



Department
for Education

National Leaders of Education (NLE) advisory group

Recommendations on NLE reform

November 2019

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Executive summary

1. In January 2019, the Department for Education (DfE) announced in its teacher recruitment and retention strategy that it would carry out a review of system leadership. Following a review by officials, ministers concluded that there was a need to reform and strengthen the structure of system leadership to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of teaching schools and National Leaders of Education (NLEs).
2. In June 2019, DfE Ministers invited a number of experienced school leaders from across England, to form an external advisory group, which was commissioned to advise on the strengths and weaknesses of the current system of NLEs and to make recommendations for improvements. The advisory group met four times between July and November 2019. The group's membership comprised:

Name	Organisation	Role
Ian Bauckham	Tenax Schools Trust	Chair
Amarjit Cheema	Perry Hall MAT	Member
Paul Cohen	Department for Education (DfE)	Member
Leora Cruddas	Confederation of School Trusts (CST)	Member
Richard Gill	Teaching Schools Council (TSC)	Member
Stuart Lock	Advantage Schools/ Bedford Free School	Member
Paulette Osborne	St Matthew's CofE Primary	Member
Luke Sparkes	Dixons Academies Trust	Member

3. This report sets out the advisory group's findings and presents its recommendations for a new NLE programme to the department.

Findings of the advisory group

4. Considering the current NLE landscape, the group felt that there was significant value in establishing a cadre of highly effective school leaders, who provide capacity and support to their peers, to facilitate improvement in schools that are facing substantial challenges. However, we concluded that the NLE programme in its current form does not fully address the demands of the system.
5. Whilst there are many examples of effective school improvement, which has been facilitated by NLEs, it is widely recognised across the system that the support offered by these system leaders varies in its quality and impact. As a result, the NLE designation – as a demarcation of expert school-improvement knowledge and support – has been weakened. The group believes that the NLE status has been devalued due

to several factors, including the department's insufficiently defined expectations, both of the role and activities and the expertise and knowledge base of NLEs. Coupled with this, is the absence of evidence-based continuing professional development, specifically designed for NLEs, which builds upon the requisite abilities of school leaders who support struggling schools outside their own.

6. We also identified an insufficient focus on the impact and outcomes of NLE deployments, which has caused concern in the system over the effectiveness of this structure of peer-led support. DfE has recently introduced tighter measures to capture the scale of an NLE's reach (in terms of number of support hours undertaken and number of schools supported) but more still needs to be done to determine the quality of the deployments.
7. The group considered if these weaknesses could be addressed by bolt-on solutions to the current NLE model, but instead concluded that a comprehensive review and redesign of the programme is required: the NLE programme in its current form must end and should be replaced by one that is new, more robust and more prestigious.
8. We set out within this report our recommendations, including on the timings of the implementation of reforms. These recommendations should be considered by the department and inform the design and delivery of the new NLE programme.

Recommendation overview

- **The role of NLEs** – should principally be to deliver school improvement on behalf of the department, with a primary focus on supporting schools that have received an RI judgement to become good or better
- **Eligibility** – the current scope of eligible school leaders should be expanded to include strong leaders with a demonstrable record in school improvement, whether as a headteacher, MAT CEO or other leader accountable for school improvement across a MAT
- **Selection** – a robust, multi-stage designation process should be established, which models the rigour of the School Resource Management Adviser (SRMA) accreditation process
- **NLE standards** – to clearly set the department's expectation of its designated NLEs there should be a set of NLE standards, which defines the expertise and abilities required for supporting weak schools and should include: i) professional credibility ii) problem solving and influencing and iii) capacity building and knowledge transfer.
- **Training** – there should be a high-quality national training programme that ensures NLEs have the right and up-to-date knowledge to provide support to schools and ensures consistency across the cadre
- **Accountability** – there should be a body responsible for designating NLEs and for reviewing their designation following a 3-year designation period

Recommendations

NLE Role

9. Over time, the role of an NLE, as a driver of school improvement in struggling schools, has been diluted. The group identified the need to define a clear remit for NLEs and recommends that their core role should be to deliver the department's school improvement support offer (SI offer) – including any future programmes – applying their extensive knowledge and experience to support schools in moving from RI to Good.
10. We recognise that, in addition to DfE-funded activities, the expertise of NLEs will continue to be sought by other bodies and agencies and DfE should not prohibit this. However, NLEs will be expected to prioritise DfE-funded deployments over other external activities.

Eligibility

11. As the principal role of NLEs should be to deliver DfE's School Improvement programme(s), successful applicants must have substantial experience of being directly accountable for school improvement. We recommend that prospective NLEs must meet one of the following eligibility routes:
 - i. *'Turnaround head'*: a headteacher with recent experience of leading a school that has moved up by at least one Ofsted rating (excluding inadequate to requires improvement)
 - ii. *'Beacon of excellence'*: a headteacher of an outstanding school, with strong performance and progress data¹
 - iii. *'Transformative MAT CEO'*: the leader² of a MAT with strong performance and progress data and experience of moving at least one sponsored academy out of RI
12. The Chair of the group will continue to work with DfE officials to agree the metrics that underpin the proposed eligibility routes – ensuring that, in practice, the routes deliver on our intentions: to capture the strongest leaders of school improvement who have the demonstrable experience, and the capacity, to support struggling schools.

¹ This may include, by exception, a headteacher who leads a school that shows significantly improving or strong performance and progress data, but which has not been visited by Ofsted during these improvements.

² In some cases there may be individuals who are not working as a MAT CEO but who have been/are responsible for significant school improvement within a MAT setting; for example, regional directors. We recommend that, where applicants can evidence their personal record of effective school improvement through the application process, applications from these leaders should be considered.

Selection and designation process

13. To establish a robust application process, the group recommends that the selection of NLEs should model the success and rigour of the SRMA accreditation process. To achieve this, we propose three stages:
 - i. Check applicant meets eligibility criteria (see above), which is evidenced by their strong and consistent track record
 - ii. Paper exercise testing knowledge that we would expect an NLE to have (see 'knowledge and skills' below)
 - iii. Interview or assessment – scrutiny of depth of understanding and ability to apply knowledge in practice
14. To ensure fidelity to the reforms, we envisage that the department will continue to make the final decision on the designation status of NLEs.

Standards

15. We believe that NLE-specific standards are necessary for designation and evaluation. Currently, there is confusion in the system over the requisite knowledge and attributes of effective NLEs. To address this, we recommend a set of three standards that will align closely with an existing suite of departmental standards and frameworks, including: i) the teacher standards, ii) the early career framework (ECF) and iii) the updated Headteachers' Standards (to be published April/May 2020).
16. On the basis that an NLE will assist other leaders in becoming more effective, they themselves must exemplify the standards that a school leader is expected to meet. In addition to having a comprehensive knowledge of these related frameworks and the underpinning evidence, NLEs must possess and apply the requisite capabilities, which have a specific focus on the challenges of supporting weaker schools. We recommend the NLE standards should encompass:

Standard 1. Professional credibility

- National Leaders of Education demonstrate secure knowledge of all aspects of educational and school leadership and management practice. The standards are set out in the Teachers' Standards and the upcoming Headteachers' Standards. The underpinning evidence is set out in the Early Career Framework and upcoming National Professional Qualification Frameworks.
- NLEs demonstrate a strong track record as leaders in their own schools of applying evidence-based practice in all areas to create an excellent quality of education and high standards for all
- NLEs remain abreast of credible developments in educational and school leadership research and its application to practical leadership challenges
- NLEs have a clear and comprehensive knowledge of wider available sources of support and expertise across the system which can assist schools requiring improvement

Standard 2. Problem solving and influencing for improvement

- NLEs are able to apply their knowledge of educational and leadership practice to identify and analyse complex or persistent problems and barriers which limit school effectiveness or efficiency
- NLEs are able to design well-targeted plans for improvement, which are based on reliable diagnosis. Plans will be realistic, appropriately sequenced, suited to context, identify risks and barriers, optimise the deployment of resources available and make effective use of appropriate wider sources of support
- NLEs are able to evaluate progress in implementing improvement plans, identify impact and show the necessary honesty and courage to reshape them where the need to do so becomes apparent
- NLEs need to demonstrate strong interpersonal skills to win the trust and confidence of headteachers and other school leaders, in order to influence their practice. They need to challenge constructively, delivering hard messages at times as well as empowering leaders and imparting a sense of ownership

Standard 3. Capacity building and knowledge transfer to ensure sustainability

- NLEs strengthen school leadership by ensuring that leaders articulate an ambitious vision and create a strong and positive culture, which shape all aspects of the school's provision
- NLEs ensure that leaders (i) focus on improving teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogical expertise to enhance teaching of the curriculum and (ii) set and implement high standards of behaviour in the school.
- NLEs apply their expertise to enable leaders to shape well-planned, coherent, evidence-informed and relevant professional development for teachers
- NLEs set an expectation that resource deployment in the school is driven by the curricular and pedagogical needs of the school

Knowledge and skills

17. The department should expect from NLEs a high level of existing knowledge, which must be assessed during the designation process; however, there should also be an opportunity to build upon this knowledge post-designation through compulsory training and follow-on CPD.

18. Areas of requisite knowledge should be:

- *Standards of whole-school excellence, including governance and financial management:* Ofsted framework and underlying evidence, and understanding of the application of Integrated Curriculum Financial Planning (ICFP)
- *Teacher expertise:* the early career framework and underlying evidence
- *Professional development:* standards for teachers' professional development and underlying evidence

Post-designation training

19. Compulsory training should build on an already high level of requisite knowledge and must be tailored to the needs of its experienced audience: it must be an attractive offer to those applying to become NLEs to incentivise high quality system leaders to engage with the programme.

20. To ensure rigour and consistency, we recommend that a curriculum framework is developed by the department – which builds upon the areas of requisite knowledge set out above – and is delivered by a national delivery body.

21. There should also be a degree of ongoing CPD delivered on a regional level. Where this is the case, follow-on training must be aligned to the department's national framework – ensuring that the content is of a consistently high quality.

Accountability and review of designation

22. To better facilitate quality assurance, and manage cases of weak performance or under-deployment, NLE designation should last for 3 years, following which, a light-touch review and re-designation process should be carried out.

23. NLE performance should be judged in aggregate at the end of an NLE's designation period (3 years), rather than following each deployment. This should determine if reaccreditation should be granted.

24. We recognise that there are already numerous contributors to school improvement acting in the system, so caution must be applied when attempting to attribute the result of a school's inspection to the work of an NLE alone. Instead, we advise that the assessment of an NLE would be based upon a combination of:

- i. Self-assessment
- ii. '360' feedback from teaching school and supported schools
- iii. Ofsted reports (where available) and school performance data from supported schools
- iv. Numerical KPIs where applicable to areas of NLE support e.g. attendance figures

25. At the end of the 3 year designation, and during the review of designation exercise, feedback on the NLE must be collated to consider if:

- The NLE provided sufficient support overall under the SI offer or any other DfE-funded school improvement activity
- The support offered match the school improvement needs of the supported schools
- The NLE achieved results in the areas in which they provided support

26. De-designation during the 3-year period should only be recommended as a result of clear failure to comply with NLE standards (e.g. lack of activity/engagement or misconduct).

Link with Teaching School Hubs

27. TSHs should be responsible for deploying NLEs. Therefore, it will be important for TSH to monitor the emerging impact of NLEs during the length of the 3-year designation. This intermediary review – to measure ongoing effectiveness of NLEs – would also support TSH in gathering evidence as part of the end-of-designation feedback.

28. Although TSH should not be responsible for the performance management or training of NLEs, the hub with which an NLE is affiliated should troubleshoot NLE deployments and facilitate peer-to-peer support through communities of practice.

Transitional arrangements

29. We envisage that the new NLE programme, as set out in this report, will take up to one year to implement fully. During this transitional period existing NLEs should continue their valuable work, ensuring that there is no risk to the capacity to deliver the SI offer in academic year 2020/21, whilst new-style NLEs are also introduced into the system.

30. To avoid prolonged confusion in the system, the department should endeavour to have in place a full cadre of newly designated NLEs to deliver the SI offer by the start of academic year 2021/22.



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