Strategies for transforming local education systems
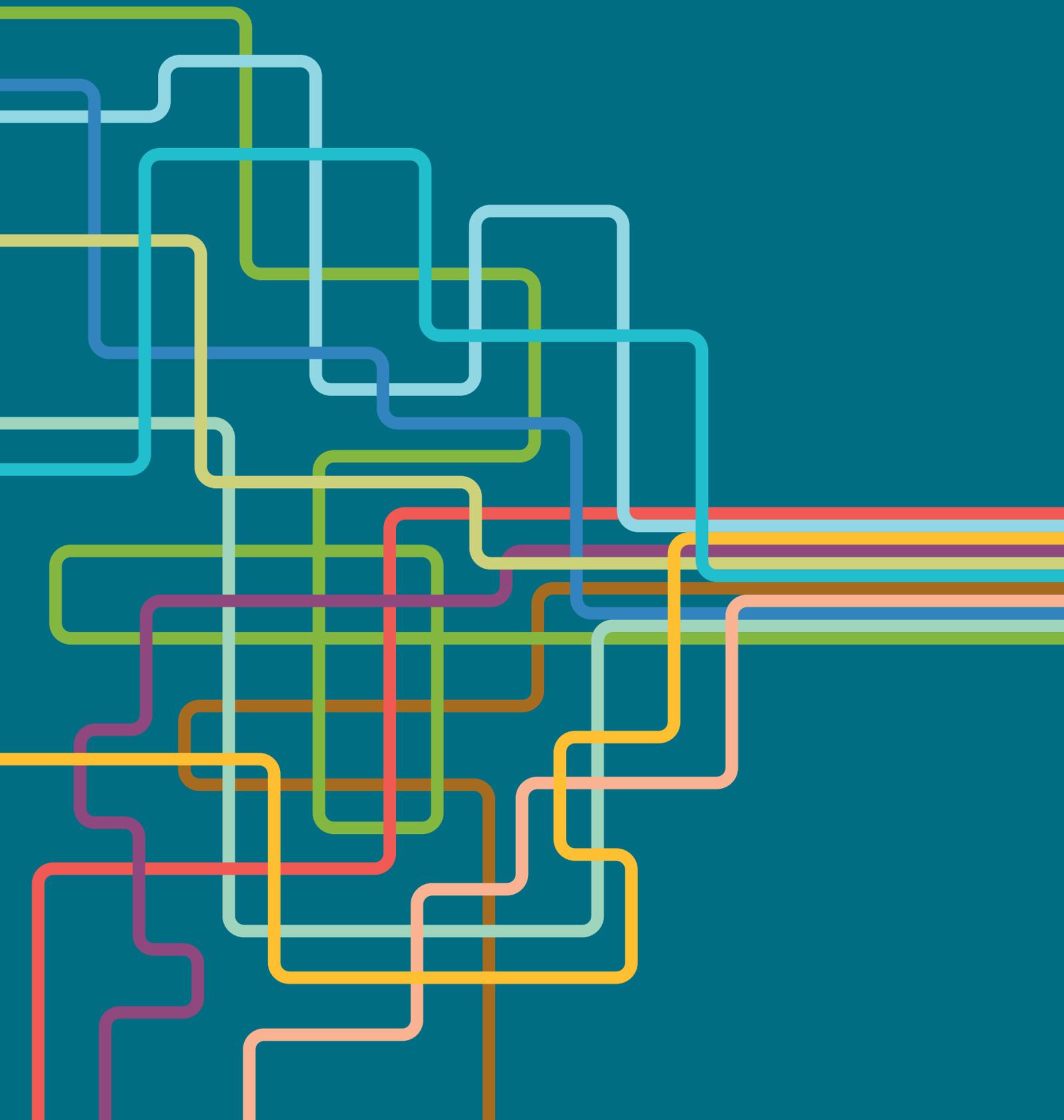
A think-piece by Ben Bryant,
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Education
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Education Development Trust

Education Development Trust (formerly CfBT Education Trust) is a not-for-profit organisation providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. Our work involves school improvement through collaboration and peer review, school workforce and leadership development for government agencies, intergovernmental bodies and directly with schools and school groups. For example, through our Schools Partnership Programme we are working with hundreds of schools around England to improve the quality of peer review and school-to-school support. In a very different context, we are supporting the Department for International Development in its successful campaign to get more than 81,000 girls from Kenya's urban slums and rural areas into school and learning.

Isos Partnership

Isos is an established research and advisory organisation. We help the public sector solve problems and delivery effectively. We work with national, regional and local government, and with local strategic partnerships, teaching school alliances and trusts, to carry out large-scale research and evaluation of national policy priorities and strengthen local strategies and priorities. We work right across education and children's services, and have a track-record in developing policy, improving delivery and building capacity within the public sector.

Our work in partnership

In early 2015, Isos and Education Development Trust started exploring some of the opportunities and challenges facing local education systems with whom we were both working. We agreed that there was opportunity to develop an offer of support for local education systems, drawing on Education Development Trust's track-record in developing peer review and Isos' expertise in developing and implementing local education improvement strategies. As a result, we have begun collaborating on a range of specific projects to support local education systems to address these issues.

Foreword

Change has been a fact of life in local authorities for some time but the government's plans for reform now give it another dimension.

At the end of last year, I attended one of the two seminars mentioned in this think-piece. It brought together twelve strategic leaders of education to talk about the implications of these reforms and the particular challenges they were facing locally. The contexts in which they worked varied enormously. Some came from London boroughs, others from large shire counties. What struck me most from the day's discussions was their hugely positive engagement with these complex issues. Without exception, these leaders were focused on how change might be managed so children and young people in their area could be better served.

Encouraged by participants at the seminars who thought others would find it valuable, Education Development Trust and Isos Partnership agreed to produce a paper for wider circulation that captured the richness of the discussion. This think-piece outlines the key questions that were raised in the seminars, together with participants' reflections on the local implications and possible solutions.

Discussion focused on two big issues. First, how might local systems minimise the risk of fragmentation and maximise the benefits of a more diverse and innovative system? Second, what could be done to ensure partnerships are not just collaborative and cosy but purposeful and robust with the challenge and support seen as helpful and even energising? As you will see from the think-piece, there are no simple answers to these questions. Education Development Trust and Isos are continuing to work with local partners to help shape bespoke responses.

Education remains of fundamental importance both locally and nationally. The evolving landscape means that none of us can be sure what local systems will look like in even 5 years' time. Education systems are likely to develop in very different ways. It is important therefore not to get distracted by the current emphasis on structures but to keep a focus on education excellence and on creating a local system that will help every child in the area to thrive, achieve well and leave school with the confidence to continue learning.

In a time of radical change, finding the space to think and talk with colleagues about transformation is not easy but the rewards are immense. I hope you find this think-piece as helpful as I have done in stimulating local discussion and planning for change.

Professor Christine Gilbert,
CBE

Introduction Setting the context for further transformation within local education systems

The last six years have seen significant shifts in the shape and character of the education system in England. In particular, this period has seen large changes in the roles of and relationships between local authorities and schools and colleges[1]. While the aim of establishing a school-led, self-improving system has widespread support, we are about to enter a new phase of reform in which these changing roles and responsibilities will be of profound importance. The White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, published recently by the Department for Education, released shortly after two consultations on reforming school and high-needs funding arrangements, have now provided greater clarity about the Government's plans for education reform. While the thrust of the White Paper represents a continuation of reforms put in place during the last two Parliaments, the White Paper envisages a further period of significant change and transformation in the education system in England. There are four key pillars that make up this vision:

1. Workforce. Reforms of teacher recruitment, qualifications and development;

2. System leadership. More teaching school alliances and system leaders, such as national leaders of education;

3. Funding. The introduction of a national funding formula for schools; and

4. School autonomy and partnerships. The aim that all schools will become academies by 2022, with further support for the development of multi-academy trusts, and a changing role for local authorities.[2]

These combined reforms present an even greater sense of urgency and a new set of challenges for leaders within local education systems to grapple with over the next few years. It is unlikely that the response will be uniform. The way local education systems will look by 2022 will depend on:

- Their local context, the maturity of existing relationships with and between schools, and current school partnership structures;

- Crucial strategic decisions made in the coming months; and

- How effectively leaders within local education systems are able to support schools to work together in clusters, trusts or partnerships.

Within a very challenging funding environment, local system leaders will now need to engage in discussions and to navigate important issues involving partnerships, systems and structures, and governance while ensuring this does not become a distraction from the core purpose of continually improving the quality and impact of education for all children.

[1] Baxter, Parish, Sandals, The Evolving Role of the Local Authority in Education (DfE/LGA, 2012); and Bryant, Sandals, The Evolving Education System in England: a "temperature check" (DfE, 2014)

[2] The DfE has "decided it is not necessary to take blanket powers to convert good schools in strong local authorities to academies at this time." However, the government said it would continue to compel academy conversions: (1) where local authorities reach an academisation tipping point and are unable to provide sufficient support to remaining maintained schools; and (2) in consistently poorly performing local authorities.

What do we mean by 'local education systems'?

The term local education systems was first coined by Isos Partnership in their 'temperature check' research for the Department for Education in 2014. This research looked at the way in which support for school improvement, for place-planning, and for vulnerable children were evolving in ten local education systems. In this research, Isos defined a local education system as:

- **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.** Focused specifically on three functions, namely (i) support for school improvement and intervention, (ii) school place-planning, and (iii) support for vulnerable children.

We think this definition is helpful in the current context since it captures the inter-relationships between schools, system leaders, local authorities and dioceses within geographically-defined local areas. Increasingly, we note that groups working on these issues are using the term 'education-led' to describe their local education systems, reflecting the complexity of the task and the multiple relationships and range of functions that need to be taken into account as this system matures.

Aims of this think-piece

While the White Paper provides a detailed articulation of the Government's education reform agenda, many of its core commitments, including increasing academisation and reforming the role of local authorities in education, had been announced previously in manifestos or in post-election speeches. In an attempt to think through the potential strategic implications of these reforms, we brought together leaders from local authorities, local education systems and dioceses. Specifically, we wanted to help to articulate some of the really intractable issues with which local education systems were grappling, as well as helping to support the ongoing transition to more autonomous, partnership-based local education systems by sharing the ways in which the local education systems were already responding.

Together Isos and Education Development Trust facilitated two seminars for strategic leaders from more than twenty local education systems across England. One took place in London in November 2015 and the other in Manchester in December 2015. This think-piece captures the key questions that were raised by these discussions, their implications and some possible solutions.

Part 1 The big questions facing local education systems

Our discussions with colleagues in the north and south of the country focused on two broad themes:

a. Ensuring strategic coherence within local education systems: particularly how local education systems can maximise the benefits of a diverse and innovative system, while minimising the risks of fragmentation; and

b. Developing increasingly deep, purposeful and robust partnerships: particularly how we can ensure partnerships are enabling school leaders, governors and staff to access effective support and challenge in order to drive ongoing improvement in outcomes.

Under each of these two themes, we agreed five specific questions that colleagues considered were crucial for leaders to address.

Ensuring strategic coherence

1 How can local education systems best make sense of the manifold relationships within local education systems?

2 How can local education systems ensure the coherent deployment of system leadership resources?

3 How can local education systems make the most of the opportunity of the transition to build system leadership capacity?

4 How can local education systems ensure that there is clear accountability and, where necessary, challenge?

5 How can local education systems link education improvement partnerships with other functions, including place-planning and support for vulnerable young people?

Developing deep partnerships

6 How can local education systems best facilitate and strengthen partnership-working where it is in its infancy?

7 In parallel, how can local education systems strengthen partnerships that are superficial, cosy and lack purpose?

8 How can partnerships within local education systems identify and respond quickly to weak and vulnerable partners?

9 How can local education systems quickly identify, disseminate and utilise knowledge about what makes partnerships effective?

10 How can local education systems develop local partnership capacity, rooted in the local context?

Theme 1 Ensuring strategic coherence within local education systems

1. How can local education systems best make sense of the manifold relationships within local education systems?

The challenge facing leaders within local education systems is a complex one. Securing educational excellence in this rapidly evolving landscape will require not only clarity of purpose, but also precision of implementation. It will also require collaborative and collective decision-making, at a time when the many different forms of overlapping partnerships, networks and alliances within and between local systems are multiplying.

Within local education systems, these include local, regional and national multi-academy trusts that may span different local areas, diocesan networks, teaching school alliances, formal and less formal school clusters or partnerships, and other affiliations. In this context, the relationships between schools, local authority leaders and elected politicians are changing, but remain vital. Beyond local education systems, new relationships with the Regional Schools Commissioners and the regional offices of Ofsted must also be established and maintained. The quality of these relationships can be crucial in shaping what one local authority leader called 'the authorising environment' in which discussions about school autonomy and the role of strategic partnerships take place.

Colleagues from local education systems were clear that what was needed were new models and decision-making bodies and fora that enabled schools, local authorities and partners to work together on shared strategic priorities. Purpose, protocols and discipline are needed: avoiding 'decision-making drift' was seen as critical.

2. How can local education systems ensure the coherent deployment of system leadership resources?

The last six years have seen a major expansion of the opportunities for system leadership - the work of school leaders, governors and staff who take responsibility for improvement not only within their own school, but working with other schools to drive improvement across a wider area. These opportunities include in particular the development of teaching school alliances (TSAs). There are now over 650 teaching schools, with a further 300 promised in the White Paper.

Colleagues from local education systems welcomed the development of TSAs as one of the key ways in which a formalised framework of local system leadership had been created. They noted, however, that the way in which teaching school alliances had evolved, pursued their core priorities and shaped their offer of support in a relatively autonomous way had, in some areas, created duplication or gaps in the offer of support for school improvement. A related key question facing some areas was how to avoid a sense of competition and 'turf wars' as a result of overlapping offers. Some seminar participants had begun to work with local TSAs to share intelligence about the need for and gaps in local support. Others had formally agreed a local level 'collegiate' with defined and complementary roles for the area's TSAs to maximise the coverage and impact of local school improvement support.

3. How can local education systems make the most of the opportunity of the transition to build system leadership capacity?

While the challenges facing local education systems are complex and serious, some of the leaders in our workshops were keen to strike a positive tone, pointing out the importance of articulating the changes heralded by the White Paper as an opportunity, rather than a threat. They saw that the changing role of local authorities presented a time-limited opportunity to deploy their resources in a radically different way to build up the capacity, expertise and skills of current and prospective system leaders. They felt this was a key priority – even a professional duty – in order to ensure that local education systems were able to sustain high-quality education and improve outcomes for young people as the traditional role of the local authority diminished.

"We have the opportunity to do things differently, to work with school leaders in a different way. We should be thinking about how we can use the next two years to build the capacity of system leadership within our local areas."

"As local leaders, we should not just see the next period as one of challenges, but as one of real opportunity. We have the opportunity to do things differently, to work with school leaders in a different way. We should be thinking about how we can use the next two years to build the capacity of system leadership within our local areas."
Local education leader

4. How can local education systems ensure that there is clear accountability and, where necessary, challenge?

Participants were of the view that many school leaders, governors and staff, through the experience of system leadership, school-to-school support and/or peer review, had become skilled in providing highly effective school improvement support to their peers in other schools. They also noted, however, that often school leaders were less sure of their role in providing tougher messages to peers locally, for example in instances of serious under-performance. They were keen to explore how, as local education systems become more autonomous and the local authority role in relation to school improvement and intervention changed,

schools would be held accountable and by whom. Clarifying accountability to peers, to the local system, to Ofsted and to the Regional Schools Commissioners was an issue that was consistently identified to be of profound importance over the next five years if local education systems are to flourish within a more decentralised landscape.

5. How can local education systems link education improvement partnerships with other functions, including place planning and support for vulnerable young people?

Lastly, participants noted that it was important to consider how education improvement continued to be linked to local authority responsibilities relating to place planning and support for vulnerable young people. While the way in which these functions are carried out in the future may be different, participants widely recognised the importance of aligning work in these areas, and indeed linking this to the work of other local services, such as health and children's social care services, in order to achieve the best overall outcomes for young people.

Theme 2 Developing robust, purposeful, sustainable partnerships within local education systems

6. How can local education systems best facilitate and strengthen partnership working where it is in its infancy?

While there were many examples of effective, purposeful partnership working, some colleagues reflected that their local education systems were very much at the beginning of their journey towards broad and deep school partnerships. These were often local systems in which there was not a culture of formalised school-to-school collaboration and existing networks that could form the foundations for new school partnerships. They saw that the challenge here was not simply that the partnerships were insufficiently mature or well-established to provide the breadth and quality of school improvement support locally. The challenge was also one of the willingness and readiness of school leaders, governors and staff to work in a more collaborative, partnership-based way; and the role of local authority leaders in facilitating this transformation.

Other local education systems described strong differences in terms of the nature and effectiveness of partnership working between schools of different phases. In some, partnership working was often better established among primary schools. In others, however, the core challenge for the local education system is helping primary school leaders and governors think through the implications of the changing role of the local authority and make decisions about the partnerships of which they would be part in the future.

In all cases, there was a clear acknowledgement of the 'competition/collaboration' tension that existed between schools. This was particularly the case where the developing practice of peer review requires transparency between schools and an 'access all areas' commitment when jointly reviewing each other's practice. The development of memoranda of understanding, with clear protocols on behaviour and confidentiality, goes some way to addressing this but it remains an issue that all systems, as they mature, will need to address.

7. In parallel, how can local education systems strengthen partnerships that are superficial, cosy and lack purpose?

Another common concern among the leaders we spoke to was that previously strong accountability relationships between schools and the local authority were being replaced by superficial and cosy 'clubs' of school leaders. In these local education systems, it was not the buy-in to the principle of partnership working that was lacking, but rather the lack of focus and challenge needed to be purposeful, and the alignment of roles between these different clubs.

The leaders attending our seminars predicted that this could present a risk that schools may spend a lot of valuable time involved in partnerships that were not deep, robust and purposeful and therefore not contributing as effectively as they might to sustainable local educational improvement. Two strong messages stressed to us by leaders at both seminars were that really effective school partnerships required both:

a. A compelling purpose and vision, focussed on improving outcomes; and

b. The time to mature and build the trust necessary to sustain highly-effective partnership working.

8. How can partnerships within local education systems identify and respond quickly to weak and vulnerable partners?

We have mentioned above a key question about accountability at the level of the local education system.

There is no doubt that the role of many local authorities in monitoring school performance and identifying the early warning signs of slippage will reduce significantly. As schools increasingly work together within partnerships a key responsibility will be looking out for signs of partner schools

becoming vulnerable. External inspection and analysis of published performance data will continue to play a role, but the ability of partner schools to have forensic conversations about areas for development (for example through the practice of peer review) will be vital. Without this explicit remit, it is unlikely that system leadership and school improvement resources will be deployed before decline reaches crisis point.

9. How can local education systems quickly identify, disseminate and use knowledge about what makes partnerships effective?

As local education systems evolve over the next few years, the nature of leadership and governance within and across schools will also, by necessity, change. In order to sustain high-quality teaching and learning in schools, it will be imperative that we marshal what is known already about effective leadership and governance of partnerships, and enable this to be disseminated to prospective partnerships and aspiring executive leaders.

In a landscape where many schools will be moving towards increasingly formal partnerships, important questions include:

- How we can form partnerships which are effective now but, in time, may mature into trusts or alliances;

- What the key characteristics are of newly-established and effective trusts, clusters and alliances;

- How to grow from a three-school MAT to a six-school MAT;

- How that differs when a MAT grows from six schools to 10;

- What the leadership skills are of leaders and governors within partnerships at these different stages of their development; and

- How to reduce the risk of clusters, trusts and partnerships becoming isolated and how collaboration between school groups might be fostered.

Answering such questions will be of great practical use in the day-to-day work not only of those working day-to-day to shape and develop their partnerships, but also strategic leaders within local education systems and partners such as the Regional Schools Commissioners and Ofsted.

They will also be vital for schools, MATs and TSAs in terms of how they develop the skills of working in and leading groups of schools for those now entering the profession, and how they articulate the career pathways, opportunities and expectations for aspiring middle, senior and executive leaders.

Leaders at our seminars urged a degree of caution when talking about the opportunities presented by schools working in partnerships. There are, they agreed, many benefits that schools have found through collaboration. They are not, of themselves, a guarantee of continuing improvement and effectiveness. The key message was that in order to maximise their effectiveness, partnerships must be focused on outcomes, underpinned by deep commitment, and with the right leadership and governance.

10. How can local education systems develop local partnership capacity, rooted in the local context?

Lastly, participants described how they were working through questions about how they could build 'partnership capacity' that was rooted in the local community. Some colleagues described in detail the work that they had done to develop local multi-academy trusts to act as sponsors of schools that had got into difficulty. Others articulated a related but distinct set of challenges: namely that of the 'stubborn standalone school'. The challenge as described to us was how to engage highly-performing individual schools that were not necessarily keen to get involved in system leadership and in supporting weaker schools. Overall it was felt that we still don't have a clear articulation of the benefits to such schools behaving in this way, sufficient empirical evidence of the impact of this approach or the necessary levers to make it more likely that all schools will willingly play a system role. This has clear implications for the broader educational research agenda.

Part 2 Making sense of the local landscape

So how can we bring together the messages we heard from participants at our two seminars with the vision set out in the White Paper? How can we begin to make sense of this new local landscape? And how will local education systems be able to chart a course through this new landscape effectively?

One possible starting point is to set out some of the principles which we believe might guide the work of local education systems over the next few years. There will be continuity here with the direction in which some authorities have been moving in recent years, and there will be new principles too.

We explain below what we believe some of the most important principles will be and how this might set out a framework for the work of a local education system. In addition, we outline below some of the most pressing questions that local system leaders will be grappling with in order to make an effective transition.

Re-thinking educational improvement in local education systems

Our emerging view is that there are four principles that will enable local education systems to establish new ways of working. These are:

1. Ensuring there is a crystal clear strategic vision and an appropriate vehicle for change;

2. Developing system leadership and collaborative capacity;

3. Giving explicit focus to developing a culture of trust-based professional accountability; and

4. Seeing the bigger picture by planning and acting regionally.

The graphic below seeks to summarise these principles alongside the development of sustainable partnerships and ways of working:
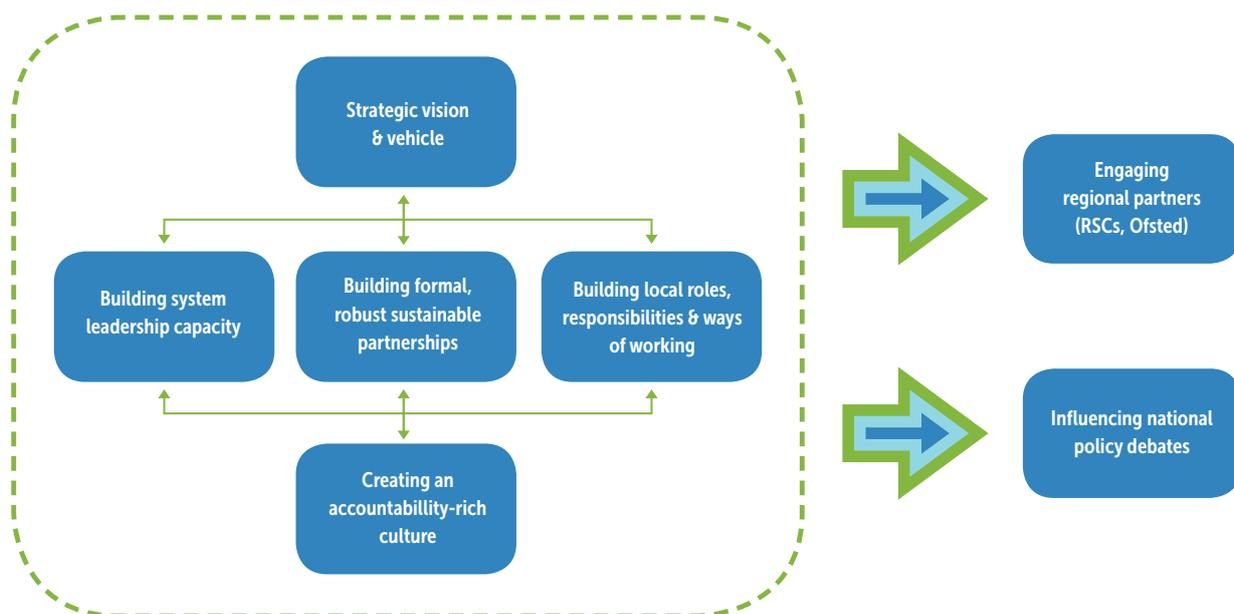
Principle 1: vision and vehicle

The vision has to be compelling and bring strategic coherence to what risks being a fragmented system at local level. One local education system leader summed this up well: 'we have a system led by some school leaders, not a schools-led system at the moment'. Strategic clarity and coherence breaks down barriers and create links between different partnerships, alliances and trusts. The vision for the local education system is more likely to be effective if it explains not only what the system is trying to achieve but also how schools and the authority will be working in this new system and why they should do so.

A 'strategic vehicle' means local education systems identifying a key initiative or establishing a strategic group in order to provide a focal point and catalyst for further activity. Colleagues discussed how their work to develop school partnerships, area-wide peer review initiatives or establish strategic stakeholder decision-making groups had provided such an opportunity. The focus of effort on this initiative provides a common purpose and gets buy-in for the wider transformation programme.

'We have a system led by some school leaders, not a schools-led system at the moment'
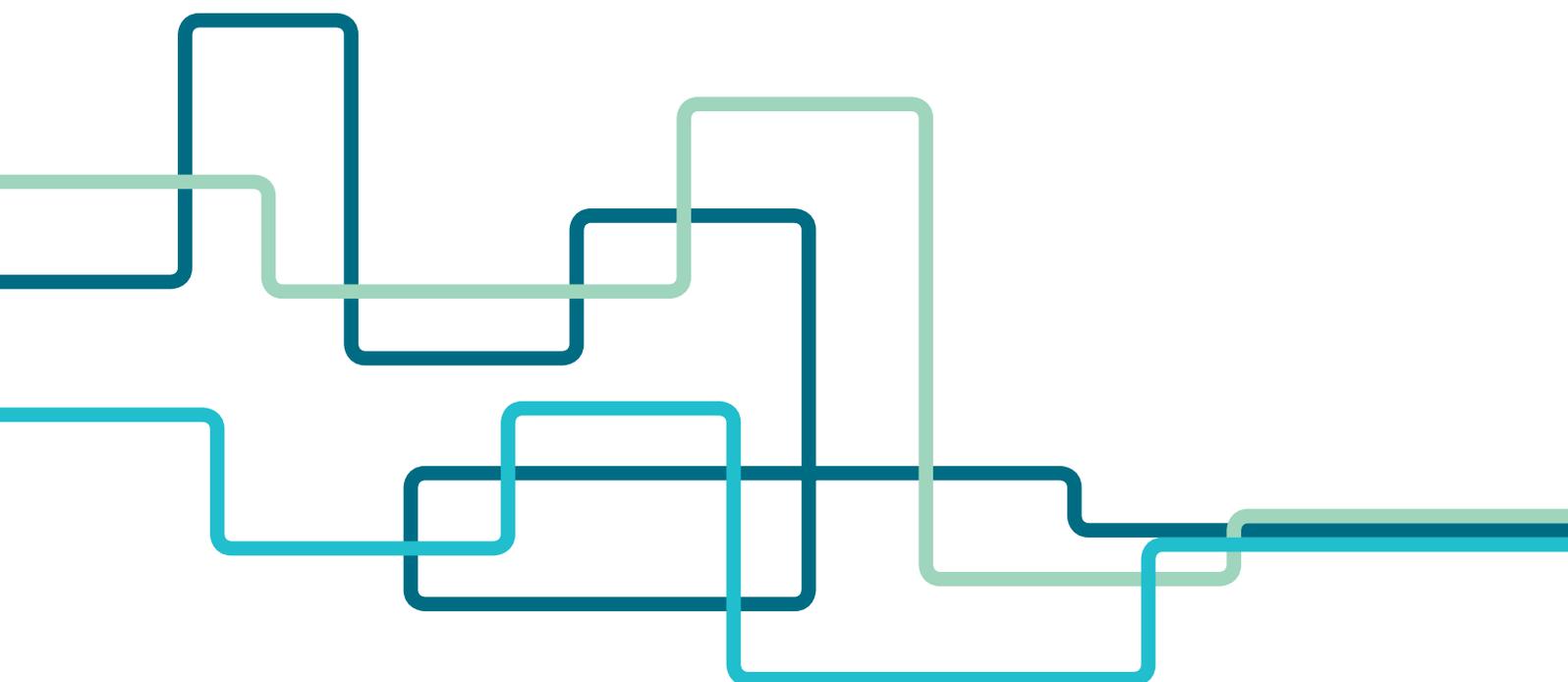
Case study

Kent Leaders in Leadership (Kent Association of Head teachers, Kent and Medway Teaching School Network and Kent County Council)

Through a collaborative partnership between school leaders, teaching schools and Kent County Council the vision to build a vibrant self-improving education system in Kent is being underpinned by a leadership strategy 'Kent Leaders in Leadership'.

The strategy is designed to meet the challenges leaders face as they engage in their complex roles. It is also designed to address the leadership challenges of the county including:

- Attracting high quality leaders to Kent

- Retaining and growing effective leaders and enabling more to influence the wider system in Kent and beyond

- Ensuring support for leaders' development throughout their careers

- Overcoming the isolation of some school leaders

- Achieving the right balance between challenge and support.

In addition the partnership is committed to create an environment for Kent leaders characterised by:

- High levels of trust and transparency between schools and between schools and the Local Authority

- A fundamental commitment from all partners in this strategy to support leadership development

- The opportunity to request and provide support in the spirit of collective moral purpose and shared responsibility for all children across the County

- Mutual respect and concern for the wellbeing of leaders

- An outward facing County committed to learning from, and contributing to, other self improving school systems

- Opportunities to both learn from and contribute to, research and practice in other education systems in the UK and internationally.

The strategy covers three interdependent strands and is for leaders at all levels including chairs of Governors. It offers leaders the opportunity to:

- Be involved in research, networked and online communities

- Engage in, and facilitate, leadership development as an aspirant, serving or system leader

- Train as a coach and have access to coaching from a serving leader, provide and receive school based support and engage in robust and high quality peer review

The next stage will be to build coherent and comprehensive system leadership across the county, and the role and remit of Kent Association of Headteachers in partnership with the LA will be pivotal in achieving this.

Principle 2: system leadership and collaborative capacity

Time and again, we encounter three common areas where local education systems have insufficient capacity to establish the momentum for change.

The first area focuses on building system leadership capacity. Over the next five to ten years, more and more school leaders will need to lead not just one school or setting, but to lead or work across multiple organisations. A key role for the local education system will be to develop and nurture future system leaders, establish clear expectations about what skills are needed in these crucial collaborative roles and explain how local career paths will offer the routes to system leadership. These will not just be about becoming a CEO of a multi academy trust. For many school leaders, it might be developing the skills to lead a teaching school alliance or to provide support and challenge to other schools as a National or Local Leader of Education.

Case study

Maximising coherence and impact of city-wide system leadership: Liverpool

Within Liverpool, there is a full service school improvement offer (SIL), as well as seven teaching school alliances. As teaching schools had been designated and alliances formed, the city found that there were some overlaps in the respective offers of support and continuing professional development (CPD) from the alliances. This was creating an area of potential contention and meant the city was not maximising the impact of its system leadership capacity to benefit Liverpool schools. As such, the local authority and the teaching school alliances came together to focus on developing a shared vision for how the alliances would together deliver a comprehensive offer of CPD and school-centred initial teaching training for Liverpool schools. Working together to develop a shared strategy has had three discernible benefits. First, it has been powerful in ensuring that each teaching school develops a clear and defined role, which complements rather than overlaps with those of the other alliances. Second, it has ensured that the city can articulate a clear core offer of the support that is available to all Liverpool schools. Third, it has also opened up a wider set of opportunities for system leadership so that the city becomes 'a schools-led education system as opposed to an education system led by some schools'. To take this agenda forward, the city is now developing some formal protocols and accountability measures to underpin this shared vision and strategy, and ensure the strategic deployment of system leaders.

The second area focuses on building formal, robust, sustainable partnerships. Many schools have become increasingly confident at developing and working within partnerships over recent years. Partly this has been due to the prevailing direction of travel, and partly because schools recognise the benefits of working in partnerships – from informal networks to tightly structured trusts. While the nature of these partnerships can vary greatly the activities and benefits collaboration can bring present real opportunities for improvement.

Greater range of CPD opportunities	**Succession planning and leadership development**	**Peer challenge, observation, planning and support**
Improving teaching and learning	**Support for vulnerable schools**	**Helping increase pupil progress**
Wider curriculum opprtunities for students	**Economies of scale through shared services**	**Assisting staff retention**

What do schools say about the benefits of working in partnerships? (Source: Isos research)

The challenge for many local education systems will be how to ensure these partnerships are both sustainable over time (not simply based around strong personal relationships between individual school leaders) and robust, so that members of the partnership feel responsible for each other's improvement. For rural areas, linking small schools effectively will be a challenge; for urban areas, it will be about navigating the range of overlapping partnerships. The best peer review models offer much in terms of developing strong and trusting relationships between schools based on open sharing of data and performance and a long-term commitment to sharing support to improve.

Third, building local roles, responsibilities and ways of working. A common approach among local authorities is to work jointly with school leaders to develop strategic groups – improvement boards, local learning partnership boards or improvement partnerships – to provide oversight of the new school improvement landscape. As local systems establish these functions there will be significant work to do in developing how the different groups and individuals will work together,

where their responsibilities will lie and how these will change over time, and how to establish ways of taking decisions collectively in the best interests of the local education system. The governance function of these groups supports the local education system's critical role in helping to broker and co-ordinate its partnerships. This is necessary to:

- Avoid schools becoming isolated and partnerships lacking purpose;

- Help broker intensive or specialist support from elsewhere in the local system if a partnership is unable to service its own needs;

- Make sure all of the local education system's resources are put to use and that duplication and inefficiency is minimised;

- Spot trends and share costs for system-wide activities; and

- Set local strategic priorities, provide a forum to communicate the priorities to schools and to hold stakeholders to account for delivering on these priorities.

Case study

Essex school-led improvement system

Essex have taken a pro-active approach to engage schools through a number of inter-related strands that aim to establish a local system in which schools are working closely together and supporting and holding each other to account. Key aims are to ensure that individual schools do not become isolated, and that the local system can build sustainable models of school-to-school support. Together, the local authority and schools are:

• Developing a detailed vision for a schools-led system in Essex

• Ensuring that all schools are part of a local cluster. Clusters have been incentivised to work on school improvement projects together through competitive grants of up to £25,000

• Supporting schools to work together in partnerships through peer review. Essex have established a number of pathfinder clusters to develop an approach to peer review that can be taken up by groups of schools across the county

• Establishing partnership structures to enable the local authority and schools to work closely together. A 'Schools-Led Improvement System Project Board' has been established that brings together teaching schools, the headteacher associations, governors, and the local authority

Essex have commissioned joint support from Isos and Education Development Trust to help develop this activity. Education Development Trust are training schools as part of their Schools Partnership Programme to develop the skills and capacity to undertake really effective peer review. This is jointly helping to implement the vision for the schools-led system in Essex, supporting the work of the Project Board, and helping develop new partnership structures.
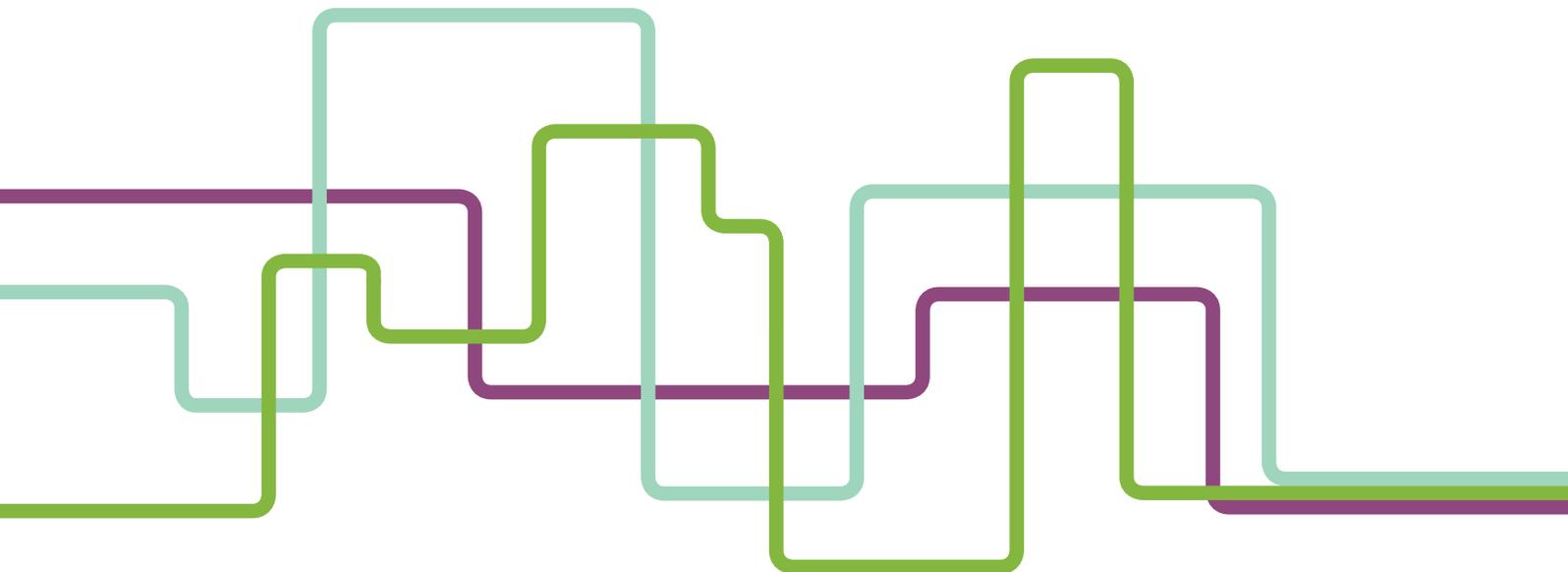
Principle 3: trust-based professional accountability

The most effective local education systems are characterised by an accountability-rich culture based on professional trust and a commitment to improving outcomes for the young people. Making this visible requires three practices:

- Open data-sharing between groups of schools that enables them to commission and seek support for their needs as well as highlight their expertise;

- Transparency about the development needs for groups of schools and settings with a focus on organisational improvement and the progress of pupils; and

- Determination that vulnerable pupils and vulnerable schools will be supported and helped to improve, not isolated or ignored.

This does, however, take time to develop. A consistent theme in our workshop was the ease with which trust could be damaged when performance data was being shared. In an accountability-rich culture, how the local education system is then able to bring the capacity that it has to support individual school and system needs and address vulnerability is one of the most significant challenges in the transition to these new ways of working. In all cases a mature dialogue about the dynamics between approaches to local peer review, accountability and improvement, and how these relate to national accountability systems involving the RSC and Ofsted was seen as urgent.

Case study

Getting Better Together, a framework for reviewing the quality, health and maturity of the self-improving education system in Cumbria

The Cumbria Alliance of System Leaders (CASL) and 3 Local Alliances of System Leaders (LASLs) are Cumbria's response to the development of a county wide self-improving education system. Cumbria is currently working to develop an Accountability Framework that will work at school/ cluster/ LASL/ CASL and county level. This will build on and strengthen the current approach to accountability that works through the LASL and CASL structure.

This framework is designed to enable each level of the system to be aware of its strengths and areas of development and is designed to help individuals and groups to hold themselves and others to account for improvement. It is deliberately designed to provide a 'health check' on the system at cluster, rather than solely at individual school level, and is currently being developed and trialled by nine clusters of schools.

The framework is built around three dimensions that look at pupil performance, the quality of challenge, in particular the quality and impact of the Cumbria peer review model and the quality of support, including an assessment of the maturity of clusters and their capacity to be self-improving.

The framework will be tested and refined throughout the academic year 2016 / 17 and it is expected that all clusters will have adopted it by September 2017.

Principle 4: regional working

Just as authorities have worked together across regions or sub-regions to develop responses to common challenges, TSAs are increasingly working together across regions. Sharing resources to develop a SCITT programme, enabling greater access to school improvement support or shaping a regional professional development programme around SEND were all reported as reasons that alliances have come together. Over time, it is very likely that local education systems too will increasingly work together to enable greater access to professional development, to share school improvement support, to liaise and work with new regional players such as the RSCs, and to develop solutions across a region to recruitment and retention challenges. For some regions over time this joint working may also become part of initiatives to devolve powers.

Case study

Developing a regional approach to supporting educational improvement: The North West

Following external scrutiny of the region, strategic education leaders have sought to work together to drive improvement and ensure there is consistent and high quality of education across the North West region. Central to this is the role of the North West School Improvement Partnership Board. The Board is chaired by former Education Secretary Baroness Estelle Morris, and includes representation from schools-led partnerships, local authorities, diocese Ofsted and the office of the Regional Schools Commissioner. Partners have worked together to identify a set of shared regional priorities, and are now focusing on three key priorities.

First, they are seeking to develop a core strategic plan to deliver improvement on shared priorities, such as closing the gap, that the Board will oversee and that will be taken forward by key partners. Second, they are working to develop a way to pool intelligence about the 'health' of the education system across the region, which could then inform targeted action to bring about rapid improvement through, for example, sub-regional challenge boards. Third, members of the Board are working to maximise alignment between the educational improvement agenda and the devolution agenda, particularly in relation to fostering skills, employment and economic growth.

Key questions and next steps for leaders of local education systems

The above lays out what we believe are the principles that will be crucial for local education systems to work to as they develop over the next few years. To help align their work against these the principles, we think there are some key questions that local education system leaders will want to consider in this transition phase:

- Does your system already have a partnership structure that involves schools, settings, the authority and other key players locally? If not, how is this being developed?

- How is your local education system actively developing trusting and collaborative relationships, rather than simply hoping these will arise? How do leaders lead by example?

- How is your system consulting and engaging widely so that it can adopt an appropriate 'strategic vehicle' around which to drive change?

- How is your local system developing a compelling vision for the future? How is this being communicated?

- How well does your local system understand the system leadership and collaborative capacity it already has available? From this, what additional capacity does it need to develop?

- How will you be able to demonstrate 'quick wins' to maintain momentum? And over the longer term, how will your local system evaluate the impact of its work – to ensure there are real improvements in teaching and learning, and outcomes for children?

- How is your local education system looking outwards and understanding how other similar systems are managing change?

From here, what are the likely next steps? We recognise that many local education systems will have the capacity and expertise they need to develop solutions to these challenges. We also understand that for others, some external support might be beneficial: to provide much needed additional capacity, assistance in developing local solutions or comparisons with what has worked in similar contexts elsewhere. That is why Education Development Trust and Isos Partnership are working in partnership in this area to make a joint offer to local systems to achieve two aims. Firstly to support local systems in achieving the sort of strategic coherence which supports successful change through a clear vision, transition plan, governance arrangements and effective support. Secondly, to help to develop robust and accountable partnerships through the practice of a locally developed peer review model drawing on Education Development Trust's tried and tested Schools Partnership Programme. This combination of a strategic drive and peer review for local clusters, as well as the opportunity to continue to learn from each other, will be vital as we work together to continue providing an excellent educational experience for all children.

If you have found this think-piece thought provoking and would like to discuss any of the themes highlighted, please contact Ben Bryant (ben.bryant@isospartnership.com) or Matt Davis (mdavis@educationdeveopmenttrust.com). Additional contact details overleaf.

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