

Enabling school improvement

Research undertaken by

Isos Partnership

Research commissioned by

the Local Government Association (LGA)

The ongoing role of councils in school improvement

While the council role in education continues to evolve, one thing that has remained constant is the vital role that councils play in driving school improvement to ensure that children, young people and their families all have access to a good school place.

Bringing strategic clarity and coherence to local education systems, councils act as independent and impartial brokers and evaluators for school improvement support, resulting in stronger support for schools.

In their efforts to drive up school standards, councils have taken a variety of different approaches to developing effective school improvement systems, responding differently to the challenges facing the education system.

Our research, informed by fieldwork discussions with a sample of eight local areas (Cumbria, Dorset, Hampshire, Liverpool, Somerset, Tower Hamlets, West Sussex and Wigan) and supported by discussions with other areas across the country, shows that there are eight key issues:

- local systems are at different stages and taking different approaches in the transition to becoming more autonomous
- in the majority of local areas, strategic partnerships have been formed to facilitate and foster a shared, system-level vision for school improvement
- most local areas we visited were continuing – and planned to continue – to offer local authority school improvement services
- there was less evidence of local systems establishing approaches to the development of system leadership capacity
- most local systems had models of and approaches to school improvement that would be familiar to schools and local authority advisers
- local systems had been planning for reductions in funding and there was uncertainty about the future
- traded services were both complementing and conflicting with other school improvement offers
- local authorities have an important role to play in the local school improvement system.

Although councils are at different points on their journeys there are a number of key themes that can be found across all effective school improvement systems.

The conditions needed to establish effective local school improvement systems

An effective local school improvement system will have a range of features including:

- strong relationships between schools, academies, the LA, and other local and regional partners
- being focussed on context and place, and taking account of these contextual factors in developing an effective local vision
- clear local priorities and clarity about roles and responsibilities
- high-quality school improvement capacity, utilising school and other capacity, and effectively marshalling limited resources

- evidence of impact in improving outcomes, developing school leadership and capacity, and strengthening partnership working
- supporting all children in the local area, including the more vulnerable.

There will of course be differences in emphasis and priority between the conditions, according to the context of the local system, the existing relationships between schools, academies and the council, and the stage of transition. But we believe all of the following conditions will have relevance for most systems.

We believe there are nine key conditions that are important in helping to establish such systems.



Key learning

How should local systems ensure their partnerships are sustainable for the future?

One risk for the sustainability of current partnership arrangements is that they are founded on effective working between individuals. When those individuals move on, the basis of the partnership changes and possibly weakens.

That is one of the reasons why some school/council partnerships have established themselves as separate, school-owned companies. There are positive reasons for this approach but it is not necessarily the right approach for all partnerships.

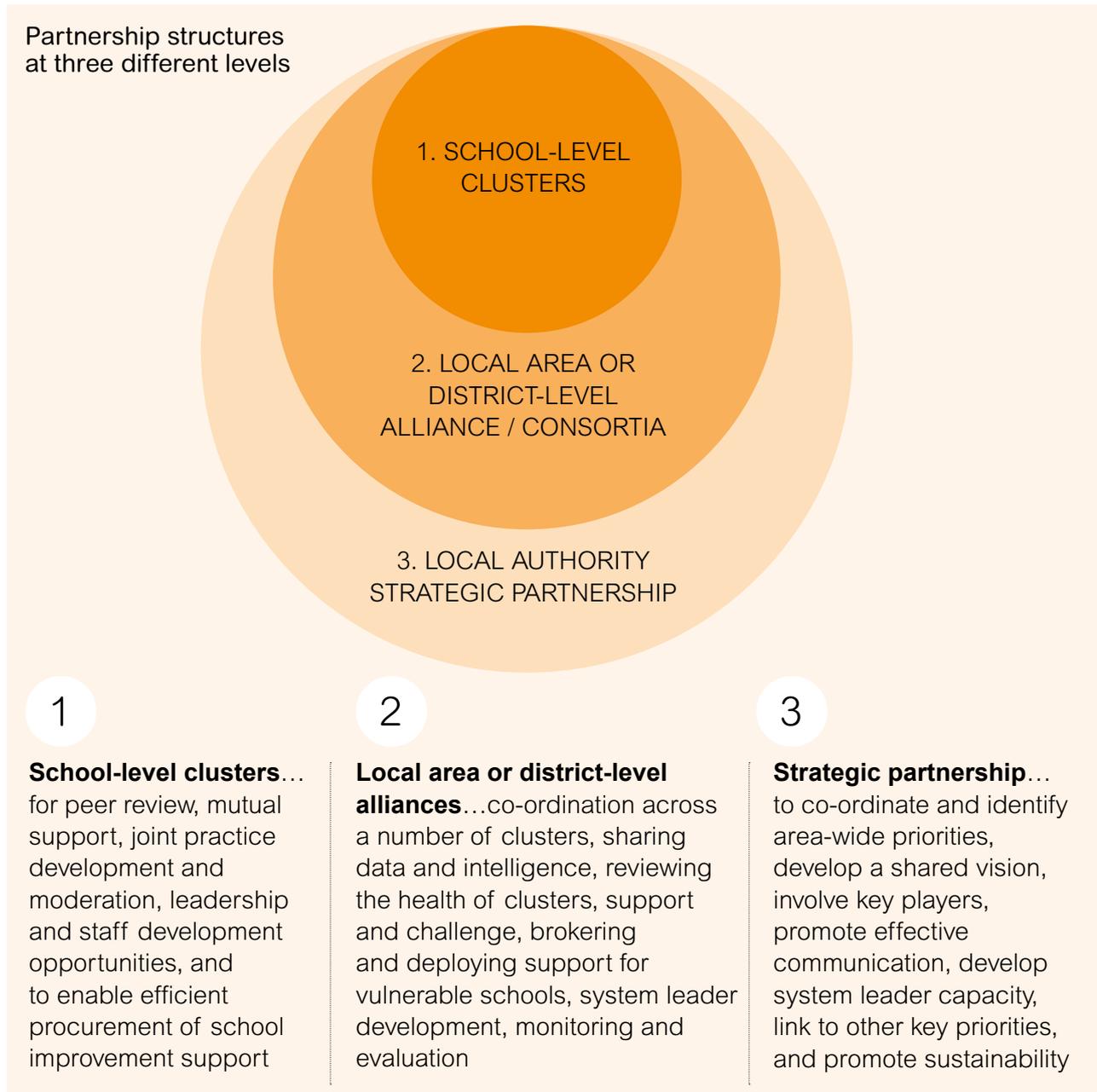
Positive considerations	Potential challenges
Hard-wires partnership working into a formal structure, giving it a greater chance of sustainability	Apparent complexity of transition process
Partnership should endure beyond existing personnel and relationships	Basic infrastructure needed to manage transition
Formal status can bring credibility with schools and external partners	Whether the new formal structure will be able to deliver a transformation in the nature of school improvement support or whether it will end up being more of the same, with a slight reshuffling of responsibilities
Schools have a clear stake in and ownership of the partnership	Future costs of school improvement support and whether schools will be willing to pay for support
Creates an entity other than the LA or an individual school that is able to employ staff and enter into contracts	Whether the local system has the capacity to deliver the support and the credibility with schools
Enables more transparent conversation with schools about what it costs to deliver certain services, what they are willing to buy and what they are not	

How can local systems work at different levels?

Local systems often work at three levels: school-level clusters, local area or district-level alliances, and local authority strategic partnerships. Between areas there are clear differences in ambition, scale, and maturity. Nevertheless, local systems will want to:

- compare their own arrangements with these structures

- review their current strategic partnership with schools and establish one if this does not currently exist
- review how their local system is operating at these three levels and identify where they need to strengthen current arrangements.



How should local systems look beyond the local area?

To be sustainable in the long term local systems must look for opportunities beyond their own local area. This might mean identifying neighbouring local systems with similar challenges, finding opportunities to share practice, or establishing where particular local systems have areas of expertise to share. This might mean looking to teaching school alliances that work beyond the boundaries of one local system. It should mean looking for sources of support and funding to help develop the local partnership further, or perhaps to work and trade across boundaries.

The use of the new £140 million Strategic School Improvement Fund is an opportunity for schools and their council to work together to identify joint priorities and activities and to make a strategic bid for resources to help develop capacity.

For the full report, including the eight fieldwork case studies, visit:

www.local.gov.uk/enabling-school-improvement



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REF: 15.15