



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [The role of Regional Schools Commissioners](#),
HC 401

Wednesday 4 November 2015

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- Department for Education ([RSC0028](#))
- Ofsted ([RSC0025](#))
- Greater London Authority ([RSC0031](#))
- Robert Hill ([RSC0001](#))
- National Foundation for Educational Research ([RSC0020](#))

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Members present: Neil Carmichael (Chair), Ian Austin, Michelle Donelan, Suella Fernandes, Lucy Frazer, Ian Mearns, Caroline Nokes, Kate Osamor.

Questions 77 – 189

Witnesses: **Dr Tim Coulson**, Regional Schools Commissioner (East of England & North East London), Department for Education, **Dominic Herrington**, Regional Schools Commissioner (South East & South London), Department for Education, **Martin Post**, Regional Schools Commissioner (South Central & North West London), Department for Education, and **Munira Mirza**, Deputy Mayor for Education and Culture, Greater London Authority, gave evidence.

Q77 Chair: Good morning, and welcome to the second day of our inquiry into the role of Regional Schools Commissioners—it is great to see you all here today. We have a range of questions for you.

Do you think it is fair to hold Regional Schools Commissioners responsible for the changes of proportion between good schools and outstanding schools in their region?

Martin Post: As a head teacher for 15 years and a teacher for several decades, school improvement is a complicated thing. We can certainly be held responsible for the quality of the advice that we give, and we obviously hope that the advice we give, with challenging targets, would lead to comprehensive school improvement quickly. I think it is fair to hold us to account, but it is always important to bear in mind that the people who affect the change in schools are good school leaders, good governors and, in the end, excellent teachers.

Q78 Chair: What about the issue of capacity to do that within the regions? Do you think you have the tools and the equipment?

Martin Post: We always need more, and one of the important parts of our job is to encourage good and outstanding schools to participate in the school-to-school support system. We are actively going out to try to encourage those schools to become teaching schools, and for the leaders to become NLEs and NLGs. The more capacity we have in the system the better, as far as I am concerned.

Q79 Chair: Tim, do you want to comment on that?

Dr Coulson: I think Martin is right. I started in this role a year ago, and you look around and wonder how you are going to do it all. Probably what we found was that we are not the only part of the system. We are working with lots of people to help to make the system work. I agree with Martin's point in particular about how the best schools in the system are what the system is going to depend on in seeing improvement in terms of the very best schools enabling those that are not yet good schools to become good schools. The expansion in each of our regions of the number of schools stepping forward to be sponsors, to set up multi-academy trusts and to take on other academy trusts is probably the most important bit of additional capacity that we have seen in the last year, and that we are going to need to see in the next year to meet the challenges that are coming up ahead.

On your other question about capacity, one of the real pleasures in the job has been setting up a regional office and being closer to where schools are in each of our different regions, while also being able to draw on the very significant resource of the Department for Education in its work with academies and free schools. To be working very much with it, with the whole infrastructure of the Education Funding Agency, has been very significant to us in having a real sense that we are able to reach out to each bit of the region.

Dominic Herrington: I echo Tim's comment about it being a fantastic job in terms of being closer to trusts and schools on the ground. The thing that I would add is how much of our work has been working through others. We have worked very closely through teaching school alliances and the teaching schools in our regions. We have worked closely with local authorities, dioceses and so on. It is a big job. Some of it depends on how you prioritise and delegate, like any big job. There is not a sense of being overwhelmed, but certainly working through others has been an important part of it.

Q80 Chair: How should a regional commissioner decide between unsatisfactory schools and schools where there is room for improvement on the question of resources and focus?

Dominic Herrington: The place to start is the key performance indicators that we all have. We have eight key performance indicators and the first three or four are very squarely and explicitly based around academy underperformance, which is defined by whether a school—an academy—is in an Ofsted category or whether it is below the floor standard. That has to be our focus. That is how we are held to account within the Department and the focus of our attention has been very much in those areas. One gets interested in schools that one is made aware of that may not have got to that position yet and we will do what we can. Clearly when you have a key performance indicator set that is very focused on tackling and intervening in failure, that is where you are going to be most focused.

There is something really different about this system in that, as Martin said, the accountable unit is the academy—the trust, the heads, the teachers and the governors around that. Our job is not to meddle in that; our job is to fix it when it is going wrong.

Q81 Chair: In London we have three possible ways of improving schools: the Regional Schools Commissioner, of course; the Mayor; and the local authorities. Who is going to take precedence out of that range?

Martin Post: In the past year or so, we have been working together with all those agencies. We have worked with the London Education Group, on which we are represented. For instance, there is a piece of work that is going to be presented on leadership in London and developing school leadership in London, and we have input into that. We are always represented at the meetings of the directors of each of the local authorities. I have 13 London local authorities in my region and I have meetings with 12 of them regularly and one is planned. We have good working relationships and I am sure that that is the case across the region.

Q82 Chair: But where does the buck stop?

Dr Coulson: The buck stops in different places for different things. We have different accountabilities and what Martin has said is that we are looking to make sure we bring those together for the good of the London education system. One of the things we are looking to do is to say how we can see some of what have been particularly good bits of London come out of London too. I can go on to that if you want me to in a second. In terms of where the buck stops, there are clear accountabilities and responsibilities. Our accountabilities are particularly for the academies in London and the academies where there is poor performance. Fortunately there are not very many in London, which is great.

Our relationships with local authorities have developed extremely well. They have a variety of views themselves about the Government policy of academies and without fail, despite the differing views they have themselves, they have all been prepared to have extremely good relationships with us about the state of academies and free schools in each of their local authorities and, where there have been concerns, for us to address them and pick them up.

The other big issue, which is very much a responsibility we share, is new provision, not just in London, but across the country. There is a growing population—not everywhere, but in some parts of London. Bottoming out how we understand where the growth is, which local authorities generally are pretty much on top of in seeing their birth rates and developments going on, where there will need to be new schools, and how we, with our opportunity of the Government's commitment on new free schools, can assist in that, has been important.

I have felt that relationships have been good since we started a year ago. Since the summer, with the real drive on additional new schools, if anything I think the relationship has sharpened and got even better because of that focus on where the best new schools should go.

Q83 Chair: The question still arises: who is responsible if we had a real problem with academies in London? There is a list we can read out: Regional Schools Commissioners, directors of children's services, councillors, head teachers, mayors—there is only one—and Ministers. If you had to identify somebody who is ultimately responsible for a problem with academies in London, who would it be?

Dr Coulson: If it is a problem about the performance of an academy—an academy that was judged by Ofsted to be inadequate, say—it is undoubtedly our responsibility to address that. In addressing it, we might well work with some of those other colleagues you have mentioned in trying to find what the right answer would be. Using the Secretary of State's powers with the funding agreement, to think about the termination of that funding agreement and to see whether the school needed to move from the trust, which would be the key question in that case, would be our responsibility.

Q84 Chair: Munira, would you like to say anything?

Munira Mirza: The Mayor's office has a very extensive education programme that has developed over the past three years or so, but our role is entirely non-statutory. Our concern about the current system, even though we have a very good working relationship with the three commissioners, is that we have always felt from the beginning that there should be one regional commissioner for London who has responsibility and accountability, and who can deal with not only school improvement, but all the other big challenges that London faces. These include, as has already been mentioned: the school places challenge; issues like the high dropout rate at 17, which is higher in London than in other parts of the country; the need for new schools and good schools; closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students; and teacher recruitment. All these are big, meaty issues for London.

At the moment our role is one that we have carved out for ourselves because the Mayor believes that education is important and even though he does not have statutory responsibility, he is politically very concerned. Most people would assume that he takes a position and has a view, and would take some responsibility. All the work that we do is of our own volition, but I think the Regional Schools Commissioner position would be better structured if it were one for London that fitted with the regional identity of London and the current regional improvement structures.

Q85 Ian Mearns: This question about who is responsible for what has come up on a number of occasions. I think the territory is a bit more crowded than even the Chair said. Apart from the local authorities, the directors of children's services and the Mayor of London in London, we also have Ofsted, the Education Funding Agency, the Department for Education, Regional Schools Commissioners, diocesan authorities; there are a whole range of different bodies in that landscape. The confusion lies with who is responsible for what, and whose responsibility is it to make sure that all the stakeholders are aware about who is responsible for what.

Dominic Herrington: One of the joys of having a new role is going out and explaining exactly what we are accountable for. When we are in a conversation with anyone about an underperforming academy, a new sponsor or a school that wants to become a sponsor, it is fairly clearly in our remit. We are quite happy to explain that and one of the things about doing a new job is that there is a real premium on that. You have to really explain why you are there, what value you are adding and what your accountabilities are. If there is confusion about accountabilities, we will sit down and work it out with the relevant parties.

I have found there is not that much, in a year. As Tim said, one of the things about working in London is that it is a tremendously successful education system. There are incredible strengths. One of the things that struck me working in London has been less a lack of clarity about accountabilities, but the real question of how can we get some of the expertise and strengths of the London system out into other parts of our regions. That is something we have been working on over the last year.

I understand when you read out that list of names it could look as if no one knows what anyone is doing. In reality we are very clear on what we are doing and also we participate with others in groups and meetings, and if there is any question about who is accountable we will immediately address it in that sort of forum.

Q86 Chair: Munira's answer to my question touched on the issue of devolution because of the non-statutory role that the Mayor has, but the one that was obviously imagined would be good in City Hall is one line of accountability. The question is who holds you to account at the moment? Is there any example of you being held to account?

Dr Coulson: It certainly feels to me like we are held to account pretty severely. You are seeing our boss, Frank, later and no doubt you will be able to ask him about that as well.

Chair: I will.

Dr Coulson: Each fortnight he expects to know what I am doing and to particularly pick up on the tricky things—the things that probably are going to cause anyone concern—and to know what I am doing and why I am doing those things. We have a monthly forum where there is pretty much a challenge of the various things that we are doing. On a two-monthly basis there is a board within the Department for Education that has a report and holds us accountable to the key performance indicators that Dominic mentioned earlier.

It feels to me that there is a pretty strong accountability system because what I have seen certainly is that a lot of people are interested in our work and will make their views known

about what we do, particularly if they have an interest in the way a decision might be going to be made, and certainly want us to be held to account for the decisions we have made. It feels to me that we are heavily accountable.

In terms of being accountable, I think we are doing well in trying to make sure that we draw on as much advice as we possibly can. You may want to come on to headteacher boards later on, but I feel held to account by them as well in terms of what they are doing.

Q87 Chair: Excellent. Munira, would you like to say something?

Munira Mirza: One of the expectations of the current system was that the London school system, which is very high performing, would share its expertise outside London, and that has not really transpired. We have currently one London headteacher on the headteacher board. All the supposed advantages of the current system have not really worked out in reality. What has happened as a result is that London schools are not benefiting as much as they might from the headteacher board. That is not a criticism of the individual commissioners, who are very good at their roles, but the structure that they have been put into is not really effective for London.

Chair: One little bit and then we have to move on.

Dominic Herrington: We have brought in—co-opted—London headteachers on to our headteacher board. I have two now, for example. We have brought them in and Tim and Martin have done so. We do have representation. On accountability we also have a monthly session with the Minister. There is also an annual academies report to Parliament as well, which I imagine we will have to be part of.

Q88 Ian Austin: What are you held accountable against? How clear are your objectives? How clearly defined is this? What is the Minister asking you at this monthly meeting?

Dominic Herrington: As I said, we have eight key performance indicators: numbers of academies that have an Ofsted 4 rating, the number of academies that are below the floor, or the numbers of academy sponsors that are performing well, are utilised and are in the places they are needed. There is a board, as Tim said, that looks at this crunchy data and plots graphs of each of us on a region that says, “That region is doing well; that region seems to need to be doing a bit better.” We are held to account against those KPIs.

The Minister is challenging us on a whole range of issues. They may be local issues of concern that have been brought to his attention by MPs. They may be issues that sponsors have raised with him. It can be any sort of issue that he is thinking or worrying about.

Chair: We are going to move on to vision and strategy, which is Lucy’s department.

Q89 Lucy Frazer: Welcome. It is nice to meet you all, especially you, Tim, who I have spoken to many times already. Dominic, you said in response to one of the earlier questions, “We are all clear about what we are doing.” I would like to know what that clarity

is. Have you all set out a vision—a strategic plan for what you are going to do in your term? If so, what is it and where can we find it?

Dominic Herrington: I have a work plan; I have a plan for the region that is set out for this academic year. There is a one-page summary of it that I have sent to the 800 academies and free schools and sponsors in my region, and to local authorities, dioceses and so on, and that plan really starts from the key performance indicators and what we are accountable for. There are four parts to that. One is about opening new provision, which Tim talked about earlier. The second is about challenging academy underperformance. The third is about growing academy sponsors and making them better. The fourth one is essentially a greater role for schools, working through other alliances, teaching school alliances and using the headteacher board. There are four main areas of my work and they are set out in that plan and that one-page summary.

I do not have a grand vision or strategy for a five-year period because I have a region that is very diverse—coastal towns, inner cities, prosperous areas—and also our roles are under review in some sense because there is new legislation coming through and there are questions about what our role will be in that. What I have stuck to is to have a focus plan for this year, which starts from the key performance indicators, on what are we going to do to help these schools improve, what are we going to do to get these sponsors better and what are we going to do to grow new schools.

Chair: Would you mind sending a copy of your plan to us as evidence?

Dominic Herrington: Yes, I am happy to share a plan with you as well.

Chair: Could you all do that? That would be really interesting. Thank you very much.

Q90 Lucy Frazer: Could I just ask you very briefly: is that a similar document?

Dr Coulson: Those four priorities are absolutely the same. In terms of sending them out, I think academies get slightly bored by how many times we tell them about those priorities. What we are trying to do when we meet them is to put a bit of flesh on some of the detail around what each of those might mean in each of our regions.

Lucy Frazer: Is it the same document that you all have?

Martin Post: No.

Lucy Frazer: You have all done one particular to your region.

Chair: We will be able to compare and contrast.

Lucy Frazer: We will.

Dominic Herrington: Frank is the overseer of them and he is bringing the consistency there.

Q91 Ian Mearns: May I come in briefly on that? You have talked about the interaction with academies and free schools in your area, but you all have a key performance

indicator about the number of free schools and academies in your particular region. Therefore, down the line, you would anticipate that more maintained schools and VA schools would become academies over time. What interaction are you having with those schools about that anticipated development into the future? Are you sitting back waiting for schools to fail before you consider them becoming academies or free schools, or are you actively out there working with maintained schools about them converting to academised?

Dr Coulson: The maintained schools that I talk to are outstanding schools. Where there are outstanding maintained schools, I do talk to them and say, “Obviously your decision about whether or not to become an academy and join a multi-academy trust is entirely that of your governing body. My job is to encourage the best in the system to step forward and to have more of you leading multi-academy trusts because the Government have said that that is going to be the main strategy to support the weaker schools in the system.”

Certainly in terms of maintained schools, the ones I talk to are outstanding schools. Not all of them want to have that discussion and if they do not wish to, that is absolutely fine. What I am finding increasingly in the last few months is that more are looking at whether or not the multi-academy trust, both for financial reasons and for the opportunity to lead the system, is something that they want to consider.

Chair: Can I just say we have quite a lot to get through here so we do need shorter answers?

Ian Mearns: Shorter questions as well.

Chair: Shorter questions; absolutely Ian. I am glad you said that. Lucy, do you have a short question coming up?

Q92 Lucy Frazer: I have a very short question. Martin, what is your top priority?

Martin Post: My top priority would be to improve the quality of education in open academies and free schools.

Lucy Frazer: That is a very big priority. What is your No. 1 aim?

Martin Post: My No. 1 aim has to be around school improvement. It has to be making sure that when a school needs improvement, we can provide support for that and hold the trusts and school leaders to account for improving the quality of what they offer the student. It has to be the No. 1 priority.

Q93 Lucy Frazer: Tim, if you could make it more precise, what is your top priority? What are your specifics for the schools in our area?

Dr Coulson: In terms of meeting Martin’s objective, it is getting more sponsors that are really up to it because not all our multi-academy trusts are good enough. We anticipate, if the Bill goes through, that we will need more good sponsors and so, for us, finding the best sponsors in the region is our top priority. The thing that we did most in the past year—probably our biggest progress last year—was seeing more outstanding schools coming forward as sponsors.

Q94 Lucy Frazer: I am going to move on. You discussed the role of the headteacher board. Does it advise you on your general vision, or just on specific issues as they arise?

Dominic Herrington: Both. I am trying to give short answers.

Dr Coulson: Shorter answers.

Dominic Herrington: I have had sessions with the headteacher board looking at what our strategy should be for this year. They have fed into the plan. They are helping with the plan and then, on a two or three-week basis, advising on each of the specific cases that we will be dealing with.

Q95 Lucy Frazer: Do you find them useful?

Dominic Herrington: Incredibly useful; very, very useful.

Q96 Lucy Frazer: You have all been appointed because you have extensive knowledge and experience in the region, but how can you have knowledge of a region that is so large?

Dr Coulson: You cannot start by having huge knowledge of the whole region. We all have knowledge of some parts of the region. I worked previously in Essex, which is the largest bit of the region that I now work in. What I have had to work very hard at is quickly getting to understand the other parts of the region. I think the question we had earlier about partners has been really important. I think that our relationships with local authorities, diocesan boards, multi-academy trusts and headteacher board members, in particular, has accelerated our understanding of the region.

Going back to your question about headteacher boards, when we come to a school or an area that we know less well, we just about manage, through our headteacher board, to have people who know enough about the region for us to begin to get a handle on it. Where we don't understand enough about the region, we go and find out more. For instance, this week we have had an issue about people referral units in Ipswich. We did not know enough about that, so we deferred a decision until we went and did some more visits really to understand that better.

Q97 Lucy Frazer: Just on London, we will see when we look at your visions, but does it make sense for there to be three different visions for schools in London?

Dr Coulson: I don't think there are three different visions for schools in London. I think what we are seeing in London is that in each of our regions, as well as what we just talked about on the issues to do with London itself, there is an oversupply of sponsors in London and of schools who would like to make a difference. At the moment, there are not enough schools for them to go and make a difference in, so we are finding sponsors in London work to do outside London, where we don't have enough good sponsors.

We had a terrible school in Braintree in Essex and there was no good sponsor there. We have a fantastic school in Redbridge, which was looking to expand its multi-academy trust. The trust is doing a great job and because Redbridge is in the same region, it helped to make it easier for us to take that sponsor into Braintree.

Chair: Thank you very much. We are going to have to move on to question 3.

Ian Mearns: Sorry, Chair, but I think that we have just heard a vision of trickle-down sponsornomics. That is what it sounds like because that is a problem. Regions like the north-east do not have enough potential sponsors for the model and that is a significant problem.

Chair: Thank you for that observation. Michelle, on different interpretations of the role.

Q98 Michelle Donelan: Thank you. You talked about your individual plans. Can you then say that you are doing the same job, or do you concede that there is a great deal of inconsistency and interpretation of the role yourselves? How do you determine that specifically for your regions?

Chair: Short answers.

Martin Post: We operate within the same frameworks. We make decisions according to the same criteria. As we have heard, they are looked at by the Schools Commissioner, who will talk to us about inconsistencies, if there are any, but it is very important that what we do is tailored to our regions because the needs of the regions are very different.

Dominic Herrington: There is published criteria. There are national criteria on what you need to do to convert to become an academy, which are on the DfE website. There are criteria by which you become an academy sponsor and criteria by which you might expand as an academy on the EFA website. The national criteria that we have to apply are the national criteria for consistency in our decisions.

Q99 Michelle Donelan: There are different reporting requirements, aren't there, and that means that, in effect, we could be exacerbating the postcode lottery that is education, in a sense, because in different regions it is carried out in a different manner? Is that not a concern to you?

Dominic Herrington: No. I think it would be a concern if we did not have the framework that holds us to account, which we talked about, and a set of consistent legislation and guidance that we have to adhere to. There is a lot more consistency in our decisions than inconsistency. Where we have been able to do things it is to bring a much closer regional understanding, history and context to the decisions, but most of the decisions are made under a national framework of accountability. When we started, some of us will have approached it in slightly different ways. We all run events. We all have headteacher boards. We all go and visit schools. We all have conversations with trusts. We all talk to local authorities. We all talk to dioceses. There are a lot of things that we will do very similarly and those far outweigh the things that we will do differently, but what we do differently is a strength, I think. The regional bit is a real strength of the system.

Q100 Michelle Donelan: It is true that some RSCs do visit schools more regularly, so is it not a danger in certain areas that we are creating a second tier of Ofsted inspections, whereas in other areas we are not? I am concerned about the level of bureaucracy that we have in each area.

Dominic Herrington: I don't think so. If I am honest, I think Ofsted gives grades. Ofsted does two-day inspections, but it does not give ideas for improvement—it inspects. We do

visit. Some of us will do more visits than others and some will work through our teams more, but what matters more is the outcomes and getting improvements in the academies, particularly the underperforming academies. There may be slightly different approaches for different means and different circumstances, but there is a similar menu and the most important thing is whether we are making a difference for children?

Q101 Michelle Donelan: Are you sharing the learnings between each other, as well as filtering up? Are you in regular dialogue with each other?

Dominic Herrington: Yes. We meet monthly. Occasionally we have dinner together. We share emails with each other about things that we are doing well. We had an email exchange the other day about things. We wanted to say one thing that we were doing well in our region and sharing it with others, so there are plenty of mechanisms for that.

Dr Coulson: Dominic is coming next month to do some work in our region, in a sense for us to do exactly what you are saying—to do a bit of that comparing and contrasting about how we are doing things, whether there are things that we have done slightly differently over the past year that we can learn from each other, and perhaps making sure that we are doing as well as each other in different areas.

Q102 Suella Fernandes: In terms of what you are targeting and how you understand it, how are you going to deal with the discrepancy between an Ofsted rating and actual attainment levels at key stage 2? Data has shown that almost a third of schools that are rated as good and outstanding are failing to meet a level 4 at key stage 2, so they might look ostensibly as if they are doing okay, but if you scrape beneath the surface, there are problems. Are you looking with sufficient rigor and scrutiny at your indicators?

Dr Coulson: I think we are and in September we spent a lot of time—if we are talking about the primary academies that you will be referring to in terms of key stage 2 results—looking in great detail at all the primary schools whose results looked concerning. We then looked carefully at what Ofsted said. Ofsted will have done a forensic analysis over a couple of days with inspectors on the ground in the school watching lessons and talking to the staff, and then doing a detailed review and publishing a public report. That is important for us in trying to understand the school. When we are not sure we go and talk with the school as well. We go and talk with the academy trust and try to understand the extent of what should be expected and the results of such concern. Where we are sufficiently concerned, despite the Ofsted grade, we would take action and use our measures of intervention.

Chair: Thank you very much for that answer.

Q103 Ian Austin: On this question of regional variation, is there a concern that the bar is being drawn or could be drawn at a different level in a different region? How confident can we be about the consistency of the standards that you are setting, or that you are judging schools by or aiming at improvement by?

Dominic Herrington: I am not worried about that at all because we have national key performance indicators that are based on the floor standards, Ofsted judgments and sponsor creation. Obviously, if you had a region that said, “Oh, well, the standards are going to be higher in this region and our expectations are going to be higher,” you would

have a worry, but because so many of our decisions are based on national data, frameworks and published guidance, the risk that a region would suddenly set another bar, or that another bar would suddenly creep in, is managed.

Q104 Ian Austin: Isn't there a contradiction here? You either have regional variation and regional expertise, or you all have a sort of Napoleonic national. If it is Napoleonic and national, that would just be set from the centre, wouldn't it? That can all be judged on a computer, can't it, at the centre?

Dominic Herrington: It goes back to the previous question, in that where the real benefit of the role has been is that you have a high degree of consistency that everyone expects to stop the postcode lottery, but you also have that intelligence that allows you to go and talk to maintained schools about becoming academies, that understands where the strengths are in each area, and that is the real bonus of the regional variation.

Q105 Chair: Do you have different reporting requirements between regions?

Dr Coulson: No, we have the same.

Dominic Herrington: No.

Ian Mearns: Not that they have been told.

Dr Coulson: We very much have the same reporting requirements. I think the issue about regional variation is that our starting point within our regions is huge. The expectations of what is being expected of schools in Norfolk compared with what is being expected of schools in London is huge. What we are trying to bring to the region is a greater sense of consistency of expectation in our regions. On your question about whether we are then interpreting this differently in our regions, I think we are working extremely hard to understand from each of our regions, and the standards of education are different in different parts of the region in terms of the makeup of schools, and the extent of academies and multi-academy trusts. There are significant differences in the education system that we each—

Q106 Chair: Yes, but you don't have different reporting requirements.

Dominic Herrington: No.

Chair: Is that right, Martin?

Martin Post: That is true. Yes, we don't.

Chair: Right, Caroline, we are going to talk about regions again within London. We have touched upon some of the questions but—

Q107 Caroline Nokes: No, we are going straight back to London. I think it was Dominic who said that within your region, because of the diversity—I am picking on you because your region is the one I know best—it is very difficult for you to set an overall vision. Would it not be more helpful if the three of you could get together and set a vision for London?

Dr Coulson: I worked in London for a long time and know quite a lot of people in London, and London is far from homogenous. London as a whole has had a great track record, but across London there are places of great strength and still significant weaknesses in the educational system. So for a vision for London, we find it really helpful working with the Mayor's office, the London directors of children's services and the heads of school improvement in terms of what the issues across London are. At the fine grain, getting better schools for every single part of London is, for us, still a school-by-school issue. For me, with working on why schools in Havering are not good enough, working with the local authority in Havering is really important, working with the multi-academy trust in Havering is really important, and having the opportunity to bring into Havering the best from not only London, but the surrounding area beyond London, is very important. I don't think that our work coming into London and not having one region for London has in any way diminished the opportunity for having work and vision across London. I think what we are doing is adding to the system and also adding to the opportunity that London is giving to the rest of the country.

Dominic Herrington: I deal with Richmond upon Thames and Peckham—those are different; they are not homogenous places at all. One of the things that I have been working on very closely recently is how we get some of the strengths of London and London schools into an area like Medway, which has difficult challenges—massive challenges—in its primary performance. How can we get the best sponsors, such as Harris, to come into Medway? How can we get teaching school alliance members and national leaders of education into Medway? There is a point about trying to get the strengths of the tremendous system and, as Tim says, we worked really well with the Mayor's office, promoting its work, the Gold Club and the conferences. It is stark. When you have a region that has parts of London and parts that are not in London, the challenge of trying to spread and build that excellence outside London is significant.

Q108 Caroline Nokes: How long do you think you can do that, though? I think Ian used a fantastic phrase of “trickle-down sponsornomics” but, apart from that, how is that mechanism working to get the benefits of some of the fantastic achievements that there have been in London out to the regions?

Martin Post: We can talk about specific examples. We have the Aspirations Academies Trust working in west London and in Poole. We have Floreat, which has moved from central London out to Wokingham. In the area of alternative provision, Orchard Hill Academy Trust has been helping some of the schools up in Bedford and TBAP has opened up in Cambridgeshire. We would like more examples, but we have examples of successful small and medium-sized trusts. None of these are huge trusts, but small and medium-sized trusts moving out into the regions to spread their unbounded expertise.

Q109 Caroline Nokes: Can I ask a question about the elected headteacher boards, with one London head teacher on there and others being appointed or co-opted? Can you explain the difference between appointed and co-opted, and also do you think it is a failure that there was only one originally?

Martin Post: It is almost inevitable that in the election the larger blocks, like the shire counties, are going to have more influence. That is the way it was going to work out and I

have one elected London head on my headteacher board, who is Teresa Tunnadine. I think both Tim and Dominic have corrected some of that by co-option.

Dr Coulson: On our board we did not originally have any elected teachers in London, so the board has addressed that by co-opting a London head on to the board. My job was also to have the opportunity to make appointments, and I appointed a London sponsor to join the trust board as well.

Dominic Herrington: I did the same. As Martin said, the elected members came from Kent, Surrey and Medway, which have the highest number of academies in my region, so I appointed someone from a London trust steeped in the former London Challenge. As a board, we have co-opted from another pan-London trust Angela Barry, who runs a trust of three schools in Bexley.

Q110 Caroline Nokes: Munira, it was inevitable that I was going to come to you eventually, wasn't it? I want your take on whether you think that London would have been a coherent RSC region in its own right and what the specific challenges might or might not have been, and also just a reflection on the Education and Adoption Bill and whether the necessity to even out the numbers of coasting schools might require changes that could in fact see London becoming a region in its own right?

Munira Mirza: We have always argued that there should be one regional commissioner for London. I take all the points about wanting to spread London's expertise outside London, but clearly to have to co-opt head teachers on to the boards indicates that it has not worked. Therefore, there is something inherently wrong with the structure that has been set up. I do think that there is a worrying complacency about London and the assumption that London is doing all right and that, therefore, these headteacher boards and Regional Schools Commissioners don't really need to worry about addressing London's problems.

There are some real challenges around school improvement still in London. We do have a gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged. There is an issue of high dropout rate at 17 and teacher recruitment, as I have already said, and I think that the whole structure assumes that London will be all right. I would argue that all the existing regional school improvement networks, Ofsted and the way that the EFA treats London are distinct for a very good reason. There are some distinct challenges and there is a distinct identity, which is important in motivating teachers.

Of course, Richmond and Peckham have differences, but there are a great deal of similarities. In fact, the way in which school improvement has changed dramatically in the last 10 years in London shows that there is a coherence and there is a recognition of working together. The programmes that we run, the Gold Club and the London Schools Excellence Fund all build upon a sense of shared identity, and if you have Islington and Hackney in separate regions, that does not make sense either. I think that that misses a real opportunity for those schools to work together.

Q111 Caroline Nokes: One quickie answer from all of you on the issue of the Education and Adoption Bill. Do you see there being redrawing of boundaries to even out the numbers of coasting schools?

Dominic Herrington: I suppose I would say it is a bit premature for us to comment on legislation that is still going through Parliament, if I am really honest.

Caroline Nokes: Okay.

Chair: Right. Thank you very much. Ian, just a couple of quick questions.

Ian Mearns: A couple of quick ones.

Chair: Yes, we have covered some of your ground.

Q112 Ian Mearns: We are talking about an expanding role for Regional Schools Commissioners. Will that necessarily require a greater resource? We already know that in your three regions you have quite varying numbers of schools—maintained, VA, and academies and free schools—so there is an expanding role. But we also know, quoting the Office for National Statistics, that there are going to be another 900,000 pupils in the system within the next 10 years. That implies an expanding role—a planning role, even—for you, and have you considered that?

Dr Coulson: Yes, we have, and I think that there are discussions going on in the Department to ensure that, as the role goes forward, if we need additional capacity, the Department will look to address that. I think at the moment we feel that probably our offices are sufficiently resourced. We are ducking the question about the future because, essentially, it has not gone through but, in a sense, obviously there are plans that our role would expand and we would take on a greater role. I would expect that the Department would have to think about whether or not our offices needed more capacity at that stage.

Q113 Ian Mearns: If you needed to beef up what you are doing because, for instance, you have 100 or more academies that are inadequate or requiring improvement in each of your regions, and therefore you needed to beef up your resources, whose resources would you call on?

Dominic Herrington: I think we would carry on. We would have to. That might sound a bit flippant, but it wasn't. I do think that when we have only just started consulting on the definition of coasting, it is tricky for us to give you a precise answer on that. If our roles were to expand, obviously we would look at the amount of resource we have, but we would also look at our relationships, how we could continue to work through others, and how we would continue to develop relationships with teaching school alliances, dioceses and multi-academy trusts, because you would want to address the challenge on all fronts.

Q114 Ian Mearns: You mentioned working through others. Are you confident that those others have the resources to help you?

Dominic Herrington: They bring a lot of resources, knowledge and expertise to the table and, as Regional Schools Commissioners, we will work with anyone who can help us with our objectives.

Q115 Ian Mearns: In the light of increasing academisation, does the Regional Schools Commissioner system need a complete rethink, or can it be made to work with ongoing tweaks and resources and powers being added to?

Dominic Herrington: We do the job on a daily basis. It is not for us to rethink the whole system. I suppose all I would offer is a couple of reflections. I think one thing that we are doing is bringing a regional knowledge and a local flavour to decisions that were previously made in the DfE centre. That, with the fantastic addition of the headteacher board, is allowing all the decisions we are making to be much nearer the ground and much more sensible. The future in terms of how big we get and where we go will depend on the legislation, the definition of coasting and what others can bring to the table.

Q116 Ian Mearns: Given a context of 2,500 to 3,500 schools in each region, that immersion in the location context becomes a bit blurred, doesn't it, really?

Dominic Herrington: I don't think so. If all those changes went through as suggested, obviously that would be a moment in time for us to re-set out what we are accountable for and what we are not accountable for so that no one would be in any doubt about what we were doing. The other thing is that if the numbers did grow, we would work more with multi-academy trusts and the trust unit, and perhaps less the individual schools. For example, 63% of academies in my region are in a multi-academy trust, so that is becoming the more dominant unit and you would want to work more closely with those trusts as that number grew.

Ian Mearns: Okay. Thank you very much.

Q117 Chair: Can I ask one question? Of course you have a new role and things are happening, so do you ever make an estimate of the kind of capacity you might need and the amount of casework and caseload that you are going to have so that you can plan ahead with that estimation in mind?

Martin Post: I have not been a civil servant for very long and what impresses me is the level of forward planning that is done by the Department, once you get on top of the jargon and you understand that they have constant assessments of pipelines. I am confident that there will be—

Chair: To leave it to the Department?

Martin Post: Our teams within the Department, in the academies group. We have a regional office, but we also have a number of people, in my case at Sanctuary Buildings, who are also working as part of my team.

Q118 Chair: Does that apply to you too?

Dr Coulson: It does. I feel that people are on top of the various possibilities. Dominic's caveat about what happens in the next few months and what Ministers then say probably goes on top of that.

Q119 Chair: You basically have an understanding of what it is likely to look like in a year's time, two years' time and three years' time?

Dominic Herrington: The definition of a coasting school has not yet been finalised, so we cannot know exactly. When we have the data through from this set of results, people will be able to model what that number of coasting schools looks like. Do we have the numbers of coasting schools that will apply in our region? No. Do we have a sense of what we are doing now and the resources we need? Yes. We have the numbers of schools, sponsors, academies and free schools, so we are working within that parameter.

Chair: Thank you all very much indeed for answering our questions.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Sean Harford**, National Director for Education, Ofsted, **Robert Hill**, Work and Education Consultant, and Visiting Senior Research Fellow, King's College London, and **Ben Durbin**, Head of Impact, National Foundation for Educational Research, gave evidence.

Q120 Chair: Welcome to our second panel. We are still brisk; in fact we are brisker because we were slightly over time there. Could you briefly say who you are, who you are representing and what you do?

Ben Durbin: Sure. I am Ben Durbin. I am Head of Impact at the National Foundation for Educational Research, which is an independent research charity that aims to provide useful information and answers for the system.

Robert Hill: I am Robert Hill. I am a Work and Education Consultant, and Visiting Senior Lecturer at King's College. I have worked a lot with multi-academy trusts and written about Regional Schools Commissioners.

Sean Harford: Good morning. I am Sean Harford, one of Her Majesty's inspectors. I am also the National Director for Education for Ofsted, overseeing our school inspection policy and also further education skills and early years.

Q121 Chair: Thank you very much for coming to this inquiry. I suppose the question really is this: are the Regional Schools Commissioners an adequate middle tier for the tasks in hand?

Robert Hill: I would say, at this current stage of development, not. I think if you looked at it in terms of how things work in jurisdictions in other parts of the world, they would not recognise the sorts of conversations that you have been having for the last hour. In most other areas the middle tier, I would argue, is primarily about pedagogy, teaching and learning, improvements in the classroom, supporting curriculum programmes, leading curriculum programmes and—

Q122 Chair: Your contention is the Regional Schools Commissioners are not focusing on the right area.

Robert Hill: They have been given a remit by the Department. I thought, as they very honestly said, it is effectively that they are Regional Schools Commissioners for addressing school failure, both within academies and in the maintained sector, so that is

the brief they have been given, along with promoting new schools. The other thing that I think came out from both Ms Frazer and Ms Nokes was: what is your starting point? Is your starting point a collection of individual institutions, or groups of institutions in the form of multi-academy trusts, or do you start with the locality or the place? For example, yesterday the Secretary of State disbursed £5 million to three academy sponsors for the north of England and improvements there. Is that your starting point—working through groups of institutions—or do you start working through, as in some places like Birmingham, which has a whole-school—

Q123 Chair: Ben, would you like to comment?

Ben Durbin: It is important to be clear upfront exactly how the role of an RSC fits into a school-led system. Is their role to go into individual schools and get a very detailed level of intervention, or is the idea within a school-led system that it is a much lighter touch role that operates through existing bodies with school improvement responsibilities, be those multi-academy trusts or local authorities?

Q124 Chair: Do you think their powers are effective or would you like to see them, for example, commissioning teacher training?

Ben Durbin: That is quite a different function, but I would not see that as part of their role.

Q125 Chair: That would be a different priority for a Regional Schools Commissioner in your world?

Ben Durbin: I would not see that as part of their role.

Chair: Sean?

Sean Harford: Generally about ITT or more generally?

Chair: I am talking about trying to sketch out what you think the role of the Regional Schools Commissioners should be.

Sean Harford: Okay. I think we have worked through the various iterations of this as the educational landscape has changed. It is the middle tier we have with a combination of RSCs, local authorities, dioceses—all those people that you mentioned earlier. Therefore, it is what we have to work with now, so the real question for me over time is whether it is going to be effective. That is what we should be looking at, because you could come up with a number of different structures and any number of them might or might not work. It is about the effectiveness of them, to me.

Robert Hill: I think one very specific role I would give them, even within their current narrowish remit—effectively they are sort of doing this, but let's be honest and transparent about it—is the role, as Monitor does for the health service, of helping to build the capacity of multi-academy trusts. We have a lot of sponsors—over 750 or thereabouts—and 840-odd multi-academy trusts. A lot of them are what I would call fledglings. Even a number of the so-called mature ones are struggling. Give them a role to support the

development there. I would also argue for a process of breaking down—I don't think it is sustainable to try to cover the size of regions that they are doing.

Q126 Chair: You are kind of describing an incremental approach of developing the role of the Regional Schools Commissioners. If you had a rational position and you said, "Right, I want to get somewhere with this structure," what would that structure look like?

Robert Hill: I would base it on economic sub-regions, which again came out in some of the earlier conversation. It would give you a much more sustainable number. I would have accountability, probably. What is interesting is that we are having this conversation. There is a separate conversation going on around devolution and elected mayors, and the northern powerhouse. I would make them accountable, or at least share the accountability, at the Department, and I would give them oversight of all the schools in the area working with local authorities. Although it looks like local authorities are being written out of the script, I think they are playing much more of a role in many areas than many people appreciate in understanding what is going on in individual schools.

Q127 Chair: But you see the Regional Schools Commissioner as the overseer of that action and participant as well?

Robert Hill: Yes, they might even not exactly license local authorities but, where a local authority was not up to doing its job properly, you might say they need to find somebody else to do some of those roles.

Q128 Chair: Ben, are you concurring with that?

Ben Durbin: I think getting the size of the regions correct is quite important. At the moment, for example, there are around twice as many schools in Lancashire and West Yorkshire as compared to the north of England. That is a discrepancy that I think needs to be addressed, both in terms of the workload and in creating a cohort of commissioners who have a common role and experience.

I would caution against breaking them down into too small a region. As we have heard, one of the greatest challenges that the commissioners are facing is the identification of new sponsors to tackle underperforming schools. I would worry that a region that is made too small would constrain the ability of a commissioner to bring in new sponsors from different parts of the country.

Q129 Chair: Size is clearly something to work on, but is there an optimum size and you are not convinced we have that yet?

Ben Durbin: I think there is potentially a case for a handful more commissioners, but I would caution against substantially more.

Sean Harford: Our concern, going back a couple of years, was that as the academy programme progressed we did not have anybody to talk to to say to whom those academies were accountable. Certainly bringing in the Regional Schools Commissioner system has helped in that respect, because we now have someone we can go talk to about our concerns. In that respect it is positive. But I would echo Robert's point about the fact that local authorities still play an important role in both the planning for schools and also

overseeing school improvement, and that is why we still inspect local authorities in that vein.

Q130 Chair: Is a Regional Schools Commissioner more closely associated with regulation and, therefore, a regulator, or is he a leader of school improvement?

Robert Hill: As the job description has been written, they join a triad of regulators of the Education Funding Agency, Ofsted and themselves. But the way that it is being interpreted by many of the RSCs is that a number are doing it more overtly than others. Certainly there are a couple of them who see their role very much as a broader school improver and are building that vision. My own view is that that is the conversation that we need to have as more schools become academies. In the short term, it looks like they are going to stay focused on the failure side of the equation with the coasting and the adequate job description.

Sean Harford: To pick up on the point about the three regulators in that area, I think the problem would be if people were not clear on their roles within that area. I think we are clear on our role. People have said, “You can’t be clear if you are calling yourself improvers,” but what we say is that it is about improvement through inspection. We are very clear on that role. The outcomes of those inspections are put up for everyone to see and those that have the improvement role then pick that up and take it forward, so I think there is clarity in that area.

Q131 Ian Austin: I would like to ask whether there is a need for this middle tier at all. Everybody knows the thing that improves education is the quality of teaching and leadership at schools, so would it be better to get rid of all this stuff, spend more money on schools, provide better comparative data and then enable parents to make the judgment?

Robert Hill: I think there is a strong case—the evidence suggests this—that you do need schools working together. Sharing learning and teachers working together is the way that you get a lot of that improvement. That does not happen. Out of serendipity that needs facilitating, steering and organising, and that is the strong case of what the best multi-academy trusts are doing. They are exemplars of that, as are the best teaching school alliances and, indeed, the best federations in the maintained schools sector.

What happens, I would argue, in the best jurisdictions is that—as really happened with parts of London Challenge; indeed, some of the commissioners, I think in the north-west, have instituted the Blackpool Challenge as a way of seeing the system as a whole moving forward together—sometimes there is an economic dimension to how they develop the curriculum, for example. It is about raising the aspirations of the kids in the area as well. Sometimes it is about bringing in employers and universities, and working and brigading those resources. I think it is just leaving it to schools; they are the focus, they have the responsibility—

Q132 Ian Austin: I think the thing you go to—I am not talking about the Ofsted definition of outstanding, but actually outstanding and brilliant schools—is headteachers working with universities and businesses, and bringing in—

Robert Hill: That is true, but I think what we are talking about is the George Bush mantra of “No child left behind”—the education improvement. I think what we are trying to do is “No school left behind”. Yes, we have those that are exemplifying exactly what you say—

Q133 Ian Austin: But the picture over decades is one of entrenched mediocrity and, every time there is a reorganisation, the same people responsible for the failing system pop up doing a similar job with a different title under a supposedly new system. I know I am sort of exaggerating—

Chair: I think that is an essay question, really.

Ian Austin: Is that unfair? I think there is some truth in that characterisation, isn’t there?

Robert Hill: Certainly, I think other jurisdictions, both probably in the health and education sector, probably look at the UK as an organisation that does get rather not obsessed, going for a lot of structural reorganisation, and I think that is where they would tend to focus on pedagogy in teaching and learning.

Q134 Chair: I think we have that point. Ben, would you like to comment on this line of questioning before we move on?

Ben Durbin: To the initial question of why we need a middle tier, I think any system needs a failsafe. An NFER analysis of the performance of academies has shown that while the evidence is far from black and white, clearly there are circumstances in which by some cohorts and some measures, sponsored academies do perform better than similar schools that have not been sponsored. There are circumstances in which you need some sort of intervention and I would argue that the role of the middle tier is to broker that support, as indeed the RSCs’ measures have defined the parts of the system that are underperforming.

Chair: Sean, a quick answer.

Sean Harford: I would also make the point about reliance on data for parents. Data can give you a picture, but it cannot tell you everything about the effective working of a school. We should not put all our store on just providing data for parents and letting them decide because it does not always tell the picture. Some schools are too small for data to be meaningful. With special schools, pupil referral units—a whole tranche of schools—you would not, as a parent, get the right kind of information if you just relied on the data.

Q135 Ian Austin: It depends on the measure of the data, doesn’t it? I think parents can be pretty sophisticated judges of what is a good school and what is not.

Sean Harford: Don’t just rely on data is my point.

Ian Austin: Yes, thank you.

Q136 Chair: Do you think Regional Schools Commissioners are operating different reporting requirements as compared to each other?

Robert Hill: I listened to what the commissioners said. My understanding from my own conversations is that multi-academy trusts operate over several regions and also—referring back to the evidence you heard in your session in October—there is some evidence of different reporting requirements. There is some evidence that, although they may work to the same criteria, how they are implementing those criteria in giving warning or termination notices is not entirely consistent. I was with one chief executive of a multi-academy trust last week who said they had had a notice in respect of one academy and she could not for the life of her understand why they had not had it for one of their others. That academy was not exactly identical, although it was in very similar circumstances in terms of meeting the criteria, but it came under a different region.

Q137 Chair: That is basically the point that Jon Coles made two weeks ago about the bar being at different levels.

Robert Hill: Yes. In terms of how big a problem it is, I think it is mostly a problem for those multi-academy trusts that are operating across two or three regions, so I don't think there is innovation for those smaller ones that are largely within the same region.

Chair: Yes. Ben, any thoughts on that line of questioning?

Ben Durbin: No, thoughts so far.

Chair: We are going to move on to Ian now, who is going to be asking some questions about measurement of performance of course in connection with the middle tier.

Lucy Frazer: Can I pick up on that point?

Chair: Just quickly.

Q138 Lucy Frazer: Just very quickly. What are the effects of that? Does that mean that a multi-academy trust, operating in two different mediums, will concentrate on the area where the Regional Schools Commissioner is sharper and picks up quicker?

Robert Hill: No, probably not. With the reporting requirements, they just have to get on with it. With the warning of termination notices, in some ways the formal notice is part of a conversation between the commissioner and the trust, as the commissioners were explaining. Even if the notices have not been issued, if they are probably still within the trust, they are very well aware of the expectations and are having to address it. In the great scheme of things, I would not have said it is the worst problem that we have with Regional Schools Commissioners.

Chair: Right, Ian, you fire away.

Q139 Ian Mearns: In answer to the questions before about the crowded landscape and who is responsible for what, the three commissioners were clear about what their role was and they felt that everyone was clear about what everybody's role was. Sean, you have said that you are clear what Ofsted's role is, but is everybody out there clear about what everybody's roles and responsibilities are? It is a crucial question. There are some significant stakeholders out there trying to improve this system, all working in their own ways, and all

working in their own landscape and also further landscapes, but is everybody clear about what everyone else's roles and responsibilities are?

Sean Harford: I am sure that not everybody is clear. It is about communication, as the commissioners said earlier, and where it is not clear, we need to go out there and make sure that the message is given clarity. But not everybody will be clear and sometimes schools that find themselves in a tailspin will be looking around and they will feel like they are being improved by, inspected by or overseen by a number of different people and I am sure it could be confusing to them. But, at that point, it is up to somebody to say, "Come to me with those issues and we will sort it through." I thought that the commissioners earlier gave a reasonably convincing case on that—that they would be able to do that if there was confusion.

Robert Hill: I think there is and there is not. There is clarity around the role in relation to finding sponsors. There is clarity around the role in terms of underperforming MATs, although it was interesting hearing their performance measures. I have not seen those in the public domain, so that would be interesting to look at some of those and to see how they go. Where there is potentially lack of clarity is, first, what it means. With underperforming schools, we do have a range of ways in which the regional commissioners go round and get involved in commenting on what is going on in schools. There is also a degree of confusion, which potentially could increase under the Bill, around new schools and pre-schools, and the respective roles around that and local authorities when sorting that out.

Ben Durbin: I would say that even if there is clarity about the roles among those fulfilling them, there is an issue with parents' understanding of the system. NFER did some research with parents last year that showed quite a lot of confusion among parents regarding different roles, with variation by levels of household income. Typically—it is the stereotype—the evidence did show that parents from better-off backgrounds were more likely to understand the system and to choose schools based on data. Those from less well-off households were less so. So, to segue into a slightly different agenda, but regarding the social mobility agenda as well, there are issues around parental understanding of the system, how it works and who to complain to if they are not happy with their local school.

Q140 Ian Mearns: In that crowded landscape, though, are the schools commissioners the new middle tier? If they are the new middle tier, how should their performance be assessed?

Robert Hill: They are part of a middle tier. We heard it is crowded—I have a slide of a football pitch with a lot of players on it. They are having to work to do the joining up to make things work. It would not be surprising to find that parents find some of that confusing.

Sorry, the second part of the question was—

Q141 Ian Mearns: How can we assess if they are being effective or not?

Robert Hill: If one takes it against the narrow definition of their role, the sorts of performance indicators they have—if they were open and transparent in the reporting entity—are clearly one level of it. If their role is going to become broader, we do need a different sort of performance management or performance assessment regime that deals

with some of the softer things around building capacity of sponsors. It is not just the numbers but the quality of the sponsors and the value that they are adding. We will need to think about how we assess and judge some of those.

Q142 Ian Mearns: I would be interested in seeing your map of the football pitch. Would Regional Schools Commissioners be part of the spine of the team on that pitch? Is it a team and, if so, is it a winning team?

Robert Hill: Is it a winning team? The analogy is probably something about half-time. The evidence shows that the impact that multi-academy trusts are making is very mixed. Essentially we have some that are outstanding, adding value and are leading the school system, but we have some where their performance is no better, and in some cases it has stayed behind.

The other bit of the mix, which I am sure Sean will want to comment on, is that we have a separate bit of the accountability system that is hanging and does not relate to anything else. That is mainly the focused inspections of multi-academy trusts that Ofsted is undertaking, which is where it comments on the trusts that it is concerned about and writes its letter. With an Ofsted inspection, if you get a letter putting you in the category, it comes back, with monitoring and consequences, whereas with multi-academy trusts, as I understand it, there are no consequences to those letters. I do not know whether Ofsted is discussing with Regional Schools Commissioners about what it is doing when it does have these inspections.

Chair: We are going to talk about that relationship in a minute, when Suella gets started.

Q143 Ian Mearns: What in this crowded landscape is the role of the national Schools Commissioner, who we are going to see in a few moments?

Sean Harford: In terms of Frank's role, the commissioners said that he tries to give some continuity and consistency across the work they do, and he is their boss and seeks to do that. Our relationship is such that I meet Frank, and the other RSCs as well as a group, and our regional directors meet the RSCs individually and in small groups. His role is to co-ordinate that and to make sure that they are held accountable for what they do.

Q144 Ian Mearns: But your regions are not contingent with the regions set up for the Regional Schools Commissioners, are they?

Sean Harford: No, they are not coterminous. That has caused us some logistical issues, so some of our regional directors deal with up to three RSCs.

Ian Mearns: Does anybody know whose idea these eight regions were? Whose idea was that?

Chair: You are going into Suella's territory.

Ian Mearns: I am sorry. I beg your pardon.

Q145 Chair: Robert, can I just ask you a question? You have been fairly forthright about the role of Regional Schools Commissioners, so can you apply the same forthrightness to the role of the national Schools Commissioner?

Robert Hill: When it was first established, it was a misnomer, it seems to me. I did not understand what they were commissioning, going back two or three incarnations.

Chair: Let's look forward.

Robert Hill: Looking forward, the role is much more coherent now. It is in its most coherent form because it is about co-ordinating, and bringing together and managing, what the RSCs are doing. In terms of there being an equivalence of the chief inspector's role in Ofsted to being a voice or an explanation to parents, the role is yet to develop. There could be one, but it is difficult for a commissioner to do that while being a civil servant. There is a question about whether the commissioners—all of them regionally and nationally—should have greater independence from the Secretary of State.

Chair: Therefore a different line of accountability.

Robert Hill: Yes.

Chair: Which we will discuss later. Michelle, you are going to talk about comparing the regions.

Q146 Michelle Donelan: There are obviously a lot of challenges and characteristics that are unique to each region, and in between the regions as well. If we look at the region of the south-west, it is very diverse and fragmented as well. Do you think that that is a concern, and how can the Department monitor the scale and scope of the changes within each region?

Robert Hill: It is probably for Ben in the first instance, because he has done the most work at looking, through NFER, at the different profiles, and I will come in on the back of that.

Ben Durbin: Clearly there are great variations. That presents a number of challenges, first around resourcing. Some of the commissioners have substantially larger jobs to do than others when it comes to not only the numbers of underperforming schools in their areas that they need to tackle, but the capacity within the system in their areas to tackle those schools. You have this catch-22 whereby if you already have some underperforming sponsors or underperforming schools in the area then, by the same notion, you do not have the capacity in the area to turn them around, so that is an issue.

If the commissioners are to work as a coherent group and to learn from each other's experiences, there is a case to be made for some degree of consistency in terms of scale and nature of the challenges that they face. Was there another part to the question?

Q147 Michelle Donelan: Going off what you are saying, do you think the system can cope? You raised the point about certain areas being more needy than others, in particular, and that certain areas are geographically bigger, meaning a bigger challenge in that sense. Do you think there is an argument for having more commissioners in certain regions and examining the whole approach? Are we catering to the needs of each region with this one-size-fits-all approach of one per region?

Ben Durbin: I spoke to this briefly earlier. I would caution against too many regions. In the situation where you do not have high-quality existing sponsors, you have a number of options. You can go to some high-performing schools in your area, but if your area is too small, your choice might be limited. You could look for new organisations, universities or education charities but, again, if your region is too small, you are limited. You could go outside your region, which is basically the problem you face again if you have too small a region, or you need to work with the sponsors who are currently struggling to help them to improve. But, again, to have the capacity to do that and to have the experience to draw upon from other sponsors who are doing well, you need that critical mass.

Robert Hill: The answer, in large part, depends upon your school improvement model—we heard the phrase “trickle-down MATenomics”, or whatever it was.

Chair: Professor Mearns.

Ian Mearns: Trickle-down sponsornomics was—

Robert Hill: Sponsornomics. I do a lot of work in Wales, where we have set up for regional consortia. We do not have commissioners, but each consortium and all schools are part of those consortia. Take one of consortia that I work with closely: all schools are expected and are grouped to be part of a school improvement group and they ensure that each school improvement group has a high-performing school as part of it. So there are different ways to think about how you do school improvement.

If you are working with a model of believing that turning everything into a sponsored academy trust is the only way to get improvement, you will probably end up with something like we are moving towards or emerging with. I am a big fan of what the best MATs are doing, but I do not think we should see MATs as a punishment for being a bad school. MATs are the pinnacle of school improvement and that is how we should be positioning them, and we should be moving all schools towards that clustered joint working.

Q148 Michelle Donelan: We spoke in the last session a lot about the approach and the inconsistencies of different commissioners—in some senses quite rightly, because each region is different, as we have just discussed—but do you not think that there is this danger that we are creating a postcode lottery even more, and that we are setting the bar differently in different areas, with an actual long-term effect to education that is quite damaging?

Robert Hill: I would put a different scenario to you. What would be better is that we ought to be more transparent about difference and say in the south-west, “We are going to follow this model. Let’s look and see how it works. We test and we evaluate and we track. They are going to do this over here in London or in the north-east—interesting. We are going to put £5 million into three academy sponsors to see if we can get extra capacity going; let’s see if that makes a difference.” Let’s be clear about the difference. I agree that we cannot tolerate postcodes to the point of view of opportunities and outcomes, but I would argue that what we need to do is to learn from the difference.

Q149 Michelle Donelan: So a more open and frank devolution of methodology and then a sharing of that between the three—

Robert Hill: Yes.

Chair: Michelle, are you happy?

Michelle Donelan: Yes.

Chair: Suella, we have touched upon Ofsted a little, but you want to probe further, don't you?

Q150 Suella Fernandes: Yes. The RSCs and Ofsted need to co-ordinate in terms of working with schools. How effective do you think the co-ordination between RSCs and Ofsted has been so far?

Sean Harford: We have good relationships in certain areas and developing relationships in others. The point picked up earlier about the regions not being coterminous has been a bit of a barrier because some of our regional directors have to work with three RSCs, which can cause some problems, although mainly logistical. It is early days though, would be our reflection, and we need to see the impact of this. Regional directors talk frequently with the RSCs. They will talk about individual schools of concern, and there is a good and frank exchange of views on those schools and on the approaches. But it is early days in terms of impact on this issue.

Q151 Suella Fernandes: What weight do you think Ofsted ratings and an opinion from an RD about a school should have in consideration by an RSC?

Sean Harford: It is one of the things that they will take into consideration. All our reports are published, so it is not just the RSC that is seeing that information. Everybody can see that and therefore they will draw their own conclusions from that. We should not be drawn into believing that a “requires improvement” school is a “requires improvement” school regardless. All these are a band, and some of them are just out of special measures and others are nearly good. Therefore the discussions that the RDs have with the RSCs are important because they can nuance what can be considered as a blank grade.

They will certainly take into consideration our work, but they also need to consider how long has it been since we have inspected. Outstanding schools are no longer subject to routine inspections, so are they still outstanding or not and is the data reflecting that? It is part of their information.

Robert Hill: What would help the process would be if we had a system, preferably a transparent one, for understanding the performance of multi-academy trusts, which we do not have. In the dying days of the coalition Government, there was a consultation document around that suggested a framework of accountability. That seems to have died a death and gone into the long grass, as far as I can see. Apart from what Ofsted is doing around MATs—it has only inspected about four or five under the new regime—since the election, quite a lot of MATs that I personally would have question marks about are still being allowed to grow.

Q152 Chair: Robert, would you mind writing to the Committee with some ideas on how that system that you touched upon there would look like?

Robert Hill: Yes.

Chair: That would be quite interesting.

Q153 Suella Fernandes: I just want to go back to this point about the input of Ofsted into the assessment of RSCs. Looking at attainment and key stage 2, recent data has shown that of the 11,000 or so good or outstanding primary schools, about 3,000 fell below the national average of the proportion of children achieving level 4 in reading, writing or maths at key stage 2. Do you think, Sean, that that level of unreliability and inaccuracy is quite damaging and not a reliable basis for an RSC when they are taking into account Ofsted data?

Sean Harford: That data was drawn from one year's test results for 2014 and one quarter of those schools only were inspected post that data being available. It is not the full numbers that you quoted; it is a proportion of those numbers. Of course, inspection judgments do not only take into account one year's data either. They judge across a range of things and they also do not look at just one metric within the outcomes. It is a way of looking at whether the inspection outcomes were reliable or not. It is not the only way and I would argue that it is not an entirely reliable method itself.

The way in which those scores are arrived at, clearly, is that children are taking a single test and getting a score on it. What that test seems to do is to tell you whether a child can read or write, but the reality is that the score on the test can be obtained from different questions doing different things. We all know the foibles of test data. That is why we use it as one way of looking into what a school may be about, but the key is going in and seeing what it is like on the ground.

Chair: We need to talk more about Regional Schools Commissioners but Suella—

Sean Harford: I thought that was where the question was leading.

Q154 Suella Fernandes: In terms of how data from Ofsted feeds into a RSC, it is not just attainment, but progress as well, because a large proportion—almost 50%—of good and outstanding schools fell below the national levels of progress required. Again, is Ofsted a reliable and sound basis in terms of this interaction of feeding in data to the RSC?

Sean Harford: All those things I just said about attainment relate to progress as well. It is one number—one test. The progress is attainment—one test be taken next—so it is all built on the same things. All those things I just said are relevant.

Chair: One more question.

Q155 Suella Fernandes: What interaction does Ofsted have with the main Schools Commissioner, Frank Green?

Sean Harford: I meet Frank termly. We also have a meeting where we meet with the RSCs as well as Frank, and I will talk to him about issues that come up in between as well.

Chair: Thank you very much, all three of you, for some very interesting answers to our questions. Thank you.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Frank Green CBE**, Schools Commissioner, Department for Education, gave evidence.

Q156 Chair: This is the last of three sessions this morning. It is a great pleasure to welcome Frank Green, who has been listening to descriptions of his role for the last two hours. Welcome to this Committee. We will get straight on: what do you think your role actually is, given that the Regional Schools Commissioners have their roles?

Frank Green: Good morning. First of all, I must apologise for my throat being a little sore, so I may have to stop every now and again for a sip of water.

My role is very much that of overseeing the new system that we are creating. I line manage the Regional Schools Commissioners; that is the major part of my role. I also help to set the strategic direction in conjunction with Ministers and provide advice and notes to Ministers. I also make sure that I get out and about to talk to groups of educators in schools and conferences and to put the message out about where the academy part of the system is going and how it is being constructed. That is the major part of the role.

Within the overseeing of the Regional Schools Commissioners, with eight regions you have to build a consistent approach where you can. Some of the judgment is deciding whether that has to be laid down in law—in rules—or if it is that open to their discretion? There is that aspect of it.

I also have relationships with all the national organisations like Ofsted, ASCL, NAHT—all the main professional associations—and the dioceses as well.

Q157 Chair: There are a couple of recurring questions though, aren't there? One is the accountability line, which we need to explore because looking at the situation at the moment you would assume that you are in charge of the regional commissioners and you have to tackle those variance issues we have been touching upon and so on. Then the other one is the question of how it all looks with everything else that is in place, in particular the angle that we have heard this morning about the fact you are civil servants. Could you comment on those two points?

Frank Green: Being a civil servant does restrict, clearly, because you provide advice to Government and you are not free to speak out of turn from what the Government position and line is, so that is a constraint. But you know that when you take the job on. I have spent 44 years in education and in only the last two have I been as constrained as I have. It is quite a challenge sometimes to bite my tongue and not say something out of place. It has always been one of my issues.

That is part of the challenge, but it is a great part of the challenge, because it is leadership in a very different way from the leadership that I have been used to of running a multi-academy trust and schools before that. That is the first part. You balance those things out and weigh the two things up. I believe we have that right so far for where we are. Just remember, it has only been going for a year and bit. When I first started the job it was a very different job from the one I am doing now. That was the second bit. Could you remind me of the first part of the question again?

Chair: About the accountability issue.

Frank Green: The accountability process. Accountability downwards—that is of me of the Regional Schools Commissioners—works, as they said, on monthly conversations either in person or on the phone that will focus on the key performance indicators. There are eight key performance indicators and although Robert said he was not aware of them, they are published and have been published since day 1 of August last year. I would say it is on those. Also we have a monthly forum that I chair, which looks at particular aspects of the work and particular aspects of changes that are happening, or new developments that are happening, and people will come from EFA, Ofsted and the dioceses to present how they are seeing the system. You are getting accountability in that respect.

The other thing that we have introduced is that on at least an annual basis—we are going to try to build it in twice a year—we do a particular challenge session where all the RSCs are required to put down on two sides of A4 paper everything they are doing and what they are doing. It is circulated among all the RSCs. They present for five or 10 minutes and one of the other RSCs does a challenge session with it, and we have a discussion about it. It is one of the strong ways of building: first, an understanding of how each other is working; and, secondly, consistency of approach when that consistency is needed. That is the downwards accountability.

The upwards accountability is that there is an academies board that I report into, which happens every two months, and every month there is a group. Most of that group meet to look at how we are progressing and looks at the numbers and digs down deeper rather than how is it fitting with the whole plan. Then there is the performance committee and the Secretary of State and Ministers. Every week I have a meeting with Lord Nash—who is the Minister I report to directly—with other members of the team here and other parts of the Department, DfE and national college.

Q158 Chair: Are you effectively a national leader of school improvement, or are you the chief regulator of the academy system?

Frank Green: I would say I am a combination of both. Probably more the regulator than the school improver because we are aiming to build what is described as a school-led system, which has two parts: self-management and self-improvement. The self-management function is very much within the RSCs' and my role. When schools are failing or not achieving what they should—certainly at the moment it is academies and free schools—it is the RSC's responsibility to pick it up and focus on that.

It is not our function to do the school improvement side. It is to facilitate it and act as a catalyst in that. That is very much the national college function through the Teaching Schools Alliance—the TSAs—in which we have 530 or so, and are hoping to have 600—that is the target for next September. We are looking to build that and to get the NLEs and the SLEs from there. The role of the regional commissioners is to ensure that there is enough support or that they can access enough support for that school. But the responsibility of the improvement was down to an academy—the trust. The contract it has is the funding agreement, which is signed between the trust and the Secretary of State.

Q159 Chair: How many schools in England do you think have the title “cause for concern”?

Frank Green: In the whole of England?

Chair: Yes.

Frank Green: The total number in special measures at the moment is 227 LA maintained schools and 144 academies.

Q160 Chair: Is there any particular region where those figures are disproportionate for that region?

Frank Green: Not massively so. The East Midlands region seems to have quite a few more academies. The East Midlands seems to have more academies that are in difficulties than other regions, but it is not a vast difference.

Q161 Chair: But the regional commissioners are responsible for academies, so that would suggest that special focus needs to be applied to the East Midlands in that case?

Frank Green: Yes.

Q162 Chair: Is that something you are doing in your role as national Schools Commissioner?

Frank Green: Yes, with Jenny, who is the regional commissioner for that area.

Q163 Chair: Do you think you have enough tools and resources to tackle that particular problem and related problems?

Frank Green: Does one ever have enough tools and resources? The tools and resources that are available at the present time are being used to best effect by each region. It is not just teaching school alliances and LLEs. There are, as we know, private providers who also work in that field, and some of them have multi-academy trusts of their own, like CfBT, which both supports school improvement nationally and internationally, as well as having a trust of its own here. So you get a range of providers, and you could always do with more to turn around the schools that are not doing well, because there are still too many schools not doing well enough.

Q164 Chair: Jon Coles talked about our regions being 80% the same and 20% different, effectively. He also talked about different levels in terms of expectations, bar setting and so on. First of all, do you agree with his 80:20 attitude? Do you think it is being reflected in the regions? Secondly, what about this issue about different reporting processes?

Frank Green: I think it probably is about 80:20. It is certainly the kind of number that I work with in my head, in terms of 80% being set down in statute, rules and regulations, and 20% being how the regional commissioner builds his or her region to get the flair and the distinctiveness that gets people feeling they belong to the region, and becomes the team leader, if you like, of that whole region.

Q165 Chair: How do you see your role emerging?

Frank Green: As the number of academies grows, as is likely to happen as a result of the current legislation, I think the role of regional commissioners is certainly going to widen, because they are going to have responsibilities on maintained schools, which they do not realistically have at the present time. So that role is going to widen, and therefore the oversight role of the regional commissioners is going to grow. I think that will become a major part of it. It is also important to build those relationships with other groups and national bodies, and also potentially to use the outstanding trusts in particular that go across a lot of regions as a good feedback mechanism in a stronger way than we do at the present. If you have a trust like United Learning, Jon Coles' trust, which operates in all eight regions, a termly conversation with him about consistency would be a very valuable conversation for me to have now that we have been operating for a year.

Q166 Ian Mearns: Do you still have a vision of 100% academised system?

Frank Green: I do. I do think there is a vision of that. I have expressed it in the past in my previous role, and I do think that there is a way of developing things. But everything is going to depend on the spending review in the next few weeks as to exactly how far and how fast any of that might go forward. It is not my decision—it is a ministerial decision—but I do think there is a way you could move the system in that direction.

Q167 Ian Mearns: On methods of working, does the new draft guidance on intervening in schools causing concern, which was issued two weeks ago, simply reflect the way that Regional Schools Commissioners have all been working over the last year, or does it usher in a new era of consistency of approach for Regional Schools Commissioners?

Frank Green: I think it does both.

Q168 Ian Mearns: The focus of the consultation document is exclusively on intervention with maintained schools, yet many academies, as we have seen from the evidence around the regions, are now also struggling, so do Regional Schools Commissioners need similar guidance on their approach to struggling academies?

Frank Green: The way they work at the moment is that they focus on academies that are not succeeding. So their role, their primary remit and, as they were saying, their primary KPI that I challenge them on all the time is: how are you working with and supporting academies that are not doing the right thing for their children? There was something like over 60 rebrokered academies last year. That sounds to me as though it is going in the same direction, if not already there.

Q169 Ian Mearns: We have seen three of your Regional Schools Commissioners this morning, and they have somewhere between 2,400 and 3,300 schools in each region—that sort of variation. Of course within that, they have quite a number of maintained and VA schools, and a number of academies and free schools. The proportions of failing schools are broadly similar between the maintained sector and the academised sector. Given the fact that you have given that guidance for the approach to maintained schools, do you think you need to rejig that for working directly with academies?

Frank Green: That is certainly something we are actively looking at at the present time.

Q170 Ian Mearns: Thank you very much indeed. Larger chains are assigned a Regional Schools Commissioner as a lead contact. How does this relationship work in practice?

Frank Green: So far it has worked very well. With the example that was quoted earlier, I think by Robert Hill, of one of the big MAT leaders saying that one of his schools had been treated in one way by one commissioner while a school in a similar state in a different region had been treated differently, my view is that that person should be talking directly to the regional commissioner who has oversight of all that trust. That would be the question that I would have fired back at them.

Q171 Ian Mearns: You mentioned that, for instance, Jon Coles's academy trust has schools in every region. Who has the lead for that, in that case?

Frank Green: At the present time, I believe that is—let's get it right. It was Paul Smith, I believe.

Q172 Ian Mearns: Thank you very much. How many chains have been assigned a lead contact? Have they all been assigned a lead contact?

Frank Green: Yes, they all have a lead contact.

Q173 Ian Mearns: Would you publish a list of that so that people know the lines of accountability?

Frank Green: Yes. I would be surprised if we have, but we would be quite happy to publish that list.

Ian Mearns: Or if you just let us have the information.

Frank Green: I can certainly let you have that information, yes.

Q174 Ian Mearns: Thank you very much. How do you ensure that the relationship does not become too cosy, given the decisions that the Regional Schools Commissioners are making on sponsorship and sponsors?

Frank Green: Cosy in what sense? That is quite a big topic. Are you talking about giving it to the HTB members that their advisory board has?

Ian Mearns: The Regional Schools Commissioner will ultimately determine which sponsor takes over a particular school. Given that each Regional Schools Commissioner has responsibility for particular academy chains, is there a danger there of the decisions being reflected on those relationships?

Frank Green: We have had this discussion on a number of occasions and we have looked at the evidence on that, and we would say that the opposite was probably true. As you have that relationship, you are harder and harsher. They have to cross the bar of being allowed to do it with tougher criteria than another trust.

Q175 Ian Mearns: Have you thought about putting in a mechanism of a sort of transparent failsafe so that everyone can see that that is—

Frank Green: Yes. There is a register of interests that is published and, although at the present time the headteacher board decisions are published, the conflicts of interest at each headteacher board will also be published in that note, and we are very meticulous about ensuring that people do not get involved in decisions. I am still a director of the trust where I was chief executive and if any decisions about Leigh Academies Trust in Dartford are taken, or even discussed in the Department, I am not allowed even to be in the room at the same time that those discussions are taking place.

Ian Mearns: But the absence of you from the room does not preclude everybody from knowing that you have that relationship.

Frank Green: No, it does not, but the education world is not that large. I have been in education for a long time, and people say to me, “Well, you know everybody, Frank.”

Chair: That is why you got the job then.

Ian Mearns: Thank you very much.

Chair: Right, Suella is going to look at the issue of relationships with the national college and LEPs.

Q176 Suella Fernandes: Teacher supply and training, and the recruitment of new people into the profession, are obviously critical to improvement and to the programme of expansion. What role do you think you can play in that objective?

Frank Green: Of improving the quality of teachers? I think it is more the Regional Schools Commissioners’ role to identify their needs with talking to individual schools and trusts. That discussion gets fed through to me, and I then have discussions with the national college executive leadership, if there are things that need to be changed. But it is a national college priority on recruitment of teachers.

The area that we have most concern on is the one that goes beyond headship, and that is the executive leader and the chief executive. There is no doubt that when you grow a trust, when you are an executive leader of two or three schools, it is a different job from being a headteacher of one school. When you are a chief executive, which comes about when you have about five or six schools, you get a different job again and there is a whole new range of skills. We have already started a training programme—23 young chief executives took part in the first one last year. We have two more courses running at the moment with another 60. We are talking to two universities at the present time—I can’t say who they are—about establishing two more programmes to develop leadership beyond that of headship of a single school, because that is the nature of the direction of travel of the system. It is not the same as the previous one, and we are not building the same system, but teachers still have to be teachers. That is the national college’s priority.

Q177 Suella Fernandes: What progress can you report since the last time you came before this Committee on the relationship between you and the NCTL?

Frank Green: I have a very good relationship. I have regular meetings with the leadership of the national college, and with the Teaching Schools Council, and with the NLEs as well. So we have the Teaching Schools Council, the national college and ourselves, and three or four times a year we have a meeting of the groups together to look at overlapping interests and to ensure that we do not tread on each other's toes when it comes to providing school improvement and getting those functions. The teaching school alliances were set up with six major areas to work on, and the ones that we focus on are school improvement, so professional development of teachers and school improvement in schools that are facing challenging circumstances. That is where we have most of our discussion, and it is a very healthy, strong and good discussion. The system has the self-managing part, which is us, the national college, which has the self-improving part, and the Teaching Schools Council, so the need for us to work very closely together is absolutely paramount. That is part of the structure we have built up in the last year.

Q178 Suella Fernandes: Just lastly on this teacher training issue, do you think that the fact that you do not have responsibility for commissioning initial teacher training is a shortcoming in the regime, or do you think that you should have more input into that entry level?

Frank Green: I don't think so. At the Leigh Trust we had a SCITT there. I chaired the SCITT for 15, 16 years, and it was part of the function of the school and the group of schools to do that, rather than of a commissioner. So I think it is very much a national college function, and our support of the college is what is required there, rather than for it to be part of the function of the national Schools Commissioner. I am not teaching commissioner. If I was teaching commissioner, maybe that would fall into my remit.

Suella Fernandes: The two are so interlinked though, and there is —

Frank Green: I would totally agree. But with the self-managing one, it is the leadership and the governance that is our function mostly. The national college—

Chair: We are a bit short of time, so just one more question, Suella.

Q179 Suella Fernandes: The last question is on the local enterprise partnerships. Obviously they have an input into your role so that the needs of employers and business are met. What kind of interaction or relationship is there between the RSCs and local enterprise partnerships?

Frank Green: The amount of interaction so far has not been significant. The level of involvement of local education with local enterprise partnerships has been much more at the classroom level than at the leadership and governance level. That has been developed through the Academy Ambassadors programme, and the New Schools Network is doing that, with Kirsty Watt managing. In the past year we have used that to increase the quality of business people on leadership teams, meaning on the governance teams of schools. Over 100 have been placed in the last year; as of yesterday 102 have been placed. There are over 100 who have wanted to join trusts to improve the quality of governance.

Q180 Suella Fernandes: There is a serious issue about people coming out of school lacking employability skills.

Frank Green: I agree.

Suella Fernandes: Can you give us any reassurance of progress you will make on that?

Frank Green: We will make a lot of progress on that. That is the next level down, but I would have said that is a teaching school function, not so much a school commissioner function. I will be suggesting that is the line of development for that.

Q181 Ian Mearns: We talked earlier about the different availability of potential sponsors in different places. The local enterprise partnerships might be an inroad into the business community.

Frank Green: I think they are. They are one that has not been tapped yet, and there needs to be a tapping into that for the next year or so.

Ian Mearns: The problem is that your Regional Schools Commissioners will have many different numbers of local enterprise partnerships within their larger area.

Frank Green: Yes. They have 16 to 27 local authorities in an area. LEPs tend to go over two or three local authority areas anyway. That is part of the workload, and when you start adding that up, it comes to a bottom line resource and comes to the spending review before we can take any decision.

Chair: Thank you for that answer. Lucy will quickly look into advisers and consultants.

Q182 Lucy Frazer: The Department for Education said that the Regional Schools Commissioners were supported by a small team of staff, a team in the Department, and then expert education advisers who are contracted by the Department to work in individual schools. Who are those advisers?

Frank Green: The majority of them are former senior teachers, or even current practising senior teachers and head teachers in schools, and former senior officers from local authorities. I know of two or three former directors of children's services who work in this kind of function. So they are people with broad-ranging experience over many years in education.

Q183 Lucy Frazer: Would you be happy to publish a list of who they are?

Frank Green: I am not sure if it is commercially sensitive or not. I don't know. I don't know whether we have —

Chair: Can we have a discussion about that? We will get our Clerks to contact you about that.

Frank Green: I am not absolutely certain of that, but there was a contract, as you know, recently put out. There were 93 organisations or individuals who received contracts under that tender document.

Q184 Lucy Frazer: Similarly, if you are able to publish that, would you be happy to do that?

Frank Green: If we are able to.

Q185 Lucy Frazer: That would be great. Would their conflicts of interest be declared anywhere if they did have any?

Frank Green: Yes. Conflicts of interest, if they are providing advice, are always declared when they are doing a piece of work.

Q186 Lucy Frazer: How does that declaration take place?

Frank Green: That would take place in the report that they have submitted to the Regional Schools Commissioner when it comes to their headteacher board meeting. That would be how it would be declared.

Lucy Frazer: So on a case-by-case, meeting-by-meeting basis?

Frank Green: Yes.

Q187 Chair: Just one last question from me. Basically, how do you think we can make the role of the regional commissioners, and indeed your role, more transparent?

Frank Green: I think that the role is reasonably transparent in the sense that their key performance indicators are there. The annual report on the performance of schools and academies will be published and there will be separate reports in there about the role of the Regional Schools Commissioner. As time goes on, we are reviewing how much more of their teacher board notes we ought to release in terms of the day-to-day operation, and that is currently under discussion. We do expect those to be fuller in time, but they are designed as advisory notes and that is why they are being protected, because individuals work in regions and need to be able to give confidential, frank advice without fear or favour.

Q188 Lucy Frazer: One more question on the same issue. Will the 93 additional people be able to cope with any additional workload from the coasting schools legislation, or will there need to be more advances after that, do you think?

Frank Green: We don't know how big the coasting issue will be, because the coasting definition is not decided.

Lucy Frazer: We heard that earlier.

Frank Green: I know, exactly. It is very difficult to tell, but we make estimates of what things are likely to be needed and work on that, which is why the priorities are set and why that scenario is set in the way that it is.

Lucy Frazer: Just picking up on that, what is your estimate?

Frank Green: I don't think the total package has been fully commissioned yet, which is why it might not be possible to be public about it, but the Department has made an estimate that the £12 billion should be sufficient for the next three years to cover the cost of advisers and brokers.

Q189 Chair: Frank, can I probe this issue about the definition of a coasting school again? You are the second person to stand behind the statement, “We haven’t got a definition yet,” but the reality is that you must have some idea what a coasting school looks like. You must have some kind of modelling, so have you sort of looked around and thought about the number of schools that might be needing attention?

Frank Green: Initial thoughts. Yes, we have done some initial thinking about it, because you are taking three years of data to show two criteria in each case, whether primary or secondary, that are going to be required to be met. We have done some initial modelling on coasting, and it depends on where you set the bar as how many might fall above it or below it. That is why it is hard to say for certain, but the sorts of numbers do not suggest that we are going to be dealing with more than a few hundred schools in the category on the modelling that we have been doing.

Chair: Thank you. Frank, I am going to thank you very much, especially since you have a sore throat. I have had it, and I think Lucy had it.

Lucy Frazer: I do. I have the Strepsils in my bag.

Chair: Strepsils work, and you will find—

Ian Mearns: Other brands also work.

Chair: I am not being paid for this, you know. You will find that you will recover. Thank you very much.

Frank Green: Thank you very much indeed.