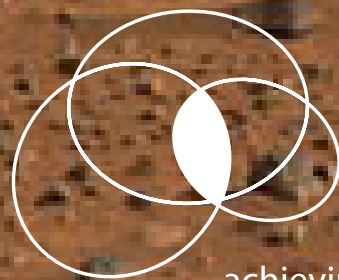


NEW TERRAIN

NEW MODELS OF EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES DELIVERY

July 2011



Aspect

achieving
change
together

NEW TERRAIN:

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1 Introduction

A commitment to raising school standards through greater school autonomy and enhanced school-to-school support, against a background of financial austerity and weaker encouragement of locally-integrated education and children's services, characterises the current approach of the coalition government at Westminster to education and children's services.

The policies of past governments have displayed variations in the balance between centralised and decentralised approaches over the years, with further distinctions in the range of methods deployed by active local authorities. We have therefore experienced a complicated and regularly changing landscape in the context of school improvement, with the last decade predominantly witnessing strong central government intervention led by national field forces and strategies.

The current conviction of government and a number of leading educational thinkers is that, while there has been overall systemic progress, this is unacceptably and unevenly spread with too many schools still not having improved sufficiently. The perceived wisdom is that the limits of central and local authority-led school improvement have just about been reached and the system will now be better developed through self-improvement via the promotion of Academy and free schools, school-based professional development and new clusters of schools.

These policies, in turn, point to a more competitive market in the broad arena of education support and children's services delivery, while traditional local authority services are already contracting under the twin pressures of severe central funding constraints and a continuing lack of clarity over the precise local government functions envisaged for the longer term.

An open market embracing different models of service provision represents new and unfamiliar terrain for many specialists and professionals in education and children's services. This paper therefore concentrates on practical considerations relating to the delivery models now beginning to evolve, and their likely impact over time. Market-based provision, as such, can offer particular advantages but also potential disadvantages, as experience from other sectors suggests.

Given the anticipated wider variety of future service providers, Aspect is clear that a carefully-designed overarching education and children's services commissioning framework will be needed, in order to ensure:

- (a) consistently high-quality provision in all areas of local service delivery, in the fundamental interests of children and young people
- (b) genuine accountability of the new system to local children, young people, institutions and communities
- (c) sufficient transparency of relevant information to allow equitable access to the market, to remove fears about 'favoured' providers
- (d) concrete support for professional staff development, to assist the workforce in leading, delivering and improving the new types of services

(e) the promotion of modern technology in enhancing communications with service users and co-ordination of the different professionals and specialists working in education and children's services.

An informed national debate over the introduction of such a framework is now required. Aspect itself has been very busy, over the past year, representing its members' interests in the localities as local authority staff redundancies have been implemented due to financial pressures, and the wider arena of education and children's services has started to change. Our detailed guidance for members on responding to local service restructuring and redundancies is available on the Association's website.

2 A self-improving school system?

2.1 Proposals

The case for the new approach is set out in the 2010 white paper, "The Importance of Teaching" which presents the keys as:

- improving the recruitment, selection and training of school teachers and leaders
- creating a school system which is more effectively self-improving while holding schools accountable for their results and setting high standards through the curriculum and qualifications framework

The white paper duly commits to:

- make clear that schools have responsibility for improvement and make it easier for schools to learn from one another.
- make sure that every school has access to the support it needs through National and Local Leaders of Education, Teaching Schools and leading teachers, or by working in partnership with a strong school
- encourage local authorities and schools to bring forward applications to the new Education Endowment Fund – funding for innovative projects to drive school improvement and raise the attainment of deprived children in underperforming schools – and create a new incentive for collaboration.
- make sure that schools have access to evidence on best practice, high-quality materials and improvement services which they can choose to use.
- support underperforming schools and ensure that those which are seriously failing, or unable to improve their results, are transformed through conversion to Academy status

Michael Gove, DfE Secretary of State, underpinned this approach in his June 2010 Speech to the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services annual leadership conference, stating:

“At the heart of this government’s vision for education is a determination to give school leaders more power and control: not just to drive improvement in their schools, but to drive improvement across our whole education system”

Professor David Hargreaves, in his July 2010 paper entitled “Creating a self-improving school system” offers four building blocks for such a self-improving system:

- capitalising on the benefits of sustainable clusters of schools
- adopting a local solutions approach
- stimulating co-construction between schools
- expanding the concept of system leadership

Hargreaves poses three key questions as fundamental starting points to a sustainable self-improving system

- What sort of school family clusters are needed?
- What action is needed to create them to scale?
- How can the process of self-improvement be assured?

These practical questions are critical to effective implementation and are basic to resolving the range of associated issues explored below.

2.2 Machinery

The proposed delivery of an enduring self-improving system builds on much of the recent work of the National College in developing family clusters of schools and the activities of National and Local Leaders of Education. It also takes a substantial amount from the successful City Challenge programmes of the long-running London Challenge and the more recent Greater Manchester and Black Country Challenges. The success of the City Challenge programmes is confirmed by significantly improved standards – especially in London. These programmes placed great emphasis on inter-school co-operation, learning from the best and overall school-to-school support mechanisms. The question is how can existing successful practices be customised to local circumstances and rolled-out across the whole country?

Several current initiatives are based upon what is regarded as Challenge legacy. This uses a mantra of customised programmes of support for schools, building specific offers using lessons learned from the City Challenge programmes. The DfE recently sought recruitment of some 80 f.t.e. Lead Advisers to be deployed in regions across the country from September 2011 to work with schools through local authorities, on a cross-phase basis, developing inter-school links. The actual implementation of this scheme now seems to be in doubt. In the interim, there are a few areas where the work is being advanced more rapidly. On the whole, relatively informal work is being pursued across the country with schools being approached, using local authorities as conduits, to identify what particular support is needed and how it is provided. If the Lead Adviser system is not progressed, it is likely that the National College will play a strategic role with local authorities in rolling-out frameworks for promoting

school-to-school support. The College will need to enhance its infrastructure to fulfil this role effectively.

The College has, of course, been proactive in promoting networks of schools for a considerable period of time. Its remit in relation to National and Local Leaders of Education remains in place. The introduction of Specialist Leaders, whose task will be to spread best practice in specific aspects of school provision, and the funding of Teaching Schools with the role of sharing excellence across local networks, form more recent developments. The Secretary of State's 2011-2012 remit letter refers to the College being expected to have an "approach that builds schools' capacity to take increasing ownership of leadership development", to assist in promoting a self-improving system. An enhanced role for the College is now a possibility.

There is a variety of available models for school-to-school support. These include high-performing schools (either on their own or in groups) working with low or under-performing ones, partnerships and federations. Partnerships and federations themselves are general terms with several different bases. Support can be at whole-school level or related to particular curriculum areas or other features of provision. It can be provided in a range of ways from fairly straightforward mentoring through modelling or observing effective practice to critical review. Consequently, there are many relationships that may be termed "school-to-school support". A genuinely national system is patently impractical with geography a key determinant of what is feasible. No-one would suggest that successful models from the City Challenges or indeed anywhere else are easily transportable, though there will be basic ideas for local customisation.

Ultimately, the success or failure of a school-to-school support system as the prime vehicle for delivering school improvement in the future requires all partners to be committed to a sustainable model of collaborative working, and sufficient high-quality system leaders to emerge willing to take on key roles within the self-improving system.

2.3 Associated Issues

David Hargreaves' three questions outlined above, offer a framework for exploring the associated issues. A number of detailed points require consideration.

- **Can effective practice from the City Challenges be customised more widely?**

The theory is that lessons can be learned from the Challenge programmes and it is recognised that they cannot be simply replicated, acknowledging Hargreaves' emphasis on local solutions. However, it is the case that the three Challenge areas (most emphatically London) are atypical of most of the rest of the country. Geography is a major factor influencing travel options in the development of inter-school linkages. Schools in rural areas will be disadvantaged especially as considerable merit is seen in linking schools across different local authorities.

It is also undeniable that the Challenge areas benefited from a significant stream of resources which have helped to create a solid platform for school-to-school support. Towards the termination of the City Challenge programmes, funding was used to develop legacy activities which are assisting current developments. Other areas will not enjoy the same facility as they seek to develop self-improvement infrastructures.

- **How will quality control be exercised in practice?**

There are quality issues to be addressed at all points in a self-improving school system. These include accurate and validated identification of need. Schools themselves may or may not be a good judge of their particular development needs. School self-evaluation needs corroboration. Good schools will buy-in such expertise but this will not be universal. Expecting local authorities with their now depleted resources to fulfil this task is increasingly unrealistic.

In addition, reliable intelligence on potential sources of expert support on any particular issue is patchy and widely dispersed. The ability to do something well is not always transferable to mentoring others. The skill of providing effective support and/or challenge is distinctive and the danger of a provider headteacher trying to “clone” practice elsewhere is a real one. Issues of quality control also extend to the Lead Advisers or similar roles. It is unclear how they will be managed and quality-assured. The DfE will be conscious of its own limited resources for fulfilling such tasks.

- **How will a self-improving school system be sustained?**

There are significant funding issues to be addressed. There will be initial facilitators to help develop local systems, but the personnel in schools as well as particular institutional priorities alter over time, making the facilitation function an on-going requirement. In Aspect's view, the case for an effective local 'middle tier' to assist schools is resurrected through such scenarios. School-level resources available for such development work, however provided, are already increasingly stretched. Provider schools will not be able to offer much support unless adequately compensated financially. Inevitably, their capacity to offer effective support is limited.

It cannot be doubted that headteachers are becoming more adept in entrepreneurial terms. Even so, primary school leaders have often shown a higher level of dependency on local authority support. This is hardly surprising given the number of them with teaching commitments and the limited internal administrative support commonly found in primary schools. Issues of stability may also arise in any school when leadership succession takes place which, in turn, can prove disruptive to support programmes.

- **How can appropriate links be established?**

The task of identifying individual schools and their needs and the appropriate source of available and suitably sensitive support, in terms of positive relationships as a critical success factor, is a complex one. The business of intervention is a specialist process and effective practice is rarely transportable simply because it is successful in one particular situation. The National College may be key in delivering useful link-ups but there will be sustainability issues once initial work is completed and as a school's improvement priorities, and for that matter, personnel alter over time.

Given these practicalities, a self-improving system is predicated on schools' willingness and capacity to support each other. In more philosophical terms, it depends on attitudes prevailing which view raising standards of education as a collective responsibility, with schools consistently extending their obligations outside of their own environs.

3 The Local Authority Role

The ability of local authorities to adapt is evident given the scale and regularity of new developments and initiatives over the last twenty years. The 2010 white paper signals that further adaptations are necessary, and, as local authorities are already experiencing severe financial restraints, the imperative of modifying approaches becomes clear.

However, under legislation, local authorities retain a strong democratic accountability function in relation to schools, with continuing powers of intervention. This begs the question of how effective interventions can be maintained in the new context of reduced capacity. It seems inevitable that local authorities will need to use the services of high-quality schools in carrying this role – leading to school-to-school challenge as well as support. Indeed, many local authorities have sought to promote and encourage formal and informal networks of schools as mutual support mechanisms over the years.

Now, all local authorities will have to consider their rationale and basis for whatever school improvement role they envisage and are able to maintain for the future. Local authorities seek to inspire a coherent and cohesive local school system; their approaches to achieving this are numerous and highly dependent upon local circumstances and the nature of existing relationships with local schools.

The immediate responses to the latest financial and government policy pressures appear to differ considerably. The scale of downsizing alone covers a wide spectrum. Some local authorities have reduced their own school improvement and other support service to a bare minimum, some have focused almost exclusively on primary schools and some are still maintaining the status quo to await developments. All will now be considering the most effective and appropriate local ways of stimulating school networking as a base of school improvement delivery. It is expected that authorities will hold detailed intelligence on schools as a conduit for identifying specific needs. They will also be important in inputting to any engineering of local school clusters.

The size of a local authority will inevitably prove a strong influence on the functions and roles it is able to fulfil and the varied pattern of specific models will therefore grow further. One factor at the heart of future local authority provision is its capability to offer traded services. This is not new, with service level agreements, as well as full trading, being a feature of the landscape for some time, but it does now seem that the scope of authorities to provide this is often size dependent.

4 New and Evolving Models

There is little that is conceptually 'new' about the different models for alternative education and children's service delivery under active consideration across the country, although they are of obvious immediate interest to professionals working in the field. A broad range of models is now open to exploration.

4.1 Multi-Authority Platforms

Several potential arrangements may pertain in planning and managing the delivery of school improvement support across more than one local authority, with a range of associated practical issues. The most developed versions evolved with the regional challenges in London, the Black Country and Greater Manchester, though a variety of other cross-local authority arrangements – ranging from fully integrated provision, through collaboration, co-operation and coordination to straightforward networking – have also been made over the years. In addition, many limited but well-established instances of school support have been provided on a shared cross-authority basis offering low incidence, specialist support or shared curriculum services. Now, as well as the regional challenges involved in legacy planning to sustain school-to-school support, as a direct consequence of prevailing financial pressures further inter-local authority developments are evolving or will do so in the near future.

Successful collaboration of this type requires three powerful elements – agreement, working together and common aims and any effective partnership requires strong principled approaches.

The key rationales for building such 'regional' activity include the following:

- greater capacity-building through partnership
- increased individual authority effectiveness through sharing
- promotion of broader-based change management
- greater critical mass which promotes learning by exposure to a broader spectrum of strategies.
- responding to limited available expertise
- greater efficiencies by pooling, rationalisation and reconfiguring resources

The practical issues involved are highly contextual. These include

- constitutional and legal – even if contractual "rules of engagement" are a cumbersome distraction, operational protocols remain necessary for confidence and transparency.

- cultural attitudes – there may be negative reactions at a corporate, political or a school level
- leadership – a crucial element for driving forward the work, although it is also important to ensure representation of all interests in planning mechanisms.
- management and administration - dedicated input is required to carry the added workload.
- location – the siting of a project office can be a sensitive matter
- funding – despite the overall savings potential, there is a cost to collaboration per se
- quality control and accountability mechanisms – need to be unbureaucratic but effective
- stability/risk/sustainability – seed funding and initial enthusiasm can be not enough
- industrial relations - areas of contracts, employment rights and pensions can be complicated and require careful attention

Cross-authority collaboration in the field of school improvement is already found across the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, two main initiatives have been dominant – the Raising School Standards Initiative and School Support Programme. Formally established collaboratives are not common but do exist in Scotland as, with thirty-two Local Authorities, most school improvement services are small and critical mass is a major issue. However, in Wales, collaborative work is strongly encouraged through the Welsh Assembly Government's Making The Connections programme. There are five structured cooperatives, collaboratives or consortia currently in existence in Wales in the field of school improvement.

For Local Authorities considering cross boundary collaboration, Aspect's advice remains:

- keep it simple – constitutional issues can be hard and lengthy to resolve
- start small – keep initial moves comfortably manageable; benefits can show and developments flourish without being imposed
- developments need leadership and advocacy in the early stages
- provide inclusive longer-term leadership
- build-in detailed management and administration; sustainability must not be personality-dependent
- take time to build trust
- ensure coherent aligned support for schools

- create a local distinctive flavour
- consider language and terminology issues
- be open-minded to potential developments

A new collaborative development reported in "Local Government Chronicle" on 2 June 2011 is a move to create a network of Labour-run Local Authorities with the aim of mutualising services of various types. The group intends to launch the Cooperative Councils Network to "shape a national agenda for Labour in local government".

4.2 Voluntary Sector

The widely-defined voluntary or 'third' sector, based on charitable and non-profit organisation, has grown considerably over recent decades. The "UK Civil Society Almanac 2010", published jointly by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC), estimates that this sector as a whole now embraces some 900,000 organisations, employing a total of 1.6 million people and attracting a combined annual income of nearly £160 billion. Recent central governments, Labour and coalition alike, have been keen to encourage wider voluntary sector participation in local public service delivery. However, this important sector has suffered from the impact of substantially reduced or withdrawn grants from central and local government over recent times, and an internal debate still persists in some quarters over the predictable tensions between relying on bidding for funds to actually deliver local children's or other public services and the sector's traditional role of advocating and campaigning for specific vulnerable groups in our society. The lobbying organisation representing most children's charities, Children England, conducted a major survey of its member bodies earlier this year which showed that 71% were experiencing funding cuts and some 40% were anticipating having to introduce staff redundancies during the first six months of 2011.

Some mergers of charities and rationalisation of this sector are appearing, under the impact of these pressures, and new initiatives have been launched to promote quality assurance schemes and stronger and more stable leadership and management of third sector organisations. Over 2010/11, a Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) project was initiated, to identify and share good practice across the voluntary and community sector (VCS), led by the umbrella body for voluntary youth work organisations, NCVYS, in the specific field of charities serving the interests of children and young people. Children England itself has researched and published a key study entitled "Commissioning: A Better Way?" and runs such initiatives as the VCS Engage programme to raise the influence and profile of this sector within the English regions.

4.3 Inter-School Collaboratives

New and different types of inter-school collaborative platforms are currently under consideration, across the country, and, indeed, many local authorities have been working hard over a long period to help promote such collaborative arrangements, in relation to shared features of provision or whole-school developmental issues. The broad shift in CPD funding towards more devolved models, over recent years, has also helped to generate school clusters and partnerships which extend available resources and provide greater critical mass. This kind of mutual support demands trust and more openness, but also respect for confidentiality where necessary, and can generate an important sense of joint accountability as collaboration builds up. However, there are known hazards to such genuine local collaboration between schools, including the inevitable competitiveness between schools for student members and the individual ambitions of some school leaders, and these need to be recognised. Most headteachers express a strong desire to remain within a community of schools, based on a shared commitment to key values and basic principles. The governance and management of clusters and partnerships can still represent a complex issue, however, and current school-level workloads and financial pressures mean that non-bureaucratic and non-hierarchical models are the most attractive in this context. The principle test for any such model is, of course, the nature and quality of the collective response to visible underperformance within the cluster. An effective collaborative structure of this type could provide a platform for local support service delivery to schools or for the joint commissioning of such services. Current titles for such vehicles being proposed or adopted around the country include 'Education Trusts' and 'Achievement Boards'.

4.4 Mutuels and Co-operatives

Mutuals, involving some level of employee ownership and/or participation, offer clear attractions. The thorough US study "Employee Ownership and Corporate Performance: A Comprehensive Review of the Evidence", published by the National Center for Employee Ownership in 2004, noted "with certainty, that when ownership and participative management are combined, substantial gains result. Ownership alone and participation alone, however, have at best spotty or short-lived results". Relatively successful international examples include the John Lewis Partnership in the UK, United Airlines in the US and the long-established Mondragon co-operatives in Spain, and Mutuo's 2010 "Britain Made Mutual" yearbook refers to over 18,000 mutuals and co-operatives of all types (including housing associations, NHS foundation trusts and finance sector mutuals) operating in the UK today, with a million employees in total and an annual turnover of just over £100 billion.

Co-operatives can be constructed to embrace wider interests than just employees. The Co-operative College, and the schools that it works with, have now created a network of co-operative schools across the country to provide mutual support. The College has found that schools benefit from using co-operative values and principles to develop a distinct ethos and culture of the school as well as developing pupils' understanding of society and of the world. These co-operatives may be based on staff, parents, pupils and community organisations. However, the point needs to be stressed that it takes real time and effort to build a local co-operative society, the key democratic membership structure which is essential to a co-operative school or to any co-operative educational support or children's service. Aspect has strong links with the Co-operative College, and the co-operative movement traditionally works with trade unions and respects the professionalism of specialist staffs.

4.5 Social Enterprises

Social Enterprises do represent a relatively new model of service delivery in that they are businesses, as opposed to charities, operating on a for-profit or non-profit basis, with objectives which include tackling social problems, improving communities, boosting people's life chances, and protecting the environment. The Social Enterprise Coalition in the UK summarises them as businesses working "to change the world for the better", and a recent report from lawyers Bates Wells and Braithwaite, commissioned by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) has recommended a new regulatory framework for social finance to support such ventures. The 2009 Annual Small Business Survey estimates that there are 62,000 social enterprises in this country. These are mainly small organisations, and it has been suggested that their average annual turnover is presently in the region of £2.1 million. The TSRC published a working paper "Social enterprise spin-outs from the English health service: a right to request but was anyone listening?" in January 2011. This noted the 'right to request' initiative launched by the Labour government in 2008 to enable NHS professionals and managers to develop social enterprises to deliver community health services, which the present coalition government has maintained. The paper identified that thirteen staff groups in the West Midlands initially explored this opportunity but only two of them were still actively developing this type of project by October 2010. Barriers to progress, in this context, included a lack of staff support for leaving NHS pay, conditions of employment and pension provision; a lack of leadership skills and capacity to take the proposal forward; a lack of support from senior PCT managers; and a lack of support from commissioners for this model of service delivery. A similar picture emerges from the 2009 Social Enterprise Pathfinder Programme Evaluation final report, by Tribal Newchurch for the DoH. It seems clear that many such newly-projected social enterprises will in fact require external support, perhaps from the established private sector in terms of business management capacity, in order to succeed and expand.

In 2008, the EDGE Partnership developed a specific arm to further its work within south west Birmingham and engage more sustainably with local communities. A social enterprise company was formed with one of its activities being small group and individual coaching and mentoring CPD themes. This is a non-profit company which works closely and collaboratively on a range of issues and takes strength from its common purpose which is to work together to improve the education and future of children across south west Birmingham. The EDGE is steered by its management group, which consists of ten headteachers, the EDGE Partnership Co-ordinator and the Managing Director of the EDGE Partnership Charity. Community development rarely features in the available planning for self-improving schools, yet all realise that local social factors are a key driver of improvement. The EDGE Partnership is therefore an interesting development, in this context.

The social enterprise concept can also apply in other instances. One City Challenge legacy has been the creation of a regional Strategic Board operating as a social enterprise. The Board is described as "a regional delivery arm for school improvement, building round locally-driven school provider structures". A funded website is being established to provide a central source of information about what is available from where in terms of support.

4.6 Self-employed Consultancy

The open consultancy market is obviously not a “new” model but, given the present volume of job reductions in Local Authorities, it is experiencing new impetus. Schools have for a long time used their own “word-of-mouth” contacts to find sources of external support and headteachers are inundated with private sector offers. Now, with viral and digital networking, these kind of informal opportunities for finding sources of specialist support are considerably extended. For individual consultants, credibility is important and personal knowledge/ recommendation/ track record currently dominates open market provision. Even so, as with school-to-school support, the key issues are the careful identification of particular need and of where an effective input is available.

The expectation for most schools to conduct a proper commissioning process is unrealistic. It is too expensive in terms of time and money. The employment of individual self-employed consultants and other self-employed workers should entail a substantial pre-purchasing check list, advertising, a competitive tendering process depending upon level of expenditure involved, selection criteria, bid evaluation and confirmation of status. Robust quality assurance processes represent a further demand. In consequence, the consultancy market still remains unregulated, leaving accredited provision and quality control as live concerns. Aspect, however, is clear that a practical quality assurance framework is required for this market, to reassure schools and consultants alike over future professional standards, and already provides self-employed members with a range of distinct services. These include reliable professional indemnity and public liability insurance cover at competitive rates, a business register for independent consultant members, the regular ‘Briefings’ digest of key reports and documents in education and children’s services carried in our magazine, and advice and representation on relevant contractual issues, as well as Aspect’s popular ‘Going Independent’ and related training courses.

4.7 Private Companies

There are also precedents for direct outsourcing to – or new forms of partnerships with – significant private sector companies in the field of education and children’s services, varying from a limited number of such instances in the specific context of local council school improvement services in the early years of the recent Labour government to some authorities commissioning whole private sector children’s social work teams today as their own in-house capacity shrinks. The for-profit approach is also more visible today within the schools sector itself, as illustrated by Edison Learning’s involvement in school management, Serco in operating school facilities and the VT Group training school-based staff. The Adam Smith Institute published a report this April, entitled “Profit-Making Free Schools: Unlocking the Potential of England’s Proprietorial School Sector”, which called on DfE ministers to go further and permit the introduction of for-profit free schools, following the example of the Swedish free schools’ movement. In some areas of children’s services, such as residential childcare, the private sector has long been a major player.

The well-known argument, here, is that the potential income for company shareholders acts as an incentive to invest capital to develop productive activity and, in the process, maximises growth, innovation and employment, including within previously government-funded services. At the same

time, the profit motive in itself can arouse suspicions over potential de-prioritisation of established ethical, labour and professional standards and a related growth in differentiated outcomes for groups of children and young people. The 2009 Aspect paper "Professionalism and Quality Assurance in Tomorrow's School Improvement Services" noted, in a different political and economic climate, that "in most outsourcing situations, general client satisfaction is reported. Efficiency and effectiveness are seen as 'positives' and business bought-in by schools has normally grown. For the local authority, private company involvement can bring certain gains as other, non-educational, services can become available at competitive rates. Private companies have put profit back into the system, for example by funding research. Clearly, this can benefit the education service but, as companies have to make a profit to satisfy shareholders, it can be viewed as an early investment towards securing access to wider public sector contracts over time. With regard to features of service ethos and rationale, and an emphasis on partnership, there is no discernible difference between current outsourced and direct local authority provision – partnership with schools remains at the heart. Contracts retain a sharp edge, with rewards and penalties, adding to the pressure for success. Arrangements normally included a degree of contract flexibility and specific areas of work can be de-commissioned as priorities alter, which is necessary with long-term schedules. Critical success factors for outsourced provision include the level of buy-in by colleagues across the council. Where there are pay differentials, resentment is likely but, overall, it is clear that outsourced services have mainly fitted in with other professional services. As ever, inter-personal relationships are crucial. Credibility of approach and systems has to be a 'given'."

5 Conclusions

The limited central government funding announced for key elements of the government's approach to education and children's services, such as the proposed new network of teaching schools, raises doubts about whether we are witnessing the birth of a new "system" as such – since their actual impact will consequently vary significantly across different areas of the country.

However, it is also the case that, while the change of government has reinforced moves towards a self-improving schools system, the previous government was moving inexorably down the same track. By the time of the 2010 General Election, plans were already well advanced to create a new market of school improvement services with a single point of access for schools, and the drive for more autonomous state schools in England was intensifying. Nonetheless, the importance of local schools working in groups, including within the Academies framework, remains strong.

Some schools have welcomed a school-to-school support system, on the basis of being "worked with" rather than "done to" as has been the perception in relation to a number of recent initiatives. It should avoid the sense of multiple overlapping top-down initiatives and interventions affecting schools; something which left many headteachers feeling pressured and bewildered.

Certain types of school networks and partnerships are already well established and further well-structured school-to-school support could provide valuable synergies. The fundamental issue is whether this is sufficient to meet schools' real needs today. If not, the fragmentation and diseconomies of diversity that have developed over the last twenty years could be reinforced, arising partly from the

cessation of major nationwide initiatives and the further removal of local authority capacity. It is likely that inconsistent patterns of delivery will ensue as a result of the many varying arrangements which will inevitably come with the greater emphasis on school-to-school support as the basis for raising educational standards.

In addition, we need to recall one of the key points made in the well-regarded and influential study entitled "How the world's best performing school systems come out on top" authored by Michael Barber and Mona Mourshed and published by McKinsey and Co. in 2007. It noted that high-performing school systems need "effective interventions at the level of the school, identifying schools that are not performing satisfactorily, and intervening to raise standards of performance". We do not see this factor clearly reflected in the present government's proposals for schools in England.

The range of new models for external school support and children's services delivery, described in this publication, display quite different practical advantages and disadvantages which we have sought to highlight. This factor in itself underlines the important case outlined at the beginning of this paper for a clear and effective national commissioning framework to be designed and introduced, at an early stage, for tomorrow's range of education and children's services.

Aspect recognises the need to rebalance provision against a declining resource base and as a response to government priorities. At the same time, our Association continues to maintain core beliefs that need to be sustained through change management. One fundamental principle is quality enhancement, demanding quality assurance through professional monitoring, evaluation and review. This demands specialist knowledge and experience to secure effective evaluation – especially as suppliers become more diverse.

Another is that distinctive accredited and professional skills are paramount in providing local services, implying a strong need for discrete and dedicated professional activity and supervision. These features are not always evident in emerging models. Neither is it clear how the important holistic approach to child development reflected in the concept of linked-up education and children's services which underpinned the early "Every Child Matters" agenda will be sustained within certain models.

Undoubtedly, Aspect members will continue to find ways of deploying their expertise to the benefit of schools, children and young people. In the new terrain, quality assurance and professional rigour will be more valuable than ever.

6 Key References

The major references in this short paper are to:

"The Importance of Teaching" DfE White Paper - 2010

"Creating a self-improving school system" National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, by David Hargreaves - 2010

"Regional and Multi-Authority School Improvement" Aspect – 2008

"Professionalism and quality assurance in tomorrow's school improvement services" Aspect – 2009

