Local Authorities as actors in the emerging 'school-led' system in England

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Abstract

Most research to date about the English government's policy to make schools independent of local authorities (LAs) has looked at the 'macro' level of national policy and at the 'micro' level of the institution. The study of which this article is a part explores changes at the 'meso' level of the locality. Over a period of six years 52 semi-structured interviews were carried out with key actors at school, LA and local system levels in three areas. Participants were chosen purposively because of their key positions in the local schooling systems. The article focuses on the role of the LA as an actor in the 'school led' system, and explores how LAs are repositioning their role and enacting influence in new ways. The article also discusses how changes in local arenas over time have been affected by the different responses to academisation of primary and secondary schools. The article uses an adaptive theory methodology (Layder, 1998) to bring together theorising set out in earlier articles and theory generated by others with theory generated from this new analysis.

Introduction

In a drive to improve educational standards many countries have focused their educational policies on making schools more autonomous, moving away from a model of localism or community schools managed by a local authority (LA) or District to an emphasis on autonomy and networking such as charter schools in the US. In what Greany and Higham (2018) describe as an 'idealised narrative', the English government calls their version of this policy a *self-improving school system'* (SISS). Glatter (2018:1) notes that the English system has always had a strong focus on autonomy and diversity, involving a delicate balance of power between central and local government. He argues that the current policies will not change that but that the policy aims to amend the balance of power in the English education system, transferring power from LAs to schools, which are in turn directly contracted to central government.

Since 2012, we have been exploring how local education systems in three locations in England have changed and adapted on the ground in response to this central government policy (Simkins et al, 2014, 2019, Coldron et al. .2014, 2015). At the start of our research, we noted that the stated aim of this policy was to create a 'school-led' system with five key features (Hargreaves, 2011; Chapman, 2015):):

- Curbing the power of local government over education through the conversion of schools into 'academies' – 'independent' state schools funded directly by the central government
- Removing the central role of LAs in the administration of the school system;
- Creating a national framework of performance targets and inspection for all state funded schools;
- Encouraging collaboration between schools to provide resources and impetus for school improvement;
- Utilising successful head teachers to be 'system leaders' exercising leadership beyond their own schools.

Academy schools were conceived in the early 2000s under the Labour government. They created a new kind of English state school funded directly by central government. The policy focused on a small proportion of schools in the most challenging circumstances. The initial programme was extended in 2010 by the Conservative party to *any* school which met certain broad conditions (Academies Act 2010). By January 2018 just over one-third of state funded schools had become academies. There was a significant difference between primary (5 to 11yrs) and secondary schools (11 to 16/18yrs) with nearly three quarters of secondaries being academies and only just over a quarter of primaries. Most schools were still under the aegis of the LA. There was also growing disquiet about what was seen as a dysfunctional fragmentation of the local systems and the disappearance of (or change to) the middle-tier, *'that space in the system where the governance and administration of education are enacted locally, take account of local circumstances and need, and recognise that decisions in relation to one school have consequences for others'* (Woods and Simkins 2014, 325).

Ball and Exley (2010, 153) have argued that policy shifts have led to an *''emergence of new state modalities, with a shift away from government towards forms of polycentric governance, where policy is produced through multiple agencies and multiple sites of discourse* generation'.These new modalities have created new definitions of the middle-tier as schools and other stakeholders are redefining relationships, locally and nationally. These changed relations are often created by explicit agreements that bind some academies together in groups such as multi-academy trusts (MATs), contracted directly by the Department for Education (DfE) to run a group of academies. Trust boards typically primarily comprise boards of lay people. Lay people have been involved in governance of the system for some time (Deem and Brehony, 1995), but the new landscape offers new challenges for them and central government hopes they will solve the problems emerging about the middle-tier.

> MATs are the only structures which formally bring together leadership, autonomy, funding and accountability across a group of academies in an enduring way, and are the best long- term formal arrangement for stronger schools to support the improvement of weaker schools. (DfE 2016 para 4.15)

MATs and free-standing academies are potentially placed in competition with each other and all are subject to a powerful accountability framework imposed by the DfE.

As intended, academisation and the creation of MATs have had significant implications for the role of LAs by removing their local monopoly on state school provision. However, LAs still have statutory responsibilities in relation to schools which require negotiation, brokerage and partnership with all schools in their area. For example, only the LA has an explicit statutory concern for the education of all the children in its area and must ensure access to suitable education for all children. Baxter *et al* (2012) suggest that the role of the LA in education is now evolving to focus on three key areas of responsibility: a convenor of partnerships; a champion of children, families and communities; and a maker and shaper of effective commissioning.

Over the course of the project reported here, the significance of certain common features has become evident in the three areas that were studied (Simkins et.al. 2019). Firstly, there is the dismantling, or radical change to, the previously existing 'middle-tier'. Secondly, there is the limited presence of large national multiple-academy trust chains, increasing emergence of local school-centred groupings and a significant proportion of academies remaining free-standing. A third feature is the different responses of secondary schools and primary schools to the policy of academisation because of the way they are differently positioned in the school field (Coldron et al, 2015). Fourthly, a key role is being played by well-positioned headteachers who exercise considerable influence in shaping local education arenas (Coldron et al, 2014). Finally, despite the original intentions of Government policy to largely remove the LA as a key player, many are continuing to play an important role in exploring what can function as a 'middle-tier' in the current system (Lubienski 2014; Woods and Simkins 2014). Similarly, Bryant et al (2018, 9) found that, although LAs were at different stages and taking different approaches to their new role, strategic partnerships were emerging as a key element which:

> provided the strategic structure around which schools and the LA could jointly form a vision for school improvement; provided a sense of strategic cohesion which militated against the risks of fragmentation; and …were providing the opportunities for local school improvement through commissioning, brokering and evaluating support.' (Bryant et al, 2018, 10)

Such partnerships can take various forms and fulfil various functions (Gilbert 2018) and this emerging mosaic (within which various types and sizes of mini-systems are being created and led in various ways with varying degrees and types of brokerage by LAs) is undoubtedly multifaceted. Our longitudinal study of three different Local Authority areas has sought to map these new groups, alignments and structures, and to understand the motivations that guided key actors. sought to discern what in the local contexts – for example in their unique history, geography, and demography – shaped different responses and outcomes.

We adopted an adaptive theory methodology (Layder, 1998) to focus on the ways in which the role of the LA has evolved between 2012 and 2017, and sought to address how LAs are dealing with the complexity of the 'top down' pressures from central government through the 'bottom up' creation of the local system, serving local needs, and how LA policies and actions coordinate and interact with those of other actors (MATs, headteachers etc). to influence the nature of the emerging local schooling landscapes. It is these LA responses that are the focus of this article.

Conceptualising the system

In 2015, Whitty and Wisby noted that:

> while devolution of responsibilities to individual organisations appears to offer [schools]…greater autonomy, the state retains overall strategic control by setting the

outputs that providers need to achieve and publishing details of their performance against them. (p.317)

They suggested then that this 'steering at a distance' would grow ever more complex, as the 'partnering state' changes its partners at will, making governance of the system more difficult, and perhaps more expensive (Bubb et al 2019).

Greany and Higham (2018;26) suggest that governance theory (Thompson et al, 1991; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998) provides a useful lens for making sense of the complexity and contradictions that underlie the SISS agenda. In particular, they argue that hierarchies impose control through vertical relationships and bureaucratic rules and routines; markets involve exchange and contracts; and networks involve reciprocal relationships designed to achieve mutual benefit. In a similar vein Woods and Simkins (2014) utilise three organizing themes – diversity of governance, legitimacy and agency. They contend that what we are now seeing is "an intermingling of hierarchical governance (directions and controls from central government, as well as within chains), self-governance (autonomy, and also market pressures), co-governance (networks and collaborations) and democratic governance (through the residual LA connection with education and opportunities at school level for parental, community, student and teacher participation).

Ball (2009: 100) has used the term 'heterarchies' to describe 'a new mix of hierarchy, market and network which is replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy, and/or divergent but co-existent patterns of relations'. Ball's writing can help conceptualise the narratives and influences both at national and local level, because of his focus on the ways that such narratives are legitimised through government policy (Woods and Simkins, 2014). Other authors have used the term 'co-opetition' to describe situations where organisations compete on some segments of their work and collaborate on others (Adnett and Davies, 2003; Muijs and Rumyantseva 2014). Although these scenarios have always been an aspect of many schooling localities (Glatter et, 1997; Maroy and van Zanten, 2009), emerging patterns of schooling make them increasingly likely and increasingly complex. Current policy would seem to favour forms of co-opetition strongly framed by hierarchical control from the centre.

Arguments about the changing balance between forms of co-ordination at the national level clearly have implications for how national policy impacts on configurations of the school system locally (Greany and Higham, 2018). Such a perspective conceives local arrangements as being constituted primarily from above through the combination of legal and policy frameworks that privilege certain structural forms and relationships, sustain and constrain particular actors, and create particular incentives for action. This perspective is clearly important (Ozga, 2009). However, our approach also tries to take account of the ways in which the system evolves locally as a de facto aggregation of what is actually happening in localities and the positions and decisions that local actors take. Lubienski (2014) argues that decentralization policies can set up dualities at the local level where actors have different interests and different capacities to mobilise power. All our interviewees were (at least in part in their own interests) attempting to constitute local systems in the sense of a coherent and

efficient arrangement of parts (procedures, roles, material resources) to achieve a shared purpose within the local arena. The result Greany and Higham argue is that, *"In the process the local is remade, both as a space for specific kinds of agency, and by the state defining entry conditions and regulation"* 2018, 27).

Local actors are attempting to establish new sets of local relations that embody their own visions, values and interests within the context of the imposition of national frameworks. Viewed from this 'bottom-up' perspective, the ways in which local systems are being reconfigured also needs to be placed within the context of debates about the middle-tier already alluded to. Arguments for some kind of middle-tier in a large school system are strong. Ainscow (2015, p 119) quotes the McKinsey report in describing the middle-tier as 'the integrator and mediator between the classroom and the centre', providing targeted support for schools, acting as buffer between the centre and schools and enhancing collaborative exchange between schools. As already noted a potential danger of policy in England is that the movement towards a system of 'autonomous' schools creates fragmentation by removing the role of the LA to function as the middle-tier while not replacing it with a way of fulfilling that function in a different way (Aston et al 2013; Lubienski 2014; Woods and Simkins 2014; House of Commons 2014). While former formal middle structures are being dismantled, the 'hollowing out' of LAs (Rhodes 1994) through the twin pressures of centralisation and school autonomy has created a space where a range of local actors have the opportunity to work together in conditions of potential 'co-opetition' in a heterarchical context. In particular, LAs may seek to find ways of maintaining what Hodgson and Spours (2012) define as 'democratic localism' where public value is the driving force, rather than the uneasy mix of 'laissez-faire localism' and 'centrally managed localism' where competitive values dominate (Woods and Simkins 2014).

Methodology

Our work has enabled us to illuminate and interpret these developments through a detailed longitudinal study in three Local Authority areas in England: a large rural authority (County), with a dispersed population of about 800,000; a large metropolitan authority (City) with a population of about 500,000; and a smaller unitary authority (Town) with a population of about 300,000. The diversity of the sites enables a rich exploration of the factors that shape, and interact in varied ways, in response to different contextual situations.

The rate of academisation has differed in each area with Town being close to the average for England while County and City have greater proportions of academy schools and of children educated in them

Table 1: State of academisation in each area

County	% Academy schools	% LA Maintained Schools	% Pupils in academies	% Pupils in LA maintained schools
Primary	30	70	39	61
Secondary	95	5	94	6
Combined	40	60	63	37

City	% Academy schools	% LA Maintained Schools	% Pupils in academies	% Pupils in LA maintained schools
Primary	40	60	42	58
Secondary	90	10	84	16
Combined	49	51	59	41
Town	% Academy schools	% LA Maintained Schools	% Pupils in academies	% Pupils in LA maintained schools
Primary	24	76	32	68
Secondary	75	25	76	24
Combined	30	70	50	50
England	% Academy schools	% LA Maintained Schools	% Pupils in academies	% Pupils in LA maintained schools
Primary	27	73	30	70
Secondary	72	28	72	28
Combined	35	65	47	53

Source: DfE (2018)

There was a limited presence in our areas of large national MATs, an increasing emergence of local school-centred groupings and a significant proportion of academies remaining free-standing by the time of the last interviews in 2017.

From 2012 to 2017 data has been collected annually to uncover the patterns of policy enactment within a variety of geographical, historical and policy contexts. We sought information and perspectives on local developments across both primary and secondary phases. Fifty-two semi-structured interviews with 43 key actors at school, local authority and local system levels were conducted (Table 2). Participants were chosen purposively because of their key positions in the local schooling systems and some were interviewed more than once to provide a longitudinal perspective.

Table 2: Interviews

	City	County	Town	Total
LA	5	5	7	17
Head teacher	8	4	12	24
Executive head/ CEO	2	3		5
Private/school-owned not-for-profit companies contracted to undertake LA functions	2	3	0	5
Governors	0	0	1*	1*
Total	**17**	**15**	**20**	**52**

Note: *A further two governors were interviewed together with a head teacher

These analyses span the responses of well-positioned head teachers (Coldron et al 2014), the position of primary and secondary schools (2015), an earlier consideration of the role of local authorities (Coldron et al 2015) and how primary system leaders are responding to new

school groupings (Simkins et al 2019). This paper reports a new thematic analysis designed to address the following research questions:

- What are the changing roles of the LAs as actors in emerging local schooling systems?
- How are LA responses influenced by local circumstances?
- How do LA policies and actions interact with those of other actors to influence the nature of emerging local schooling landscapes?

We use an adaptive theory methodology (Layder, 1998) to bring together our understandings drawn from previous analyses, theory generated by others (as discussed in the preceding sections) and theory generated from this new analysis. As Layder (1998, p5) explains, 'the word "adaptive" is meant to convey that the theory both adapts to, or is shaped by, incoming evidence while the data itself is simultaneously filtered through, and is thus adapted by, the prior theoretical materials'. This enables both deductive and inductive approaches to be combined and of particular relevance in this longitudinal research project enables earlier theorising to both be drawn on and adapted. The analysis was conducted in three sequential stages, comprising: a grounded thematic analysis (stage 1); development of an analytical frame related to the research questions, thematic analysis and testing of coding decisions by the study team (stage 2); and conceptual re-organisation and creation of overarching thematic categories (stage 3). Further details are set out in Table 3. As in previous analyses care has been taken to organise data so it could be read in context for each area and considered thematically across the areas. This enables interpretations to draw on rich understandings of the complex interactions of factors within each area as well as the thematic similarities between areas.

Table 3: Analytical stages

Stage	Analytical approach	Interviewees
1	**Grounded thematic analysis** to identify key themes and associated data in relation to the research questions.	3 new interviews conducted in 2017: - Senior LA officers in Town and County - Senior officer in the school-owned not-for-profit company contracted to undertake LA functions in City
2	**Development of analytical frame related to the research questions, thematic analysis and testing of coding decisions by the study team.** The analytical frame was developed iteratively from the stage 1 analysis, theorising from earlier analyses, and consideration of theory developed by others and close reading of 18 interviews.	18 interviews (14 from the period 2015-2017; 4 2012-201) from 2012- 2017 - Senior LA officers (9) - Private/school-led not-for-profit companies contracted undertake LA functions (2) - Key actors well-positioned to comment on LA activity (7 : 5 head teachers; 2 executive heads/CEOs)

3	**Conceptual re-organisation, creation of overarching thematic categories** with particular attention to recently emerging literature in the field (e.g. Greany and Higham, 2018)	As the 18 above.

The analytic frame developed during stage 3 is presented in Table 4. To illustrate the use of adaptive theory methodology, concepts and theory informing our thinking in relation to key themes are also set out in this table. It is important to note that, for clarity, we have linked concepts and theories to the themes where they have had the strongest influence on our thinking. Inevitably they also informed our thinking on other themes in our framework.

Table 4: Final analytical frame

Research question	Themes	Related concepts/ theory informing analysis
What are the changing roles of the LAs as actors in emerging local schooling systems?	• Intelligence gathering • Ensuring challenge and addressing fragmentation • Power, influence and brokerage • Local arrangements/telling a story	Governance theory (Thompson et al, 1991; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998) Diversity of governance, legitimacy and agency (Wood and Simkins, 2014)
How are LA responses influenced by local circumstances?	• Balancing acute /routine needs • Engagement: variations in/Factors influencing level of engagement • Role • Dispositions and relationships of key players • Motivation and personality	Co-opetition (Adnett and Davies, 2003; Muijs and Rumyantseva 2014) Differing interests and capacities to mobilise power (Robertson and Dale 2013) Democratic localism (Hodgson and Spours, 2012)
How do LA policies and actions interact with those of other actors to influence the nature of emerging local schooling landscapes?	• Contributions/influence of external bodies: the RSC/Ofsted • Positioning and responses of schools and MATs • Future developments	Heterarchies (Ball, 2009) The middle tier and its reconfiguration (Lubinenski 2014; Ainscow 2015) Remaking of the local as a space for specific kinds of agency (Greany and Higham, 2018).

		The partnering state (Whitty and Wisby, 2015)

The study was undertaken in accordance with the BERA guidelines for ethical research BERA, 2018). We now turn to the data, to see how the two key demands of centralisation and school autonomy have created a space where a range of local actors have grasped the varying opportunities for 'co-opetition' in a heterarchical context.

A space for LA actors in the system
Our research has sought to follow the impact of Government policy on the structure and governance of the school system in three local systems and how they might change in the future partly by understanding the motivations that drive the responses of key players. Fundamental to this has been to understand how our participants conceived the boundaries of their obligations and pragmatically assessed the level of influence they could exert. As Greany and Higham (2018) also found, these conceptions and assessments were manifested by the values and visions they expressed, and influenced by the history and context within which they worked, including political, demographic and geographic conditions.

All of the interviewees in our three LAs were working to avoid similar threats to their organisation:
- official censure for failing to fulfil their statutory duties to ensure access to suitable (i.e. high quality) education for all children in their area
- electoral censure from parents for not fulfilling their and their children's needs
- financial difficulty following significant reductions of reseources from central government
- systemic disorder because of fragmentation and a consequent breakdown in area-wide decision making, intelligence gathering, and effective school improvement measures

This is illustrated in the following accounts.

In our previous work (Coldron et al 2014) we could, despite their formal relationship of accountability to school governors, reasonably take our headteacher participants as the *de facto* main determiners of their schools' responses. This was not the case for our LA participants. While a headteacher was concerned with a relatively small organisation, a Director of Education in an LA was concerned with something much larger and more complex. Further, their formal role as officers appointed to help fulfil the duties and implement policy decisions of elected members was a real constraint. As professional advisors they had considerable influence on policy and decision making but they were not the final decision makers. The relationship between elected members and appointed officers was one to be managed. As the Director of Children's services in Town put it:

> We're accountable to politicians. A portion of those politicians hear the message or they have heard the message that all schools will be academies, and there's no real role for the local authority in education, full stop. They think, "oh great we can just move away from that area then and concentrate our resources on other things". Other politicians and certainly, obviously, people like me are a little bit more reflective on the changing role of the LA and the fact that just moving away from that will be quite a mistake.

Further, the political, demographic and geographic context in which they worked, including the effects of very large reductions in the financial resources of local government, was larger and more complex than that faced by a headteacher or the CEO of a MAT.As noted earlier a particularly significant difference was that the LA was statutorily responsible for all the children in their area while headteachers and CEOs of MATs were not. Consequently, while the formal relationship with local government was superficially the same as that between school governors and headteachers, the differences in scale and political legitimacy posed significantly different threats and opportunities. In addition, they were managing a forced loss of power in relation to other stakeholders in their field of influence while the headteachers we interviewed were managing a concomitant increase. We aimed to take these factors into account as we analysed how each of our three Las responded.

The most senior officers interviewed confirmed the very real change in their power to shape important decisions in relation to schools and a recognition of the need to adopt a different role:

> The] Schools' forum......used to be an advisory group and [the LA] made the decisions [about the allocation of finances] …but now they are the decision-makers... (County)

> … in comparison to people who have held what the comparable role would have been in the past…it is night and day really. The number of occasions where I genuinely have the power to direct someone to do something is tiny, I mean really tiny. It is all influence and brokerage really. (City).

The level of influence the LA could exert depended on how far headteachers and CEOs of trusts acknowledged its legitimacy as a partner in the running of local schools. This seems strongly to indicate that the need for such a concession put all of the power into new hands. But that was not the case. Historic habits continued to shape collaborative relations to some extent and the interests of local school leaders varied considerably. For example, the majority of primary schools and some secondary schools resisted academisation and were disposed to maintain a strong role for the LA (Coldron et al 2015). Further, the statutory duties of the LA required school leaders to acknowledge their role as partners at least concerning certain legal duties. But in addition, the professional ethic of school leaders that implied responsibility for all children in the area, together with a widespread recognition that systemic disorder in their local area was not in anyone's interests (Simkins et al, 2019) were reasons for some level of commitment to area-wide engagement including with the LA.

The LA's effectiveness as a broker depended on their being trusted to play that role but also in there being structures (and forums within those structures) where negotiation could take place. Our LAs saw their engagement in midwifing new area-wide entities as a way of filling this gap which would better enable them to fulfil their statutory duties and also put them in a good position to negotiate a new but important role. For these reasons they looked to how new bodies might be created that had legitimacy through having representatives of all local stakeholders including the LA. But they were each working in a different historic, geographic and demographic context. Consequently, there were significant differences which affected what each aimed for and achieved in this respect.

A key factor in County is geographical – it is a large rural county with small to medium sized towns distant from each other and many small villages scattered between them which makes it costly to provide transport for children to access their schools. Another factor was political policy. It had retained at the time of the research a selective system of secondary education which meant that there were never fewer than two secondary schools – a grammar and a secondary modern - even in small towns. It had also historically chosen to adopt an arm's length approach to their relationship with schools but this was changing. In addition, there were continuing challenges concerning standards across the county - it had many small schools, most of them primaries, not wanting to academise and therefore whose quality of provision was directly the responsibility of the LA when its ability to provide school improvement support and to monitor the quality of a large number of schools was greatly diminished. Also, the divided secondary sector made achieving high performance in the secondary moderns a considerable challenge. But the fact that how to improve schools improve schools and to monitor provision needed to be rethought and that everyone was worried about a dysfunctional fragmentation may explain why the LA has adapted relatively quickly to the new policy context given that the only answer was to go to the school community to broker new arrangements. The pro-active Director of Education with the support of elected members and officers set out to broker area-wide initiatives and to negotiate the establishment of what Sandals and Bryant (2014) call a 'governance model' whereby a board comprising headteacher representatives elected by their peers, alongside local authority officers, are the strategic decision-makers for local school improvement services. The Board is explicitly designed to have legitimacy by being representative of all sectors, stakeholders and geographical regions. It takes important county-wide decisions on priorities regarding school improvement and the maintenance of quality of provision and is the clearing house for commissioning support from Teaching Schools and MATs. The LA aim was clear:

> Increasingly, we're talking about integrated localism rather than fragmentation. So we absolutely recognise that it is fragmented. However, we are working really hard to ensure there is a forum for sensible decisions… I would say the learning partnership is the way we agree priorities and we share them with headteachers. (County)

County's facilitation and brokerage role was focused on establishing a fully inclusive partnership, which *'has now got a very clear improvement plan for [County], which is really wide-ranging'*. School improvement was largely being driven through peer review and the partnership commissioning projects that support the scale-up of use of research evidence. The LA has taken a central role in building this inclusive partnership by appointing former primary headteachers as system leaders who have steered and supported the development of a comprehensive school improvement offer. This has been achieved through the enactment of a deliberate strategy of including and working directly with TSAs and MATs. In common with Town and City, County faced the problem of having to depend for the provision of support for school improvement on nine local Teaching Schools all of which were formally separate and in competition for business from schools. Following negotiation with the TSAs:

> We fund now one website for the Teaching Schools to ensure that wherever possible they offer a complementary offer to schools rather than a competitive one, so that schools can begin to have a full breadth of school improvement offer through the teaching schools.…I think as a local authority we've recognised the importance of engaging with the CEOs of our MATs and challenging and supporting them really to be meeting what they need to be doing within the sector. I've just done a visit around every CEO of the MATs to talk to them about it. (County)

As this suggests County has put considerable effort into building relationships with MATs and bringing them into school improvement partnership activity. As the Director told us:

> Certainly in [County] the days of the MATs wanting freedom from the local authorities and off they go, are very different now. Our MATs tend to be as connected to me personally in my role as my maintained schools…the MATs are very comfortable about coming and saying can I have a chat about this, can we talk that through. And recognise that the local authority really is the honest broker and also is on the balcony of it looking at the dance floor and can spot some of the things that would be useful. (County)

City serves a dense population within a relatively small area. There were no grammar schools in City or nearby in other authorities, and in terms of wealth and ethnicity some schools serving predominantly mono-ethnic and/or predominantly poor or affluent communities. It was facing similar challenges too. County as a result of academisation: a majority of secondary schools being academies and a minority of primaries opting to remain with the LA; a fragmentation of the local system with an absence of area-wide decision-making structures; and a drastic reduction of resource and dismantling of previous school improvement provision. It had historically been criticised for the quality of its schools and had felt for some time under pressure to improve. The LA had historically been very 'hands-on' with its schools. Prior to the push for universal academisation it had a policy of grouping neighbouring schools into 'families' to develop mutually supporting relationships. When we began the research these had been grouped together as *localities* which the LA was trying to maintain and invigorate by devolving some decision-making powers over the Special Needs

budget together with a role to act as an intelligence gathering system by monitoring the quality of its member schools and reporting concerns to the LA. As one LA official put it:

> *What we're trying to engender is partnership structures...that will progressively take on greater responsibilities for school improvement....we have some very highly functioning localities at the moment with quite sophisticated systems of data sharing, moderation, providing peer review, exchanging staff...to localities where they (are)...not necessarily working to a clearly developed sense of where the priorities are within that area. (City)*

Faced with the need to devolve school improvement and other powers, the LA, like County and with the same motives and justification, set out, in addition to the work with localities to establish an area wide body which would give them a formal role with schools. They opted to broker a city-wide not-for-profit schools' company largely owned by the schools but in which the LA is a 20% shareholder. The legal status as a company has allowed the LA formally to delegate some of its statutory powers. The localities provided an enabling framework for some of the work of the schools' company. Like County, the LA worked at first most closely with primary school leaders and appointed a primary school headteacher to lead the development who later became the Director of the Company. His words reflect the aims of the LA to establish local order:

> organisations like this have to be the glue, if you like, that bind all of those different moving parts into one system, or the safety net, whichever metaphor you want to pick really. (City)

Town's schools, like those of City, admit all abilities but like County there is an element of selective education with a number of grammar schools in neighbouring LAs attracting Town parents. The performance of the LA's Children's Services was judged inadequate four years prior to the beginning of the research and there was a history of difficult relationships between the LA and its schools. A new management team had made good progress in restoring goodwill but the history still resonated in our interviews with school leaders. Town's population has grown and continues to grow. In the 10 years prior to our research the school population had grown by 25%. This meant that Town had continually needed to build new schools and manage allocation of children to them. Under the policy of academisation these now had to be academies. At the beginning of the period of research in 2012 the LA had set up an area wide School Effectiveness Partnership Group in order to move forward its own statutory, and to some extent, strategic, responsibilities. This consisted of the local teaching schools, the only MAT, LA advisors, primary academy representatives and the local National Leaders of Governance. LA officers interviewed knew their power was waning and were wary of the power of central government. At the same time, they were unsure what LA action would be deemed compliant with the wishes of national policy makers. They therefore sought endorsement of their plans before fully committing to them. For example, when Town sought to maximise local commitment and engagement by ensuring that the new schools were part of trusts run by outstanding schools within Town rather than national or regional chains of academy trusts they checked with DfE:

I think local democracy is…actually it's a key element of the, you know, once a child is born, a citizen is born, the process locally, localism, is that there are elected politicians who have an interest and a role in their local citizens and also in, you know, the provision of outcomes of the children and young people for whom they are responsible.(...) we felt that a presumption of expansion of existing outstanding [schools] in [Town] would keep the resource in [Town]. It would build on the strengths in [Town]…We've conveyed that approach to the DfE and we've had a letter back from the DfE, showing interest in the approach we're taking. Not indicating that it's inappropriate or unacceptable and saying that they will follow it with interest… (Town)

The continuing expansion of the school population was perceived to strengthen LA engagement with schools. By fulfilling their school planning role, the LA was able to place itself more centrally in the schools landscape:

If I sent an email out now and said "Look I'm meeting tomorrow about school place planning", every school would be here, honestly. They are absolutely obsessed about it. They're really interested in it, not least because they want to know how it might impact on the places, the number of vacant places or the supply issue. There is something very helpful for the local authority, because it's very clearly our job to secure sufficient places for children. (Town)

The approach in Town at the beginning of the research was, like City and County, to emphasise their role as having responsibility for the education of all children in their area and on this basis to seek to broker area-wide structures in which they played an integral part. But by the end of the research we detected a change in that approach that was more ambivalent about their horizon of responsibility. Following a section of the interview where the senior leader confirmed the complexity and difficulty of managing a fragmented local system -

There is no pattern…No pattern. It's a total random situation. (Town)

He suggested that it was not necessarily the LA's role to 'make sense' out of what he perceived as disorder.

…from some perspectives I think maybe we should play more of a role in trying to make more sense of this, but from another perspective I think no, this is not our agenda. This is for schools and the Regional School Commissioner to address. (Town)

Asked directly if he would accept responsibility for a hypothetical future verdict by Ofsted that schooling in Town was inadequate, his answer was strikingly nuanced:

For me that would largely depend on where the problem was. If the problem was in schools that were maintained, we have the legal duty around school improvement, I absolutely think that's quite right to take us apart on that. Are we investing the right resources? Are we doing the right thing? Is our practice up to date? Are we being

assertive enough? Are we being creative enough? But if those issues were in the academy sector, I would have to say, well what's the Regional Schools Commissioner doing to address those? Let's have a look at that response then. And for me in that context, we care for all those children who are caught up in that, but we can't take responsibility on for solving those problems.

We can only cautiously speculate about the reasons for this ambivalence – was it influenced by the fact that the interviewee's area of responsibility was now far wider than just Children's Services? Was he reflecting the ambivalent commitment noted earlier of the elected members he formally serves?? The interviewee indicated another possible reason in the contradictory implications for LAs of national policy where national and regional MATs, set up as private companies, seem to demand local public resources. As he noted, if the LA supported failing academies in their area:

> We literally will be then spending council tax payers' money improving a school that might be sponsored by [name of Academy chain] in [name of a distant county], which take a 5% cut. It's not a defendable position. (Town)

Whatever the reasons for his and the LA's ambivalence it matched the relatively undeveloped collaborative structures in Town.

Conclusion

Our LAs were working to develop local, 'bottom-up' solutions to the problems posed by the greater autonomy of schools. They saw themselves as the only actors with a statutory responsibility for the quality of education given to all children in their area, but were faced with a drastic reduction in their resources and formal power and influence. Woods and Simkins (2014:330) note that *"new patterns of governance generate roles and relationships that create – and close down – opportunities for agency, empowering some and disempowering others, and encouraging and legitimizing particular forms of behaviour"*. The LAs had reasons for both proposing area-wide co-ordinating bodies which operate 'above' school groupings and in which the LA, as advocates for all children, could demand could demand a rightful place. Claiming the moral high ground was not only 'right' but also afforded them a legitimate and important role.

The biggest change in all three areas was in who provided support for school quality and school improvement. Broadly this had previously been delivered by local government appointed advisers housed in a central resource. By the end of our research in 2017, the advisory staff structure had all but disappeared and school improvement functions had been built into new non-LA structures. None of the LAs perceived that they should compete with MATs and TSAs to provide such support but they explicitly retained a responsibility for commissioning it where they felt it was needed. This may or may not be the case in other LAs but would merit further research. Our more recent interviews which we draw upon for this article, illustrate the complexity of defining an LA's horizon and show what may be a

widening variation amongst LAs. For example, in the LAs studied here the horizon was all young people and children, and all schools in relation to their statutory duties, especially around school places.

The way educational policy is enacted in our local areas is multifaceted. The fragmentation implicit in Government policy means that the 'local' is being continuously and fundamentally redefined. That redefinition is being enacted differently in diverse local circumstances. Despite the original intentions of Government policy to largely remove the LA as a key actor they continue to be significant participants in their local systems. Local history and context are important factors in determining the role actors' play in developing a new history of local interaction. LA actors are developing governance arrangements that attempt to establish coherence by addressing the dangers of fragmentation that are present in the emerging system and that are underpinned by locally-determined concepts of public value. as Las explore their roles and problematize what is meant by the 'middle-tier' in the current system (Lubienski 2014; Woods and Simkins 2014). In some cases, the LA is developing a 'multi-dimensional middle', comprising regional agencies (DfE, Ofsted), MATs (national, regional, local), the LA itself, and other sub-LA arrangements. The way such developments progress locally are affected by capacity and by the demands of national and regional policy players. LA actors have made different judgements about how active they should be, who they should engage with, and how; but each of our LAs remained key participants with schools in the development of the new local education landscape. The academisation policy has now been vigorously implemented for nearly a decade. LA Actors in local areas have seen power shifts. As Ball (2010:14) suggests these heterarchies *"enable new forms of policy influence and enactment and enable new kinds of actors to colonize the spaces opened up by the critique of existing state organizations, actions, and actors."*

Having explored over the life of this project how a new order is being fashioned in each of our three areas, how do we judge the outcomes of this upheaval? The empowering of school leaders to take a much more decisive role in their colleagues' professional development and in monitoring and supporting the quality of their fellow school leaders through peer review and collaboration has been energising for many. But the imposition by central government of entities (TSAs, MATS) and their governance (TSAs, MATS) modelled on private companies has simultaneously introduced disincentives to collaboration that stakeholders on the ground have struggled to mitigate in order to make things work efficiently and effectively... It has also inhibited the development of locally-determined, diverse, creative and innovative kinds of partnerships with a variety of forms of governance more congenial to mutually supportive professional relationships.

A striking feature of the changes is the effect of the different responses to academisation of primary and secondary schools. This has meant that LAs have continued to have responsibility mainly for primary schools and that primary system leaders have tended to play key roles in the development of new area-wide structures while secondary heads have tended to play key roles in the development of many MATs.

Over the period of our research all of the people we spoke to, and the institutions that they led, were seeking to make things work on the ground in the sense of enabling them to fulfil their core responsibilities as they perceived them. All stakeholders recognised the following common questions in achieving this under the new dispensation:).

- **Challenge** – How can school leaders be appropriately challenged when falling short in a peer review system where peers might feel reluctant to criticise?
- **Intelligence** – How can schools that are in danger of failing be identified and helped at an early stage?
- **Equity** – This has two major dimensions. How can scarce resources be distributed to those schools that have greater needs? Secondly, equity in admissions: how can a drift towards greater social segregation be mitigated?
- **Capacity** – How can the community of schools in the area that have *de facto* different levels of capacity to participate in the new school led local system prevent a steep hierarchy of engaged and unengaged, well-positioned and poorly-positioned schools?

LAs are repositioning their role and enacting influence in new ways. A key question for further research, in addition to how far our findings are representative of what is happening across the board, is how far LAs see their democratic mandate as an important element in the arrangements they are seeking to influence. This repositioning will also be subject to central policy steers, and the capacity of local actors to react to these in a timely manner. Whether this will *'produce an orderly, equitable or intelligible system that is capable of generating trust and consent'* (Glatter 18:22), remains to be seen.

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