



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Academies and Free Schools](#), HC 258

Tuesday 24 June 2014

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Members present: Mr Graham Stuart (Chair); Alex Cunningham; Bill Esterson; Ian Mearns; Caroline Nokes; David Ward; Craig Whittaker

Questions 684-782

Witnesses: **Katie Beal**, Headteacher, Eastfield Primary School, Kingston-upon-Hull, **Wendy Marshall**, CEO, David Ross Education Trust, and **Emma Hardy**, Primary teacher and Vice-President of East Riding NUT, gave evidence.

Q684 Chair: Good morning and welcome to this session of the Education Select Committee, which is not taking place within the environment of Westminster, but is here in Hull at the Sirius Academy. We are grateful to Sirius for hosting us in their splendid building. We are also grateful to the three of you for coming and giving evidence to us today. As you know, we are inquiring into academies and free schools. The expansion of academies has been the central characteristic of education policy under this coalition government, and we want to explore the issues around the subject: whether academies and free schools are going to lead to an improvement in educational standards over time in general, whether it will help close the gap between the rich and poor and provide more socially just outcomes, and what recommendations we should make to government to protect or improve the current settlement so as to encourage the maximum amount of interschool collaboration and raising of standards overall. Thank you for being here.

The issue of what stands between the Secretary of State's desk and the increasing number of academies—primary and secondary—around the country, has bedevilled this debate. The government has recently come forward with the proposal of having school commissioners to help broker support for academies that fail. We took evidence from the Schools Commissioner and some regional commissioners recently. How do you foresee your relationship developing with the local regional schools commissioner, Jennifer Bexon-Smith?

Wendy Marshall: Certainly from our point of view, we cover three regions, and the relationship is going to be key in terms of understanding the regional context in which we operate. I am looking for some leading guidance on that but, equally, personally, from a multi-academy trust perspective, I would like one regional commissioner nominated as our key link, as we have with Ofsted, so we can build a close relationship with the group.

Q685 Chair: Whereas having to deal with three is going to be more confusing and difficult. Emma?

Emma Hardy: Yes, I agree that there has been a problem with having the academies and a problem with the lack of local accountability. The Public Accounts Committee report in

January 2011 said that there were inadequate financial controls. Instead of saying, “Let us invent something new,” which might also create difficulties and confusion in schools, let us have a look at what we had to start with and why what we had to start with was quite so good. The reason that we support local authority schools is because of the strengths of those local authority schools and the way they can manage and look after the schools in their area—because they know their communities well. I am not quite sure how the new proposal will actually work know their communities quite so well.

Just as an example of how they know their communities so well, as I am sure you are all aware—for those of you who have come to Hull, we had a conversation about this—we have our Hull fair in October. It is a fantastic place.

Q686 Chair: Is it Europe’s largest travelling fair?

Emma Hardy: It is Europe’s largest travelling fair. I made this point last night, and it is Europe’s largest travelling fair. One of the things Hull City Council do is offer education to all the travelling children, and that is something they do because it is a specific issue for Hull City Council.

Q687 Chair: So the NUT remains opposed to the academies programme—

Emma Hardy: I am telling you what I know.

Chair: —and you would use the whole context in particular to emphasise the success of local authority control, would you?

Emma Hardy: You are not actually letting me finish. What I am saying is that in Hull there are specific issues to do with education that a regional person would not know about, would not be aware of, and how much would they actually care about it? Hull City Council are having to close this travelling education that they provide for these children. These children are going to have no education when they come to Hull, because they are having to close it. They are having to close it because of the cuts that they have had to their funding and part of this is because of the number of academies that we have in Hull.

So, one, I do not think academies actually benefit all children, because they clearly have not benefited the children from the travelling community.

Q688 Chair: Are standards in Hull improving at the moment?

Emma Hardy: Standards in academies are very limited. Professor Stephen Machin found that the effects of academy conversion on students in the bottom 10% and 20% were insignificantly different from zero and possibly negative for later conversions, suggesting no beneficial effects on students in academies.

The Academies Commission, set up by the Royal Society of Arts and the education company Pearson, concluded that “the evidence does not suggest that improvement across all academies has been strong enough to transform the life chances of children from the poorest families”. It added, “Academy status alone is not a panacea for improvement.” Henry Stewart’s analysis outlined that disadvantaged children in primary schools with lower than average SATs results would do better if their school remained a maintained school.

Q689 Alex Cunningham: We do see improvements in some cases. Is it not a case for horses for courses, i.e. different systems for different children? I have seen tremendous improvements in an academy in my area. It is an academy that I paved the way for when I was the lead member for children and young people in Stockton. They have done something different to bring success. Then again, we had examples yesterday from Katie and others where they took what were good, well-performing schools and continued a notch on it.

Katie Beal: Yes, as part of a strong supporter of Hull, we would want to work with local people and can see a place for a regional commissioner, who could work and get to know the local authorities within that patch. Certainly from the academy group we belong to, we represent a lot of underperforming and more children with needs in Hull. We have definitely raised the attainment of those pupils and they have made significant process. I am not saying that is completely in light of being an academy, but certainly we feel there is a place for academies to work with other types of schools in Hull. Working together is the important point.

Q690 Craig Whittaker: Emma, it was great listening to the NUT transcript but I am sure—

Emma Hardy: I can assure you that a lot of this was written by me.

Craig Whittaker: Will you let me finish? I am sure all the panel can read them and they are well published. Let me just ask you, because you mentioned very specifically local authorities, why did it go so wrong in Hull for so very many years under local authority control?

Emma Hardy: One of the improvements that we had in Hull—and being in this building is a fantastic example of it—was the building schools for the future programme and the investment that they put into new buildings. Sirius was one of the Labour academies. It was one of the first ones set up when sponsored academies actually had to give money and put investment into new buildings, rebranding and a fresh start. That is what has made a difference.

Q691 Chair: Did you not oppose those as well?

Emma Hardy: Do I oppose those as well?

Chair: Did the NUT oppose the Labour academies and the academies of the Coalition?

Emma Hardy: I do not oppose investing in schools, and investing in schools and giving money for new buildings, creating a new school identity—

Q692 Craig Whittaker: So it is new buildings then?

Emma Hardy: That does make a big difference, yes.

Q693 Alex Cunningham: Surely it is leadership and the quality of teaching and learning. It does not matter whether they are an academy or a local authority associated or maintained school.

Emma Hardy: Yes, can I just say the former schools commissioner, Sir Bruce Liddington, who used to head E-ACT—

Craig Whittaker: We can read that type of information anywhere on the internet.

Chair: We want to hear your testimony, not your reiteration of NUT briefing papers.

Emma Hardy: He said academy status is a state of mind.

Chair: Emma, we will control this session and you will answer our questions, and we will set them. I will bring Bill in.

Q694 Bill Esterson: He does not normally give witnesses such a hard time. I am not sure what you have done to him. Katie, we met you and your colleagues yesterday; you are all very impressive leaders and the schools were all “outstanding” or “good with outstanding features”, apart from one that was headed in that direction we were told as well. Would you have maintained the improvements whether you became academies or not?

Katie Beal: We have made a faster rate of improvement because of the collaborations we have made with the other schools in our MAT—that ability for us to challenge each other and support each other to improve even further in a way that we possibly could not have done if we had not had those links that make us absolutely responsible for each other’s successes. We are accountable for each other, and therefore it is imperative we support each other to improve.

Q695 Bill Esterson: So it is accountability you think that is the difference?

Katie Beal: Shared accountability, but high support as well as high challenge. It is not just being told how well you are doing, but being able to help each other to tackle the issues we need to to raise attainment even further.

Q696 Alex Cunningham: Why was that not happening before the advent of your trust?

Katie Beal: It was happening in places; however, you can offer support to a school, but if there is no formal relationship between you, there is no absolute commitment to have to undertake the advice and support that you are offered. Whereas if you are accountable for each other, we are committed to listen and to take heed of the advice of others, who sometimes do have better experiences to offer, that can make improvements in our schools.

Q697 Ian Mearns: In evidence to this committee, the Commissioner for Schools for England said that he would envisage a fully academised system within five years, so that means an awful lot of schools converting on an annual basis. The DfE subsequently, in another evidence session, said that that was not their policy. So is it viable or desirable for a small primary school to convert as a standalone academy?

Emma Hardy: We were talking about this last night and certainly in the East Riding there would be huge difficulties with the number of very small schools that we have. We have 10% of them with fewer than 60 pupils; 46% of them have fewer than 150 pupils. They are in a vast geographical area, so they are often not near to each other; it would not be as easy for them to collaborate as they are further away from each other.

The extra responsibilities that would come with being an academy would be unfeasible for some of these small schools. They do not have full time bursars; they do not have the non-teaching staff who could deal with all the new responsibilities they would take on. As has been proven in other areas, it would be a huge distraction from teaching and learning, and in many of these really small schools, some of the headteachers still teach. There is too much responsibility for this, and that is maybe one of the reasons why there are not so many academies in East Riding: because of the geographical nature and the fact that we have so many small schools.

Wendy Marshall: I agree that the feasibility of smaller primary schools converting to standalones is very limited because of capacity. However, joining with groups of like-minded schools, whether in collaborative clusters or in multi-academy trusts, opens up a number of benefits, not only financial benefits but educational opportunities and economies of scale. Our smallest primary school has 55 children; our largest has 600 children and, equally, our smallest secondary is 150. So there are ways that smaller schools can be presented with the same opportunities of working in groups, clusters, collaborations or academy trusts, but I do not think it is feasible to stand alone. The infrastructure just does not exist.

Katie Beal: I agree; a small school on its own can do really well, but there has to be some advantage in working alongside other schools in some capacity or other. It does not mean that a school has to lose its own identity and uniqueness and the things that make it special to the local community. Those things, I believe, can definitely be retained whilst working alongside other key strands where there are similarities in other schools. There is the opportunity for economies of scale in that respect.

Q698 Ian Mearns: We saw you yesterday—the Collingwood Primary School—and what we saw together there was a collaborative partnership trust that was working across a geographical area of about eight and a half miles, covering five, soon to be six, schools. If you take that into rural Northumberland or Cumbria, where you might have 15 or 20 miles between schools, how effective do you think that can be in terms of that collaborative working? Even two schools might be 15 miles apart; putting six together might mean bringing together people from a much bigger geographical area.

Katie Beal: It would be more difficult, but technology these days is a marvellous thing and there is a lot you can do with the internet and with opportunities for pupils and for staff, where you do not necessarily need to be meeting together all the time. I do accept it is more difficult if you are further apart.

Emma Hardy: Can I come in on two things? One, there seems to be a misconception here that collaboration did not exist before academies; collaboration did exist. You had the old school clusters that fed into the local secondary, where the heads met and collaborated. In the South Hunsley Partnership, all the schools that fed into South Hunsley used to meet together regularly. I remember the primary school headteachers there writing their own curriculum and their own topics, which were then fed out to all the schools. So this collaboration did happen; it is not something that was invented with academies.

Q699 Chair: Emma, on that note, most of the evidence we have had suggests that there is a greater level of partnership and collaboration now. How much that is triggered by

academies and the freedoms they give or how much it is to do with other changes in either policy or attitude, I do not know, but would you agree with that? Is there greater collaboration and partnership now than there was before?

Katie Beal: I believe there is, but that is not singly down to academies. The invention of teaching schools and the school-to-school support agenda that is happening nationally has broadened that out, because local authorities use school-to-school support as well as academy groups. So I do not think it is a single academy agenda.

Q700 Chair: But it is greater now than it was?

Katie Beal: It is greater, I believe, yes.

Q701 Chair: Do you think it is greater now than it was, Emma?

Emma Hardy: Talking about the South Hunsley Partnership—I know this because my dad was a local headteacher and used to meet there—one of the schools became an academy and was then not part of that, so it led to less collaboration because that school was not then collaborating with any others because it was a standalone.

Q702 Chair: Overall do you think there is more or less now? It is just that everybody else has told us there is more, but perhaps you do not see it that way.

Wendy Marshall: Our schools in Northamptonshire, for example, have a very strong area improvement partnership. The schools that we have in Northamptonshire are still members of that partnership, so it is more rather than less. We share the good practice that we have from our network through the area improvement partnership. We are very open that that is for the benefit of Northamptonshire schools and meet with the local authority to share that best practice at local authority level. We do not pull up the drawbridge; this is really good practice for the system—not just to be kept in one small group.

Q703 Alex Cunningham: If there is more, why is there more? What has been the catalyst for change? It has not just been the creation of academies. What has actually led to greater collaboration? We heard yesterday from people in informal things that they were working more closely together, they had a vision for the whole city of Hull and a whole manner of things like that. What changed? There was an almost overnight change where things were all of sudden being driven in a different way.

Wendy Marshall: I can offer you some explanation from the heads in our trust. They, first of all, value the opportunity to work with other schools in other local authorities. They think that that brings a different dimension and different energy. They also liked the idea of sharing resource on a practical level, which did not seem to exist before, and the career pathways that it presents to teachers. We share teachers across the group and have lead teachers in various areas.

Q704 Alex Cunningham: Were professionals not doing that before?

Wendy Marshall: It seems not in all areas, no. To be clear, some of the smaller schools were not part of what may have been those inner city groups. It may have been there was stronger and tighter collaboration in those inner city areas, but certainly not in the rural regions.

Katie Beal: It is also understanding the value of teacher working with teacher, which in the past, perhaps, was not fully appreciated when the priority was to keep the teacher in front of the children in the classroom day after day, which obviously is the main way they are going to improve. However, some time taken out for teachers to collaborate with other teachers can be immensely valuable and lead to those improvements in the quality of teaching and learning that we are all looking for.

Emma Hardy: Can I say two things here: to what extent does collaboration become loss of autonomy for schools? We were talking just last night about one of the academy chains outsourcing all its TAs and its non-support staff and putting out a £200 million contract to have them brought in from somewhere else. That does not seem like collaboration; that seems like dictation—being told what to do by a large chain—which does not seem to make sense to me, because you are talking about schools working together; whereas this actually looks like a very heavy top-down model of headteachers being told who they should employ, how they should employ them and by whom they should get their new staff.

Again, going back to the fact that collaboration did happen before and is happening now with the local authority, it is happening in Leeds at the moment, where the local authority have support partnership arrangements. So, again, I do not accept this view that is coming across that collaboration was invented with the Education Act of 2011.

Chair: I am not quite sure who has ever suggested that.

Emma Hardy: Well, hopefully no one here.

Q705 Ian Mearns: Part of the problem we have is that we are working in a system where academy trusts are developing and they are as diverse as local education authorities were before. A sad memory that I have is that, when grant maintained status was invented, in some local authorities there was a massive flight towards grant maintained status because they had a very poor view of the local education authority, and in other places there was not a flight towards grant maintained status. There are different patterns happening in different parts of the country in different scenarios. When it comes to becoming an academy, what additional responsibilities do you think are incurred by the management of the school and by the whole school in becoming an academy? What additional responsibilities do schools take on?

Katie Beal: You do not have potentially—and I say “potentially” carefully—the support of the local authority in making sure certain things are done that you need to make sure are done. Nevertheless, certainly in our experience, the local authority has still offered all those services to us, so we have not had that feeling of being alone or being excluded from other projects that the local authority is doing just because we are an academy. Whilst we have had additional responsibilities in terms of our reporting and our accountability for the business that we have become, we have been well supported and nothing has been taken away from us just because we have been an academy.

Q706 Ian Mearns: What additional skills are required in the school workforce after academy conversion? We met some staff yesterday that a maintained school might not have had in that context.

Katie Beal: In our case, we have not taken on any additional staff; it has just been a slightly different skill set for business managers and so on, in terms of the accountability and the reporting through solicitors and accountants, which previously would have been dealt with in a slightly different manner.

Q707 Chair: Are they co-operating more and being able to share skills in a way that did not happen before under the local authority?

Katie Beal: Yes, I would definitely say they are, too, collaborating and sharing skills, and improving their own practice.

Emma Hardy: Just to come in on what the new responsibilities of an academy are, I am sure Graham will be very aware that tomorrow will be 25 June, the anniversary of the—I am testing you now, Graham.

Chair: We will ask the questions, Emma. We have limited time: short and sharp answers, please. Thank you.

Emma Hardy: Yes, the anniversary of the flood and the floods that had a detrimental impact on the people of Hull and East Riding, with the loss of 114,400 school days. If the floods were to happen again, the local authorities are no longer responsible for finding new premises, undertaking repairs or rebuilding work. In an area like Hull, which is a flood risk area—we saw this in December when the tidal barrier was again up protecting the people of Hull—there is a real danger that schools will be flooded again.

All these academies are talking about how they are working together and they have four schools. When you have a local authority, they can move pupils, redistribute people and find them buildings to work in. How would they cope if their schools all flooded now and they were in a small chain of three schools?

Katie Beal: No one hopes that that kind of situation will arise again, but we do have insurance and we do have plans and policies to make sure that, if that were the case, we would need to think about relocating pupils. I am sure the local authority would undertake to support us in that because they still do have some responsibility.

Q708 Chair: Tell us about your relationship with the local authority, or am I anticipating someone else?

Katie Beal: We have a very good relationship with the local authority. Our decision to become a multi-academy trust was in part in negotiation with the local authority, because we had a school in the city that needed to be sponsored. It was not their choice; it was something they had to do, and certainly we were looked upon as a local solution, rather than another kind of solution, where we could support a school in the local context.

Q709 Ian Mearns: From your perspective, Katie, do you see academy status and management of resources as a greater extension of LMS?

Katie Beal: In some respects, yes; it has been about using the situation that exists to do the best, we felt, for pupils and schools in Hull.

Q710 Mr Ward: We spent some time on this yesterday, Katie, but for our records—for the evidence—could you just summarise the relationship with the local authority and particularly the services that you may have lost? Could you just summarise the good things and the bad things, if you can?

Katie Beal: The vast majority of services we have still retained from the local authority. We have good relationships with the local authority, and certainly our intention was to maintain all the strong aspects that we had. It has only been one or two small aspects that we have currently looked elsewhere for. That is only just a very small contract, which we may well have done in any case, because there is no compulsion for schools these days to use local authority services. There is nothing particularly that we have outsourced because we have become an academy.

Emma Hardy: There is just one thing that I have noticed: there was a conference on 27 March in Birmingham, “Performance-Related Pay, Preparing for Pay Decisions”, which was a conference aimed at giving legal advice to schools on how to off see the potential legal challenges they would have with regard to performance related pay. One of the things that the academies would be responsible for is this legal challenge where it was made and for paying for it, and I wonder—going back to this idea of these small primaries becoming standalone academies—if that is something they would have to pay for out of their school budget were that to happen.

You are forgetting the legal protection that being in a local authority offers many of these schools, as well as being the stretcher bearer in terms of fire, flood and damage and things like that. While these schools may celebrate their freedoms, which, to be honest, I do not see that the freedoms are something that they could not have done already, they need to be very concerned about the risks that are out there. As we have seen in a number of cases, they are not coping and they are getting bailed out because they are not dealing with the extra responsibility they have.

Q711 Mr Ward: We asked you yesterday whether you would be prepared to sack one of your heads and you said you would. What if one of the schools wanted to sack you, or you, Wendy? Should they be able to say, “We don’t want any more of this. We want to revert back”?

Chair: Should individual schools be able to extract themselves from MATs or other organisations in which they have effectively lost their legal independence?

Wendy Marshall: Certainly, I think the strongest element of our trust that has led to the improvements we have had is that there is buy-in to the values, the ethos and the direction. If any school has a difficulty with that, then the fit is not going to be good and it is going to be a very clunky relationship. We have got to look at other options in that particular circumstance. We have not come across that, but I cannot see that there is any point forcing that continued marriage. Currently they cannot revert back to the local authority under the legislation, so there need to be other relationships forged. It is going to be a common issue as more and more schools become academies.

Q712 Caroline Nokes: Predominantly I am going to kick off by asking Katie this because she a serving headteacher, but please do feel free to chip in if either of you two want

to contribute. How do you see the role of a headteacher in a primary school being different in an academy from a local authority school?

Katie Beal: I do not really see it as very different at all in many ways. My primary job is to ensure the highest standard of quality of teaching and learning for the pupils in my school to ensure that they get the best deal for the seven years they are in my school. My job is to look out there and do the best I can to ensure that that happens. What that will look like today is definitely different from how it looked five years ago and will be again in another five years, because we have to respond to the world that is around us. My job is to try to analyse that, look out and see what is there, and make sure I am bringing the best deal possible for my pupils.

Q713 Caroline Nokes: What additional freedoms do you feel that you have as the head of an academy school that either were not available to local authority maintained schools previously and what are the new freedoms that they might now have that they could enjoy? Emma said a minute ago that they do not necessarily have freedoms that they could not have had already. Are there any additional freedoms that you have?

Katie Beal: In fairness, the agenda has changed for maintained schools in a way that it has for academies, because things have changed regardless. There is flexibility now in terms of appointing staff and pay that perhaps none of us had previously. I am not certain that being an academy necessarily offers you that difference. It is about the collaboration and ideas of working with other schools rather than living in isolation. Rather than trying to do something completely different, we are just trying to make our schools an attractive place to work and a great place for children to learn.

Emma Hardy: There is definitely a changing nature of what it is to be a headteacher. I think we would all agree that what makes schools good are good teachers and good headteachers. Whatever side we come from, that is definitely what makes schools good. The academy role and the responsibilities it takes on are taking headteachers further and further away from being good teachers that lead teaching and learning. A fantastic example, and I recommend you go and visit it, is Huntington School in York, where the headteacher, John Tomsett, is doing this research into teaching and learning. This is a maintained school, but it is a fantastic place. He believes that the headteacher should be there still teaching and should be the best teacher in that school to model what brilliant teaching looks like, and to encourage and develop the staff in his classroom. I do not see how he could be this drive for improving teaching and learning if he was having to concern himself with building maintenance contracts, legal issues and outdoor education.

Katie Beal: I totally believe in being a brilliant, strong teacher, but for me it is employing business managers and other people that allows me to focus on teaching and learning rather than the buildings. That is not what I consider my area of expertise.

Wendy Marshall: Mine is really a very similar point. Not one structure fits all, but certainly in our trust the focus of headteachers is on the professionals. We have certain services that are dealt with at the trust level—buildings and HR would be two big ones, or finance, accounts, VAT returns, etc.—and some that are dealt with at local level through cluster arrangements, but we certainly do not want our headteachers tied up with day-to-day finances and dealing with buildings. They are lead professionals: many of our headteachers do teach.

I just want to come back to the question of freedoms. I think one of the biggest freedoms is around governance, how that is managed and how that impacts on pupil outcomes. Everything really needs to focus on making sure the decision-making is made nearer to the core end of the business, and that the decisions are more focused on what is going to improve learning and outcomes for the pupils in that particular context. The biggest freedom is around governance and how that is structured to deliver that particular outcome.

Q714 Caroline Nokes: We are going to come back to governance in a minute. Fret not on that score. Katie, you mentioned flexibility on staff pay. DfE figures indicate that headteachers in academies are paid slightly more than their counterparts, whereas teachers are paid slightly less in the primary sector. Why do you think that is the case and do you think that the wider gap between teacher and headteacher pay is appropriate?

Katie Beal: I cannot comment on those figures. All I can tell you is that we would want to be paying our teachers at least in line with what teachers elsewhere would be paid because we would want to be an attractive proposition for people to come and work for us. Certainly, the view on headteacher pay is something that governors need to look at very carefully and we need to make sure we are getting value for money across the board for all the staff in the school.

Emma Hardy: I was looking at that increased gap as well. One of the things I noticed, and I am sure you are aware of, is that there is an increased gender pay gap. There is actually a growing difference between men and women getting paid in academies and in maintained schools. For example, in secondary schools, men earn an average of £1,300 more. This gap is more pronounced in senior posts, with male special school heads earning on average £5,900 more than their female counterparts. Not only is there a gap between management and teachers, there is an increasing gap between the pay for men and women. That this has arisen from this as well is something else you should look into.

I do think it is a concern, and I respect headteachers who want to maintain teachers' pay and conditions to keep it in line with others, because it needs to be. You cannot create a two-tier workforce with teachers. You will not be able to retain or attract teachers if they know that in one school down the road they are not going to be paid as well as they are somewhere else. Of course there should be a national pay scale for teachers as well and there should not be performance-related pay, but I will save that for another time.

Q715 Caroline Nokes: Could I come back and just ask whether the figures that you quoted about the gender pay gap took any account of those who are working part-time versus full-time?

Emma Hardy: I have not got it all here, but I could send the information to you afterwards if you wanted me to.

Chair: We would welcome that. Thank you.

Q716 Caroline Nokes: We met some governors yesterday who were certainly very clear about the roles and responsibilities, and the seriousness with which they took their roles as governors. Certainly, the picture became quite clear that, for their responsibilities,

academy governors needed to have additional skills, take more responsibility and devote more time. First, do you think that this raises issues with attracting governors and finding people who are prepared to undertake those responsibilities? Secondly, do you think it is easier to recruit and retain governors with the specialist skills they might need in more affluent areas, where you might more easily find higher numbers of professionals who might be prepared to take on those roles?

Emma Hardy: Emma Knight, the Chief Executive of the National Governors' Association, has actually written recently saying that they have a problem attracting and retaining good quality governors, especially because the governor role is so much more significant in the academies. They are expected to do so much more, so this becomes even more of an issue because they are looking at governors who have legal or financial backgrounds. It would definitely be difficult in some areas to find governors to suit that. As you know, she recently wrote a letter to Michael Gove over his helpful comments on what governors were like. Part of her anger with this was the fact that they are finding it so difficult—and they are trying to promote being a governor as something that parents would want to be interested in—because the role has increased so much.

Q717 Chair: Thank you. Wendy, to what extent are chains able to take that limited governance resource and spread it and share it across the system in a way that was not possible before?

Wendy Marshall: There are a number of opportunities with chains. In our multi-academy trust, in common with others, the responsibilities stay with the board in terms of high-level responsibilities. We have legal, finance, HR and corporate expertise on the board. We focus the work of our governing bodies on support and challenge, in terms of educational outcomes in the particular academy, and ears and eyes—links with the community.

We do share governors, so our governors sit on more than one governing body to spread that expertise. We have six chairs of governors on our board, which is part of transparent governance, but also the part of the communication flow both from academies to the board and from the board to the academies. We have regional meetings of chairs of governors and the training of regional governors. There are a number of opportunities that we can look at in sharing that expertise amongst MATs, but we also work with partner organisations to nominate governors who are interested in working with the local schools.

Katie Beal: I would just say that I think the expectation for governors has risen across the board for all schools, and the expectation that governors know their schools extremely well is higher than it has ever been.

Q718 Alex Cunningham: You were saying yesterday, Katie, that you are struggling. You are actually going out into the street and basically dragging parents in and saying, "Please be a governor."

Katie Beal: Not literally in our case. That is not the case.

Chair: That was Chatham House rules, as I remember.

Katie Beal: We are very fortunate that we have a very good and strong governing body at Eastfield. Nevertheless, governors think very carefully before taking on that role now

because they are aware that increasingly there is a stronger commitment not just to support the school, which they have always done very willingly, but to provide that knowledge and educational knowledge that is the difference. Whereas they could just bring their expertise, I believe, from their own field to add to the mix, now they are expected to have a very strong and up-to-date agenda on the strengths and weaknesses educationally.

Q719 Bill Esterson: We heard yesterday of the success of the Hull Collaborative Teaching School, and those arrangements go well beyond the multi-academy trust. To what extent is the success of the Teaching School the reason for your high standards and improving standards, and to what extent is it you becoming a multi-academy trust?

Katie Beal: The two go hand in hand. As lead headteachers of the trust, we are founding members of the teaching school, but it is that principle of school-to-school support and teachers providing support for other teachers that is implicit in the success of both. We are not the only teaching school in Hull now. We recognise the fact that teaching schools, *per se*, are a very strong way of schools improving. We need that network around so that teachers and schools can look out there and find out what it is that they need and build on it. The days of teachers just going on a training course, learning something new and coming back only fulfil a small part of the development for real, proper school improvement.

For teachers to continually strive to improve, they need to take their improvement into their own hands, which they do very much these days, certainly in our schools, and want to look for links with teachers in other schools and share their expertise and practice in a way that is not a top-down approach; it is becoming very much from NQT onwards. NQTs are pairing with other NQTs, visiting each other's schools and learning things from each other in a way that in my experience never happened 20 years ago but now does. RQTs are doing the same. Through all levels of leadership we are hoping to really improve that network so that the teachers can actually take the training and learning into their own hands, to some extent, to improve the deal that children get.

Q720 Bill Esterson: You have given an impassioned argument for teaching schools there. I am not sure you gave any evidence to support why you needed to be an academy to do that.

Katie Beal: In that particular instance, I do not necessarily think that that is an issue.

Emma Hardy: I completely agree about teachers driving their own learning and teachers developing and becoming better. That is absolutely right and the school curriculum should reflect the children they have got and the area they are in. That is completely right. That is one of the concerns I have about academies, because if you look at Mosaica Education Inc., which set up the Aurora Academies Trust, which has four academies in Sussex, their own schools were made to pay £100,000 a year for their patented global curriculum. Their curriculum did not reflect the local makeup of that area; it did not reflect the passion, the skills and the expertise of the teachers in there. All it did was pay money to the American company. When Ofsted went in there, it was criticised for having a curriculum that had no local focus.

This Aurora Academies Trust has lead sponsor status with the Department for Education. That concerns me greatly, because it should be about teachers sharing their expertise; it should be about good headteachers, going back to the example of Huntington in York, and looking at how we can develop them. It should not be about schools paying £100,000 a year to buy a curriculum from America that has nothing to do with the UK.

Q721 Bill Esterson: Which academy freedoms are most relevant for primary schools? Is it curriculum, staff pay and conditions, or length of school day?

Wendy Marshall: The value of the individual freedoms relate to the context. Certainly, in some areas the extended school day has been a need that has been identified. Things like that are more restricted in schools that are PFI, because it is not as easy to command an extended day with a PFI school as with other schools. Curriculum freedoms are pretty much the same for maintained schools and academies. I do not see that there is very much difference, but all the curriculum developments that we do and we do in clusters, are all driven by the local context and need.

Q722 Bill Esterson: Is it practical for primary schools to exercise these freedoms in anything other than a very modest way?

Wendy Marshall: It is practical to use the freedoms, but they have to be informed through context. I do not think they should just look at the freedoms and decide that you are going to apply them with a blanket approach. They have to be context-driven.

Emma Hardy: A lot of the freedoms that they have already existed. The reason why schools are not developing curriculum freedoms—and I am not just including the ones that are spending a fortune buying them from America—is because we have the same accountability regime. While we still have the same SATs tests in years two and six that you have to do anyway, and while we still have the year-one phonics test that all schools have to do, you are not going to see schools being really innovative and trying different things. They are all assessed and measured in exactly the same way. The National Curriculum has always been as large or as small as the school chooses to make it. When the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies came out, they were never statutory and no one ever had to do them, so the freedoms have always been there.

There are a lot of bad curriculum freedoms as well. The Boulevard Academy in Hull, for example, was quoted as saying, “But if we open on a Saturday, we will teach our PE then,” indicating that it was a curriculum freedom to not teach PE any other day of the week. There needs to be a lot more monitoring of these freedoms and seeing what this actually involves. Does it involve children missing out on a broad and balanced curriculum?

Q723 Bill Esterson: We have heard evidence that children in converter academies do better at Key Stage 2 than children in maintained schools. Given that those schools that converted were mostly either “outstanding” or “good with outstanding features”, is that because they were already doing well or has teaching and learning improved since they have become academies?

Wendy Marshall: We have not had that experience. Our sponsor-led academies have improved at a slightly faster rate than our converters, and that is because generally they came in at a lower base, so our converters have continued to improve. I do not think we have that trend reflected in our trust.

Q724 Craig Whittaker: I wanted to ask you about financial incentives for schools and, in particular, whether you think they are a good idea. I am thinking along the lines of the Primary Academy Chain Development Grant, for example, which encourages primary schools to form plans. Do you think schools are capable of making those decisions for the right reasons, or do you think the financial incentives could perhaps make them make the decision because of finances?

Katie Beal: In fairness, it is not an enormous amount of money that is aimed at being spent on pupils, and it just facilitates that setting open the collaboration and putting those networks in place. It puts that infrastructure in place, so it is an assistance. I cannot believe anybody would convert simply because of a small amount of money such as that.

Emma Hardy: In March 2011 a survey of 1,471 headteachers—

Q725 Craig Whittaker: Can I just interrupt? Could I have your view and not the NUT's view, please?

Emma Hardy: It is not the NUT's view. I have got statistics written here.

Craig Whittaker: Can we have your view on the question?

Emma Hardy: My view is that I think schools are looking at it because they are in financial dire straits. I know anecdotally from headteachers I have spoken to that because of the budget cuts they are in a desperate situation and that is the only reason they are looking at it, not educationally.

Wendy Marshall: I do not believe that schools convert for financial reasons. That is certainly not our experience. There is a cost of putting the infrastructure in, as Katie said. Again, structures are different. Within a multi-academy trust, we have got a lot of the infrastructure in place, so schools come in and can benefit from that infrastructure overnight. The financial cost of conversion is a lot less once that infrastructure is in place. Certainly, I do not think schools should take the decision on conversion based on financial reasons. I think that is quite the wrong reason.

Q726 Craig Whittaker: Do they do it though?

Emma Hardy: Yes.

Katie Beal: Not in my experience.

Wendy Marshall: In my experience, no, not the ones that have joined us, but I have heard stories of ones that have.

Chair: No, no, yes.

Q727 Craig Whittaker: No, no, yes—excellent. How easy is the process of locating new services for academies that they have traditionally been supplied by the local authority?

Katie Beal: There are a lot of companies out there that want to offer their services across the whole spectrum.

Q728 Craig Whittaker: So just because you choose not to use the local authority to procure your services does not mean that you are going to be disadvantaged. Is that right?

Katie Beal: No, but obviously you have got to look very carefully at what the companies are offering because, on the face of it, it may not be as good a service as it might appear.

Q729 Craig Whittaker: Can I just ask you then what sources of information you would use to procure those services?

Katie Beal: The experience of other schools.

Emma Hardy: Can I just come in? It might not be a disadvantage to the academy that is buying the services, but it is a disadvantage for schools that are maintained like, as I have already mentioned, the travelling education school that is having to shut because it has not got the money, because the schools are not choosing to buy into some of the services from the local authority. Going back to, “Does it benefit all?” no, it does not benefit all children.

Wendy Marshall: As Katie said, there are many operators out there. The quality assurance is critical, but if services are packaged in the right way, there are vast economies of scale. In our trust alone, this year we have saved almost £1 million in procuring services across the trust that has gone back into school budgets. There is the power of bulk purchasing to be had.

Q730 Chair: Do you think your purchasing has helped sharpen up the local authority offers as well because they have had to compete with a wider basket of other suppliers?

Wendy Marshall: They have become more bespoke and more customer-driven. We do buy some services off the local authority.

Q731 Alex Cunningham: The Secretary of State and Education Ministers talk about autonomy and this opportunity to spend your own money on things. Emma mentioned the potential AET contract, which is going to strip away many of the powers of a headteacher to appoint support staff, dinner staff, all manner of ground staff and things like that. She also mentioned this situation in Sussex where this school is forced to spend £100,000 on buying an American curriculum. What needs to happen within the system to protect the headteachers’ and the local governors’ responsibilities for their budget? How do we protect them against the big guys?

Emma Hardy: I’d obviously suggest breaking them all up and putting them back into the local authority.

Alex Cunningham: I do not think we are going to go there, Emma.

Katie Beal: I can only suggest that often schools that are in a sponsored academy situation do not have an enormous amount of choice into who becomes their sponsor. That could be what you would look at.

Q732 Alex Cunningham: So all this talk of autonomy is nonsense because eventually the large groups actually dictate to headteachers what they must do and who they must take?

Katie Beal: That is why we are a small group—so that that is not the case. That is why we have looked to do that for ourselves.

Q733 Alex Cunningham: But you might grow. You might be a 20-academy chain one day.

Katie Beal: That is unlikely, but there is nothing stopping other people from doing as we have done so that no school is isolated. In Hull, though, I have to say, all schools are well-catered for, be it by academies or the local authority, in my experience.

Wendy Marshall: My view is that schools, when they are choosing a sponsor or a chain, because there is some choice, need to do full due diligence on that sponsor.

Emma Hardy: But do they always have a choice? That is the issue. I do not think they do always have a choice. I think the brokers come in and then the schools are given a very limited choice and told, “Join this academy chain.”

Q734 Alex Cunningham: That is why we are having this inquiry, among other things. Can I just ask you a final thing about staff retention and things like that? We know that many staff leave when a school becomes an academy. Some of them are sacked; some of them are allowed to continue in their roles; new people come in. What is different in the academy system that leads to better retention in the longer term than perhaps in the maintained sector?

Katie Beal: In our experience, we have not lost any staff in converting to academies. We feel, and staff tell us they feel, it is an attractive proposition because there are potential staff development opportunities.

Q735 Alex Cunningham: You were already a good school, as were your partner schools.

Katie Beal: Not just in my school, but the chance that they may take on an additional role in one of our partner schools. There are opportunities now for jobs to be created that work across the schools. That again offers another alternative to the traditional progression through teaching.

Emma Hardy: In the surveys that we have done, 62% of teachers in academy schools described morale as “low” or “very low”. On the issue of teachers moving schools, there are a number of teachers within the academy trusts who do not want to move schools because the schools in the academy trust might be at vastly different geographical locations. Where their home is, and where their life is, is where they want their school to

be, and they are being forced to move because they are an employee of the academy trust. It can be seen as a benefit, as long as it is not a benefit that is abused by the academy to just pick staff up and drop them somewhere else miles away.

Katie Beal: As a headteacher, I accept that potentially we have that ability, Emma, but I would not want a teacher who was vastly opposed to working in my school having to travel miles, making them unhappy and probably not as effective as they could be. That would not be a solution I would feel would be a good idea. I am sure other headteachers would feel the same.

Chair: Can I thank all three of you for giving evidence to us today? If you have any further thoughts, particularly around any recommendations you would like to see in our final report, then please do be in touch.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Helen Fulcher**, Head of Church Lane Primary School, Lincolnshire, **Milorad Vasic**, Director of Children and Families, Hull City Council, and **Marie-Claire Bretherton**, Executive Headteacher, Mount Street Academy, gave evidence.

Q736 Chair: Welcome. Thank you very much for appearing before the Committee today. I think all three of you listened to the first evidence session. I am grateful for your coming. Can I ask: is there enough incentive in the system for primary schools to work together to create a self-improving system? Regardless of whether you are looking at academies or teaching school alliances, there has been a change in attitude in which it is thought that the capacity to improve needs to be embedded at school level so that there is an open-door policy within schools, greater observation of each other's teaching, peer-to-peer support within schools and peer-to-peer support across schools. Are there enough incentives to get people to co-operate in a genuine way rather than paying lip service to it and is it the right direction of travel if we want to raise standards for children overall, and we want to close the gap and provide better education opportunities for poorer children?

Helen Fulcher: In Lincolnshire, we were very supported to become part of a collaboration back in 2012. We did have a financial incentive at that point to become part of the collaboration, and I did not feel at that time it was a done-to approach; it was with discussions with the local authority about who we were to collaborate with and what the benefits of the collaboration were at the time. The collaboration has grown since this time, and that is because of the schools working together and actually forming their own agenda. This has not been a local authority agenda; this has been a schools agenda, deciding on the way they want to improve themselves, on how they want to work together and how they want to support each other and challenge each other. In particular with my collaboration, the schools have really looked within themselves about what things they really need to do to improve. Again, in our collaboration there is a difference. There are academies; we are all "good" and "outstanding" schools, but there are also academies as part of our

collaboration. I think it is really important that we are focusing on working together and have that accountability on improving the provision for children in the area.

Q737 Chair: Do we need to avoid a false dichotomy between academy and maintained schools, and view them as part of one system?

Helen Fulcher: Yes.

Marie-Claire Bretherton: Yes, I agree. There are some incentives in the system. I think the teaching school movement has led to some of those conversations happening, but there could be more. There is a potential danger where schools are competing for children that collaboration might not go as well, or where we are reporting to Ofsted as separate, individual schools rather than as groups of schools. If we had joint reporting of results and if we had finance to get the infrastructure in there, there would be more incentive.

Helen is right. In Lincolnshire, the local authority did nudge the system and some fantastic collaborative partnerships have emerged. As a big school that was not involved in that, what I have noticed is that a lot of the big schools in Lincolnshire have said, “Hang on a minute; this is really great and standards are improving in these schools. We want a piece of this.” They are now joining in with the collaborations and there is a big snowball effect. As a teaching school alliance, I now have 30 schools working in seven collaborative partnerships within it. Half of them are academies; half of them are maintained. Half of them are church schools; half of them are not. There is no division in labour around the agenda of improving standards for children.

Milorad Vasic: First, can I just welcome the Committee on behalf of Hull City Council to Hull? You have seen one of our great schools here. In terms of the incentives, I think the key incentive in the system of collaboration is that it is seen to improve the outcomes for children. That has to be the key incentive; we have built frameworks and thought about how we might do that, and force partnerships etc. If we force partnerships, that tends to be a false direction of travel, so there is maybe something to debate about compelling academies.

Q738 Chair: What is different? Emma was talking about the fact that when her father was a head there was collaboration; it was not invented in 2010 or 2011. Yet most people agree that there is far more of it now. What is it that has changed and is it going to last, or is it going to be one of those fads? Education has been beset by fads, which were fashionable for a while and then dropped. Is this more than a fad?

Helen Fulcher: It was. Previously it was very woolly. I have been in Lincolnshire since 2001 and there were clusters and schools working together, but it was very woolly. It was really dependent on the headteacher and the leadership team, and whether they wanted to be part of that collaboration or not. As we know there was a financial incentive, there was accountability and a memorandum of understanding, and when you offer it as part of a package, that is when it becomes a much more formal approach. That then leads to greater understanding of actually where you fit in as part of that collaboration.

Milorad Vasic: I would add that expectations have risen, in terms of our expectations of pupils and how you achieve that, and expectations of headteachers. It is very difficult, particularly in primaries, to be out and about and see everything that is going on, bringing

new practices to your school, to deliver. Everybody is fearful of having a poor Ofsted; those standards are set and people want to achieve those standards, both in terms of the imperative to get good education for children and in terms of their own professional development and careers within the school. Collaboration has grown and evolved. It is pre-academies. There were hard federations of some the key leaders in the system pre-academies, where they were already becoming executive heads and driving school improvements.

Q739 Chair: The people we met yesterday were very impressive and inspiring. Does academisation, and multi-academy trusts in particular, provide a basis or foundation on which those people who are already there are able to have a greater and wider impact across the system to the betterment of more children's education?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: From my perspective, yes, multi-academy trusts can do that, but I do not think it is the only route, in and of itself, to achieving the kind of collaboration and partnership that is needed to raise standards. You asked whether collaboration is a fad and whether it is just going to go. For me, it is the evidence of the impact of the collaboration that is the bit that teachers and heads are hanging on to. I have staff applying for jobs in my school who are saying, "We want to work for you because you are working with other schools in collaboration and we know that there is a professional development offer as part of that wider network that we would not have if they were standalone schools."

Q740 Chair: If you look at this Government's education policies, when we look back in history and we look for what was most positive, will it be the promotion of teaching school alliances or will it be the promotion of academies? Or is separating them a false dichotomy itself?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: I am in a multi-academy trust and a teaching school alliance.

Chair: If you had to pick one as being the more important, which of the two would it be?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: I cannot speak for all multi-academy trusts, but the multi-academy trust that I am a part of has really enabled me to engage in teaching school alliance work. They have promoted that; they have promoted a sense of moral purpose—a sense of connecting with the local community and local schools. The multi-academy trust has enabled me to work as an alliance and led to school improvement across a group of schools.

Q741 Bill Esterson: Are you saying that you would not have been able to do it if you had not been in a multi-academy trust?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: We were doing it before we became an academy. We applied to be a teaching school when we were a maintained school, and became an academy and a teaching school simultaneously.

Q742 Bill Esterson: So it would have happened anyway?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: You have to have been doing the work to become a teaching school before you get given the status. I think it would have happened anyway, but I do think being part of the multi-academy trust that I am a part of, CfBT, has given me international reach; it has given me evidence and research; it has connected me to a much bigger network of professionals, which has helped me to do my job better.

Q743 Mr Ward: Do you not think that the whole academies debate has taken a strange turn? It was originally about the freedoms given to individual schools. It was about that school and what it could individually do with these new freedoms. It now seems as if the debate is much more to do with the freedoms it gives to schools to actually work with others in collaboration. We have identified that that needs to be in a smaller area as opposed to dotted all over the country with these chains. The focus now is actually the freedom to work with others.

Helen Fulcher: We are a maintained school and I do not feel in any way constricted or restricted in what we do. I think it is all about having a visionary leader. That is the most important thing. The leadership team and having that vision set across all of the collaboration is the most important part, whether you are an academy or a maintained school. I am not frightened to extend the school day, because we have the opportunity to do that. I am not frightened or nervous to put in my pay policy the fact they have to be part of a collaboration, because we have done it. In terms of recruitment, I am not frightened to admit that we are a maintained school and we have those freedoms because we do that in the curriculum; we do it with the fact that I recruit and retain staff by putting in retention allowances. It is about having the leader, having the opportunity, and being brave and saying, “This is what we are going to do for our school.” Being an academy does not make that any different.

Q744 Alex Cunningham: How do your staff manage to move around or move into more senior positions? Does that happen within your collaboration of several schools as it does in one the academy chains?

Helen Fulcher: Yes, it does. That is exactly how it does happen. We second staff between the collaboration; we move staff around; we have promotion opportunities within the collaboration. Just for one example, I have got a deputy head who is ready for headship coming to shadow me for the whole of next term, starting in autumn. I think they are the opportunities we could only have if we are part of this collaboration, as a maintained school. I cannot talk about academies; I can talk about maintained schools, but because we work together very freely and openly, and have those honest discussions, we are able to give these development opportunities to our staff.

Q745 Craig Whittaker: We have been told in this Committee by the National Governors’ Association that the option of becoming a federation is generally not put forward to primaries and that joining a multi-academy trust is being promoted as the way forward for collaboration. Is there any evidence that multi-academy trusts actually do improve educational standards and result in better collaboration?

Milorad Vasic: Hopefully I will answer the question you have just asked. With MATs, we need to guard against an assumption that by saying “a multi-academy trust” it means there will be improvement, in the same way that talking about maintained, collaborative, softer

federations, umbrella trusts, or whatever you want to call them, means there will not be improvement. As you increase the number of each, you will get a wide spread. Some will improve and some will not, and you need to understand why that has happened within that area.

Q746 Craig Whittaker: Are they right to promote the MAT over a hard federation, for example?

Milorad Vasic: If I were to be honest, I would say not. Within the primary sector you have evidence from different people to say different approaches have worked well, and you need to understand why those different approaches have worked. As you are evolving into something that you might call a MAT, it is around that consistency of approach, leadership and vision. Where MATs have worked, and particularly in Hull, what the academy agenda perhaps has given is that people have looked for collaborations with like-minded staff and like-minded headteachers who are not necessarily geographically located together.

The converse to that is that those schools that would have worked geographically together because they are working with the same issues do not have the time to work, necessarily, in the same way with those schools that are not part of their multi-academy trust. Often what you find is that umbrella trusts involve more schools earlier because they do not have to spend the time to organise themselves through all the governance structures and everything like that. I would like the recommendation to promote the variety of collaborations so they can deliver the outcomes that we are talking about and, over time, you will solidify some of the governance arrangements that you talk about. I think compelling it and saying, “That’s your only option,” will put off a lot of schools and leave some schools isolated and not part of anything.

Q747 Craig Whittaker: Marie and Helen, do either of you have a different view from that?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: I agree. I think that a variety of options should be available to people. My experience in Lincolnshire is that there are a number of federations that have emerged where that has been the case, as well as other examples.

Q748 Craig Whittaker: The Committee has recommended in the past that the Primary Academy Chain Development Grant, for example, should be opened up to other forms of collaboration. Do you think the Committee is right by doing that?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: Yes.

Milorad Vasic: I think it is right. Whether it is affordable is another issue. Maybe you would have to look at that.

Q749 Craig Whittaker: Helen, do you have a different view?

Helen Fulcher: No, I would definitely agree that financial incentive, for us in particular, has made collaboration more effective and accountable, so I can understand why that would be effective.

Q750 Caroline Nokes: Wherever you go in the world and find a high-performing education system, there will be some sort of collaboration involved but, from what we have heard today and previously, no two models of collaboration are the same. There was a fantastic quote from Helen that what used to be woolly is now set out a bit more clearly. Is it your view that an effective autonomous school system is one that lets the schools decide the degree and type of partnership model that works for them?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: For me, it is about the evidence of what works. I think a variety of models should be explored and available. Schools should be advised on different things that do work, as long as there is robust evidence for how that particular way of doing things will improve standards. Going back to the primary schools grant, where there is money, if there is accountability for what that actually looks like, I would like to see partnerships operating with KPIs, similar to teaching schools do; I would like to see accountability for results across the partnership, which then incentivises heads to genuinely really care about the performance of other schools in their group. There should be evidence to show that it works.

Q751 Chair: You touched on earlier that you would like to change the accountability system so it was not just single-school-focused and people were held to account for a group of schools. How could that work? Local authorities have been held to account for the performance of all their schools. It does not always lead to change, but how could it work?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: There are some examples from America where they do look at joint reporting for schools in their areas. I think there would obviously have to be clear sign-up from the heads in that group. For example, I am the head of an infant and nursery school with a feeder junior school. I would love us to be able to combine what we are doing and be unified in our approach to progress on attainment.

Helen Fulcher: That all comes down to the openness of the schools working together. It is about sharing the data, being open and honest, and having those frank conversations about where we are in terms of our school's journey. As a collaboration, we are able to do that because the local authority has brokered the support right from the start, with the educational adviser being part of that collaboration. I would be very happy to be responsible for our collaboration's data because we know that working in collaboration has had a massive improvement in all of our data.

Milorad Vasic: You have to think about who you are being accountable to and for what purpose. The key people who you should be accountable to are the parents. In terms of the system you put in place, you can overcomplicate it.

Q752 Chair: Are you right? Is it not historically true that lots of schools get put in special measures, and if you look at the last parent survey they are 96% delighted with the education at the school? Parents are a pretty lousy consumer of educational services for their children. If we have a system that rests on whether or not they are happy, we had fluffy primary schools failing the kids and parents loved them. There is no school so poor that the local community will not come out in protest if you try to close it. Surely we need to recognise that fact if we are going to get a clear accountability system.

Milorad Vasic: Having been through the process of trying to close a failing school, I have got those particular scars to show around that. Nevertheless, we still ought to demonstrate why that school is good, because part of that issue there—and this is the whole point around education—it is not about school structures; it is about children and what impacts on their life. If you go to more affluent areas, if we call them that, schools lose pupils because parents do understand the value of education. That is actually part of a wider issue about parental value of education.

Q753 Chair: Staying on accountability, you started off saying we should rely ultimately on the parents. I do not think we should. I do not think there is any evidence to suggest that that's the best place to put it. Where should it be? Should it be Ofsted? Should it be league tables? How do we have a sharp accountability system that means that failure is squeezed out and success is rewarded, supported and expanded?

Milorad Vasic: I was not suggesting that we would only be accountable to parents and you would not have some form of understanding of what good looks like, because I think that is part of it. Within a chain's results, if you were just looking at a chain or a multi-academy trust, you could hide very easily the results of some of the schools that are not doing so well. There is a way that you need to ensure that each individual school is accountable for serving its local children, and then you also need to consider to who and how you would hold the people responsible for a group of schools to account.

Q754 Chair: That is what we are asking. We are trying to find out who and how precisely so we can recommend it to the Government.

Milorad Vasic: The key driver for a lot of the collaboration and the fear of why certain schools decided to go with a local solution has been Ofsted and the regulatory framework and, set alongside that, as somebody said earlier, the testing regime, because that is how you are judged. Those two things need to work together. The accountability is there already; you are just deciding how big or wide, and how you want to aggregate your results.

Q755 Caroline Nokes: The report into primary partnerships in Lincolnshire emphasised how important it was that there be a memorandum of understanding on how any partnership would work, and that the rules be very clearly laid down. In your view, how critical is that?

Helen Fulcher: Having that written agreement is very important. It is even more important when you have got a situation where you are competing for pupils in very small rural primary schools within a community. Then you only need—and I am going to use this term—a rogue headteacher in that collaboration who does not want to be part of the collaboration and who is a new member of staff as part of that group of headteachers working together, and the whole system can fail. You have to make some very clear, safe mechanisms in a structure to ensure that any new leader coming in is aware that this is a collaboration and that it is a strong collaboration working together for school improvement, and that it is advertised as such. That is why it is so important that the collaboration is part of the pay structure, and it is part of the wider performance-related pay and performance management, so it is embedded into the structure.

Marie-Claire Bretherton: I agree. For me, as the head of a teaching school alliance where schools can opt or opt not to work with us, one of the things we are trying to pursue is really heightening the level of accountability—a memorandum of understanding of some description that says, “This is the commitment we’re making to each other.” I guess I would liken it to any good marriage. If you go into the marriage thinking that divorce is on the cards, it is not a good start, but if you go into a relationship and a partnership thinking, “There is no exit; we’re going to make this work,” the chances are that the relationship will be better.

Q756 Mr Ward: The ideology of the academies seems to be, “You’re a failing school; academies are good. You become an academy; you’ll be good.” That was Mr Gove’s ridiculous dream. The danger with collaboration is we actually slip into the same thing: “You’re not a very good school. Start collaborating and you’ll become a good school.” I know from my own experience that schools have worked in clusters before and it has just not worked. There need to be some ingredients. Is there not any value in actually saying to schools, “You two or three schools are not very good. Start collaborating”? Who does the brokering of that? Is there a role for somebody to do that, and would that work?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: Yes, there is a role for some brokering. There is a role for teaching school alliances, local authorities and multi-academy trusts to enable that kind of conversation happening. You are right that collaboration in and of itself is not the solution. It is about the accountability framework that is there. For example, within the teaching school alliance we have seven collaborative partnerships. We are creating a model of peer and self-review, moderated peer review across those schools, and then clusters and collaborations moderating each other. You talk about a school-led system and sector-led improvement, and we are holding each other to account for the performance of each of our partnerships. It is having that level of commitment. The best leaders want to be held to account for what is happening, so it is about creating structures and having the systems in place in those partnerships to make that happen.

Q757 Mr Ward: Is it not a danger that the best heads, as we saw yesterday, would be the best heads whether they were in a collaboration or not? The danger is that the collaboration works because of the good heads and not because it is collaboration.

Milorad Vasic: That is an interesting question, but I think the answer is probably not that simple. As you said, there are certain heads or certain people who will end up being the leaders of whatever system they choose to be in. That is just the nature of certain individuals. They will work together and get things together.

To upscale that across every single primary is a real issue. I think it was Emma who gave the view of one particular head who wants to just focus on their school. To broker, to collaborate and to do partnership, whether it is a MAT, an umbrella trust or whatever, takes time, effort and a will to do that. Not every single headteacher wants to be that person. Similarly, if they are not involved in that, how do they ensure that they are doing the best that they can do? From a local authority point of view, what we are doing is looking at the collaborations across the city, and which schools are not in something that we would understand to be a clear collaboration—something that might be woollier than some of the others. We are looking at that to understand how those schools are working, whether they are maintained, supported by us or in a looser federation of some description.

That broker-partnership role in accountability currently sits with us as a local authority to work with schools and understand the benefits of the various partnerships and collaborations. Like I said, some will happen, either local area based, across the city or wider, and other schools will not take part in that because they do not have the capacity. As they develop, those key leaders who have developed the informal partnerships do not want to take it to the next step, so who will and how do you broker and support that? That goes back to your primary chain grant money, etc.

Q758 Bill Esterson: There are penalties for schools that will not collaborate. Are those penalties effective? Are they enough? Are they right?

Helen Fulcher: I do not think they are effective. We have a school in the local area that has achieved an “outstanding” rating without collaboration with anybody and without working with any school. That is really insulting to those schools who working really hard together and Ofsted stating that you have to work in collaboration to get the “outstanding” grading. That is something that I find a bitter pill to swallow, because we are working really hard within our local community, and we are in a very deprived area. I find it very difficult to understand when we are working in that way.

Q759 Bill Esterson: Is this a recent rating?

Helen Fulcher: Yes.

Q760 Bill Esterson: They are not supposed to get “outstanding” if they are not collaborating.

Helen Fulcher: No. It is very difficult to understand.

Q761 Alex Cunningham: Do they not have a responsibility to help other schools collaborate—in other words spreading their expertise—and should they not be required to do something like that?

Helen Fulcher: I totally believe it should be required and I think that is what is most important. I really was very happy to see that as part of the new framework—that working in collaboration was a key part of the “outstanding” criteria. I think it should absolutely remain in that framework.

Milorad Vasic: If there were a recommendation that I would like to see or something to debate further, it is the notion that collaboration when you are an “outstanding” school should not be restricted to the multi-academy trust that you belong to. What we have heard so far is, to some extent, an example of maybe best practice, but I am pretty confident that across the city and across the country you will find examples where that expertise, collaboration, that working and that sharing of best practice is restricted to that multi-academy trust as it tries to sell itself as a good multi-academy trust. That would be key for me.

Marie-Claire Bretherton: Yes. I can only speak from my experience. That is not how I feel within the CfBT schools trust. I think the moral imperative behind that organisation is about outcomes for children regardless of what school they go to. There are just different examples. I can imagine there are some multi-academy trusts that perhaps do not see it

that way. You mentioned the question about the best heads, and Helen has made the point about a school getting “outstanding” with no evidence of collaboration. Really, the best heads should be creating heads for the future who see a system-led school improvement structure—leaders coming through schools, NQTs and senior leaders who get the vision for pupils in their community regardless of what school they attend. Some of the best multi-academy trusts are doing that and some of the best teaching schools are. If we can incentivise it further through Ofsted to make sure that “outstanding” really means you are system-leading—you are creating improvement across multiple schools—I would be in favour of that.

Q762 Bill Esterson: Research shows that deep partnerships depend on exceptional leadership. Since, by definition, not all school leaders can be exceptional, is partnership really an effective long-term way to ensure oversight and high attainment?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: I think there is room for development here and there is a skill set for leadership that needs to be explored. Being head of one school you could characterise as quite hierarchical—you are the head; you are the boss. Leading a partnership is a completely different skill set. It requires collaborative leadership; it requires humility; it requires an ability to be a learning-centred leader. The system—and we are doing this within our alliance—needs to respond to that and develop the leaders for the future who have got that ethic and that ability to lead in that kind of way. The characteristics of single institution leadership are not necessarily transferrable to partnership working. Again, there is something for the system to respond to there in the kind of leaders that we need to make partnerships work long term.

Helen Fulcher: I totally agree. The most important thing is the skill set of the leader. The development of that partnership is so important for the individual leaders coming together. I do feel that the collaboration in our areas works better when one of those leaders takes a lead role within that collaboration and starts to look at key things that need to happen within the collaboration, and key things that need to happen within the teaching and learning. Somebody needs to take a lead role within that collaboration.

Q763 Chair: The heart of Bill’s question was about the scalability of this. Every initiative I ever see in education—nearly every one—that actually gets realised on the ground works. In order to change something in such a conservative world as education, you have to fight so many people and you have to be such an evangelist that it does not matter what you do; you can have an obsession with pre-1910 desks. If you get permission to set up schools with those desks, you will see that results will go up, because you have to be such an amazing character to be allowed to do it. Then there is this issue of scale. As a Committee, we are trying to identify policy that, when it is rolled out on a wet Thursday to the 1,922nd school, actually leads to a greater likelihood of success than before. The heart of Bill’s question was about that scalability. If you are just taking the great people that we have always had in the system and you get them to do great things, you go, “We now have a golden model, the silver bullet that policymakers like us look for to impose everywhere across the country,” and when it gets rolled out on that wet Thursday to that 1,000th place, it just turns out that without the special people it does not work. That is the heart. What is there to show that it is scalable? Can we build the people with the qualities you are talking about or are they born with it?

Helen Fulcher: Yes, I really believe we can. I think we can build those. If we do not believe we can build great leaders, there is something wrong with our education system. I really believe that we can build great leaders, and great leaders can be great leaders in a variety of different situations. I do think collaboration has that opportunity to build those great leaders because you can recognise them from an early situation. It is just like Marie-Claire said about the skill sets of different people. If somebody gets bogged down in a school that does not want to collaborate, then often that person cannot be recognised, so that person can get stuck within a school. This means we have to look wider and look at the wider agenda.

Q764 Mr Ward: Do you feel you are competing against anybody else? Are you doing anything you are doing to beat others?

Helen Fulcher: No, I do not want to beat others. I just want us to be the best we can be. There is not a situation where I want to beat others. The most important thing is that we have teaching and learning coaches that develop teachers across the whole collaboration. That, for me, is really important, rather than actually having a teaching and a learning coach that just produces great teachers within my school. It is important to look at the wider agenda and look much further afield. I do not need to beat anybody.

Q765 Mr Ward: Do you not look at league tables and say, “We’re going to beat them next year”?

Helen Fulcher: No.

Q766 Chair: Can this thing really be scaled up and deliver the change that we want?

Milorad Vasic: Yes, and I would just add to that. I think that we can recognise leaders. The big issue is in making sure that we encourage teaching as a profession for as many people as possible. Some people do not believe they are leaders when they are in a school. They become good teachers; some become good headteachers; some become good leaders. Others are just happy being good teachers and we should value that as well, because the teaching is the key to young people and how well they achieve, and leadership is part of that mix. I think it is about encouraging it and how. Teaching school alliances are one thing. What happens in university and how you encourage people into schools and education is one of the tricky issues.

Marie-Claire Bretherton: I think it is scalable, but my recommendation would be that this is a very emerging model in teaching school alliances. It needs time. My personal plea is it needs continued investment. You asked the question, “Are we competing?” As the head of a teaching school alliance, I am dreading the point at which my funding stops and I have to suddenly act like a business to keep the infrastructure that I need to operate.

Q767 Chair: How much funding are we talking about?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: It was £60,000 in year one, £50,000 in year two and £40,000 in year three, then nothing. Actually I need some infrastructure behind that. I need to have a

head of school in the two schools that I run to be able to be able to work as an NLE and lead the system.

Q768 Chair: You work across 30 schools?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: Yes, as a teaching school alliance with 30 schools.

Q769 Chair: And you need, if you were negotiating with—

Marie-Claire Bretherton: Is this going on record?

Q770 Chair: Yes, this is going on the record. What figure would you be asking for as the minimum with which you could provide the capacity that you think is essential to keep it going?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: For me, the grant that we had in year one of £60,000 was enough to get the infrastructure in place around the back-office support that I need and the staffing within my own school. If that were to continue, that would give us the freedom to do the kind of school legwork we are doing. The bit I do not like in the system is the idea that I have to be a businesswoman and create a teaching school alliance that is financially operable.

Q771 Chair: Do you not just have to accept the reality that that is £2,000 per school? If the evidence is as strong as you say it is of the commitment of everybody concerned, they can easily find £2,000 from their budget—even primary schools and even relatively small ones can find £2,000 if they value it—so you need to be a businesswoman. Let me put that to you.

Marie-Claire Bretherton: Yes. Note to self.

Q772 Alex Cunningham: I love it when the Chairman gives himself a recommendation. Can we talk a little bit about the planning of school places and the complicated picture we now have out there? A number of written submissions have suggested to us that it has become more difficult as we have had the academisation programme—I wish I did not use that word—and there is the fact that we have more and more converter schools. Is it a real problem in the planning of places? I am looking straight at you, Mil. What is happening in the local authority to make sure that you can do it and that it is not ad hoc, as the National Association of Head Teachers would suggest it is?

Milorad Vasic: The local authority has to recognise that that is one of its primary duties. That means for the whole city. The basic piece of work of having a coherent plan for the city about where children are and where they are going to be, taking all those sorts of things into play, is not impeded by anybody other than, possibly, having the right staff to do it and do it well.

Q773 Alex Cunningham: You probably have very effective collaboration, but in other parts of the country a free school pops up here, a free school there, an academy there.

Milorad Vasic: That does not negate the fact that you need to understand the place and what the future of the place is going to look like, and how those things will impact on that.

Being able to bring additional places in is very difficult because it costs money, and there are all sorts of political debates going on—big “p”, little “p”—about giving money to private companies to expand their places and what that means. It does impede it, because it is not always easy to put the places where parents want those places, because it is not the local authority that can create that, and there is a long negotiation about that and a lead-in time. It needs to be planned and discussed. Part of my current role is to make sure that I have got very good relationships with every school and every sponsor, so that I do not end up in an antagonistic position about places, and working with the city about how it spends its capital money above and beyond what comes through for schools. In some cases we have had to put money in because our primary duty is to make sure we have got sufficient places.

Q774 Alex Cunningham: Do you want the power to turn around and say to an academy, “I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to take another 20 kids”?

Milorad Vasic: Yes, but it needs to be recognised that what we are talking about is ensuring that those children who are there get to the school that they want to go to. Free schools popping up, as you said, here, there and everywhere are not necessarily the answer. However, if that is the way that you get money, I dare say local authorities have considered where free schools might benefit certain pressures that you have in places. The key really is about looking and understanding what the issues and pressures are, and trying to plan well enough in advance to deal with all the potential issues you have about negotiating that. It is having that primary purpose and people like myself advocating on behalf of children and young people—it is about their education and not about academies and private business or whatever else it might be.

Q775 Alex Cunningham: Marie-Claire, you are in an academy chain. How does it affect you? Does the local authority say to you, “We need you to do this and you mustn’t do the other”?

Marie-Claire Bretherton: Ironically, I opened a new school in September of this year due to a shortage of school places in Lincoln city centre. We went through a competitive process with the local authority and we were nominated to run that school as an academy once it opened. My experience has been that the local authority has been proactive in making sure the places are there. We have not had a great number of free schools spring up, but I agree that the local authority should have a remit for ensuring there are enough school places for children. If that means conversations with academies, great, I am up for that.

Q776 Alex Cunningham: What is your understanding across the country, though? It may well be great in your particular area.

Marie-Claire Bretherton: To me it just seems ludicrous that there is not some oversight of all of that. I agree with parental choice and I agree with there being enough school places, but there needs to be a co-ordination role to make sure that nobody is losing out. By losing out, I mean the children and the parents.

Q777 Alex Cunningham: As a maintained school or a maintained school head working in collaboration with other maintained schools, do you feel that you are under extra pressure from the local authority to take additional pupils because of the places crisis?

Helen Fulcher: I want to take more pupils. I think it is fantastic.

Q778 Alex Cunningham: Have you got room?

Helen Fulcher: Not now, thank goodness, but we are in a situation within our collaboration where we can take on extra places. If there is a situation where we do need more children, we can do that. There is also an opportunity, again, working in the collaboration, if there is a child at risk of exclusion or if there needs to be a managed move, to work together to do that without the child having to be shipped off to a PRU that could be many miles from the child's home. Working in collaboration has actually improved the provisions for children and places. There are places within our collaboration; there are small classes that could take children that we cannot. That is what we do as heads. We work together to say, "Have you got room in year two? Have you got room in year three?" and we talk to the parents and say, "We haven't got room at this time, but this school has and we are all working together, and our teachers have the same level and the same standard."

Q779 Alex Cunningham: So the bottom line is that the changes in structures within the system have not really impeded the local authority's or anybody else's planning of school places?

Helen Fulcher: No.

Milorad Vasic: It is probably too early to say because the main drive or pressure has been in primary schools. Looking ahead into the future, it is going to be secondary schools. We will assume, not unreasonably, that the majority, if not all, secondaries will be in some academy form or other. That is what we need to plan for nationally: the bulge into secondary school. It is expensive to put secondary school places in, and there will be a real issue and difficulty in doing that.

Q780 Alex Cunningham: What do we recommend in relation to the planning of school places, bearing in mind that there is this bulk to go through into secondary?

Milorad Vasic: There has to be an overriding duty to ensure sufficient places and that you commit to that, and that academies cannot just move away from that duty in their area because they do not necessarily want it. It has to be like that, otherwise where do they go? If every single academy took that position, what do you do with those children?

Q781 Ian Mearns: It appears to be a contradiction in Government's planning that you have a situation where the Government are almost precluding local authorities from opening any new directly maintained schools, so you cannot get a new school unless it is an academy or a free school, but the local authority still has the responsibility for securing enough places in their area, and also still technically has responsibility to make sure that standards are raised in their area. The problem from your perspective, Mil, is do you feel as though you have no or receding powers to do anything about this, but you are still handy because you are there to blame?

Milorad Vasic: I do not think that has changed much. I think that has always been the case for local authorities. I am not sure that we have ever really had—not for a long time anyway—the power to compel and decide what education should look like. I do not think we ever should have had that. Local authorities that have felt that that has been their role are probably the ones that you have alluded to before that have not been the best people there. There is a bit of legislation that would help, which I have just alluded to, in terms of that.

From my work, though, and the schools I have visited, and bringing those different heads together, the role of the local authority is different and I do not think, necessarily, having the powers to compel would actually improve standards in any way. Having an overview and understanding, and supporting those schools, is part of it. There is always somebody somewhere, whether it is a Secretary of State or whoever, who can compel certain things, but if we get into that position, then as a local authority I think we have failed. The answer, irrespective of who determines whether a school is not working well, is collaboration and working other schools, and getting those collaborations in place to begin with rather than waiting until failure starts.

Q782 Ian Mearns: Despite those contradictions, you do not feel that local authorities are yet about to abdicate responsibility for what happens in those areas.

Milorad Vasic: I think a local authority that abdicates its responsibility for the education of the young people within its city or its council area is a foolish one.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for giving evidence today and please be in touch if you have any further thoughts, specifically around recommendations in particular that you like to see in our end report. Thank you.

