



Bits & Pieces: No.5

The views expressed in this report are based on discussions at the **Staff College Summer Think Tank: “Towards excellence and equity for all: Educational innovation in changing times on 23rd and 24th August 2016”**. The Think Tank was attended by 23 senior leaders in children’s services, from local authorities across England.

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Current concerns

A consistent theme for senior leaders was a sense of continuing and significant change, characterised by further reorganisation and restructuring, adapting to new roles – for themselves and/or others – and the search for new, often more collaborative and school-led, improvement models.

Increasingly, local authorities are preoccupied by the need to fashion a degree of coherence within their local area to what continues to be a diverse, sometimes fragmented, “middle tier”. The challenge is to work in a locality with a wide range of key players, including school leaders and the Regional Schools Commissioner to help shape a middle tier that is best suited to the distinctive character of the area. Participants also recognise that, by the nature of their role, most school leaders do not instinctively think strategically beyond the boundaries of their own school, partnership, alliance or Trust.

Responding to the challenges

Central to the school improvement endeavour is the LA’s role in brokering, supporting and, where necessary, building new partnerships and alliances around a shared sense of moral purpose. Keeping the system safe while securing fundamental change poses a number of challenges:

- Engaging multiple stakeholders, each with potentially different or even competing values and priorities
- Fostering mature and trusting collaboration between schools that can accommodate the “sharp edges” required to provide effective challenge where needed to secure improvement. In some areas, for example, National Leaders of Education and other system leaders appear more comfortable undertaking a support and challenge role with schools outside rather than within their own locality
- Resisting the urge to pursue unrealistically tidy or elegant solutions in a VUCA¹ world, tolerating instead a degree of messiness that is inevitable in a world in which they have to share and/or cede control as partnerships and alliances evolve across and beyond administrative boundaries. The need is to find ways to ensure that these emerging models are effective in securing a good education for all learners and represent the best and most equitable use of public funds.

As might be expected, LAs are at different stages in a journey the direction of which is shaped significantly by their local context, history and traditions. There was a general consensus of the risks involved if LAs *sleepwalk into a new system, rather than being at the centre of shaping any new arrangements with a focus on outcomes and impact.*

LAs recognise the need to respond to the changes proposed in the Education White Paper in a considered and measured way and have advised school leaders in their area to do the same. Some LAs report a shortage of suitable academy sponsors willing to take on some of the most challenged schools in their area. Others, suggest that in some cases faith schools’ options are being limited by the position taken by their diocese, e.g. around joining a MAT that is not predominantly made up of and led by Church schools.

¹ Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity.
See http://thestaffcollege.uk/wp-content/uploads/VUCA_publish.pdf



Some LAs are at a relatively advanced stage in their thinking about the steps that they need to take to prepare the ground for establishing a LA led/sponsored MAT. Newcastle City Council, for example is considering externalising some of the Council's key functions and, despite the complexities involved, see this as a structure around which it might build a MAT. Others, such as Lincolnshire County Council identify potentially significant risks, particularly in relation to the likely size and/or character of the group of currently maintained schools likely to be involved and the impact on the LA sponsored MAT's ability to be effective.

The future role of education

Charles Leadbeater² suggests that radical innovation often comes from places with huge need, unmet latent demand and not enough resources for traditional high cost solutions. In contrast he challenges a traditional model of education as an inheritance from the past that has failed to reach those it needs to serve most or, indeed, address the deep education inequalities that remain. In its place, he argues for an education model based more on pull than push - one that engages and motivates learners through productive activity that is intrinsically interesting and relevant to their lived experience. Furthermore, he highlights the need for education innovation that reinvents how schools operate, supplements formal education, e.g. through family-based learning and transforms education by finding new and different ways to enable learning to take place.

Participants questioned the extent to which the range of models that have emerged in England have substantively changed the way in which education is delivered, citing constraints associated with largely compliance-based regulation and inspection and evidence of a two-tier education model developing that risks disadvantaging vulnerable learners. They felt that there was an opportunity for LAs to construct a new narrative to reflect the collective will of the local area, a narrative more attuned to the times that champions excellence, equity, and innovation during a period of deep and sustained austerity.

The changing shape of the middle tier

National and international research such as McKinsey (2010)³ highlights the role of an effective middle or mediating tier between central government and schools in securing significant, sustained and widespread improvement in education outcomes. In particular, this middle tier plays a key role in implementing reform, co-ordinating practice and facilitating collaboration between schools.

As the middle tier becomes increasingly complex, LAs can only meet their principal statutory duties by forging partnerships and alliances with and working through a wide range of partners. Recent research⁴ describes the local authority contribution to an autonomous education system as:

- Convenor of partnerships
- Maker and shaper of effective commissioning
- Champion of children, families and the community.

2 Education innovation in the slums; TEDTalks 2010

3 How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better; McKinsey 2010

4 Action research into the evolving role of local authority in education - Final report for the Ministerial Advisory Group; ISOS Partnership 2012



Participants likened the LA's role as "glue in the system" – facilitator, shaper and engager – that is most effective when built around a compelling civic vision. This perhaps is best illustrated by the way in which the City of Leeds has built its aspiration to become a "Child Friendly City".

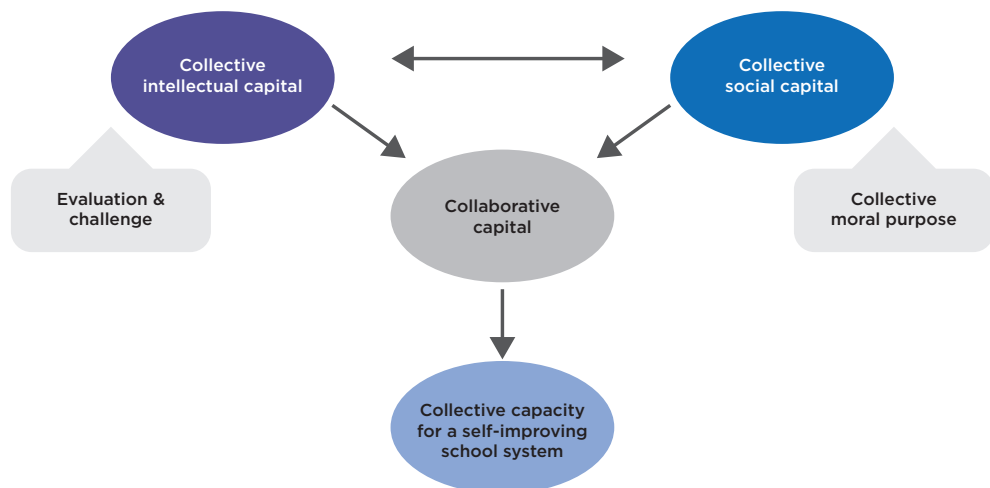
In the absence of central prescription, LAs have an opportunity to act as a catalyst for a local determination of the model and approach best suited to their local context. Messages from emerging and promising practice are to:

- Seize the agenda – don't be apologetic or wait for instruction
- Treat schools as partners and leaders in the education system
- Be clear about the local authority role in establishing and driving partnership working and develop governance with and between schools so that strong and positive relationships are less dependent on particular individuals.

A key role for LAs becomes that of encouraging school leaders to broaden their horizons as systems leaders and to think and act strategically beyond the boundaries of their own school, partnership, alliance or Trust.

David Hargreaves⁵ used his seminal article, *a self-improving school system: towards maturity*, to propose the corner-stones of a system led by schools for schools. He highlights a **collective moral purpose** – *that which motivates and sustains teachers in their professional commitment – as pre-requisite for success.*

Hargreaves identifies **high social capital** – underpinned by **trust** and **reciprocity** – as a further key ingredient of the deep partnership that lies at the heart of a mature self-improving system. The diagram below outlines his conceptual view of how to develop collective capacity for a self-improving school system.



He argues that *"Reciprocity thrives as long as people can be persuaded to collaborate with one another to improve professional practice. Trust, however, is a more subtle concept and is established much more slowly."*

5 David Hargreaves; *A self-improving school system: towards maturity* 2012

Hargreaves suggests that a cultural shift is needed to create a context for effective collaboration in which innovation can thrive and challenge is readily accepted. The challenges in making the vision a reality, include the following:

- A school-led model challenges LAs, school leaders and other partners to reach a new settlement, based upon a common moral purpose and principles, underpinned by a willingness to subjugate the interests of the individual school to the common good. The LA has a critical leadership role in matching and shaping community expectations as austerity bites ever deeper and the public sector shrinks - recognising that schools, acting collectively, may be best placed to step into the middle tier space vacated by LAs. This assumes that most, if not all, school leaders have or can develop, the capacity - and appetite - to assume collective responsibility for the wider wellbeing of the communities they serve
- Increasingly diverse accountability arrangements must recognise and accommodate fundamental change and help to reinforce the alignment between excellence and equity that characterises the best education systems across the world. Key performance measures must reflect a collective responsibility for school effectiveness and an urgent priority must be to clarify the various regulatory roles and accountabilities of, e.g. OfSTED, the Office of the Schools Commissioner and Academy Chains ⁶.

Lincolnshire Learning Partnership and Camden Learning demonstrate how two LAs with sharply contrasting contexts are collaborating with school leaders to build models for school improvement that will increasingly be *led by schools for schools*:

- Lincolnshire is a large, diverse shire authority. Its long-standing school improvement contract with CfBT is coming to an end. This, along with some recent education performance challenges represented a compelling case for change. The LA decided that, rather than stepping back into the space vacated by CfBT it should collaborate with school leaders to design a school-led model - the Lincolnshire Learning Partnership (LLP);
- Camden is a small, diverse and high performing inner London authority. It has a relatively low number of academies of which to date none are converter academies. The Council is passionate about Camden learners and largely resistant to the academy agenda. The LA wished to reorganise its approach to school effectiveness and free up capacity and, with schools, co-designed Camden Learning as a legal entity to reinforce an already strong schools led partnership.

Each case study highlighted opportunities and challenges specific to its particular context. However, common themes also emerged:

- At the heart of both examples is the LA's willingness to embrace change and show real leadership, ceding territory where necessary to help achieve a common goal. This was helped by school leaders' interest in and commitment to developing a school led model
- Both LAs had recognised the need to invest time, energy and resource in building strong and sustainable relationships with and between school leaders, based upon equality, trust and reciprocity
- The models help to strengthen alignment with Teaching Schools, providing a framework within which to coordinate their offer across the schools within the partnership
- Currently neither LA plans to lead/sponsor a MAT
- Both models share a clear and articulated commitment to serving the wider needs of the community.

⁶ See for example the recent report into the Role of Regional School Commissioners: House of Commons Education Committee, January 2016



What next: From fragmented centralism to connected localism

Participants expressed a renewed sense of the work that needs to be done and their role in continuing to lead change and generate the optimism and energy that will encourage partners to take collective action around a common moral purpose. They were clear that, in a VUCA world, rather than waiting for a central steer, the opportunity is there for LAs to work with others, to look forward and do what needs to be done. Collectively, this will take courage and a willingness to accept a level of risk that invariably accompanies true innovation.

Participants recognised real challenges in “selling” the vision and persuading key players, not least their Elected Members, to understand and support the need for radical change. They need to continue to exercise leadership within the middle tier at the same time encouraging others to step up to a wider systems leadership role. This ongoing role of the local authority was summarised by participants as:

- Facilitators, enablers and shapers
- Champions of equity and fairness
- Communicators
- “Crowd sorters” – identifying and releasing social and collaborative capital
- Safeguarding champions.

Overall, and despite the obvious challenges, there was a sense of optimism about a very different future for school effectiveness and that while many of the traditional LA roles were likely to disappear, whatever model of school improvement is adopted, the associated skills, experience and insights of local authority ‘intelligence’ and ‘know-how’ remain highly relevant.

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