System fluidity in English School Governance: Reflections on the implications for senior leaders of closed hierarchies

Introduction

This article draws on unfunded research in two contrasting local authorities (LAs) in an English Government region: a geographically large rural shire, and a more compact urban unitary authority. Both Councils were controlled overall by a single political party, albeit different ones. Both, as reflected in strategic documentation, faced similar challenges: significant demographic growth of young people, the need for economic development, new employment opportunities, skills development, new housing and new school places, not always in current geographical locations.

Secondary academisation was largely complete in both authorities, but still developing at primary, reflecting the national position (DfE, 2017b). In the unitary, secondary provision was made largely by national or regional multi-academy trusts (MATs), but in the shire more secondaries remained stand-alone academies, or Single Academy Trusts (SATs) as they are now commonly referred to. Both demography and political histories in the contrasting LAs reflect Simkins' *et al's* (2014) distinction between historically interventionist and 'hands off' approaches to schools.

The primary data came from semi-structured interviews with senior politicians from three political parties (Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour) to explore the arrangements for local democratic oversight of the areas they served in relation to what Greany and Higham (2017: 26) describe as the 'hierarchical control' (by central government) of all

schools, whether ‘maintained’ (by local authorities), free schools or academies (see below). Greany and Higham argue that this is a key aspect of the government’s policy aspiration for a ‘self-improving schools-led system’ (SISS). They claim that this aspiration is ‘largely undefined in official texts’ (p10), but aspects of it – for example, the need for ‘school leaders to lead improvement across the system’ – have featured in many documents, from the first white paper (policy document) of the Coalition Government (DfE, 2010: 18).

Only the summary outcomes of these interviews are referred to here for reasons of space, but also because several interviewees agreed to be interviewed and recorded only on condition that no direct quotations would be sought. Gibton (2016) describes this perennial problem in interviewing senior policymakers, elected or appointed.

The interviews took place within the rapidly changing context of national policy intentions and the aspirations of the two LAs expressed in their strategic documentation. Interviews were structured according to the outline of intended LA responsibilities, defined for the current conjuncture at least by the 2016 White Paper (DfE, 2016). More time was spent on school improvement and its significance for local school ecosystems, possibly because it was more controversial.

The interviews were widened to include senior officers in both LAs, including chief officers. Because of the *de facto* concentration on school improvement, interviews were then held with senior postholders with responsibility for school improvement, though titled differently.

A later phase, still continuing, includes interviews with head teachers and chief executives (CEOs) of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), a Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) arranged through the office of the National Schools Commissioner, an individual involved with a national charity promoting free schools, a former senior member of staff in central government roles, including at the Office of the Prime Minister, Number 10 Downing Street, and others. This later stage of the research is touched on here, but will be drawn on more extensively in later work.

Policy background

The movement away from LA 'control' of schools in England to what arguably is now a 'mixed economy' of schools has been much studied at various stages of the process, for example: Academies Commission (2013), Boyask (2013), Coldron *et al* (2014), Cousin (2018), Greany (2014, 2015, 2018), Lord *at al* (2016), Riddell (2016), Simkins (2015), and many more. Many earlier studies have been relatively small scale, comprising a few schools or handful of local authorities, but recently, the outcomes were published of a national Nuffield-funded project (Greany and Higham, 2018), using 47 school case studies across four localities, with a particular focus on the Self-Improving Schools System (SISS) and how stated policy aspirations have shaped and formed the current polity.

Briefly, the 'mixed economy' comprises academies, which can be 'sponsored' (from 2003), and 'convertors' (from 2010), free schools, and (local authority-)'maintained' schools. There are faith schools in all categories. Academies are funded directly through an agreement with the Secretary of State, for which they are held accountable by the Education and Skills

Funding Agency, an 'executive agency sponsored by the Department for Education' (GOV.UK).

Academies have increasingly joined Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), not always consensually, that vary in size and reach from the very local to the national. MATs developed from informal and formal governance arrangements between schools (referred to as 'soft' and 'hard' federations), then Trusts from 2006 Education Act. New proposals for *single* free-standing academies (SATs) - commented on by Simkins (2015) as a feature of the (then) system - no longer receive approval, although this seems to be a recent development. MATs are companies registered at Companies House, with a small number of founding 'members' akin to shareholders in a private company who appoint the Board of Trustees. The Board then determines the governance relationships with individual schools, which may have local governing bodies with varying powers, or none (all DfE, 2017a).

Free schools are formally academies as well, although ones that could be proposed (to the Secretary of State) by parents or other groups. In practice, proposing a free school is now the only way in law of opening a new school and such proposals are often made by MATs.

Accompanying the declining statutory and other responsibilities of LAs have been strategic reductions in central government grant support (49.1% in real terms 2010-11 until 2017-18 – NAO, 2018) and budget reductions due to 'losing' academies. New regional officials of central government were appointed from September 2014, known as Regional School Commissioners (RSCs), who are *advised* about the development of new MATs and academy conversions by headteacher boards (HTBs), three quarters of whom are elected from

existing academy heads who are 'well-positioned' (Coldron *et al*, 2014). These RSCs were given new extensive powers, with growing staff complements to match, but announcements made by the Secretary of State (Hinds, 2018) will dramatically change the local balances of power.

It is argued here that substantial changes such as those announced recently, made without the need for secondary legislation (for example, a Ministerial instruction) – because RSCs are directly appointed central government officials – could be followed similarly by more of a different nature. This makes it extremely difficult to be clear about national directions for school governance and organisation in the longer term, and the settled roles of RSCs, CEOs, headteachers, recently constituted Sub-Regional School Improvement Boards and LAs more widely. This policy 'assemblage' (Ball and Junemann, 2012: 138) appears to be (permanently) unstable, as Greany and Higham (2018) also observe, with shifting degrees of 'steering and rowing' (Ball and Junemann, *ibid*: 141). This fluidity not only generates uncertainty, but makes it difficult to achieve the objective distance required for authoritative academic comment.

Primary data gathering

Arguably, many studies of the developing English 'system' (to use the contested term) of schooling examined aspects of the *implementation* of policy and policy narratives: how had it gone? what are its effects, intended and unintended? what is the emerging shape of the system? Less frequently examined are the current nature of democratic oversight of state schooling in England (and by whom), and how parents and wider communities can be involved in their children's schooling.

Thus, semi-structured interviews were sought in both Councils with the Leader of the Council (however defined), the Cabinet member for Education (similar), and the Chair of Scrutiny. In one council, the party of the Cabinet member changed due to a reshuffle and so two interviews were held. All requests were agreed, though it did not prove possible to arrange a timely meeting with one of the Leaders. All interviews were recorded, though without transcripts because of the confidentiality matters explained above. Questioning covered the following broad areas:

1) Perceptions of the role of the council in relation to schooling, the nature and extent of the council's democratic mandate and the contribution of schools to their strategic priorities.
2) How the Council made decisions: which in open forum with the possibility of questioning by members of the public, and which in private. In addition, which matters went to Scrutiny, how these were selected, and whether they considered scrutiny and the involvement of wider stakeholders effective.
3) Perceptions of the exercise of the Council's three major responsibilities as above: providing sufficient school places of good quality (defined by Ofsted inspection criteria), ensuring the needs of vulnerable children are met, and championing parents and families (DfE, 2016: 70). In practice, all three responsibilities involved some measure of attainment and student progression monitoring, and hence involved school improvement functions and how school quality was considered relevant to the Council's broader aspirations. This aspect then turned into a lengthier discussion, despite the

Government's *original* intention that LAs would cease school improvement work by 2017 (2016, *Ibid*).

Interviews with senior officers broadly complemented the above and sought perceptions of the Council's work in the same areas and the contributions made by staff. Councillors and officers provided copies of relevant documents that could not be found on websites, of which there were a considerable number. Later comments of heads and others referred to above are drawn on where available and relevant to the discussion, although their focus was slightly different.

Summary outcomes

The summary outcomes reported here are grouped under the three headings outlined above and draw on interview data, together with local and national documentation. All interviews with elected politicians were conducted before the significant announcement made by the new Secretary of State (Hinds, 2018).

1) There was broad agreement about the nature and extent of the council's democratic mandate and the potential contribution of schools to strategic priorities. For example, in the unitary LA, the development of new industrial sectors (media, creative and digital) was creating new and different demands for skills according to the Council and its partners, identifying a need for more investment pre- and post-16. In both LAs, population growth, plus in the shire, the relocation of armed service personnel, was generating a demand for more school places. Similarly, a growth in SEND referrals (of

children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities) was creating substantial need for new places in both mainstream and specialist provision.

Building new schools and creating new school places has never depended on just the LA: besides their own decision-making processes, which can be lengthy, it has depended on a statutory process and external approval for substantial change – either ministerial or through School Organisation Committees – and the ability to fund any capital works involved. These have varied with national circumstance and political control, but the requirement to run 'competitions' for new schools, which since 2010 have had to be free schools, has led to processes described by politicians, officers and CEOs as 'chaotic' at best. The decision to open a new free school is one for the Secretary of State, advised by the RSC.

The 'sponsorship' for such a new free school is now sought from an 'approved' MAT which is generally seen as likely to provide and sustain 'good' school places. The forecast for new school places required however comes from the LA, but the capital allocated from a national DfE Team. Local MATs in an area can agree between them which will bid to open a new school on a quasi-cartel basis and in the unitary they had asked the LA to run a competition for new secondary schools. But it is open for a different MAT altogether – with a head office out of the area - to make a bid direct to the RSC (from 'left field' as one officer descried it). This had occurred in the unitary.

The further complication for new (free) schools is that a separate national DfE-owned property company (see www.LocatEd.co.uk) is responsible for finding possible sites,

consistent with local planning restrictions and other needs such as finding land for new housing, within the time scale required for children who are actually born and getting older. Not surprisingly, in both LAs, substantial delays were reported and in one of them, discussion had taken place of the conversion of a former fire station for a new special school. In the other, the LA had reluctantly taken the decision to expand its special school places by consulting on the closure of existing maintained schools, a process that still required a lengthy statutory process, and proposing a new academy on an identified site. Although they regarded this as necessary, it was a complex and unpredictable process, and much contested.

In the absence of new school places, in existing schools or otherwise, the LAs have no power to *compel* existing academies or free schools to increase their intake even marginally. The opposite is the case for maintained schools, but overall this can reportedly leave children without local accessible school places precisely when they are needed. In one case a newly-appointed headteacher was unable to move to a new school at all.

2) *All* interviewed in the LAs, with officers' and politicians' views mirroring each other, made the case for the Council being the *only* body that could understand local needs and claim legitimate oversight of *all* the services in their communities. In one LA, this was expressed in explicit moral terms, reflecting Council literature. In the other, it was similarly claimed that the Council was the only organisation that could legitimately *represent* residents.

The nature and levels of openness of each Council's decision making was thus presented as vital. There are few open, publicly accessible, routine meetings of any committees any more (with some exceptions) with the notable exception of the two Cabinets. Both Cabinets were entirely composed of members of the majority group on the Council. Strategic or publicly important decisions about Education were brought to Cabinet by the Cabinet member for Education. She would explain in public what they were minded to decide, supported by a senior officer; sometimes the Cabinet would vote on the matter. Papers for meetings are published on the Councils' websites well in advance, according to statutory requirements, and members of the public are allowed to ask (previously notified) questions. In practice, members of the public are also allowed to *address* Cabinet in both Councils, as was explained.

Both Cabinets could refer major decisions to a full meeting of Council, with similar requirements for public access and address. Certain statutory matters can only be discussed in Council, for example, setting the annual budget and the level of the Council Tax.

Contrast with this with decision making by the RSC, who reports to the National Schools Commissioner (NSC), an official who is in turn directly accountable to the Secretary of State. This ministerial postholder is elected as an MP, but appointed by the Prime Minister and accountable to Parliament. In practice, RSCs and the NSC have since their inception been overseen by an appointed and unelected member of the House of Lords. RSCs make decisions, on the advice given by the HTB, affecting individual schools, groups of schools or MATs which are only then made public. Neither the agendas nor

the papers (reportedly because of commercial confidence) for HTB meetings have been published historically *at all.* Summary minutes of the monthly meetings have been published in a timely way only recently, though the current interim National Schools Commissioner has stated publicly he wishes to change this. This reportedly often leaves councillors, officials, headteachers, governors, MAT CEOs and their Boards unaware of when and why decisions are made. The latter three have a DfE official assigned to them to advise on new school proposals they have made. This official is supposed to inform them when decisions will be made and what was decided, but not on *how* discussion went and why.

At individual academy level, or MATs as a whole, decisions about staffing structures – and sometimes the futures of individual leaders – are made at a Board or executive level, then communicated, sometimes indifferently and without any local input to a MAT whose HQ may be in a neighbouring town or 'hundreds of miles away' (LA officer). One example encountered was where, following a disagreement with a MAT Board, the original members of the MAT had met in private session and decided to dismiss an academy's entire local governing body, as they were entitled to do (DfE, 2017a). The academy's staff were told of this decision at a morning briefing by the CEO with the headteacher present, who then informed the chair of governors who did not yet know.

Individual academies within a MAT reportedly have virtually no relation with the RSC. The RSC relates only at MAT level: although there is a reported annual 'health check' on a school's data (including Ofsted data) undertaken by an RSC officer (and both the LAs visited), any immediate concerns from the RSC are taken up directly with the MAT,

usually via the CEO. There appears to be a developing pattern whereby the RSC will hold an arguably 'challenging' annual meeting with the Chair of the Board, who will also often be a founding 'member', and the CEO. Ofsted do 'focused' inspections of schools, in the absence of a statutory right to inspect the MAT itself, and in one of the LAs visited, this had led to the rebrokering of a MAT by the RSC. There are plans currently for Ofsted to 'evaluate' MATs though these were not published at the time of writing. However, the headteacher of an individual school often has little say or involvement in any of these sorts of decision, including about their own futures. One, reflecting speculation about whether headship 'autonomy' may become a thing of the past (Lord *et al*, 2016; Greany and Earley, 2018), expressed her isolation and dismay at her lack of involvement in (her own) annual appraisal process. Much of the everyday language in MATs noted in this research was of 'holding to account', 'what are *you* going to do (about this)'; rarely 'what support do you need'. No doubt this will provide a future object of profitable study for critical discourse analysis.

Lastly, on openness, the scrutiny processes of local authorities need noting. Originally set up in the wake of the abolition of former committees, Scrutiny Commissions, as they are termed, have the power to scrutinise or 'call in' not only decisions and processes of their Council, but of all those of organisations in the area served by the Council. The scrutiny process was being reviewed in both LAs visited, but there were common features, including being chaired by a member of the opposition party, being routinely consulted directly by the Cabinet member, and agreeing an annual programme of work, especially where the Council was undertaking a major review (eg the expansion of special school provision, or closure of children's centres). Headteachers and other

stakeholders attended both commissions and often a controversial report would receive extensive public local media airing (for example, a report critical of school admissions processes for secondary academies). In this sense, they may resemble the functions of House of Commons Select Committees (see https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/committees/select/), and neither have the power to *compel* change from their respective executives. Nevertheless, all Cabinet members interviewed felt they were directly responsible to the communities their Councils served and that they needed to make an adequate and justifiable response to criticisms and the views of stakeholders.

3) All interviewees questioned about the implementation of the three major LA responsibilities in the 2016 White Paper (DfE, 2016) rehearsed the implications of the budget reductions outlined earlier; all referred to the increased demands for children's services and elderly social care; all knew of the reported forthcoming crisis in at least one council nationally against annual assessments of council financial sustainability (NAO, 2018). All explained current officer restructurings in their Council as being related to the difficulties of 'focusing on the right things'. Officers in particular explained that they either had no one to undertake particular responsibilities, or the ones that they had were sometimes overwhelmed, while statutory responsibilities had not diminished. One Cabinet member explained how consequently they had worked on developing a culture in their Council where all officers and politicians, irrespective of responsibilities (eg in Finance or Personnel), were able to contribute to championing vulnerable children, families and communities and enacting the corporate parent. Time and further research will tell whether such efforts are successful or not.

The difficulties in current arrangements of securing the provision of sufficient good school places, particularly in the context of demographic growth and change have been outlined, particularly where this involves developing new schools or expanding existing ones.

Developing new 'good' school places, however, implies much more than just commissioning them from the private companies that are MATs, irrespective of *their* willingness to provide them. The schools involved may have uneven trajectories and years of poorer outcome data or weak inspections. So the annual LA health check on data is sent to all schools, irrespective of status; where there are 'concerns', however defined, contact is made with senior leaders. Both LAs expressed the willingness of maintained schools (*and* MATs) to respond to such approaches, both offered support (often from an existing senior leader) and access to other programmes, with variable charges depending on status. This was more problematic for secondary schools because of reported LA capacity problems.

But where academies (or MATs – both LAs have had recent negative experiences in this regard) did not wish to engage with LA concerns, officers and politicians both expressed their complete lack of power to challenge the schools effectively. In one LA, politicians of the same political party as the government expressed 'utter' frustration with the system as it now is, pointing out their worst performing schools were academies but they could do nothing save refer it to the RSC, who would then refer to the MAT, sometimes using their own 'Education Advisers' to undertake a investigation parallel to

both that of the LA and Ofsted. These senior politicians described how they had repeatedly raised these concerns about an overly complex system that just did not work in national party political gatherings, without receiving any response.

Partly as a response to these quality matters, but also because of the need to expand school places in the right locations and the wish to engage all state schools at early stages of setting the strategic objectives for local visions, both LAs had developed LA-wide partnership arrangements in which academies, free and maintained schools were represented and, crucially, the MAT CEOs, even where regional or national.

Both LAs were in the process of refining the terms of reference for School Groups – partnerships in new formulation such as those considered by Hatcher (2014) – that develop collective responses to the 'development, support and challenge' of all schools as one put it. The desire was to move from mere 'talking shops', as one secondary head described it, to bodies that actively engaged in more collective responsibility for monitoring and improving outcomes for all young people in their areas - something both Councils, controlled by different political parties, felt was part of their core purpose.

The apparent and reported development from the earlier non-engagement of MATs to the active enrolment of all those represented in an area represented a significant development in both areas. More significantly still, both LAs reported that the RSC saw these bodies as crucial to 'holding to account' MAT CEOs – something also considered absent before.

This, if it develops positively, may prove to be a developing national pattern. One apparent driver, unlike in the partnerships described by Hatcher, was the very recent announcements made by the Secretary of State (Hinds, 2018). These, in response he said, to widespread concerns expressed by all parties about unclear systems and parallel inspection and data systems, was the need to set out a 'vision for a clearer school system' (*Ibid*). The *immediate* implications – because of the centralised nature of the state referred to - seemed to be for RSCs and their staff. They could no longer employ their 'Education Advisers' to give an unpublished assessment of academy outcomes or MAT's quality – including leadership – 'parallel' to Ofsted and there were to be no more compulsory academisations of 'coasting' schools. RSCs were to work more closely with LAs (though many had been doing so), and their endorsement of these local school partnerships could potentially represent significant changes to the local governance structure round schools.

DfE officials had recently been conducting their own research into how LAs conducted their school improvement responsibilities (one LA had been involved) saying there was to be a 'ministerial briefing paper'. It has now apparently been announced to LAs (not publicly) that there would be consultation paper on the role of LAs to be issued in Autumn 2018 – this had not yet emerged at the time of writing. Chief officers also reported that they had been told that there had been a draft paper on the roles of LAs before the 2017 election that never emerged either because of lack of ministerial sign off. This paper would presumably have not included much on LA school improvement functions but its successor might.

Since these discussions, further documentation has emerged that provides further clarity on the changing governance arrangements in which schools work. One of the regional teams of the Teaching Schools Council has issued a document outlining a 'regional operating framework for school improvement' (TSC, 2018). Although an older reform, Teaching Schools were intended to be a central part of the development of the SISS (Self-Improving Schools system) as Greany and Higham (2018) point out. Their role was to help develop school based programmes of initial teacher education and coordinate the deployment of school leaders to support schools with training or development needs, especially after unsatisfactory inspections or being deemed 'at risk' through the annual data health checks of LAs or the RSC. The coverage of Teaching Schools is uneven nationally, however, as Greany and Higham point out and Greany (2018) further points out that the development work they enable is often 'upstream' of a serious problem being identified in a school.

Nevertheless, there are two significant aspects of this document. The first is an early statement (p2) that 'much of the school improvement work in academies, previously led by the RSC's office, has ended or has been scaled back', demonstrating the impact of Hind (0218). The second is that, as part of the renaming of the Sub Regional School Improvement Boards, set up to oversee the former School Standards Improvement Fund that has now closed to new bids according to three interviewees, a significant role was envisaged for the Local Schools Standards Boards - at LA level. The partnership arrangements developing in both the LAs studied could well fulfil this role.

Discussion

Arguably, the two most significant findings emerging from the research summarised in this paper are first the re-emergence of local authorities in the local governance arrangements for all schools, maintained and academies, and second the diminished powers and capacity of the Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs).

On the first, the arrangements emerging in the two LAs studied are as yet in formation. If they are more widely replicated, then this could represent a strategic attempt to include MAT CEOs, or their representatives, in accountability structures in which DfE officials will also be represented. It is not clear what this might mean for MAT CEOs, or the 'evaluations' promised by Ofsted, but it might mean a more open discussion – albeit still behind closed doors - on performance and role. In the urban unitary, an existing partnership arrangement already involves MATs and discussions take place there on the broader strategic issues faced in the LA's area, as detailed above. In the shire, possibly because of the greater geographical area covered, this is intended though slower in coming to fruition. It is certainly the case that MAT CEOs interviewed to date recognise that the schools they oversee are embedded in the wider social and economic context being considered by their respective councils.

This is not quite the same function as the Local Schools Standards Boards described by the Teaching Schools Council document, however, which is intended to have oversight of local data, schools potentially at risk and the support and development arrangements that might be put in place for them, or 'brokered'. Work of this latter sort is taking place in both these LAs, including on data sharing protocols. Moving from 'talking shops' as one headteacher put it, however, has not been achieved and a lot of very detailed

discussion is involved. However, although the politicians interviewed in both LAs were pleased that these partnerships were beginning to do their work, after various attempts to engage, they had no direct input to either – reflecting Hatcher's earlier charge of 'managerialism'.

And although there is involvement of MATs (and officials) in both these functions, there is no local forum where broader issues of policy or direction – such as the promotion of all-through schools, the nature of alternative provision or the specialist sector – can be discussed alongside, perhaps, the limitations of capacity at national and local levels because of budget restraint. The RSC interviewed made very clear that this was so and that decisions such as the above would be made generally on a case by case basis, sometimes including MATs, sometimes including LA politicians and officers, and sometimes just individual schools. This does not mean that these discussions could not take place in the future, and this was beginning in the urban unitary, but it does represent the 'depolitisation' referred to by Wilkins (2017) and others.

What may seem as managerialism by some can be seen as professionalism (and welcomed) by others: these arrangements do represent (largely) senior professionals having oversight of the development of and support for state schooling, but that also represents a 'depoliticised' acceptance of the main purpose of state schooling being to raise attainment outcomes and, possibly more broadly, progression and social mobility.

But not all senior professionals are present in these arrangements. As suggested above, Lord *et al* (2016) are among several that suggest the more traditional autonomy of the

head teacher or senior leader in a state school may be becoming rarer, with relations of academies with DfE officials being conducted through the CEO and Chair of the Board, as was found here. The accountability (DfE, 2017a) of the head teacher in a MAT is to the CEO and the Board and sometimes, as found here, not even complicated by a local governing body that includes representatives of parents and the local community. The effect of another school visited as part of this research of receiving an 'inadequate' inspection verdict, for example, was the immediate abolition of its governing body by the MAT asked to take over its governance by the RSC. And the comments of Coldron *et al* (2014) are relevant here: it is the well-positioned head teachers that are most prominent and active in these arrangements, reflecting the emerging 'hierarchies' identified by Greany and Higham (2018).

The results of the second finding to emerge, however, the diminished power and capacity of the RSCs, are more difficult to interpret. They are set within a much broader reported picture of diminished capacity of all government departments – one senior officer explained 'there is just no one at the DfE to talk to' – as a result of budget restraint there too and, as reported at least by politicians of the same party of the current UK government, the preparations for Brexit. But it appears that the previously seen large numbers of compulsory conversions to academy status and MAT expansion are at least past their peak, possibly for the foreseeable future.

These changes do not require primary legislation (passed by Parliament) of any sort, and so could well be altered quickly in the future, with further implications for the changing work and power relationships for all significant local actors in state schooling. At the risk

of being sententious, fluidity in school governance is likely to be the steady state for some time – this is one of Ball and Junemann's (2012) 'unstable assemblages'. Further, even when arrangements are set out clearly, for example in new secondary legislation, then their implications locally will also vary with the numerical balance of maintained schools and academies; the local presence of MATs and their governance arrangements, ambitions and structures (which vary widely nationally, as Greany and Higham identify); the choices of role made by the LA; and, of course, the number of schools being identified at risk by current and future national criteria.

Structures are important for professional relationships, not least because they may be constraining or empowering, but how they are enacted locally will also depend (Ball *et* al, 2012) on the way senior leaders conduct themselves and the moral purpose and drive they bring to their respective roles in schools, LAs, MATs and as officials. But how they are experienced in schools will also depend on the latest iterations of the 'highly centralised state', as one ex-senior official expressed it, and Grany and Higham (2018) found, albeit one that is also 'chaotic'. RSCs have been part of this previously, but Ofsted still remains. The results of the annual data health check by LAs and RSCs, together with changing expectations from Ofsted with successive inspection frameworks, even as accepted comparative measures change, will continue to create its own annual focus on outcomes for all schools, even well-positioned ones, with the tensions that this brings for staff. In this sense, it is perhaps not surprising that Greany and Higham found that fewer than half of school leaders support the trajectory of current English policy while being positive about their own schools.

Conclusions

As Gunter (2012) argued, the expectations and structure of national education reform frame and position school leaders' work. For some, where those who not well-positioned in the current contexts of outcome and inspection data, demographic change or school reorganisation, these changes may affect the nature or source of future support or intervention. They will be affected also by the fluidity of the changing governance arrangements, including the nature of the MAT they might belong to. So they may be involved to a greater or less extent when there are problems. Choosing where to work, in academies or maintained schools, well-positioned or otherwise within the local hierarchies, and their concomitant openness, may be important. But this has always been the case arguably – local authorities have never been uniform in the ways they work any more than the communities they serve. Wherever school leaders do work, however, the fluidity of the current arrangements and shifting organisational arrangements may in any case alter their local context over time.

And although the permanent readiness for Ofsted described by some interviewees for this research must certainly structure much leaders' work, it is worth bearing in mind that 86% of schools inspected in the most recently reported round achieved a 'good' or better grade (Ofsted, 2018). Although the vigilance described may be appropriate, it is a small minority of schools that will experience a 'full' inspection with its implications for detailed and accountable action planning undertaken in the public glare.

Councils more widely – politicians and their appointed officers - may well feel optimistically they have authority to develop a local vision for all the communities that elected them, and the developing new arrangements give them a recognised role in the oversight of all schools in their areas. With their reported lack of capacity following budget reductions, however, and now apparently that of the RSCs, the ability of all to undertake development work appears diminished, especially at secondary level. For MATs, there is also now an increasingly recognised role in local governance arrangements, including their contributions to the broader challenges Council areas face. But there remain two undiscussed issues concerning the routine involvement of parents and local communities in the development of state schooling and the as yet lack of any forum of any sort to routinely discuss local policy directions and choices. The Teaching Schools Council document, while setting out clearly several layers of authority, only deals with school improvement work.

For DfE officials and the agencies through which they work, their activities in relation to local schooling may be more restricted now, but this also reflects the same generic capacity problems as their local authority colleagues. And of course this may change again in the fullness of time, including after a change of minister or government. The longer term outlook is unstable.

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