system told us that their sponsor's local hub was a crucial resource in connecting the academy to a school improvement network offering high-quality, responsive and swift advice.

Case study: Oasis Academy Nunsthorpe, North East Lincolnshire

In order to recruit high-calibre teachers and dispel misconceptions about working in a deprived area, the Oasis Academy Nunsthorpe formed a partnership with Teach First. This year, four Teach First trainees are in post and working towards becoming newly-qualified teachers. The Teach First Regional Manager is a member of the Academy Council, while the academy has become a hub for local recruitment by hosting Teach First workshops for other schools. The academy also works closely with the Oasis Academy Wintringham and the local hub of Oasis academies across the region to improve year 6 transition and develop new teaching practices. Learn more at www.oasisacademynunsthorpe.org.

Key learning points

- Choose the right partners and bind them into the vision of your school.
- Being part of Oasis enables principals to access the best practice locally, regionally and nationally.

The role of dioceses is evolving as leaders reflect on how to support local faith schools most effectively.

For faith schools, the local diocese is another network that may provide and broker school improvement provision for local schools. During our study, we found that local dioceses were reflecting on how best to support local schools in the new landscape, and how their role may need to evolve to do this most effectively.

We found examples of local dioceses encouraging and supporting the formation of local MATs or federations of schools of the same religious denomination. In the main, these were made up predominantly of primary schools, but in one local system a cross-phase diocesan MAT had been established to align primary and secondary education of children of that particular faith.

We also found instances of local dioceses exploring partnership-working with other dioceses in order to develop the capacity they needed to support local schools. Some

dioceses were advertising for a Director of School Improvement in order to provide dedicated leadership of their vision for education and to ensure that the diocese had the right capacity to offer high-quality support to local diocesan schools. For schools themselves, where the diocesan services were well regarded, this network offered another way of accessing advice or providing school-to-school support.

The locus of decision-making, particularly in relation to school improvement services, has shifted to networks of schools.

In local systems in which there was a local strategic partnership, through which school leaders could play a role in shaping the local vision and strategy, school leaders were more likely to agree with our survey statement that there was a shared local vision for education.

In other systems, school leaders commented that, while there was a clear vision *within* their partnerships or networks, they did not feel that there was a clear vision for education that was shared *across* the local system. School leaders explained that this reflected the diversity of the partnerships that were leading school improvement. As described above, these partnerships may operate at the level of their immediate community or the local system, or indeed at a regional or national level. School leaders also pointed to the diminishing capacity of the local authority to shape a strategic vision.

In a small number of cases, school leaders, particularly of secondary schools, expressed a feeling of being in competition in certain respects with other local schools. Where school leaders felt there was competition among local schools to attract pupils, this often influenced the choices that they made about partnerships. In these cases, school leaders had looked to neighbouring systems in order to identify similar schools with whom to work on school improvement.

Within systems where some school leaders perceived there to be competition, we also identified a number of ways in which local schools were collaborating. For instance, within some teaching school alliances and networks, we found examples of what might be termed 'competitive collaboration' (Fullan 2010), where school leaders competed and collaborated to support all schools within the network to improve. In other local systems, some schools that saw themselves to be in competition to attract pupils collaborated with each other on common issues, such as provision for vulnerable children (see Section C, below).

Case study: Latchmere Teaching School, Kingston upon Thames

Latchmere School gained teaching school status in 2012 and was involved in our previous study. Since then, the teaching school alliance has matured and has seen an increased focus on its school-to-school support and professional development offers. Against a backdrop of a strong and well-established EducationKingston Partnership providing school improvement support, Latchmere Teaching School is typical of other local systems where there is an increasing range of options to access school improvement support. As part of the development of joint education services across Kingston and Richmond, from September, Latchmere will be one of five teaching school alliances that will work across the two boroughs in partnership with SPARK (the School Performance Alliance for Richmond and Kingston) to offer an overall package of school improvement support. Learn more at: www.latchmereschool.org.

Key learning points

- Partnership working was happening anyway prior to gaining teaching school status – it was based on a strong existing commitment to the local system.
- 'Competitive collaboration' (Fullan 2010) is achievable – the already strong brand and provider of school improvement support, EducationKingston and now SPARK, is a strategic partner in the alliance.

In half of the 10 systems, where local strategic partnerships or similar system-wide schools-led vehicles have been established, school leaders were more likely to agree that there was a shared vision for education across the local system.

School leaders see both the attractions and the necessity of being connected.

A key finding at the time of our last report was that relationships were king: local authorities recognised that their ability, and that of schools, to influence and co-ordinate local provision would depend increasingly on their ability to motivate and lead and decreasingly on direct control.

Relationships remain vital, but are no longer enough on their own: schools are increasingly seeing the importance of being connected to at least one formal network. For the vast majority of school leaders, relationships are being transformed into more formal, self-conscious and professional connections. We found that school leaders were making connections for one of three reasons, which are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Key reasons why schools are becoming connected

Reason	Description
Broadening horizons	Some schools, predominantly secondary schools, were attracted to joining regional and national networks and being able to access and share practice across a wider group of like-minded schools.
Leading locally	Other schools, across all phases, wanted to be able to shape deeper, sustained, school-to-school support. They saw this as a way of increasing their impact and providing richer opportunities to share staff, resources and practice.
Practical necessity	Other schools, predominantly primary and some special schools, were prompted by what they saw as the reduction of local authority services, and the need to maintain their level of performance and thus control over their partnerships.

One increasingly important way in which school leaders are forming connections is by forming or joining MATs.

As one primary academy principal put it, being part of a MAT provided 'stability and support' at a time when 'everything we are used to working with is changing'. We found a significant proportion of primary schools either considering, in the early stages of becoming, or establishing MATs for one or a combination of the three reasons outlined above. In one local system, the local special schools have explored forming a MAT. Primary faith schools particularly, both Church of England and Roman Catholic, were increasingly conscious of the opportunities offered by forming MATs with other faith schools. Among primary, special and faith schools, MATs are now a central feature of the debate about connections. In a very small number of cases, primary school leaders reported that they did not need to be connected *formally* to other schools: these schools, which tended to be outstanding, preferred to connect with other schools in less formal ways.

As schools formalise their partnerships, they are also reassessing the type of leadership required. School leaders, particularly those leading large teaching school alliances, were reflecting on how to create the right leadership and governance structures, and thus capacity, within their partnerships. Some school leaders were considering taking on a more strategic, executive role within their alliances or MATs, whereby they would oversee an overarching school improvement strategy, and support and mentor new leaders. Other school leaders were seeking to build capacity within their networks by creating new positions that would co-ordinate the day-to-day work of the partnership.

Case study: Bishop's Cleeve Primary School, Gloucestershire

In February 2012, Bishop's Cleeve Primary School formed a MAT with two other schools. They are also supporting another local school through an executive leadership arrangement. Between them, the four schools have just over 200 staff, which provides the capacity and flexibility to offer school-to-school improvement support. All schools within the MAT have experience of turning around schools in challenging circumstances. They believe they have already benefited from the partnership, and are considering opportunities to sponsor another school. Geographical proximity will be a key consideration in this decision.

Key learning points

- Be mindful of the risk of over-reaching – be ambitious, but be clear about your capacity and the geography of your partnerships.
- Select partners who have experience of school improvement in challenging settings.

Likewise, many schools were reflecting on the increased responsibilities of school governors that came with greater autonomy and oversight of larger partnerships and networks. These schools were exploring how to develop the working arrangements and capacity of their boards of governors, drawing on support from their partners, local teaching school alliances, their academy sponsor, diocese or local authority service.

School improvement provision has evolved, and is increasingly characterised by peer-led, school-based joint practice development and peer evaluation.

Across all phases, school leaders reported that their school improvement activities were characterised less by one-off, out-of-school courses, and more by peer-led, school-based and pedagogically-focused joint practice development (Hargreaves 2012b). Activities such as lesson study, twilight sessions looking at the latest research, cross-partnership lesson observations and peer-to-peer evaluation were reported by school leaders as key aspects of their school improvement practice and CPD.

As well as support, school leaders were also commissioning external challenge from a range of sources, such as registered Ofsted inspectors, through peer-to-peer challenge or data and inspection-style "health-checks" within their networks, or from national groups such as Challenge Partners.

Case study: The Forest Way Teaching School Alliance, Leicestershire

Forest Way was described by Charlie Taylor, Chief Executive of the National College, as 'a template for education in England in the future' (Taylor 2014). It is an outstanding special school and was one of the first teaching schools designated in 2011. The alliance comprises more than 40 schools and is led collectively by a genuine partnership of equals. It offers teacher training, 30 School Direct places and CPD across subjects like science and maths. Each year, members of the alliance receive an Ofsted-style "health-check" to determine the strengths and areas for development within the alliance. This requires – and generates – significant levels of trust between members of the alliance and the resilience to have difficult conversations. Where necessary, support is commissioned from national, local and specialist leaders within the alliance. The alliance itself is co-ordinated by a full-time lead practitioner.

According to Charlie Taylor, the three key factors in the alliance's development are its leadership, a deep commitment to drive improvement through collaboration among leaders within the alliance, and the trust placed in the alliance by Leicestershire County Council. Learn more at www.forestway.leics.sch.uk/fwtsa.

Key learning points

- Trust is crucial – inspire trust by demonstrating your commitment to the alliance and the children within it, not just your school.
- Be scrupulously fair and show others you will not shirk the tough decisions.

School leaders did not feel that peer evaluation was leading to cosiness between schools or that external challenge was becoming blunter: if anything, school leaders reported the opposite. School leaders said that they found that the challenge they received was sharper, more robust and, as a result, more beneficial. Clearly, however, the rigour of the external challenge depends on the quality of both the challenger and the receiver. Where a school's leadership and governance is weaker, the risk of cosiness and of poor follow-through will be greater.

At present, most school leaders enjoy a wider range of school improvement services than was available two years ago.

In addition to locality-wide schools-owned and schools-led companies, teaching schools, academy sponsors, federations and dioceses, school leaders are also commissioning school-to-school support, CPD and governor training from local authority traded services, where schools believe these offer quality and value for money. A range of private and

not-for-profit organisations were also involved in providing support to schools in the 10 systems, such as Challenge Partners and EdisonLearning.

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Case study: Ashley Down School Federation and EdisonLearning, Bristol

Ashley Down is a school federation in Bristol that brings together an infant and a primary school. It also leads a teaching school alliance, along with a small group of strategic partners, and has a strong history of partnership working. One such partnership was based around curriculum innovation using the EdisonLearning Primary Curriculum as part of a network of local Bristol primary schools. The curriculum at Ashley Down Federation is constantly evolving. Ashley Down is a full partnership school and named Hub School for EdisonLearning UK. Curriculum leads within the Federation work closely with a designated Edison achievement adviser on curriculum content, organisation of learning environment and learning skills. This has been key to bringing together practice and designing a curriculum within the Federation, as well as preparing for the new national curriculum. Learn more at www.edisonlearning.net/case-studies/primary-case-studies/ashley-down-juinor-school.html.

Key learning points

- Having a shared focus helps bind the partnership – in this case it was curriculum innovation. The external support helps this.
- School-to-school partnerships often overlap and serve different or distinct purposes – they are not static or fixed to one group of schools.

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At local authority level, for example, Serco were working as the strategic school improvement partner to North East Lincolnshire, where their role included scrutinising school performance, brokering school-to-school support, developing partnerships to tackle pupils' challenging behaviour and preparing for the new SEN reforms.

Local systems have begun to develop ways of signposting support that is available locally.

A small number of school leaders reported that the flipside of having the freedom to shop around was the time it took to identify the right support and the challenge of assuring its quality. One local system has responded by creating innovative, online signposting to school improvement support.

Case study: GlosEd, Gloucestershire

In 2011, GlosEd was launched as an online directory of local providers of school-to-school support, including NLEs, senior leaders and advanced skills teachers. In February 2014, it was re-launched as a more interactive tool that would be driven by feedback from schools that have received support. Clearly the quality of the resource will depend on the feedback from school leaders: the early feedback from school leaders and governors has been encouraging.

Learn more at www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/schoolsnet/article/110274/GlosEd.

Key learning points

- Make it easy for schools to find out about support that is available locally.
- Use peer recommendations to provide feedback and quality-assure local support.

School leaders see the impact of their partnerships on the quality of teaching, school improvement practice and a broader sense of shared responsibility.

Table 2 summarises the four ways in which school leaders described the impact of their partnerships with other schools.

Table 2: Types of impact of school partnerships identified by school leaders

Type of impact	Description
Better quality of teaching	School leaders had seen the confidence and skills of their staff improve as a result of working with other schools. This had translated not only into improvements in the quality of teaching, but greater in-school and teacher-to-teacher collaboration. As one leader told us, 'now, my staff are not just in their own classrooms: they are far more giving to one another within the school.' School leaders felt that better teaching would improve pupils' achievement. As one leader told us, 'if you aspire to greatness, put the right people in the right place, and let people see what good looks like, this will raise aspirations and have a knock-on effect on attainment.'
More schools becoming good or outstanding	Many school leaders pointed to specific cases of schools that they had supported that had since achieved a good or outstanding Ofsted judgement. Over time, their aim was to increase the number of schools getting to good or better within their partnerships.

Type of impact	Description
Better school improvement practice	As one school leader told us, 'just because we are outstanding, it does not mean we know it all.' Many school leaders spoke about the benefits of supporting other schools in that it exposed their school to the cutting-edge of school improvement techniques.
Shared responsibility for the progress of pupils in other schools	As one school leader put it, 'my deputy headteacher, who is now accredited as a coach of the outstanding teacher programme said to me: "we have helped 20 teachers, but think of the number of students we have reached this year, and the knock-on effect next year, and the next year."'

Over time, as their partnerships become more embedded and mature, these school leaders believed that they would see ongoing improvements in teaching, school results and pupil progress, as well as better staff recruitment and leadership succession.

Local authorities have developed new ways of working with all local schools and academies, some in response to Ofsted's inspection of school improvement arrangements.

In all 10 systems, local authorities have continued to scrutinise the performance data of all state-funded local schools, including academies, and to provide external challenge through termly monitoring visits to schools where risks are identified. In some systems, Ofsted's inspection of local authority school improvement arrangements has prompted local authorities that had previously reduced their engagement with local academies to rethink the way they engage local schools. In some cases, for example where the local authority may have been seen to step back from their previous role too abruptly, the new inspection framework has caused them to retrace some of their steps.

In these systems, local authorities have re-engaged with academies and put in place data-sharing protocols. Some have commissioned a small team of advisers to visit weaker schools, for example as part of the work of a local schools-led strategic partnership. This is not a reversion to a previous model of school improvement services. Instead, this has been done to ensure that the new schools-led partnerships have the capacity they need to identify schools at risk and to broker the right school-to-school support and intervention. In these systems, the schools-led strategic partnerships are working with the local authority to assess risk and broker school-to-school support.

Local authorities are supporting this by using data to identify schools at risk of falling into an Ofsted category of concern, brokering support through local partnerships, initiating

early conversations and using pre-warning notices, and using their formal powers of intervention where appropriate.

North East Lincolnshire has revised its contract with its strategic school improvement partner, Serco, to ensure that the routine of scrutinising data and approaching schools where there are concerns was extended to cover academies as well as maintained schools. In other systems, local authorities have had direct experience of challenging performance in academies and working with the academy sponsor and the Open Academies Unit at the Department for Education (DfE) to develop a solution.

In our previous report, local authorities questioned from where they would be able to access the soft intelligence that would provide the crucial early warnings of declining performance. School leaders and local authority officers remain aware of the importance of ensuring schools do not become isolated. Some systems have begun to explore ways of gathering soft intelligence about performance risks. Leicestershire, for example, works with its local strategic partnership as well as governor and human resources services to identify schools that are experiencing high governor or staff turnover. Gloucestershire gathers information about attendance at school network meetings.

During our study, school and local authority leaders were exploring these and other questions, such as what would happen where an under-performing school refused to engage with a supporting school and how local systems might work with the new regional schools commissioners.

The evolution of school improvement and intervention: a summary

At the time of our last study …	Since then …	Questions being explored …
• Schools and local authorities were excited about potential for new, innovative approaches • Cautious excitement about opportunities for schools to lead local school improvement • Primary school leaders were less confident about schools-led school improvement than their secondary colleagues	• There has been a decisive shift towards schools-led partnerships leading local school improvement • School leaders across all phases are confident that they can access the support they need • School leaders see both the attractions and necessity of being connected – MATs are an increasingly common form of connection among primary, special and faith schools • School improvement provision has evolved and is increasingly characterised by joint practice development and peer evaluation • Local authorities have developed new ways of working with all local schools and academies, some in response to Ofsted's inspection of school improvement arrangements	• How best to signpost schools to local support? • How to ensure school improvement provision is high quality and has an impact? • What if a school refuses to engage with support from another school? • How should local systems work with the new regional schools commissioners?

B. School place-planning

Most local systems have adapted and developed ways of planning school places to meet basic need at primary level.

At the time of our last report, there were high levels of anxiety among leaders of local education systems about how school places would be planned in a system in which increasing numbers of schools had the freedom to set their own admissions. Local authorities were unsure about how they could increase the number of places to meet basic need and about the impact of free schools on planning. They feared a number of scenarios in which a critical mass of schools would refuse to co-operate in local planning discussions.

The worst of these fears and scenarios have not materialised. Instead, we found that the local systems have begun to adapt to planning places in a more autonomous landscape. They have coped with the initial challenge of increasing primary places to meet basic need, and some are beginning the dialogue about places with secondary schools. In some systems, the adaptation has been smoother than in others.

Case study: Primary place-planning in Bristol

Bristol has had a 30% increase in primary pupil numbers over the last five years. The local authority has focused on pro-actively sustaining strong two-way links with all local schools regardless of type. The local authority has met this place-planning challenge while at the same time improving parental first-choice preferences for primary schools. They have done this by looking to expand existing provision where possible, as well as working pro-actively with new providers, in order to achieve quality and meet parental demand.

Key learning points

- Taking a pro-active approach to engaging potential or new providers of free schools and academies increases the chance of meeting basic need and other priorities for provision.
- Maintaining two-way relationships with all schools, including academies, is vital in addressing such a challenge in planning high-quality places.

Local authorities are aware, however, that the challenges have not receded entirely, particularly in relation to the forthcoming negotiations with secondary schools. The fact of school autonomy is now an established feature of local education systems: direct control of school admission numbers is not. As such, as pupil numbers ebb and flow across all phases, in totality and between particular catchment areas, local authorities and schools

will need to continue to draw on and develop the approaches that they have used to plan primary places.

We found examples of local systems in which school leaders are playing a leading role in local place-planning.

These local systems have convened decision-making fora for schools, empowered school leaders to develop collective solutions, and used their expertise and strategic oversight to support schools-led decision-making.

Case study: The Strategic Pupil Place-Planning Group, North East Lincolnshire

North East Lincolnshire has a Strategic Pupil Place-Planning Group so that school leaders can play an active role in planning places. The Group meets termly, has formal terms of reference, and a remit for some capital expenditure. Members included schools, the local authority and other local services – the latter ensure that decisions about places can take account of the latest information on birth-rates, migration and housing developments. The Group is looking ahead to plan secondary places for the academic year 2016 to 2017 as well as increasing special school places. Local schools value the local authority's expertise in planning places, their pro-activity in drawing down national and local capital funding, and the principle of open and wide-ranging consultation with school leaders.

Key learning points

- Consult openly and transparently with all schools likely to be affected by a place-planning decision, and base the conversations on robust data.
- Avoid surprises – ensure other services are part of the discussion.

In these local systems, all state-funded schools, including academies, are engaged in these conversations. In systems whose approach is characterised by many of the success criteria in Table 3, school leaders value the early engagement, dialogue, and encouragement of schools to exercise greater collective responsibility for place-planning.

In response to our survey, overall almost two in three school leaders (62%) responded to our survey saying that they agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the medium-term plan for places at their school (see Figure 5). In systems whose approach displayed many of the success factors set out in Table 3, the majority of school leaders agreed or strongly agreed with our survey statement. In these systems, school leaders are more likely to be cautiously optimistic about local place-planning, and this optimism is more likely to be shared by local authority leaders.

Table 3: Success factors of effective local place-planning drawn from the 10 local systems

Feature	Success factors	System inhibitors
Leadership	Principled leadership, moral imperative – 'These are our children'	No clear leadership – responsibility dispersed
Data	Reliable, robust, accurate	Often inaccurate – 'We do not trust the numbers, we ignore them and do our own'
Consultation	'If it affects you, we will consult you'	Behind closed doors – 'Why wasn't I asked?'
Planning	Long-term, strategic plan – clear direction of travel	Ad hoc planning, individual schools left to decide on their own
Expertise	Local authorities have retained expertise – people who know the schools and know place-planning	Lack of expertise and knowledge
Governance	Forum for schools to make collective decisions	Decisions taken in an ad hoc fashion with individual schools, and which lack transparency
Partnerships	Strategic planning and decision-making is done with other services (especially health, housing and immigration)	No line of sight to other services – birth data, housing developments, migration

In some systems, however, while school leaders may have felt that they understood the planned numbers for their own school, they were less confident in the place-planning arrangements across the local system. In local systems where, for example, decisions about place-planning lacked transparency and are taken centrally without involving schools, or where there is an absence of strategic leadership and collective co-ordination of this agenda, school leaders were less likely to be confident about local place-planning.

Our evidence suggests that it is more difficult to put in place arrangements that meet the success factors in Table 3 in rural areas than in urban areas. In urban areas, it is more straightforward to convene collective discussions with a smaller number of larger schools, particularly primary schools, than in sparser rural areas in which there are more small primary schools. There were, however, exceptions to this among the 10 local systems,

including largely rural systems that had found ways of expanding places and involving schools in place-planning that fitted the local system's geography and context.

The differences in the effectiveness of local place-planning appear far less linked to whether there is a critical mass of academies, who are able to set their own admissions numbers, within a local system, and more to do with the style of leadership of local place-planning and the quality of engagement with school leaders. Across all 10 systems, the fear, expressed by some during our previous study, of widespread resistance by schools to planned expansions of places does not appear to have materialised. In the few isolated instances where this was reported to us, it appeared to reflect the stance of an individual school leader, rather than the type of school that they led.

> ## Case study: Achieving for Children, Kingston and Richmond upon Thames
>
> The two local authorities currently share a joint place-planning lead and, as part of bringing together the two local authority education services from 1 April 2014, are exploring further synergies. The new organisation, Achieving for Children, is a community interest company under the leadership of a joint Director of Children's Services. Initially the two place-planning functions will be brought together into a single team covering the two local systems. Over time, opportunities to develop single policies and approaches will be explored, which could lead to more efficient planning, better approaches to mobility across borough boundaries, and potentially greater choice of schools for parents.
>
> **Key learning points**
>
> - Proposals were initially formed in 2011 – building partnership approaches takes time.
> - The partnership builds on a history of joint-working – shared leadership posts on safeguarding and place-planning are already in place.

Most of the 10 systems have, for the most part, met the challenge of increasing primary places. Those whose approach is characterised by the success criteria in Table 3, however, appear better equipped to deal with the challenge of increasing places at secondary level.

Local systems should be better equipped to plan places at secondary level, but the challenge remains to get this right over the next three years.

In some systems, local authorities have already begun the process of engaging secondary school leaders and planning how to expand secondary places. The combination of past experience, good data about numbers in primary schools and early engagement with secondary leaders is a good starting point for these discussions.

We found that secondary school leaders were more confident about medium-term place-planning than their primary counterparts. In part, this reflects the fact that most of the upheaval in local place-planning to date has taken place in the primary phase. It also reflects the fact that some local systems have begun the planning process and engaged secondary school leaders early. In these systems, perceptions of effective primary place-planning have also given secondary leaders confidence that predicted pupil numbers are robust. As we have said above, secondary school leaders in systems in which there is not a framework for collective leadership and co-ordination of place-planning decisions foresee greater challenges in planning secondary places.

Likewise, most local authority leaders believed that their local systems are as well-prepared as they can be for the challenges at secondary level. All recognised that the challenges will be different to those at primary level, due to the fact that school autonomy has historically been greater at secondary level, and that there are more secondary academies. Local authority leaders were expecting more challenging negotiations, which will place an even greater premium on principled leadership, skills of persuasion and influence, early engagement and partnership-working.

Case study: Secondary place-planning in Gloucestershire

In 2013, Gloucestershire identified a need for a one-off increase in secondary places in a specific town, and decided to adopt the approach they had used to engage primary leaders in place-planning. They convened local school leaders and presented them with the data. Rather than risk de-stabilising a local school that was improving after previous difficulties, and had been downsized, a local academy agreed to create a one-off additional form of entry. The local authority is using revenue funding to facilitate this, to avoid the risk of creating additional places that will not be needed beyond the current year. The academy is also continuing to support the improving school in order to build the capacity locally to meet the increased demand for secondary places in the long-term.

Key learning points

- Robust data and emphasis on collective responsibility are key.
- One-off solutions can avoid the risk of funding empty places.

In addition to the challenge at secondary level, local systems will also need to develop new ways of planning places in special schools. We found that school leaders in special schools were less confident about local place-planning than their primary and secondary colleagues.

As with the primary and secondary phases, however, we found that local systems in which special school place-planning worked well were characterised by evidence-based, strategic conversations between local authorities and schools based on accurate data. Where arrangements worked less well, special school leaders gave one of two reasons:

- uncertainty about pupil numbers beyond the current year, due to changes in the way special schools are funded and their places commissioned; and

- an increasing demand for places, due to the increasing complexity of children's needs, particularly behavioural needs, and a lack of a long-term strategy to expand specialist provision to meet these needs.

We found examples of local systems that are working pro-actively with free school proposers to incorporate them into local place-planning and complement local provision.

In our previous study, free schools were very much an unknown quantity: local authorities and schools were concerned at the thought that a free school could be approved in a locality without regard to local place-planning. The aim of the national policy on free schools, however, is not only to meet basic need, but also to improve choice and standards within local systems. At the time, some local authorities were beginning to explore the potential offered by free schools to meet basic need, but all were uncertain about how they would handle the creation of a new free school in an area of existing surplus places.

Since then, local systems have begun to adapt to the free schools programme. They are continuing to explore the opportunities offered by free schools and are finding ways of negotiating potential challenges. For example, some local authorities have taken a pro-active approach to encouraging and supporting new free school proposers to help meet their basic admissions and other needs. Wandsworth has established an academies and free schools commission to work with and support prospective free school proposers. Manchester, likewise, has taken a pro-active approach in drawing on the expertise and local knowledge of school leaders, colleges and businesses within Manchester and encouraging them to become sponsors of academies.

Case study: The academies and free schools commission, Wandsworth

Wandsworth established an academies and free schools commission to work with prospective academy sponsors and free school proposers. Elected members in Wandsworth want to promote diversity and encourage local school sponsors. The commission is independently-chaired, and members include local authority members and officers, school leaders and parent representatives. The commission aims to encourage new sponsors and promote dialogue between proposers and the local authority. Their work is central to efforts in Wandsworth to meet the growing need for primary school places, and to continue to promote quality and choice for parents. One outcome of the commission's work is the new Tooting Primary School, a newly-established free school sponsored by Graveney School, a local secondary academy.

Key learning points

- An independent chair and senior membership conveys objectivity and credibility.
- There is an emphasis on constructive dialogue with prospective sponsors and transparency to all stakeholders within the local system.

Free schools remain uncharted territory for many local authority and school leaders. For example, one local system has had to respond to the closure of a free school, and the need to create places for its pupils in neighbouring schools at short notice. Other local systems within this study have worked through the implications of a free school being proposed in an area in which there is already a surplus of school places. For many of the local systems, these are new experiences for which there are no precedents within the local system. Some local authorities recognised, however, that the process for informing them about proposed free schools had improved.

The evolution of school place-planning: a summary

At the time of our last study …	Since then …	Questions being explored …
• Anxiety about how to increase places and whether schools would co-operate in local planning • Uncertainty about the impact of new free schools on local planning	• Local systems have developed ways of planning places to meet demand in the primary phase – some more smoothly than others • We found examples of new approaches in which schools are playing a leading role in local place-planning • Local systems should be better equipped to plan places at secondary level and in special schools, but the challenge remains • We found examples of local systems that are working pro-actively with free school proposers to enhance local provision	• How best to engage secondary schools in local place-planning? • How to link up place-planning with other services, such as housing? • How to incorporate new free schools into local strategic planning?

C. Supporting vulnerable children

Provision for vulnerable children is evolving more gradually than school improvement and local place-planning.

In our previous report, as with place-planning, local education systems were in the process of redefining the way support for vulnerable children would be arranged locally. At the time, local authority and school leaders were concerned about:

- the capacity of the local authority to provide the right combination of services;

- schools potentially opting out of fair access protocols and becoming more reluctant to admit vulnerable children; and

- schools' capacity to commission provision for vulnerable children and the availability of provision that schools could commission.

Since then, while support for vulnerable children within the local systems has evolved, the changes have been more gradual and tentative. During our study, we used a broad definition of 'vulnerable children' to explore school and local authority leaders' views on provision, for example pupils with SEN or who are disabled, pupils from deprived backgrounds including those eligible for the pupil premium, and pupils who are being supported by social services.

While there are innovative examples of schools-led approaches, there has not yet been a decisive shift towards a partnership-led approach to support for vulnerable children.

Unlike place-planning, where local systems have had to adapt to meet the increased demand for primary places, the imperative to change local arrangements for supporting vulnerable children has been less immediate. The evolution of support for vulnerable children is linked closely to the timeframes of the relevant national policy reforms. For example, while some reforms of national policy for vulnerable children, such as those relating to behaviour and disadvantaged children, have been implemented, other reforms, such as the wide-ranging changes to the SEN legislative framework, have only been finalised more recently.

Confidence about readiness for the new SEN reforms varied across the 10 systems.

School and local authority leaders within half of the local systems were excited, viewed these changes as a positive development, and were confident that they were ready to implement the new SEN framework. The other half were at an earlier stage in their

preparations. Across most of the 10 systems, school leaders were less clear than local authority leaders, and consequently less confident, about the implications of these changes and about local preparations for their introduction. This suggests further in-depth engagement between local authority SEN services and school leaders will be important before the SEN reforms take effect in September 2014.

> **Case study: Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) networks, West Sussex**
>
> SEND networks are being developed across West Sussex in response to the reforms set out in the Children and Families Act (SEN and disability reforms). The aim of these networks is to enable children and young people aged from birth to 25 to have effective mainstream education provision that is led by schools and co-produced with parents, carers and young people. The networks are part of a broader strategy to create locality-based infrastructure to deliver support as close to schools and their communities as possible. There are currently 10 networks, each with a special school leading the development of the network.
>
> **Key learning point**
>
> - Partnerships take time to embed and grow in different ways – the 10 partnerships are at different stages of development due to a range of local contextual factors.

Local systems have begun to develop new, schools-led approaches to supporting vulnerable children in areas where the national policy has been set.

At the time of our previous study, local systems were anxious about the implications of introducing a new approach to funding provision for pupils with high needs in specialist SEN and alternative provision settings. Indeed, during the first phase of our fieldwork in the spring and summer terms of 2013, there was still widespread uncertainty as many school and local authority leaders were getting to grips with the new funding arrangements.

One year on, most of the initial anxiety about funding for high needs pupils has dissipated. The challenge has not receded entirely, particularly in relation to the placement of pupils across the boundaries of local systems, and in relation to post-16 high needs funding.

Some systems have made great strides in relation to high needs funding, other systems have made initial steps, and, for some, the significant changes have yet to start. For example, systems like Hertfordshire had an advantage as they had already devolved funding and responsibility for commissioning services and provision for children and

young people with high-level SEN in their local community. In Hertfordshire, this role is played by the area developing special provision locally groups, which are made up of mainstream school leaders, parents from the local community and local authority officers.

More recently, Middlesbrough and Gloucestershire have developed and implemented new funding arrangements whereby schools moderate each other's applications for high needs funding. Overall, although many school and local authority leaders spoke about the high needs funding changes as a 'challenge', the local systems have adapted to cope.

Schools-led approaches have also been developed in relation to behaviour. In Leicestershire and North East Lincolnshire, addressing this common issue has been used as the platform to create partnership approaches among schools and build the foundations for deeper, system-wide collaboration. School leaders in North East Lincolnshire are now considering how to extend this approach in order to develop more flexible, short-term provision for pupils at risk of exclusion.

Case study: Behaviour partnerships, Leicestershire

To improve provision for pupils with challenging behaviour, Leicestershire has worked with schools to create five schools-led behaviour partnerships (BPs) to take responsibility for behaviour support at key stages 3 and 4 across the county. In 2012, this arrangement was more formally established as a commissioning agreement between the BPs and the local authority. A service-level agreement is in place with each of the five lead schools, which includes milestones against which the BPs will be held to account by elected members. Through this arrangement, all central funding for behaviour support is delegated and/or devolved to the BPs. Each lead school holds the budget, and uses this to employ staff and commission provision within their partnership. This was a significant change in local behaviour services, and the local authority had to judge when the time was right to step back and let the BPs take the lead. The BPs were launched in 2012, when there were 150 permanent exclusions. This year, there have been fewer than 20 permanent exclusions. The ambition is to reach zero.

Key learning points

- Create space for others to lead by stepping back while building capacity and accountability for results.
- Build momentum by increasing responsibility and demonstrating impact.

In relation to the pupil premium, most school leaders welcomed the additional funding and the focus on pupils eligible for the pupil premium in Ofsted inspections. These school leaders felt that funding, when combined with focused accountability, could be a powerful combination in improving provision for this group of pupils.

Some school leaders highlighted the importance of building expertise in order to ensure schools made the most effective use of the pupil premium. To respond to this, some local authorities and school partnerships have offered support and advice to schools on the most effective techniques for improving the progress of disadvantaged pupils and closing achievement gaps. For example, within schools-led companies, such as Herts for Learning, and some teaching school alliances, support in using the pupil premium effectively is a key part of their school improvement and CPD offer.

The concern that increasing numbers of schools would opt out of local fair access protocols does not appear to have materialised.

In our previous study, some local authorities were concerned that schools may take advantage of their autonomy to opt out of local arrangements to take their share of hard-to-place pupils. There were also concerns raised about the process for agreeing in-year admissions with academies. At the same time, however, school leaders who took part in that study recognised the need for objective and transparent fair access arrangements to which all schools were committed.

In our current study, school or local authority leaders reported that the majority of local fair access protocols were working well. As in our previous study, although a few isolated exceptions were reported to us, these appeared to reflect more the approach of a particular school leader rather than the type of school they led or the extension of school autonomy. Furthermore, as in our previous study, other examples were reported to us of academies that routinely took more than their fair share of hard-to-place pupils.

School leaders' uncertainty about the future evolution of support for vulnerable children reflects their perception of increasing need, sharper scrutiny and diminishing local services.

While many of the school leaders to whom we spoke were confident that they had the provision to meet the needs of vulnerable children within their school, fewer were confident that there was the right provision available across the local system. Indeed, we spoke to a number of school leaders who were keen to stress the progress that they had seen in building the capacity of mainstream schools to be more inclusive and meet a wider range of pupils' needs more effectively. As one secondary academy principal told us, 'over the last 10 years, there has been a massive explosion of expertise within schools themselves about students with special, complex, behaviour needs. My school has, through collaboration with other agencies, worked hard to develop that expertise.'

Nevertheless, other school leaders to whom we spoke were less confident in being able to access additional external support for their more vulnerable pupils where they needed

it. This, combined with the more gradual pace of change in this area, explains the uncertainty school leaders reported in response to our survey question (see Figure 5). In their responses, only 55% of school leaders agreed that there was the right provision within their local system, even if many were confident that their in-school provision was strong.

In addition to the different national reform timescales, we also identified three factors that accentuated school leaders' uncertainty about this area of their local system. These are set out in Table 4.

Table 4: Factors that are shaping school leaders' confidence in local support for vulnerable children

Reason	Description
Increasingly complex needs	Both mainstream and special schools perceived that pupils were coming into their schools who were displaying increasingly complex needs, specifically in relation to challenging forms of behaviour, in greater numbers.
Increasing scrutiny	At the same time, school leaders perceived that they were under greater scrutiny specifically for the progress and achievement of their most vulnerable pupils through changes to school accountability measures and Ofsted's focus on pupils eligible for the pupil premium.
Diminishing local support	In some systems, schools reported that local authority non-statutory support was being reduced, while at the same time thresholds for statutory assessments of SEN and social care were being raised. In the past, while many schools will have had experience of receiving school improvement support from other schools, more often than not their support for vulnerable children will have come from the local authority. It is these services that schools are now seeing diminishing.

At the national level, over time, greater scrutiny and more developed partnerships that tap the expertise of the most inclusive schools may lead to support for vulnerable children becoming a more integral part of mainstream school improvement provision (Rea et al 2013). In the short term and at the individual school level, however, school leaders appear less certain of how and from where to access the support that they need compared with other forms of provision.

Primary school leaders are less confident than secondary or special school leaders as to whether there is the right provision for vulnerable children across their local system. This reflects the fact that primary schools are:

- more likely to have received support for vulnerable children from the local authority, and thus are likely to perceive reductions in local authority services more keenly; and

- smaller than secondary schools, and thus less likely to have the internal capacity and resources to create or commission their own provision to make up for reductions in central support.

We found examples of schools playing an active role in shaping provision for vulnerable children within their local system.

Some local systems, such as West Sussex, are exploring ways of creating partnerships to build the capacity of schools that feel cut off from sources of support by creating local SEN hubs built around special schools. In other systems, such as Leicestershire and Wandsworth, special schools are playing an increasingly prominent role in cross-phase partnerships and teaching school alliances. In Gloucestershire, the outreach service provided by special schools is in the process of becoming a schools-commissioned service – previously it was funded centrally. In Hertfordshire, schools are working with the local authority admissions and integration teams to support young people and their schools to make successful transitions during managed moves.

Case study: Southfields Academy, Wandsworth

Almost six in 10 pupils at Southfields have been eligible for free schools meals in the last six years. The academy takes pride in offering programmes for pupils with challenging behaviour, such as the xl programme. This supports eight to 10 key stage 4 pupils who find it difficult to settle in class to study English, maths and science, plus pursue other projects. Southfields is a teaching school, and the Principal is a NLE and a senior partner in Challenge Partners. According to the Principal, 'collaboration is part of the life-blood of the school'. The xl programme itself has developed through collaboration: Southfields developed the original programme, a partner school adapted it, and then Southfields itself adopted those refinements. The academy recorded best-ever GCSE results in 2013, with a number of graduates of the xl programme achieving good grades.

Key learning points

- Be a magpie – always be on the look-out for ways to improve your programmes, including from partners who have borrowed and adapted your ideas.
- Keep the individual child and their pathway to success at the heart of all provision.

Leaders of academies, particularly converter academies, reported that they were able to access support from within their networks, or use their freedoms to shape their own local provision for their vulnerable pupils.

Furthermore, in some systems, school leaders praised 'exemplary' social services, local safeguarding children boards, and virtual headteachers for looked-after children. In other systems, school leaders perceived that local social services departments were stretched as they sought to manage reductions in budgets and increasing need. In most of these systems, school leaders, although frustrated at the difficulty in accessing support from social services, understood the reasons why this was the case. Some school leaders, particularly those working with the most vulnerable pupils, also pointed to difficulties they had experienced in accessing other specialist services, such as health and mental health support.

Leaders in specialist settings and mainstream schools acknowledged that there is more to do to tap the expertise within local systems.

There are encouraging developments in the provision of support for vulnerable children. In the systems in which new partnerships have been established, they are in their initial stages and embedding gradually. Schools-led partnerships that drive local provision for vulnerable children are not yet widespread across the 10 systems. In most systems, for example, experts in supporting vulnerable children, such as special schools, felt more

could be done to make use of their expertise to create a coherent, system-wide approach to support for children with SEN. By the same token, however, they acknowledged that there was more they needed to do to understand the needs of mainstream schools and to shape their outreach offer accordingly. Progress is needed on both sides if there is to be a decisive shift to a schools-led, partnership-based approach to provision for vulnerable children.

The evolution of support for vulnerable children: a summary

At the time of our last study …	Since then …	Questions being explored …
• Anxiety about local authority capacity to provide the right combination of services • Concern that schools might opt out of local fair access protocols • Uncertainty about schools' capacity to commission support for vulnerable children	• Approaches to supporting vulnerable children are evolving more gradually than school improvement and place-planning • Local systems have begun to develop schools-led approaches to behaviour provision, funding and the pupil premium • School leaders are less certain and confident about the future evolution of support for vulnerable children than school improvement and place-planning – this reflects the timescales for national reforms, but also school leaders' perception of increasing need, greater scrutiny, and diminishing local services • Many schools have developed expertise in supporting vulnerable pupils, and local systems are exploring partnerships to make the best use of that expertise	• How can schools play a greater role in commissioning and providing local services for vulnerable children? • What form of partnerships will encourage sharing of local expertise and the building of capacity in schools to meet the needs of their most vulnerable pupils?

Part 4: the evolution of the 10 local education systems

Changes in the make-up of school types within local systems largely reflect how effectively the transition to a more autonomous, schools-led local education system has been led.

In our previous study, we described the way in which the role of local authorities in education was evolving to focus on three key functions: as a champion of children and families, as a convener of partnerships and as a commissioner of services. This time, we found that local authorities were using these three concepts to define their role and their relationships with schools and local partners. We also found that the roles of local authority and school leaders have evolved in response to the changes in their local systems described in Part III. The transitions that the 10 local systems have experienced have been driven by four main factors, which have also led to changes to the make-up of school types, including the growth of academies.

- **Perceived quality of local authority education services and access to alternatives** – schools leaders' perception of the quality of local authority education services is a key determining factor of the transition experienced by the local education system. Often, this perception is linked to the past performance of the system. In systems where services are perceived as poor quality, schools have felt unleashed and there have been more abrupt changes as schools have explored options for connecting to other schools or groups of schools. In systems where services are well regarded, the change has been smoother, started earlier and has felt like more of a natural extension than a change of course.

- **Strength of connections among schools, and between schools, the local authority and other local partners** – local systems with stronger connections among schools themselves, and with the local authority and other key partners such as the diocese, have found the transition to greater school autonomy more natural. Across secondary schools this has been fostered over time where local authorities have a history of high delegation of resources and responsibility. Across primary and secondary schools, connections have been established through new investment in groups of schools working together in a variety of partnerships based on geography, policy themes and other binding interests. Furthermore, schools are increasingly turning towards established partnerships such as teaching school alliances, MATs or federations, either to join these groups or to collaborate and access their expertise.

- **Past performance of the system** – local systems with large numbers of low-performing schools have had the pace of sponsored academies accelerated in collaboration with the DfE. In turn, this has shaped both the balance of sponsored

compared to converter academies, the presence of some of the established MATs and sponsors, and overall confidence in the local system among schools and their communities.

- **Leadership of change** – regardless of performance or perceptions of quality, recent policy changes have provided local systems with a fresh opportunity to demonstrate effective leadership. Those that have been effective have engaged all school types pro-actively, been open and honest, listened, and ensured schools were driving change within the local system. Those that have been less effective at leading change did the opposite to this by attempting to impose an agenda without first building the conditions for its success, not acting at all or not swiftly enough, or developing the right idea but implementing it badly.

These factors feature differently in the local systems that we have followed, and can be used to classify essentially three types of transition that have been taking place. These transitions are shown in Figure 6 and described in more detail in Figure 7. Few of the local systems can be pigeon-holed into a single type, and most straddle the boundaries of two transitions. Indeed, different aspects of, or localities within, one local system can be experiencing different types of transition at the same time.

Figure 6: Three types of transition common across the local systems

Leadership approach

Passive   Active   Directive

| Slow mover | Timely adapter | Sudden reactor |

Piecemeal   Broad and deep   Superficial

Engagement approach
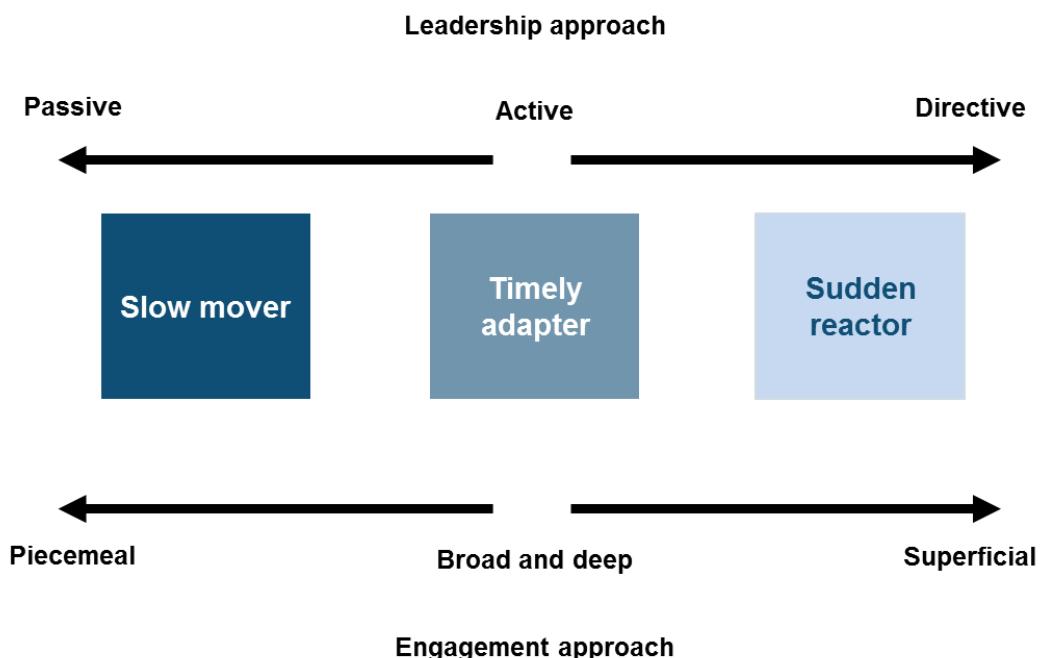
It is too early to judge the impact of the different types of transition on pupils and schools. The local systems that anticipated change and adapted with reasonable pace, however, have had the smoothest transition. Within these systems, leaders feel most confident that there will be a positive impact on pupils and schools. Leaders within systems that either did not adapt or reacted abruptly, without preparing the ground for change, have experienced a bumpier transition, characterised by uncertainty and disruption. This has been caused by insufficient engagement with school leaders, poor leadership and poor

planning of change. Owing to this, while these systems could still achieve a successful transition, it may take longer before a positive impact on pupils and schools is seen.

Figure 7: Features of the three transitions

Sudden reactor	• Clear view that local authority education services should quickly regress regardless of quality • Clear view that school-led groups were the way forward regardless of their maturity to date • High- and lower-performing systems with different starting points but the same end goal in mind • Change dictated, driven quickly, with pace outweighing the precision of planning the changes, and without creating the conditions for schools to lead a successful transition
Timely adapter	• Local authority education services mainly valued by schools • Had recently set out to encourage greater school partnership working – local authorities and schools worked together to create the space and conditions for schools to lead the transition • High-performing systems in the main, but not exclusively, with sufficient confidence to adapt • Change was already happening or system seized the opportunity for change and led pro-actively
Slow mover	• Mixed views of local authority services, many view services as weak and too variable • History of high levels of school intervention and a controlling local authority leadership role • Lower-performing systems, lacking confidence and already undergoing dramatic change • Slow in turning ideas into action, reacting too late, or ineffective leadership of the change

While the make-up of school types is not the main factor influencing the shape of the transition taking place in the local systems, some patterns of the changes in the make-up of school types are associated with particular forms of transition.

- **Timely adapters** are more likely to see a pattern of school autonomy evolving through the growth of converter academies, with converters forming local MATs and some taking on a local sponsor role. These local systems will be more likely to see disparity between secondary and primary academy numbers, as many primary schools still see the value of a strong connection with the local authority where the quality of services and leadership is perceived to be strong and the capacity to provide services remains. There are likely to be relatively few sponsored academies compared to converters.

- **Slow movers or sudden reactors** are more likely to see a relatively higher proportion of sponsored academies to converter academies, a rise in the number of primary schools becoming academies, and a greater presence of the larger and national sponsors and MATs.

The local systems are in line with the national trends for new primary and secondary academies.

Over the course of the first year we followed the 10 local systems, a further 18 secondary schools across the 10 systems became academies, bringing the total to 209 secondary

academies (there were 191 in the previous year, 2012 to 2013; DfE 2013, DfE 2014). A third of these were sponsored academies and the rest were converters. Nationally, 202 secondary academies opened during this period, reaching 1,824 in total (compared with 1,622 previous year, 2012 to 2013). Figure 8 shows the change in secondary academy numbers in each local system over the year. As you would expect, the trend shows that the large local systems continued to grow, that by and large those with relatively more headroom saw the largest growth, and that the tendency towards academy converters continued. North East Lincolnshire became "all academy" at secondary level as a result of changes in academy numbers.

Figure 8: Open secondary academies in January 2013 and February 2014

Over the course of the first year following the 10 local systems, a further 76 primary schools across the 10 systems became academies, bringing the total to 237 primary academies (there were 161 in the previous year, 2012 to 2013). Nationally, 782 primary academies opened during this period, reaching 1,788 in total (compared to 1,006 in the previous year, 2012 to 2013; DfE 2013, DfE 2014). Figure 9 shows the change in primary academy numbers in each local system over the year. The growth rate of primary academies is stronger than at secondary, but there are some similarities in the trends with the larger local systems dominating growth and the tendency towards academy converters continuing.

Figure 9: Open primary academies in January 2013 and February 2014
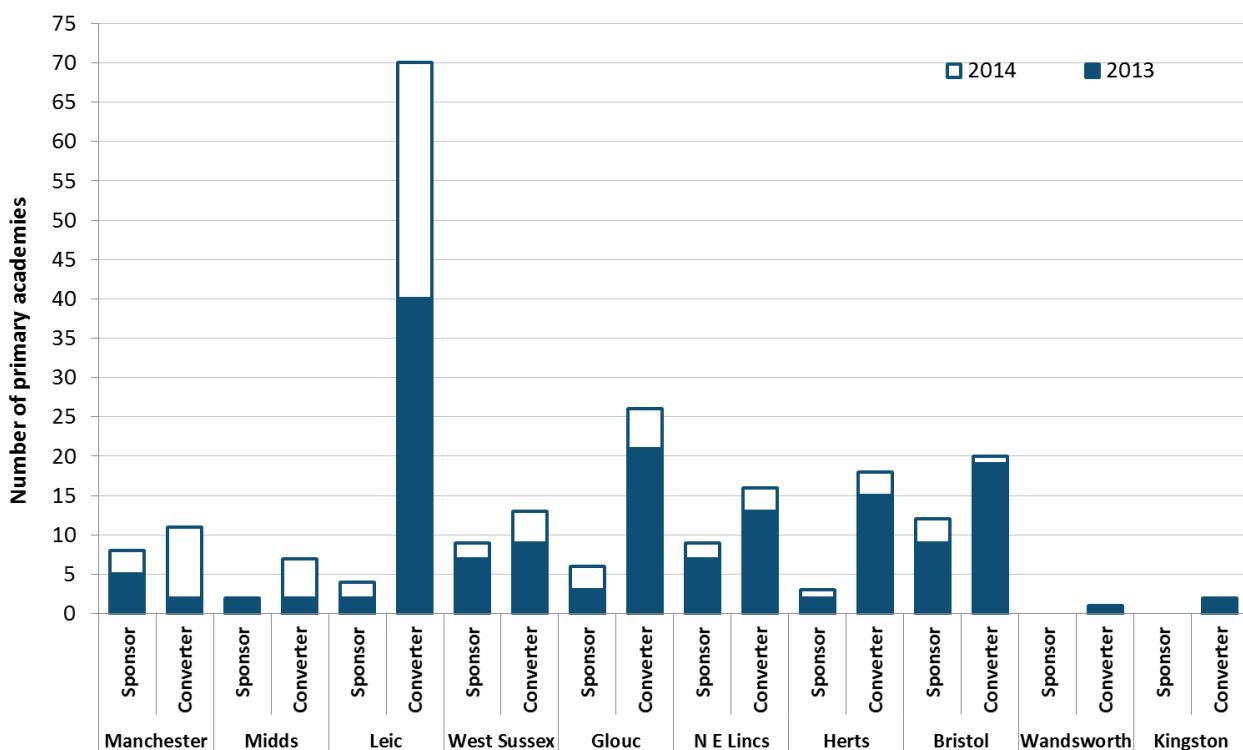
Sources: DfE 2013 and DfE 2014

Primary schools are increasingly considering becoming academies as part of groups.

There has been a noticeable shift in primary schools considering the option of converting to academy as part of newly formed or pre-existing groups. This is confirmed in the current rounds of applications for primary academies where the majority are applying as groups. There are several reasons why this is likely to continue.

- **Schools anticipate the ongoing diminution of local authority education services** and, regardless of the quality of the service, especially schools that are good or better are increasingly considering alternative options as they anticipate the capacity of the local authority and the services it offers will diminish further.

- **There is a greater range of alternative connections available now than a year ago** in terms of specialist national primary academy trusts such as REAch2, local MATs, local secondary sponsors creating cross-phase groups of schools, and other types of partnerships enabled by professional associations.

- **Primary schools are increasingly considering creating their own primary MAT**, talking to each other and key partners such as the diocese to explore this option.

- **There is a growing understanding of the process of becoming an academy, establishing a MAT, and greater sharing of know-how**, despite some primary

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schools still feeling anxious about the process of becoming an academy and the additional responsibilities this entails.

Special academy numbers remained static in the 10 local systems, which is out of line with the national trend.

Over the course of the first year following the 10 local systems, there were no changes in the numbers of special academies despite there being room for growth, especially in the larger systems. Nationally, 42 special schools became academies, taking the total to 101 in January 2014 (there had been 59 in January 2013; DfE 2013, DfE 2014).

Our evidence suggests that the reason for this is related to the specific context of the local systems. Many of the special schools within our sample that had already become special academies were located within systems in which all schools had been directly encouraged to convert to academy status, or had converted early to develop particular services and form new connections. During our study, many of the special schools that had not previously converted reported that they were considering academy status afresh, or had considered it and decided to pursue other forms of connections. Their reasons were similar to those given by primary school leaders for converting and forming local MATs: the need to be connected to other schools as local authority services diminish. This suggests that we may see some growth in the number of special academies across the 10 systems in the future.

Part 5: the next stage of evolution

Seven lessons for leading change in a local education system.

Whatever the starting point of the local system, the make-up of school types, or the roles and responsibilities of leaders in the system, there are lessons that can be learned from the 10 local systems that we have followed.

We think that these lessons are transferable to any form of transition within a local education system. This would include ongoing changes in areas where schools are already playing a leading role, such as school improvement, or changes that are at an earlier stage, such as the forthcoming changes to the SEN framework and the development of support for vulnerable children more generally. Some of the lessons are obvious, but nonetheless have been captured as reminders.

These lessons apply equally to those with leadership responsibilities for schools, a teaching school alliance, an academy sponsor, a diocesan network or a local authority service. In all cases, 'you' could be the leader of any of these organisations.

1. Look out for each other

Keep an eye out for those at risk of getting lost or already looking isolated within your partnerships, informal networks and the wider local system. Some schools lack the confidence, time or know-how to form partnerships, feel under pressure to focus on their own patch, or face practical barriers to joint-working such as geography. Timely adapters identify those at risk of becoming isolated in their alliances, networks and systems, and reconnect them before problems emerge.

Which schools look lost in your local system and how are you helping them to connect with others?

2. Signpost support

Make it easy to find high-quality support by clearly signposting the partnerships, academy sponsors, teaching school alliances, local authority offers, hubs of national organisations and any other high-quality support available, to reduce the time schools need to spend navigating this for themselves. Slow movers often cause frustration by not doing this quickly enough, leaving others to navigate the support available for themselves, while sudden reactors underestimate the value of signposting.

Where is the best high-quality support within and in easy reach of your system, and how are you helping others to access it?

3. Maintain the dialogue

Keep engaging in meaningful dialogue about the transition, its successes, the long-term vision and the path to it, as well as the common issues that bind schools together. Plan and solve problems jointly along the way to demonstrate impact and maintain momentum. Timely adapters have judged this well and struck the right tone to keep all partners engaged.

How are you convening conversations across your local system that are current, bind schools together and move beyond words to action?

4. Foster innovation

Encourage meaningful engagements that give others the opportunity to lead the transition and let the best ideas "bubble up". Sudden reactors risk misjudging this approach by jumping straight to what they see as the right answer and instructing others to follow, while slow movers can often stifle innovation by not seizing the opportunity.

How are you enabling others to step forward and innovate, creating the space for new ideas to be put into practice and ensuring they are sustained?

5. Inspire trust

Consistently role-model effective behaviour in order to build trust, openness and honesty. These are the foundations of effective partnerships and transitions, and need regular reinforcement. Sudden reactors and slow movers can damage these foundations, however secure they may have been, if they misjudge their behaviour by driving change too quickly and before the system is ready, or too slowly when it is geared up for change.

How are you leading by example and tackling poor behaviour among peers?

6. Follow through with action

Making change happen and stick separates the timely adapters from the slow movers. Making the time and resources available to ensure change is sustained marks out the timely adapters from the sudden reactors. High-quality implementation is symbolic of the shift from talk to action, demonstrating impact, establishing credibility and convincing any doubters of the benefits.

How are you focusing on implementing changes successfully in the immediate term, while also planning for the longer term and helping the system work its way forward?

7. Empower others

Judge the right time to let others take the lead. Taking the time to build the capacity, responsibility and associated accountability among partners will help to ensure the

transition is smooth and successful. Stepping back abruptly and unilaterally, without creating the conditions for success, is often the mistake of sudden reactors; waiting too long or not doing so at all is the downfall of slow movers.

How will you know when to let others take the lead a bit, gradually more, and eventually step back?

Figure 10 illustrates the way in which these seven lessons connect with the three types of system transitions we described in Part IV.

Figure 10: Seven lessons for leading change in a local education system

Seven lessons for leading change in a local education system	Slow mover	Timely adapter	Sudden reactor
Look out for each other	Can miss the early signs of others becoming isolated	Always on the look-out to reconnect those looking lost	Drives change unilaterally and risks leaving people behind
Signpost support	Too slow to point the way to support, leaving others to navigate for themselves	Supports others to improve by signposting effective practice	Over-estimates system maturity, under-estimates the need for signposting
Maintain the dialogue	Misjudges the tone or lacks the capacity to put ideas into practice	Strikes the right tone with all partners and keeps them engaged in the change process	Takes action without sufficient initial or ongoing dialogue
Foster innovation	Stifles innovation by not seizing the opportunity	Encourages innovation and creates the conditions for them to succeed	Jumps straight to the answer and instructs others to follow
Inspire trust	Damages trust by leading change too slowly when the system is geared up	Builds and sustains trust through open and honest engagement	Undermines trust by driving change more quickly than the system is ready for
Follow through with action	Slow to move to action, and implementation is patchy	Backs up words with actions, and demonstrates impact to boost credibility	Sees change as a one-off – does not invest in sustaining it
Empower others	Waits too long and frustrates those who are ready to lead	Builds leadership capacity, responsibility and accountability in others	Steps back unilaterally and forces others to lead regardless of readiness

Seven changes we anticipate if the local systems continue to evolve in the way we have seen.

Some local systems have already been through significant changes. This would certainly apply in the case of secondary schools, schools becoming academies and local systems close to becoming "all academy". For others, large changes still lie ahead.

As a result, the next stages in the transition to becoming a more autonomous, schools-led system will vary between the local systems. This applies particularly to primary schools and local systems that have been less pro-active in preparing for the forthcoming SEN reforms, for example. Based on the 10 local systems that we have followed, and the common messages reported to us, we have attempted to anticipate what might happen over the next stage of evolution of the education system in England. These are captured sequentially.

1. Further reductions in capacity for local authorities to deliver school improvement directly, which may have a more noticeable impact on the way in which services for vulnerable children are delivered.

Capacity will continue to narrow and be directed towards statutory duties, targeting schools at risk of underperformance, and almost exclusively towards primary and special schools. More services will be shifted to a traded basis in order to sustain them, or remaining central resources will be used to commission school improvement, including support for vulnerable children such as those with SEN or those eligible for the pupil premium, from teaching school alliances and other school partnerships.

2. The range of school improvement support will continue to expand.

For services that schools value, alternative local authority governance models such as schools-led mutual or not-for-profit companies will become more prevalent. Teaching school alliances will become more prominent as they grow in number and in maturity, as will other sources of expertise such as MATs, federations, and private or third sector education organisations.

3. Schools-led partnerships will become more embedded and increasingly broaden their remit to include support for vulnerable children.

Partnerships with an explicit focus on supporting vulnerable children will become more commonplace, while existing partnerships, as they mature, will focus on building capacity and recruiting new partners with expertise in supporting vulnerable children. The focus of these partnerships will broaden to include SEN and behaviour support.

4. At the same time, school partnerships, especially teaching schools, will need to ensure that they are on a sustainable footing.

Many school leaders welcomed the encouragement to lead local school improvement, for example, by forming a partnership such as an alliance, MAT or federation. During our study, school leaders were reflecting on questions about the capacity of their partnerships, how these could become financially self-sustaining, and the right governance structures to drive forward the partnership's vision. At the same time, they were also considering the contingency plans they would need in case of an adverse Ofsted inspection or the moving on of the leader who holds all the key relationships with partners.

5. The momentum of the conversion of primary academies will continue with potential acceleration of primary-focused local MATs.

In part, this will be driven by the combined impact of local authorities' capacity continuing to decline and alternative schools-led connections emerging in their place. Primary and

special schools are at a key juncture in terms of the future shape of their partnerships. Where these have been established already, the funding model, capacity and structures are different from secondary-based partnership models. Constructive dialogue between leaders within local education systems about the models available, such as diocesan trusts, local MATs, teaching schools, or national phase-specific academy sponsors, will be vital.

6. Some small local systems will change course.

Some smaller local systems have remained stable, most importantly due to the continuity of leadership at all levels of the system. As some school leaders move on in these systems, new leaders from outside could dramatically change the course of the system's evolution. This will place a premium on three things: long-term leadership succession-planning and support within local systems, supporting school leaders to develop the skills and experiences to be systems leaders, and inducting new leaders into the local system and its nexus of partnerships.

7. Local authorities will have a tougher time planning secondary and special school places and need to be timely adapters now in order to succeed.

For the reasons we highlighted in Part III, secondary place-planning is likely to be tougher than primary, while the system is adapting to new arrangements for commissioning places in special schools. Local systems will need to start planning now, engage early, and demonstrate effective negotiation and the right behaviour and values, in order to adapt successfully.

Glossary

BP – Behaviour partnerships (Leicestershire)

CPD – Continuing professional development

CREDO – Center for Research on Education Outcomes

DfE – Department for Education

e-PD – enabling Professional Development (West Sussex)

LGA – Local Government Association

LEEP – Leicestershire Education Excellence Partnership

LLE – Local leader of education

MAP – Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership

MAT – multi-academy trust

MSA – Manchester Schools Alliance

MSTA – Middlesbrough Schools' Teaching Alliance

NAO – National Audit Office

National College – refers to the body known as the National College for School Leadership (2000 to 2009 and 2011 to 2013), the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2009 to 2011), and the National College for Teaching and Leadership (2013 to the present)

NLE – National leader of education

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Ofsted – Office for Standards in Education

RSA – Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce

SEN/SEND – special educational needs/special educational needs and disabilities

SLE – Specialist leader of education

SOLACE – Society of Local Authority Chief Executives

SPARK – School Performance Alliance for Richmond and Kingston Schools

UTC – University technical college

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Annex A: survey of school leaders

No.	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	**Vision**: There is a clear vision for delivering high-quality education in this area over the next two years, shared by the local authority and schools.				
2	**Networks**: School-to-school partnerships are well-established, purposeful and contribute to a strong education offer in our local area.				
3	**Places**: My school understands the likely changes in pupil numbers over the next three years, and has the information and processes to plan to meet that need.				
4	**School improvement**: My school is able to access and commission high-quality professional challenge and support to meet the needs of the school.				
5	**Vulnerable children**: There is the right provision within my school and across the local area to ensure vulnerable children receive a high-quality education.				

Annex B: list of schools, local authorities and other organisations that took part in the study

A total of 159 schools took part in this research:

- 64 took part in phases one and two;

- 43 took part in phase one only; and

- 52 took part in phase two only.

In addition to these schools, and the leaders from within the 10 participating local authorities, a number of other organisations also contributed to this study.

Schools

Abingdon Primary School

Archibald Primary School

Ashley Down Primary School

Balcarras School

Belleville Academy

Belmont School

Billingshurst Primary School

Bishop Road Primary School

Bishop's Cleeve Primary School

Bolingbroke Academy

Bosworth Academy

Bristol Metropolitan Academy

Brookburn Community School

Caldicotes Primary School

Christchurch Church of England Primary School

Cirencester Primary School

Corpus Christi Roman Catholic Primary School

Cunningham School

De Lisle Catholic School

Dorothy Goodman School

Ellingham Primary School

Ernest Bevin College

Garden City Academy

Grand Avenue Primary and Nursery School

Grange Primary School

Graveney School

Harpenden Free School

Healing Academy

Henbury School

Innsworth Infant School

King's Langley School

Launde Primary School

Manchester Enterprise Academy

Manor High School

Nailsworth Church of England Primary School

New Waltham Primary Academy

Newall Green Primary School

Nightingale School

North Ridge High School

Oak Lodge School

Offa's Mead Primary School

Pallister Park Primary School

Park View Community Primary School

Prince Bishop School

Rawlins Community College

Redland Green School

Ribston Hall High School

Richard Challoner School

Severn View Primary Academy

Sharpness Primary School

Southfields Academy

Southway Primary School

St Andrew's Church of England High School for Boys

St Anthony's School

St Edward's Church of England Primary

St George Church of England Primary

St Joseph's Roman Catholic Primary School

St Matthew's Roman Catholic High School

St Paul's Church of England Junior School

St Peter's Catholic Primary School

Summerhill Academy

The Avenue Primary School

The Beauchamp College

Tollbar Academy

Unity City Academy

Warden Park School

Welland Park Community College

Wybers Wood Academy

Local authorities

Bristol City Council

Gloucestershire County Council

Hertfordshire County Council

Leicestershire County Council

Manchester City Council

Middlesbrough Council

North East Lincolnshire Council

The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

Wandsworth Council

West Sussex County Council

Other organisations

The Aldridge Foundation

ARK Schools

Aspirations Academies Trust

Aspire Academy Trust

Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)

Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

Cabot Learning Federation

Church of England Education Division

The Co-operative Schools

E-ACT

The Education Fellowship

The Elliott Foundation

Greenwood Dale Foundation Trust

Freedom and Autonomy for Schools – National Association (FASNA)

Landau Forte Charitable Trust

Local Government Association (LGA)

National Governors Association (NGA)

Ofsted

School Partnership Trust

Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE)

SSAT (The Schools Network)

University of Chester

Woodard Academies Trust

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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