ASCL Association of School and College Leaders

Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence In Education

SYNOPSIS

Leadership of Learning - Synopsis

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Foreword by Geoff Barton
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Forward by Geoff Barton

"It's unnerving," confided one long-established trust leader to me recently: "Too often it feels as if I'm making it up as I go along".
Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that in England our complicated education system is in a fledgling state. The principle of schools working in partnership isn't new of course; nor is it unique to England.

But the development of multi-academy trusts - groups of schools united in charitable trusts, underpinned by shared governance and a wider mission - this is still in its early stages of development.

Hence that trust leader who found headship demanding but knowable and found the step-up to executive leadership unnervingly anxiety-making.

It's a common feeling from people who have been confident in their headships and then feel spooked by their next career step.

That's why this booklet - Leadership of Learning - is so significant. In the CUREE tradition it provides us with an evidence-based insight into what trust leadership is like. It serves up invaluable case studies that help to inform and reassure people like us who wonder what the demands of trust leadership might be, how the role differs from previous ones we might have held, and what we should respect.

In providing examples, it also reinforces a sense of community - the feeling that there are others like you taking on this important new role and sharing their experiences.

As a major provider of the NPQEL qualification, ASCL is proud to be associated with this work by CUREE. We are grateful for their illuminating work.

Most of all, I hope it helps you - whatever stage you may be at in your leadership journey - in navigating the steps ahead. There are few more important roles.

Geoff Barton
General Secretary - ASCL

Preface by Philippa Cordingley

Multi-academy trusts (henceforth 'trusts') are the new kids on the block in English education. They, and the new breed of senior posts they are generating, have been around for less than 10 years. So, it's not surprising that we have little direct research to draw on to help us identify patterns of effectiveness. What evidence there is has tended to focus on the impact of these forms of school organisation at system level or draw on the experience of the few, untypical larger trusts with dozens of schools, multi-million pound budgets and a specialised 'corporate' executive team.

We were very pleased to have this opportunity to inject into this space a modest piece of research which focuses on the more typical case – trusts with two to fifteen schools – and explores what the leaders do and deal with every day focusing quite tightly on the leadership of learning.

Here at CUREE we are careful not to over-claim. This is a small sample of trusts and trust leaders so we have to be careful about asserting any generalisable conclusions. There were, nevertheless, some interesting commonalities emerging from our sample:

a) a strong sense of a diverse community with valuable identities rooted in the locality sharing but not to be overridden by common values and interests
b) a recognition (sometimes a new understanding) of the important role of governance at individual school level
c) a provisionality around the processes and mechanisms for sharing authority and responsibility which were frequently flexed in practice even within a stable formal delegation structure

Finally, our sample CEOs and Executive Heads recognised that the new, often unfamiliar demands on them were generally the 'corporate systems' things like strategic finance planning or managing the estate. They still wanted to be focussed on the main thing – teaching and learning – and saw themselves as, first and foremost, the lead professional

Philippa Cordingley
Chief Executive – CUREE

Introduction

About case studies

New and aspirant leaders in multi-school contexts have a lot to learn. One of the things they discover quite soon is that being responsible for two or more schools is a very different proposition from their previous experience, usually, of one school at a time. What they need to know, what priorities will take up their day and how they make things happen will all be different – and generally, initially, more complex.

Those leaders (we will call them all executive heads, or EHs, for simplicity) will learn from research and other published resources, from experts of one kind and another, and from each other. And they also want to know about and learn from people in a similar position in the system, preferably by going and having a look at what they do in 'the field'. So, most leadership programmes include some visits and case studies. These are valuable but are a) very time consuming and b) often not very informative because leadership in multi-school contexts is not really very observable.

CUREE's role in this NPQEL programme was to help the participants learn some of what they needed to know as efficiently as possible about the leadership of learning. To do this, we organised a lot of the research material in a 'route map' using the London Tube map as a metaphor for finding your way around the research quickly. And, to make accessing the experience of other practitioners as efficient as possible, we interviewed a number of them, looked at some of the official data about their schools, trusts, federations (which we will refer to collectively from now on as 'trusts') etc and summarised that information here. This case study material takes two forms:

- A synopsis which looks across the 13 case studies and looks for interesting similarities and differences.
- A very short, tight 'vignette' [1] for each EH setting out on one A4 page the context, the principles underpinning the group (MAT, federation etc), the way the trust distributed authority and responsibility and its approach to school improvement.

About this synopsis

This version of the report contains the synopsis **without** the individual vignettes. The report was commissioned by the ASCL-led NPQEL partnership to support the participants on that programme and the full version is provided to them. The ASCL partnership recognised that the summary made a relevant and timely contribution to the discussion about this still emergent system leader role and agreed that it could be made public.

About *these* case studies

We learned early on that EHs are often rather reticent to stick their heads above the public parapet, so we are particularly grateful to the 13 who were willing to do this in the interests of their less experienced colleagues. This also means that the leaders in our sample are relatively confident and successful and may not be completely representative of the sector. We gave each respondent the option of having their 'case' reported anonymously but all were happy to be named. We went for around a dozen because we thought we might detect some interesting patterns at about this size.

[1] Not included in this public version which is the summary only

More might have been merrier but would have been an unmanageable read including all the individual case 'vignettes'.

The sample is necessarily a bit opportunistic, but we tried to be roughly representative in geographical spread, in sector distribution and context (urban/rural). We tried for a reasonable mix of female and male leaders, but we deliberately skewed the size (i.e. number of schools) to the lower end of the range. This was because we knew that the majority of participants on the NPQEL programme were from smaller school groups and we wanted to present information which would clearly be of relevance to them.

Interviews

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview framework which asked them to reflect on their own experience with a particular focus on the leadership of learning. We added some basic descriptive statistics and created a short summary, a 'Vignette' for each trust (see Appendix). We focused on the EH experience, the structure and underpinning logic and values of each trust, and the model of delegation and approach to governance. We asked how they determined the trust's school improvement priorities and if there was there a clear model they were using to do so. Selecting relevant 'solutions' was a topic we discussed with the interviewees, the way they evaluated the effectiveness of school improvement and what were their sources of support.

Headlines

These are case studies intended to illustrate the range of approaches to leadership – particularly the leadership of learning – used by real people in real contexts. They are highly summarised in a way intended to convey to our readers, busy professionals, a lot of information in a short time. Each situation is unique and generates unique responses to it, but we have, in this synopsis, attempted to distil some of the more frequently occurring features across our 13 settings. There are no 'findings' but there are some things worth noting:

- The trusts in our sample saw themselves as bound together by a set of common values within which each member school would maintain its unique local identity. We did not select for this so it's reasonable to think that this is a common value position, at least of trusts of this size
- Reconciling an increasingly top-down ('command and control') approach to accountability (coming from government agencies) with maintaining extensive delegation to its schools was a standing challenge to a trust. In consequence, the relationships, systems and processes which give this life were in constant flux even where the formal aspects (e.g. schemes of delegation) were relatively stable
- Almost all the executive heads in our sample had moved into that position directly from headship and from a school within the trust. Many of them were the 'founding' EH and had been active in creating the trust in the first place
- A central board (trustees) plus local governing bodies was still the most common model of governance though the larger and/or more widely distributed trusts were trying some other approaches
- Some functions were universally centralised (particularly finance) and some localised (e.g. curriculum portfolio). Between those two points, all kinds of different operational delegation arrangements were being tried somewhere
- Shared or common approaches to curriculum or teaching and learning were generally encouraged and facilitated bottom up rather than mandated top down

- School improvement was a core activity of trusts linked closely to their core missions but our sample showed many different approaches. There were two common models – individualised, targeted interventions and trust wide improvement strategies
- Most trusts implemented school improvement strategies via various forms of staff development and learning with coaching becoming a more common element. In several trusts, their own teaching school was a key co-ordinator of these processes. Monitoring and evaluation was typically undertaken through existing internal review processes

Responsiveness to Context

Most of the trusts in our sample had emerged in response to local issues and challenges and saw themselves as reflecting the values and needs of local communities. The federation and most of the MATs saw themselves as opt-in groupings which other schools joined voluntarily (often as 'converter' academies) and had adopted values and processes which they expected would be attractive to such schools. Though many of the MATs were sponsoring schools (i.e. schools with poor Ofsted judgements required to join a MAT), these were always a minority and many trust systems and structures reflected this basically 'collegiate' philosophy.

Though none of the very large trusts were included in our sample, it did reflect a wide variation of size. (up to 16 schools). However, size did not appear to be a major driver of policy or systems though it did, we think, have impact on the centralisation/localisation issue and on approaches to governance (see below). Possibly of more significance, in relation to delegation issues, was the number of sponsored schools the trust was supporting.

Nonetheless, size was a factor which many Executive Heads managed self-consciously and had significant impact on how they balanced centralisation and distribution of decision making and resource. For example, centralised decisions were understood as challenging to design and implement effectively in larger school groups because they have to span a greater range of circumstances. On the other hand, scale was also seen as bringing capacity to release resources. Different trusts adopted different stances in balancing what to keep tight and where to let go of control but there were sub clusters of responses which illustrated the range of possibilities from which trusts made choices. In order to make it easier to see the possibilities and choices being made we have used four-way grids plotting the balances being struck between localisation and centralisation and whether or not this interacts with the size of the MAT (see Graph A below).

Size and composition of trusts

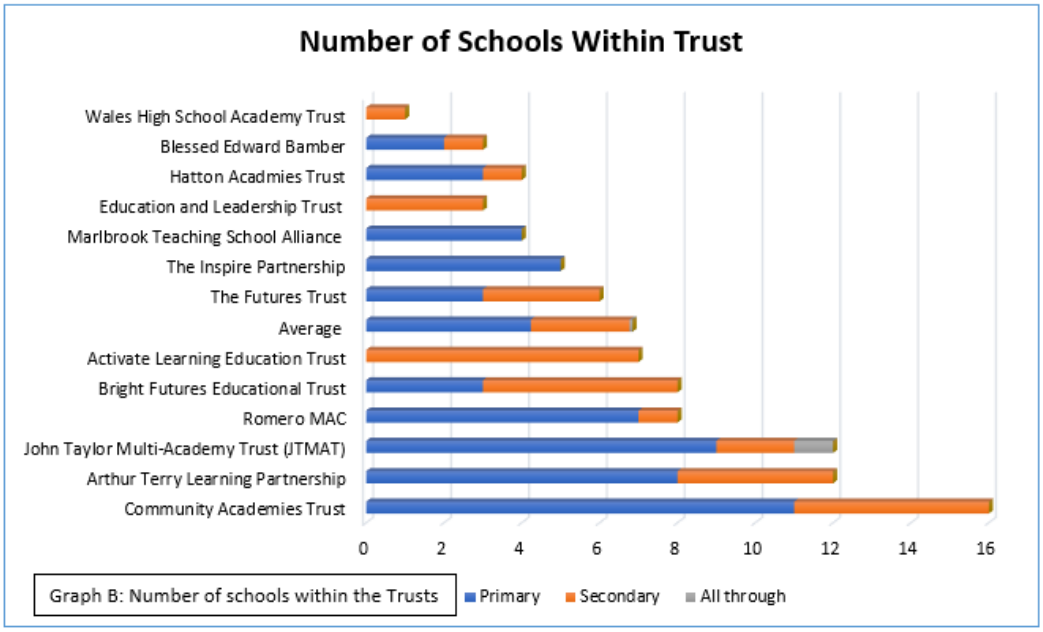
In this project, 13 leaders were interviewed from 13 Trusts/Federations across England comprising a total of 55 primary schools and 33 secondary schools. There was a wide range in the number of schools within each Trust, from one to 16 with a median of 6. As seen in the Graph B, 9 of 13 EH's led cross-phase trusts, one had an all-through school, one included a special school, one had both studio schools and a University Technical College (UTC). Five trusts included a teaching school.

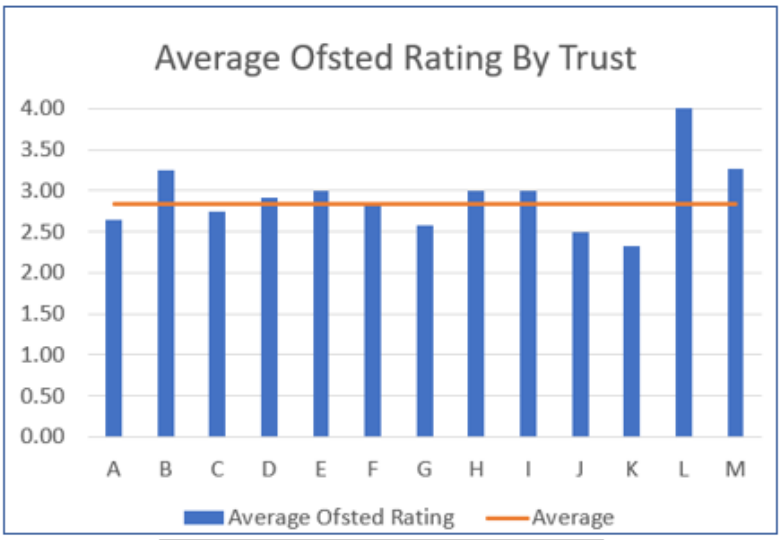
Our sample was mostly of multi-academy trusts, but we had one primary federation, one co-operative trust and one single school MAT. One, Romero, was a Catholic Multi Academy Company (MAC).

Type of school grouping	Number of trusts
MAT	10
Federation	1
Other type (e.g. MAC)	2
Includes other types of education provision (special, UTC etc)	3
Is a school sponsor	6
Includes a Teaching School	5

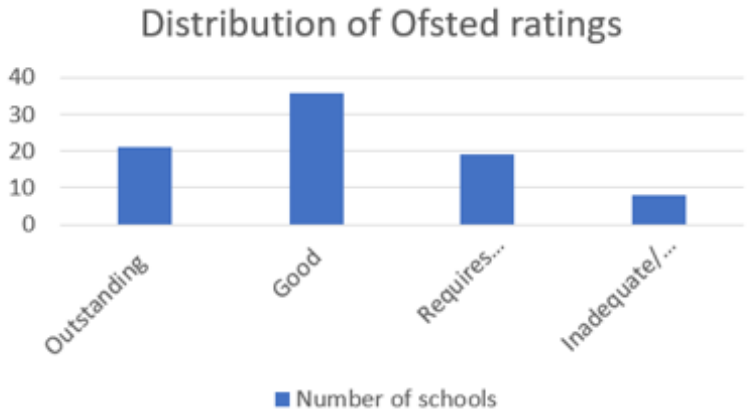
Public performance data

We were not setting out to review the performance of our sample (for which reason, we have not identified them here) but we did collate their recent Ofsted ratings, just to check that our sample was not seriously skewed from the average. We present these data below in Graph C and Table 2 showing the average of Ofsted ratings by Trust and the average (orange line) across the whole sample.





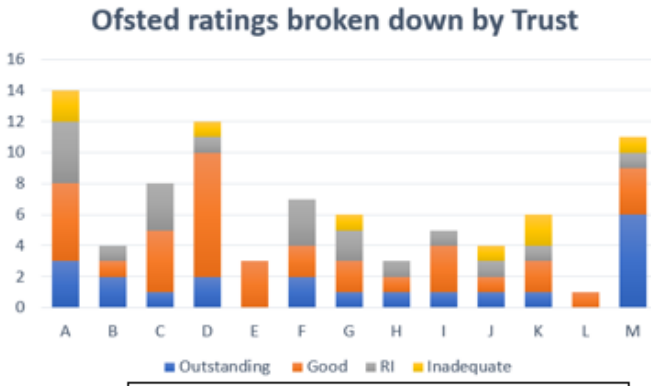
Graph C: Average Ofsted rating by Trust



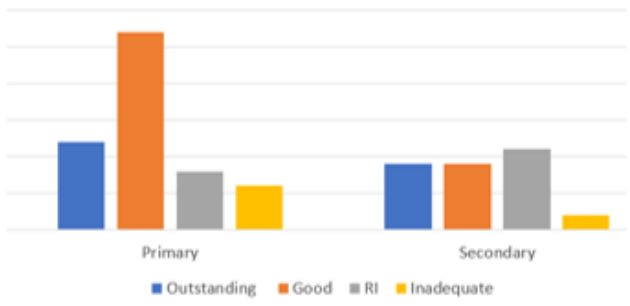
Graph D: Distribution of Ofsted ratings

Ofsted Rating	Number of schools
Outstanding	21
Good	36
Requires Improvement	19
Inadequate/Special Measures	8
No rating	4
Grand Total	88

Table 2: Ofsted rating by number of



Graph F: Ofsted ratings broken down by Phase

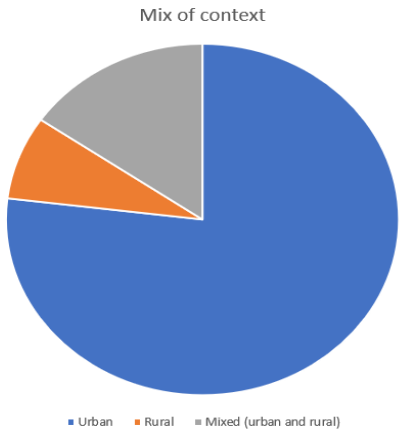


Graph E: Ofsted ratings broken down by Trust

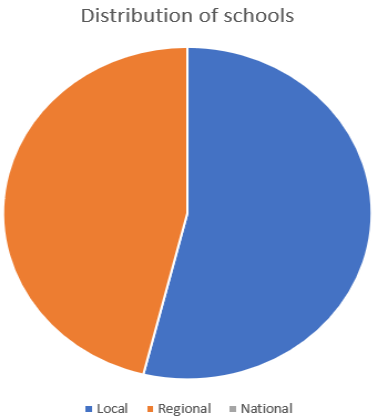
Locality

Most of our 13 trusts had some schools in an urban context (see Graph G) with 10 of them having all schools in an urban locality (e.g. within a city/built up area). One trust was completely in rural settings and two had schools in both settings.

Over half our trusts operated across a small geographical area (local) with the remainder spread out a bit more regionally. The main distinction is travel time - those operating across a wider geographical area are less able to collaborate informally and require more deliberate co-ordination systems.



Graph G: Mix of context in schools



Graph H: Distribution of schools

Executive Head experience

It is no surprise that the leaders in our sample had a lot of leadership experience including, in all cases, of headship. All but one had moved from headship of a single school to executive headship (or CEO) in the same trust. Many, but not all, were the 'founders' of the trust and this was particularly true of the newer ones. One CEO had moved from school leadership to senior civil service roles (in the Department of Education) and back into a MAT CEO post. Our trust leaders also brought experience in a range of other senior roles including the Teaching School Council, regional Headteachers' Board, Ofsted and many served as governors outside their own trust.

Current and recent experience	Number
Is an Executive Head?	5
Is a CEO?	8
In a headship position prior to becoming a CEO/Exec head?	12
Head at one of the schools in the trust prior to becoming a CEO/Exec head?	12
Also hold another relevant role (e.g. NLE, Ofsted Inspector, governor)	8

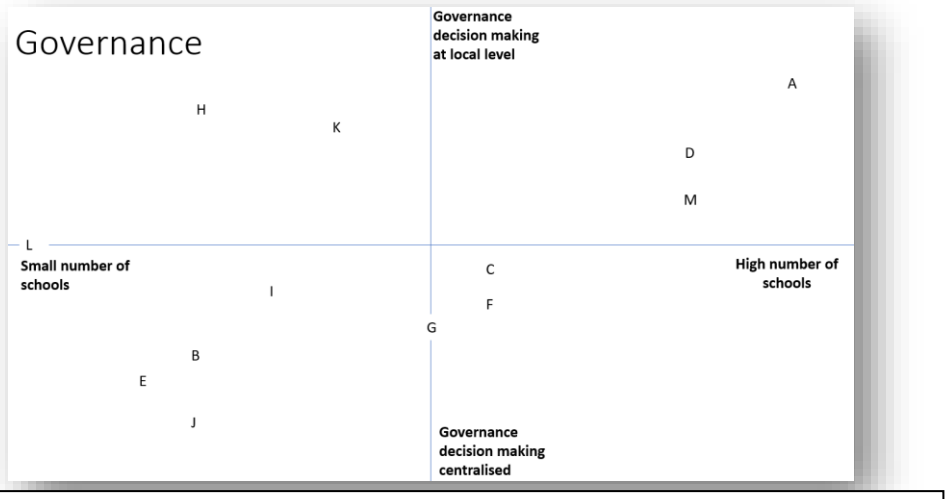
Approach to delegation

The issue of managing the distribution of responsibility and accountability across the trust came up in virtually every conversation. For some of our leaders it was a continuing problem but for everybody it was an issue. The broad, 'collegiate' stance mentioned earlier was reflected in a widespread desire to maintain a measure of independence and identity at individual school level. This was sometimes in conflict with operational and accountability pressures to centralise a wide range of decisions.

Governance

Most of our trusts maintained local governing bodies (LGBs) with substantive delegated powers. The common rationale was that the schools each had and needed to maintain a distinct identity and to be responsive to local stakeholders. These trusts interpreted this principle to include a representative LGB (though several also acknowledged the growing challenges of recruiting effective people to LGBs). One trust had a model of governance which inserted a novel local 'hub' level of governance comprising both non-executive governors and executive leaders. Another had replaced LGBs with an advisory structure (but this was an unusual trust which included UTCs and studio schools).

All leaders were confident that they had a clear and well-understood model of delegation, but this did not mean that it was static. Four trusts had what they thought was a settled approach to delegation, but all the others saw it as flexible and evolving. For some, this was a reflection of newness – their systems were effectively being piloted and were expected to change as they matured. Others recognised the need to modify approaches to governance (and delegation) as the trust expanded. Another widespread concept was various versions of 'earned' or 'contingent' autonomy in which delegation was extended or reduced based on effectiveness indicators, typically Ofsted grade supplemented with a financial performance indicator. The chart below (Graph A) illustrates a slight correlation between trust size and the extent of delegation to local governance structures.



Graph A: Balance between localisation and centralisation and interaction with the size of the trust

Operational

Most of our trusts had mechanisms for managing the distribution of responsibility between a 'central team' and school leaders. Many Executive Heads were very cautious – even a bit apologetic – about the size of the team and felt a strong moral obligation to be able to justify it, preferably in terms of educational benefit. Finance was universally centrally controlled but that control itself quite varied.

Standard finance software and reporting processes were common as were centralised procurement procedures. Financial planning and budget setting, on the other hand, were typically more distributed with heads, sometimes executive heads, and LGBs all frequently having a substantive role in the process. HR was the other commonly centralised function, but this too could be varied in application with, for instance, staff appointments made at school level but Safer Employment processes controlled centrally. Simplistically, there was a greater degree of central control of 'compliance' functions (e.g. finance, health and safety, data protection) than anything else.

At the other end of the spectrum, most trusts did not mandate a common curriculum policy or trust wide models of pedagogy. That said, many leaders reported a substantial and growing degree of shared approaches developed organically and encouraged through cross-trust working parties, projects and through tools and processes such as training and handbooks.

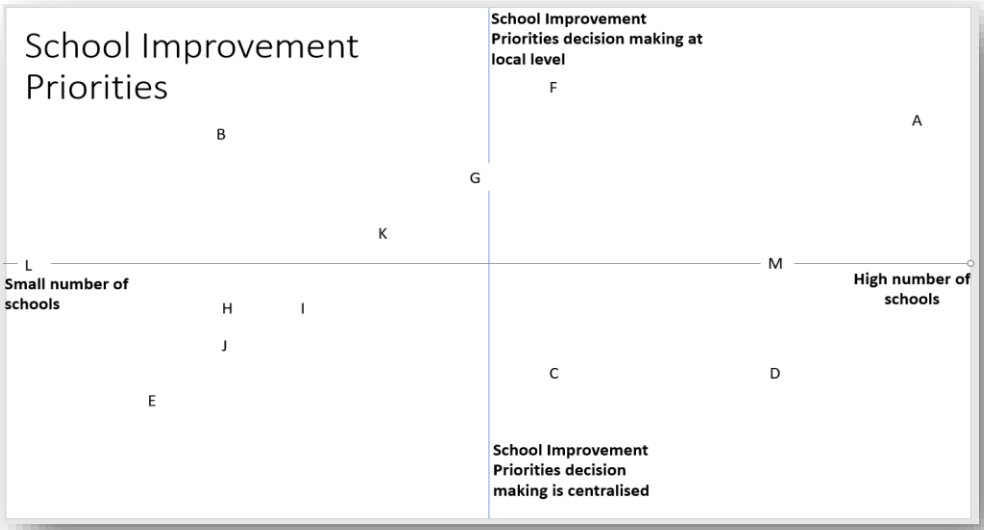
The trusts in our sample had a wide variety of approaches to the challenge of co-ordinating the schools educationally – a particular issue, given their philosophical resistance to centralisation. Trust leaders faced the dilemma of marrying top-down accountability (carried by the trust) for educational outcomes with a highly distributed responsibility for achieving those outcomes. Structurally, our trusts largely resisted the 'regional director' solution (though few were big enough for this to be viable). A number had models of 'cluster' executive heads. Many more had a trust director of phase or of a curriculum area (usually core subjects) who might be full or part time – but these were mostly part of the school improvement system (see below). One trust – the biggest in our sample – had an unusual hub-based model where governors and school leaders jointly governed/managed the schools within the hub remit. This issue – how to reconcile distributed leadership with centralised accountabilities – was the most provisional and unstable of all the aspects of trust leadership which the leaders in our sample were wrestling with. One interesting response we heard was the use of leadership coaching as the glue which bound the enterprise together. This also helped the executive head to put some distance between him/her and the day-to-day operations of the schools (a particular challenge when your 'old' school is also in the trust). Two variants of this emerged; one in which leaders (usually heads and deputies) were coached and trained in co-coaching (of each other); the other went a bit further and trained those leaders as coaches of other school staff. [These developments seemed to echo similar initiatives been adopted elsewhere including in some Opportunity Areas].

Approaches to school improvement priorities

None of the leaders in our sample saw themselves as leading an outsourced services organisation. They led a community with a shared educational vision and philosophy, not an apparatus for saving money – though most acknowledged they needed to do that too. So school performance and improvement were near the top of their agendas, but with very different ways of approaching it. All the trusts here had some form of structure for determining school improvement priorities. Most had an annual review process, ranging from a moderated self-evaluation to an externally (to the school) facilitated education audit. Performance data featured heavily but our executive heads were wary of falling into the trap they felt Ofsted had, of an over-reliance on those data.

Two broad approaches emerged across our sample to the school improvement task. The first was highly individualised school-by-school. An audit process would identify particular problems and a package of measures would be designed or purchased. This could be – and usually was – focussed on a particular school in difficulties (e.g. sponsored) or it could be picking up a broader area of weakness across several schools (e.g. weak pupil assessment). The second approach was more structural and based on school improvement strategies or frameworks, such as three-year plans or approaches based on Sir David Carter's 4-Stage Improvement Model. One trust made explicit use of the EEF Teaching

and Learning Toolkit, matching focus areas emerging from their education audits to strategies with high efficacy and high value for money. Another trust set great store by involving students, via 'student voice' in establishing priorities and student leadership in enacting them.



Graphic I: School Improvement Priorities

Implementing change

There was less pattern in the ways trusts set out to implement the school improvement priorities than there was in the determination of them in the first place. The more common features of the implementation process include:

- A focus on "bespoke" solutions rather than implementing a pre-existing model or package
- Understanding school improvement as a development process wholly or largely taken forward as professional development and learning
- Securing the active engagement of the stakeholders (usually middle managers and teachers) rather than simply mandating compliance
- Some use of 'task and finish' groups of various descriptions – specifically convened working groups usually drawing staff in from across the trust
- Extensive use of formal and informal opportunities (usually regularly programmed) such as staff conferences, development days, middle and senior leadership team meetings etc
- Using the teaching school as the co-ordinating centre and engine of change (again, usually understood as CPDL)

Evaluating effectiveness of school improvement approaches

Most trusts relied on their regular monitoring systems to generate evidence that their school improvement activities were have a positive impact. Some had a regular programme of performance reviews. Others had focussed 'audit' systems which looked more closely at those schools or parts of the trust where specific improvement measures had been applied. Some trusts included improvement priorities in personal performance review targets and then monitored achievement in subsequent reviews. All had in-house pupil progress monitoring systems of various degrees of sophistication which provided some data for the evaluation process

Support

It is lonely at the top and being the senior leader in a group of schools can be lonelier still. We asked our EH's where they got their support from. For most, it was their senior colleagues; others cited trustee's (especially the chair) as the principal sounding board. A lot of our leaders were members of a variety of other professional forums from which they derived both challenge and support. Some of the more unusual support sources cited included

- Twitter (other social media sites are available!)
- External "consultants" (including Sir David Carter and CUREE)
- Ofsted
- Students
- Academic and research sources e.g. EEF, current and previous post-graduate study (e.g. an MBA)

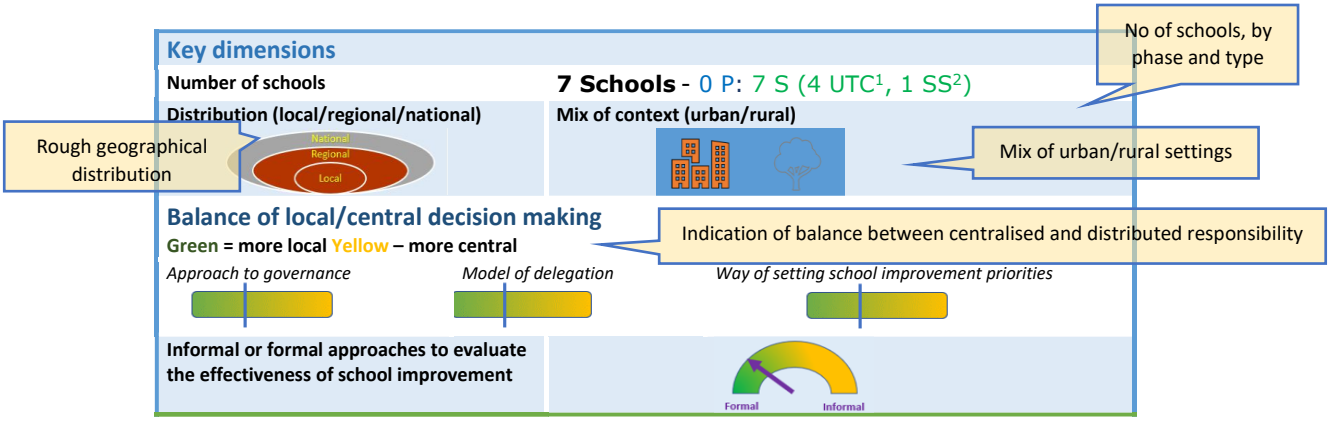
Appendix A

Where are the Vignettes?

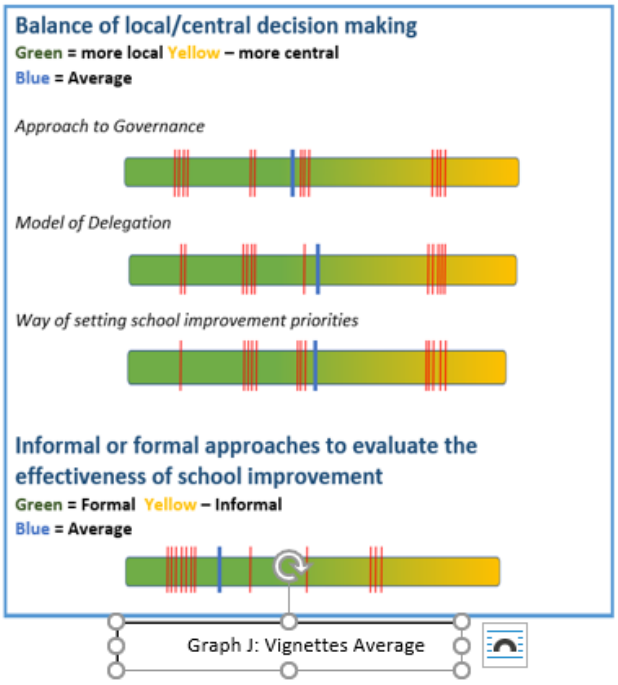
In this 'Synopsis Only' version of the report, the vignettes are *not* included

What are the Vignettes

We summarised the information for each executive head and school grouping in a single page 'vignette' following a consistent format. We've attempted to capture some of the core data about the trust in visual form as the annotated example below illustrates



And Graph J below illustrates the average for all the Trusts about the 'Balance of local/central decision making' and the 'Informal or informal approaches to evaluate the effectiveness of school improvement'.



Overall, the Trusts had an average of a more local decision-making approach to governance while their model of delegation and way of setting school improvement priorities sits in the middle. Most of the Trusts had a more formal approach when evaluating the effectiveness of their school improvement measures. Each red line represents a trust and the blue line is the average of all of them.