Item 3

Appendix A

Action research into the evolving role of the local authority in education

Executive Summary of the final report for the Ministerial Advisory Group

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this research has been to explore how local authorities are evolving and adapting their role to meet the needs of a more autonomous education system. The particular focus of the research has been on three core responsibilities of the local authority in education:

1. Ensuring a sufficient supply of school places
2. Tackling underperformance in schools and ensuring high standards
3. Supporting vulnerable children.

There has been considerable, and useful, discussion in the system about what the function of the middle tier and local authority should be in the future, but this research does not aim to second-guess that ongoing policy debate. Furthermore, just as local authorities are evolving in the context of a new education landscape, so too have schools been contending with how their role as system-leaders develops. However it has been beyond the scope of this project to examine this schools-led transition in detail. Instead its purpose is to provide a picture, drawn from a small number of local authorities from across the country, of how, right now, local authorities are practically responding to the challenges and opportunities afforded by a more autonomous education system.

Nine local authorities were selected to take part in the action research, based on criteria which were designed to ensure a broadly representative sample.[1] The selection included authorities with a high percentage of well-established academies, authorities with a high percentage of newly converted academies, authorities with a rich diversity of schools including academies, free schools, and teaching schools, and authorities with a high proportion of community, voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools.

The action research took places in two broad phases. In the first phase, from November 2011 to February 2012, fieldwork visits to each of the local authorities were carried out alongside interviews with national stakeholders in order to develop a snap-shot of how local authorities were responding to the changes in the education system and a sense of emerging opportunities and challenges. The findings of this phase of the research were published in an interim report.[2] In the second phase of the research, from March 2012 to June 2012, the focus shifted to action learning. In practical terms this meant that the local authorities were organised into two groups or "action learning sets", broadly configured

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[1] The nine local authorities were Bolton, Bristol, Gloucestershire, Hertfordshire, Middlesbrough, Oxfordshire, Thurrock, Warwickshire and Westminster. Unfortunately Westminster were not able to commit to the second phase of the action research due to other time pressures, therefore the second phase of the research proceeded with just eight local authorities.

[2] The interim report can be accessed at http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/doc/m/action%20research%20interim%20report%20%20%20february%202012.pdf and http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/home/-/journal_content/56/10171/3480152/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

around areas of common interest and challenge. Each authority was encouraged to identify one or more areas of focus for the duration of the research that they would work on. Each action-learning set met twice together as an opportunity to share practice, identify successes and challenges, and benefit from each others' expertise. This final report captures the findings that have emerged from the action research process.

Strategic vision

All the local authorities taking part in the research had recognised and sought to respond to the vision for a more autonomous and self-improving school system, and they demonstrated a clear commitment to enabling schools, irrespective of their status, to lead their own improvement. In many cases this increasing autonomy was viewed as the next stage in a much longer process of transition, rather than a very rapid transformation simply associated with the growth in academies. Indeed, the delegation of increasing powers and responsibilities to schools is something that many of the local authorities involved in the research have actively encouraged for a number of years. Overall the eight local authorities felt confident that they had established a coherent vision about how they could work with schools to support the quality of education over the next period, and that key partners were signed up to this. However, they all also recognised that they were going through a period of transition and that none had yet reached the end of that journey.

Some particular tensions and challenges emerged for local authorities as they focused on redefining their responsibilities. All the local authorities are currently working in the context of a mixed economy of schools, typically with a high proportion of academies in the secondary sector and a much smaller proportion in the primary sector. Continuing to balance the demands of being a maintaining authority, and the responsibilities that that entails, with the development of a different type of role as a facilitator and enabler within a more diverse and devolved school system is a tension that had been felt quite acutely in some instances. It is certainly the case that, in the context of ongoing budget cuts, tighter focus and prioritisation on the part of local authorities is a subtext that underlies all other activity.

Local authorities have also wrestled with achieving the right balance between speed and comprehensiveness. There is an appetite to maintain momentum, and a real urgency expressed by some maintained primary schools, in particular, to establish greater clarity around the level of support, challenge and engagement that might be available from local authorities in the future. However, the action research has clearly demonstrated this is not a process that can be rushed and still be successful. There is a real danger that in developing a local vision, and defining the responsibilities, both individually and jointly, of the local authority and schools, the final result is a superficial consensus to which everyone can sign up simply because it fails to tackle the really difficult questions. The local authorities participating in the action research have recognised that unless they engage with the detail that sits behind the high-level aspirations, and really be precise and specific about what this means for their role, and the interface with local schools and other partners, the resulting "agreement" might quickly become meaningless.

An associated challenge, is the extent to which this dialogue about the local role of the middle tier is led by local authorities or by schools. In many ways the dialogue is about those functions that extend beyond what a school can achieve individually, and is focused on responsibilities that schools need to work together to discharge and where external input beyond the school is beneficial. It is therefore right that the local authority should play a key role in leading the dialogue. However, some of the local authorities taking part in the action research have observed and reflected that at times they need to deliberately step back and not try to secure the solution to a difficult issue which requires coordination and commitment among schools, and instead allow schools space to arrive at a solution themselves. This can be a more time consuming process, but ultimately may lead to a consensus which is more binding on schools as participants.

A consistent reflection of the local authorities taking part in this research is that in the new world, 'relationships are king'. They recognise that without the power to direct schools over particular issues, their ability to carry out certain functions is likely to depend on their capacity to motivate, persuade and exercise principled leadership. The primacy of relationships in the new landscape carries the risk that the effectiveness with which the education system operates in the collective interest of children and young people could become too dependent on specific individuals who are in post and who have developed effective ways of working together over a period of time, and therefore too prone to disruption when those key individuals move on and relationships have to be created afresh.

Schools, too, are very clear that the future of the education system lies in the strength of their partnerships, and it is encouraging that schools are mobilising themselves to capitalise on these opportunities. For some, the chance to strengthen existing partnerships was one of the main attractions of becoming an academy. The range of partnerships, from teaching schools alliances, to individual federations, transition groups, and subject networks, is very broad and speaks volumes of the vibrancy and dynamism of the school system. However, headteachers are also aware that these partnerships can be fragile and very dependent on the good will of the individuals involved. To counteract this, a lot of consideration is being given, by local authorities and schools, to local governance mechanisms that bring key partners together around specific issues or decisions, that demonstrate their worth to those involved, and that create a sense of moral obligation that makes it difficult for schools to "opt out" of decision making processes that serve the collective interests of children and young people.

Through the course of the research three distinct 'roles' for how local authorities are exercising their responsibilities in relation to ensuring a sufficient supply of school places, tackling underperformance in schools and ensuring high standards, and supporting vulnerable children have emerged. These roles can be summarised as the local authority as a convenor of partnerships; the local authority as a maker and shaper of effective commissioning; and the local authority as a champion for children, parents and communities. These provide a helpful lens through which to view the emerging practice of local authorities.

Ensuring a sufficient supply of school places

One of the chief concerns of local authorities identified in the interim report, and reinforced here, are the challenges associated with ensuring that school places match demand in a system in which, with the growth in academies, many more schools are free to set their own admissions numbers. There are two particular issues which have been highlighted by the action research. The first is how to increase the supply of places when demand rises, and the second is how to manage the consequences of oversupply.

With increasing numbers of primary aged pupils nationally, and a significant concentration of growth in urban areas, the challenge of meeting the increased demand for places is affecting large swathes of the country. The specific issues are created by demographic pressures, but the coincidence of this trend with a period in which schools are exercising greater autonomy in terms of determining pupil numbers makes it more difficult for local authorities to plan ahead effectively. It is also the case that in around five years the current bulge in primary numbers will feed through into the secondary sector. As there is a far higher proportion of academies in the secondary sector, some of the challenges being experienced now could become much more acute when translated to the secondary phase. In areas where the demand for places is rising sharply, particularly at primary, there is some evidence that academies are using their freedom to choose not to expand or community schools are looking to academy status as a means of avoiding expansion in the future. Schools have a range of very valid individual reasons for these decisions, including respecting the wishes of existing parents at the school for a particular size and style of education, the belief that expanding would compromise their effectiveness and quality, and being unwilling to expose the school to the financial risk of not being able to completely fill a new form of entry. These decisions make complete sense for an individual school, but in some cases the combined effect of many individual school decisions can lead to a shortfall of places in a particular area.

Where supply outstrips demand, for example as a result of a school expanding or a new school entering the market, a potential consequence may be that a neighbouring school becomes unviable and has to close. This is an important element in the government's agenda to drive increased quality in the education sector through the mechanism of parental choice. However, it also poses challenges for local authorities in managing the consequences of oversupply. The first issue is that, historically, the process of school reorganisation which might lead to federation, downsizing, academisation or closure of a school that has become unviable has not always been handled, either locally or nationally, with sufficient speed and purpose to ensure that the education of children at the school in question does not suffer. A real concern raised by local authorities in the action research is that it is not currently clear who will be responsible for overseeing the necessary school re-organisation in the event that a stand-alone convertor academy becomes unviable, if the individual governing body does not have the capacity or inclination to take the difficult decisions needed without external support.

A second associated issue for local authorities is how they can safeguard the interests of pupils, parents and communities in circumstances where the planned expansion of one school places the viability of another school at risk, but closure of the school is not a good solution. This might be because the school is a good school, because closure would leave a

particular community without a local school, or because demographic projections suggest that a school would again be needed on the site within a few years. Far from being a hypothetical case, the eight local authorities involved in the research have yielded two instances where this is already happening. Both these examples are where new Free Schools are opening and creating a significant new influx of places. While many local authorities welcome the capacity and diversity that Free Schools can offer, there is a concern that the short notice that local authorities sometimes receive in relation to Free School applications from the Department for Education can make forward planning difficult and lead to abortive work.

A further specific and complex aspect of the place planning agenda is in determining the pattern of post-16 provision. The particular challenges post-16 relate to the need to plan place provision across a very diverse partnership of providers, in a context where the autonomy of many of these providers is well established. Local post-16 partnerships are also contending with changes in the profile of demand created by the raising of the participation age, rising youth unemployment, shifting demographics and significant changes to qualifications. The diversity of the post-16 landscape is also increasing, with new Studio Schools and University Technology Colleges offering exciting opportunities to expand the range of options for young people, but requiring adjustments on the part of local schools and other providers.

Local authorities and schools together are finding a range of different ways to tackle the challenges related to place planning in a more autonomous system. One key strategy employed has been to reshape the negotiations around school expansion to give headteachers greater ownership of the agenda. This means facilitating an open and transparent dialogue between schools about the implications of setting their admissions numbers, and devolving responsibility for collective rather than individual decision-making to groups of schools. In one local authority they have trialled bringing together partnerships of headteachers in areas where there are particular peaks and troughs in demand, presenting them with the data, and supporting them to arrive at a joint conclusion about where expansions would be required. Although just a small-scale trial this has proved a smoother and more constructive process than individual bilateral discussions with headteachers that were held previously. Another authority used its expertise in forecasting and analysing data to highlight forthcoming issues in terms of demand for places and used that as a way to stimulate headteachers to plan collectively. Where demand is rising, a number of authorities have also engaged strategically and productively with potential Free School promoters in order to incentivise applications for new and high quality schools in the specific areas where they are needed.

Tackling underperformance in schools and ensuring high standards

A key tenet of the schools white paper is that the driving force for improvement in the education system should come from schools themselves. This means schools taking active responsibility for their own improvement, but also playing a role in supporting the improvement of other schools in the system. The opportunities for school-to-school improvement arising out of the new education landscape are significant, and both schools

and local authorities are excited about the potential for transformation. One of the great strengths of the model is that it is a bottom-up approach to change – drawing on the existing skills and capacity of teachers and leaders in the school system. Many of the headteachers interviewed for the research have highlighted these opportunities for school-to-school support as one of the most significant benefits arising out of the new education landscape, and are of the opinion that much more teaching and learning activity is now growing organically out of schools, than being delivered "from above". The potential for innovation and informed sharing of good practice is therefore very great.

Nonetheless, local authorities continue to hold a democratic accountability for securing good outcomes for all children and young people in a local area, and a statutory duty in exercising their education and training functions to do so with a view to promote high standards and promote the fulfilment of learning potential. In this context, the question for them is how to ensure that a school-to-school support model is coherent and comprehensive and not piecemeal; that every school has a wide range of high quality support to draw upon and that every school receives the informed external support and challenge that is crucial in securing improvement or sustaining outstanding quality.

In a more diverse and devolved education system the capacity of schools and sponsors to access effective school improvement support from other schools and external providers is a critical element in ensuring a self-improving system. Headteachers and academy sponsors who have contributed to the action research were generally confident about their ability to source and commission high-quality support for school improvement and in general local authorities share this view. However, authorities were less sure about the ability of primary schools to do so, particularly emphasising the need to build the understanding of primary schools in relation to the commissioning cycle, so that they can be confident in carrying out all elements from effective needs analysis through to robust quality assurance.

It is clear from the action research that teaching school alliances are rapidly becoming a very important route for schools to source high quality support from other schools in their local area, and as they grow in number may provide the underpinning infrastructure which ensures *all* schools can access the support they need. In some local authorities their positive and strategic engagement with teaching schools can lead to strong collaborative partnerships. In the best examples, local authorities have been invited to become members on the boards of teaching school alliances and are using this as an opportunity to contribute to their strategic direction. They are also working with teaching schools to provide technical support; to help them broker relationships with other schools and partners; to provide and interpret data, to signpost schools to the training and support that the teaching school offers; to commission programmes and training from the alliance; and to help them identify the schools locally which are most in need of support.

However, it is clear from the feedback of teaching schools nationally that not all local authorities are able to play such a productive role. It is also apparent from the action research that local authorities, while seeing the huge potential of teaching schools, continue to have some misgivings. Specifically, they are concerned that teaching school designation can be fragile because it is tied to an individual headteacher who might move on. This means

that significant ongoing investment in an alliance infrastructure could be wasted and that the benefits that a teaching school alliance brings over individual school-to-school support, namely the systematic and comprehensive nature of the offer, might prove to be fleeting.

While, broadly, local authorities were confident about the capacity within a more autonomous education system for schools to access high quality support, they identified a number of concerns in relation to how underperformance or poor performance might be tackled in future. The first is an anxiety about whether, in the future, local authorities will continue to have sufficient capacity to effectively support and challenge their maintained schools, given the reductions in local authority school improvement capacity. This is certainly a risk that was flagged by some of the headteachers who participated in the research whose perception was that local authority school improvement teams had been stripped back to the core and that, in the process, some long-standing expertise had been lost.

The second challenge is how to ensure that school-to-school support is a really effective means of driving improvement in schools which are failing or underperforming. The pragmatic experience of the local authorities and schools involved in this action research suggests that school-to-school support mechanisms are far more effective when they are sharply brokered and robustly held to account by someone external to the two schools involved. A question raised in the interim report, and which has continued to be a theme throughout the action research, is who would continue to play that brokerage and accountability function in a fully devolved system? A number of headteachers who were interviewed for the research concurred with the view that schools can find it very difficult to challenge each other, unless that challenge is invited or objectively brokered in by a third party. For example, one teaching school headteacher remarked that school-to-school challenge works well if the head is open to this and sees it as a professionally valuable experience, but felt that most of the schools which need to be challenged are in that position because the head is defensive or complacent and therefore unlikely to be open to challenge from a peer.

The third issue is more systemic. A key anxiety for local authorities, also echoed by some national stakeholders and schools, is whether there is sufficient shared intelligence in a more autonomous school system, in which support and challenge is accessed from a range of different sources, to spot the signs of declining performance in a school before it impacts on results. Headteachers pointed to the fact that it is the least self-aware school leaders who are least likely to seek external challenge and most likely to be susceptible to declining performance. This is particularly a risk for maintained schools in those authorities which have had to very significantly scale back their school improvement capacity and for convertor academies which are not part of a wider chain or multi-academy trust. A related challenge is where evidence of poor performance or declining performance in stand-alone convertor academies becomes apparent, whose responsibility it is to tackle this? In the first instance it will be for the academy trust, which in many cases will essentially be the same as the school's governing body, to take action. But if they should prove unable or unwilling to turn the school around, it is not yet clear what the mechanisms are to secure improvement.

The final challenge is the ability of local authorities to work effectively with the Department for Education and other partners to broker in a sponsor to take on schools that are failing. Many local authorities are now looking to actively engage sponsors to shape the pattern of provision in their local areas. In particular, they are keen to build good relationships with a small number of sponsors who can develop a deep understanding of local needs and contexts, and where sponsored chains and federations can help to cement relationships between schools locally. One of the frustrations expressed by local authorities is a perceived lack of clarity in how the Department for Education goes about lining up a sponsor for a poorly performing school, the criteria that are used to determine selection, and the contribution, if any, that the local authority is expected to make to the dialogue.

Again, the action research has provided evidence of how local authorities are responding to these opportunities and challenges. The policy context and the experience of the local authorities taking part in the research make clear that to a great extent the future for school improvement lies in the ability of schools to support each other successfully. The emerging good practice illustrates how local authorities can facilitate and contribute to a vibrant system of school-to-school support. Many local authorities are working with schools to maintain opportunities to address improvement issues as 'a local family of schools', brokering effective school-to-school partnerships to address underperformance and halt declining performance, supporting the creation of academy-led federations to turn around failing schools, and actively promoting the conversion of schools to academy status as part of multi-academy trusts. Local authorities are also refining their own traded services, creating opportunities for schools to engage in the leadership and governance of local authority traded services, and supporting schools to navigate and quality assure the full range of additional services available from other providers. Finally, local authorities are also taking the opportunity to more tightly define what it means to be a champion of pupils and parents in an autonomous system, and the specific implications this might have for the roles of members of and officers, and the relationships between local authorities and schools, including academies.

Supporting vulnerable children

An important observation from the action research is that, overall, authorities appear to be less confident that, together with schools, they will continue to be able to able to offer good quality support for the most vulnerable children than they are in their capacity to establish a strategic direction, ensure a sufficient supply of school places or contribute to school improvement. Local authorities' concerns broadly relate to two main areas of activity– the first is securing a good quality school place for every vulnerable child and the second is how to ensure every vulnerable child receives the best possible combination of services and support to enable them to succeed.

Schools' participation in local Fair Access arrangements is critical to ensuring that a good quality place is available for every vulnerable child. The interim report found that, in general, in those areas where Fair Access Protocols were seen as objective, fair and transparent schools were continuing to engage with them well. However, where Fair Access had not historically been administered successfully schools had been swift to disengage from the

process. As the action research has progressed, local authorities have expressed increased anxiety as to whether Fair Access arrangements will continue to hold strong even in those areas where they have historically been effective. There is a fear among some local authorities that the climate of increased autonomy could lead to individual schools deciding to "opt out" of taking their fair share of students who face multiple challenges and are consequently hard to place. Some local authorities also reflected that the pressure of forced academisation for schools at or near the floor target increased their reluctance to accept pupils who might have a negative impact on the school's results. A further complicating factor is that disputes with academies which are escalated by local authorities to the Education Funding Agency are not being resolved quickly enough.

However, despite these anxieties, evidence from the action research continues to suggest that the issue of whether schools engage effectively in fair access arrangements appears to have more to do with the individual motivations of headteachers and governors, and their commitment to principles of inclusion, than it has to do with whether a school is an academy or a local authority school. Headteachers engaged in the action research suggest that schools clearly recognise the need to have transparent and objective fair access arrangements that work well and to which all schools are committed, and that the way local authorities approach the task of convening Fair Access partnerships can have a critical role in supporting their future success.

In terms of securing the right support that will enable vulnerable children and young people to succeed, local authorities believe that schools are not as confident in commissioning services for the most vulnerable pupils as they are in commissioning services for school improvement. Furthermore there appears to be a narrower and less well-established range of provision in many areas for vulnerable children and young people than there is for school improvement more generally. To some extent headteachers reinforced the view put forward by local authorities. While many would attest to being confident commissioners in this area, they often concurred with the view that the range of potential support services was too limited. Some headteachers also pointed to the greater challenges associated with successful commissioning for vulnerable children. In addition to their concerns around schools' ability to commission successfully for vulnerable children, local authorities were also wrestling with the difficulties of restructuring their own services for vulnerable children with the devolution of a greater proportion of centrally retained funding to schools and trying to continue to join up services for vulnerable children and families in the context of a much more diverse system.

Despite the significant concerns raised in relation to supporting vulnerable children, some local authorities and schools have worked together to develop highly effective strategies for not just sustaining, but improving the quality of their provision for the most vulnerable in the context of a more autonomous system. One local authority has, in partnership with their schools, completely refreshed their approach to Fair Access so that there is a far greater emphasis on preventing exclusions, more transparency about how vulnerable children are placed, and greater ownership of the agenda by headteachers. Another local authority has pioneered the delegation of both funding and responsibility for preventing exclusions and commissioning alternative provision to partnerships of schools. A third local authority has

worked with schools to completely review their commissioning of SEN support bases to be sharper around outcomes and to set clearer expectations on both sides.

Emerging issues

This action research has taken place during a period of very significant financial, policy, contextual and demographic change. It has focused on practical solutions that local authorities have put into place to address some of the immediate challenges that emerged as a result of the first wave of mass conversion of schools to academies, and which were outlined in the interim report. However, as the action research has progressed new issues and themes have emerged, the implications of which are still not clear. The first issue is that the "mixed economy" of schools in which local authorities are working is changing all the time. As increasing numbers of schools opt to become academies, local authorities will need to be sufficiently flexible to adapt. A second key area of change is the impact that the new Ofsted inspection framework will have on the system. It is likely that, as the bar has been raised, more schools over the next year will enter categories of concern leading to a possible further surge in the creation of sponsored academies. It is also possible that some of the newly created convertor academies that were previously good or outstanding will receive a less favourable inspection outcome. These will be important tests for the new system of how schools, local authorities, sponsors and the Department for Education can work together to secure rapid improvement.

The third and final significant change is the recently published consultation on moving towards a national funding formula and introducing significant reforms to how funding for children and young people with high needs will be managed. To some extent the new funding arrangements resonate well with the local authority's emerging roles as a convenor of partnerships, as a maker and shaper of effective commissioning and as a champion of children and young people, and given the early consultative nature of these proposals it is impossible to be definitive about what the implications of the changes might be. However, local authorities have some significant concerns about the tighter restrictions on priorities for which the Schools Forum can decide to centrally retain funding. There is also some uncertainty about the implications of the new high-needs funding proposals on local authorities' ability to commission flexibly for children and young people.

Conclusion

Overall the evidence in this report suggests that in many cases local authorities and schools, working together, are creating local solutions to some of the challenges that have arisen as a result of the new education landscape and are at the same time finding ways to maximise the opportunities. The first part of the conclusion to the report therefore summarises some of the key emerging messages for schools and local authorities about how they might approach this period of transition and what effective practice may look like. However, the research also points to issues and challenges which, so far, have not proved amenable to local solutions and where some additional clarity, further action, or ongoing reflection may be needed on the part of national government and its partners. These are summarised in the

second part of the conclusion. These messages, for local and national partners in education, are reproduced below:

Key messages for local partners in education

The action research strongly suggests that there are some emerging areas of good practice which local authorities might find helpful to consider as they make the transition into a new role and set of responsibilities:

- Be systematic in working through, with schools, where the local authority can add most value in the new education landscape, prioritise what to focus on and then confidently inhabit the space agreed. Seize the agenda, rather than be apologetic and wait for instruction.

- Treat schools as partners and leaders in the education system, and provide the space for them to develop solutions to community-wide issues that are owned by schools.

- Where existing relationships with schools are strong, begin to develop the governance mechanisms and, if appropriate, more formal partnerships with and between schools so that good relationships have a life beyond the particular individuals involved at any one time. Where relationships with schools are not strong, then take immediate action to turn these around as a matter of priority.

- Look for quick wins to demonstrably contribute to the resolution of new and pressing issues that are emerging as a result of the changing education system. This will help address the concern that there is too much theory and not enough action.

- Focus on co-creating, with schools, a local education culture based on a clear moral purpose and identify the headteacher advocates who can lead that process. Work with schools to support the conditions in which headteachers are prepared to challenge each other to take decisions which are in the collective interest of pupils in the wider community as well as the interests of pupils and parents at their school.

- Find mechanisms to learn from other local authorities, to avoid re-inventing the wheel at a point when all local authorities are wrestling with a similar set of issues.

- Develop the capacity to carry out really sharp and high quality data analysis that will enable schools, parents, and other partners to understand the system-level needs and how they can best be addressed.

- Work in partnership with local academies and sponsors to jointly understand what the local authority's role as "a champion of pupils and parents" means in relation to standards of performance for all children and for groups at risk of underachieving, so that it is clear and agreed what each partner can deliver.

- Invest in support for governors overall so that they can add real value to the schools they govern, and strategically target local authority governors as a group who can

provide a conduit between the local authority and academies, and can provide more systematic intelligence about the performance and capacity of education locally.

- Map and establish systems for regularly scrutinising "soft" performance indicators available from a range of sources including engagement with individual schools, local authority traded services, parents, members and governors.

- Develop strong relationships with local academy sponsors and free school promoters and maximise local intelligence to become a valued partner in the commissioning dialogue related to future school provision.

- Further develop the outward facing scrutiny role of members so that this becomes a powerful route for championing and advocating on behalf of children and young people.

- Keep a close watching brief on the sufficiency of support available for vulnerable children both within schools and externally, and the effectiveness with which schools are able to commission that support to meet needs. If it becomes apparent that the needs of vulnerable children are not being served, work closely with schools, providers and other partners to build capacity and strengthen the quality of what is on offer.

- Identify opportunities to delegate further powers, responsibilities and budgets to schools, within a framework of strong partnership working and robust quality assurance for outcomes.

In parallel the shift to a more autonomous system also places new responsibilities on schools, not just for their own performance but for the ability of a community of schools to meet the needs of all children and young people in their area. In some of the best examples of where schools and local authorities together are making the new constellation of responsibilities work well, schools are taking much greater responsibility for collective, rather than individual, outcomes in relation to exclusions, admissions, fair access, post-16 planning and supporting better teaching and learning. Schools are owning the agenda, have an appetite to get underneath the issues, recognise that one school's decisions can have far-reaching implications, for good or ill, across a community, and are finding the confidence to challenge their peers on the basis of evidence. Schools also have a responsibility to grow their own capacity to make the most of the new opportunities that come with a changing education landscape. In particular, becoming an expert commissioner, with confidence to define need, identify the right support, and quality assure the service delivered by an external provider will be essential skills in the new system.

Key messages for national partners in education

The thrust of this report has been to demonstrate how local authorities, working with their schools and other local partners, are responding to the opportunities and challenges emerging from a more diverse and devolved education system. For the most part there are encouraging signs that practical local solutions are emerging. However, there are some

challenges which, on the basis of this early evidence, do not appear to be amenable to locally developed solutions and where further thought at a national level will be required. These are summarised briefly below:

- Historically, there has been a very wide range in local authority performance. The extent to which local authorities have the skills to adapt to the new agenda successfully is therefore likely to be very varied. Furthermore, the collective capacity of schools in different local areas to assume a system leadership role will also be varied. The Children's Improvement Board and sector-led improvement initiatives provide a means for sharing good practice across local authorities, and the mechanism for identifying local authorities which are struggling to get to grips with the new agenda and brokering in support from a peer or other appropriate source. The evolving role of the council in education may well be a particular issue on which councils would welcome greater opportunities to share practice and learn from peers going forward.

- It is clear that responsibility for closing or federating schools where supply is outstripping demand is proving very difficult. Where the school whose viability is threatened is a community, VA or VC school the local authority has a role in leading the reconfiguration of pupil places to manage the risk, however as more schools become academies their flexibility is increasingly constrained. In the case of any convertor academy whose future viability may become uncertain there is no obvious point of accountability in the system to take the difficult decisions about what should happen to that school, and manage the repercussions for other neighbouring schools.

- A similar issue has emerged in relation to the future performance of stand-alone convertor academies. Although in some areas academies are continuing to welcome challenge and support from the local authority, and in others the concept of "challenge partners" (through which schools challenge each other) is taking root, there is no mechanism to ensure that the performance of every stand-alone convertor academy is scrutinised and that where such an academy is poorly performing an effective intervention is put into place.

- In the interests of high quality commissioning and sharing intelligence it would be helpful if the Department for Education could offer greater clarity on the criteria it uses to assess the suitability of a potential sponsor for a school and how it monitors sponsors' performance. This would enable local authorities to make better informed decisions in circumstances where they are looking to commission a new school or find a sponsor for an existing school. There is also some unevenness in how local authorities are engaged in the dialogue about the choice of sponsor for a school that is failing. This may be a reflection of local authorities' own capacity, but clearer expectations of the role that the Department would like local authorities to play in these circumstances, and how local authorities might contribute to the Department's ongoing quality assurance of sponsored arrangements may be helpful.

- Teaching school alliances are emerging as a critical component in orchestrating and providing a wide range of services and high quality support. However, while teaching schools are designated based on a range of demanding criteria, there is a concern among some local authorities that some teaching schools could lose their designation if the head teacher moves on. They argue that this makes the sustainability of the support feel fragile and a difficult basis on which to build a local strategy. The National College is taking action to mitigate this risk by allowing for two or more schools to be designated together and so share the responsibilities and, where the current head teacher of a teaching school does move on, looking at the succession plans and overall leadership capacity of an alliance before taking the decision to de-designate. However, this is an issue, along with the attendant risk that if a teaching school's performance drops or it loses its Ofsted outstanding rating, it will face almost certain de-designation. Where this does happen, the College is committed to trying to manage the impact as far as possible in the interests of stability.

- There is considerable anxiety among local authorities that current processes for escalating disputes around fair access to the Education Funding Agency are not proving timely, and that the education of vulnerable children and young people may suffer as a result. It would be helpful if the Department could review the existing processes to ensure that they are fit for purpose. It may also be helpful to establish a system for monitoring the levels, pattern and nature of fair access disputes in order to ascertain, over time, how well the needs of the most vulnerable children are being served within a more autonomous system.

The full report can be downloaded from http://bit.ly/MOvGlJ