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Emerging local schooling landscapes: the role of the local authority

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Introduction

The school system in England is undergoing rapid change. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat Government came to office in 2010 and its programme to create a school system comprised primarily of ‘independent publicly-funded schools’ (DfE 2010) through ‘academisation’ has proceeded apace (Woods and Simkins 2014). The intention is for the majority of schools to be academies which operate under direct funding agreements with central government removing them from significant influence by the local authority (LA). They are autonomous in terms of curriculum and management, but operate under the same central government accountability regime of testing and inspection as those schools that remain within the ambit of the local authority. By September 2013 9% of primary and 52% of secondary schools had converted to academy status (a total of 3304) and a further 99 new ‘free schools’ had been created also as academies.

The implications of these changes are both increasing complexity and increasing fragmentation as schools take a variety of routes towards academy status and new forms of formal and informal collaboration between schools emerge. As a consequence many argue that it gives rise to what has become known as the problem of the ‘middle tier’ (Hill 2012; House of Commons 2013; Aston et al 2013; Lubienski, 2014; Woods and Simkins, 2014). In large systems middle tier structures can play important administrative and democratic roles. Devolving responsibility to local agents makes more manageable the complex task of administering effective, efficient and equitable schooling in a particular local area. It can also be democratic where local people are given influence over their locally elected representatives about schooling in their town, city or county. In England, which has some 25,000 schools, the LA has traditionally played both roles. However they have been challenged or modified over the last three decades. From the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the introduction of ‘local management of schools’ many of the administrative functions once exercised by local authorities were delegated to school level; while local authorities have seen their powers bypassed as schools have been increasingly subject to specification, monitoring and control of their outcomes by central government through regimes of testing, inspection and intervention in response to perceived school underperformance. These trends have been accelerated by the rapid increase in the number of academies since 2010, significantly weakening the ability of LAs to manage the pattern of schooling in their areas. Lubienski (2014) has described this process, which is also occurring in other countries,

as ‘disintermediation’. But caution needs to be exercised in applying the analysis in England. LAs have not yet been entirely written out of the script. In its White Paper (DfE 2010 para 16) the Government proposed a continuing role for the LA as a ‘champion for parents, families and vulnerable pupils’; commissioner of sufficient school places; coordinator of admissions; and supporter of local school improvement. However, the changes taking place are presenting LAs with another potential role, that as one of the agents which influence – or attempt to influence – the emerging landscapes of schooling in their local areas. This is not a new role (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010), but it is one that presents new and very different challenges in the current policy context.

The aim of this article is to explore the ways in which LAs are responding strategically to the challenges presented by local schooling landscapes which are increasingly threatened with fragmentation as increasing numbers of schools take a variety of routes towards a status (‘academisation’) which has the potential to loosen their relationships with their broader local community. In this context, what kind of visions do LAs have for the future of schooling in their localities, and in particular how far should they – and how far can they – seek to influence the landscapes that are emerging in an attempt to retain a sense of ‘locality’ in these landscapes? The article seeks to address these questions by drawing on data from three, very different LA areas. It begins by considering alternative views of what a future middle tier might look like: one argues that such a tier is either unnecessary or can be built from below through emerging structures of school-led collaboration; the other proposes that such an approach will be inadequate to counteract the negative effects of fragmentation and that there needs to be a continuing role for the local authority. The rest of the article then considers how the three LAs have responded to the policy context, focusing on one particular role of the LA – acting as one of the ‘brokers’ in the processes through which new local landscapes emerge. It concludes by considering the implications of the findings for the future of schooling locally.

School restructuring and the middle tier

‘The debate over whether there is a need for a middle tier in the new school system has been going on for as long time... [and]... who or what should constitute the middle tier is also a matter of some long-standing debate’ (House of Commons 2013, paras 74-75). Although much nuanced, the debate can be summarised by two poles of the argument, or alternative visions. One sees no need for a middle tier beyond the new configurations of schooling as the sole form of organisation below that of the central government. The other envisages the continuing need for a mediating layer between schools and central government, with most of those who take this position arguing for the LA to continue to play a key role in this, albeit one that is considerably changed.¹ We discuss each of these alternatives in turn.

The first vision sees a formal, centrally established ‘middle’ tier as unnecessary, because, as the Policy Exchange (2009) and O’Shaughnessy (2012) argue, accountability to parents and effectiveness are best achieved through schools or school groupings competing in a market place. In this view quality standards are best assured simply through accountability for performance to central government or its agencies. Thus the Policy Exchange (2009) conceived of a tier of ‘regional authorisers’ who are contracted by central government to authorise academy conversions and call schools and school chains to account, a position recently been embodied in the DfE’s creation of eight posts of regional commissioner who will have delegated responsibility from the DfE for carrying out functions concerning academies which have previously been the undertaken by the DfE centrally. Significantly, the Government has been reported as stating that these commissioners will not ‘become an added layer of bureaucracy’ and should not be seen as a creation of a so-called middle tier², which begs a number of questions about how their role will be carried out.

Insofar as any ‘middle’ tier exists in this view, it is an emergent one, with schools working with each other to challenge performance and facilitate improvement as components in a ‘self-improving’ system (Hargreaves 2010 and 2011). The emergence of inter-school collaboration is central to this vision. This can be informal, or arise through the increasingly complex and varied forms of formal grouping that are emerging (Hill et al 2012; Chapman 2013; Woods and Simkins 2014). These can include formal chains, led by a not-for-profit organisation or a school (Papanastasiou 2013; Salokangas and Chapman 2014), federations of schools choosing to come together to establish shared governance and/or leadership structures (Chapman et al 2010; Ofsted 2011; Howarth 2014), or looser forms of organisation entailing limited co-operation in defined areas such as continuing professional development or management services. Such groupings include teaching school alliances which are being orchestrated by central government as a means of giving substance to the idea of the self-improving system (Matthews and Berwick 2013).

Chains and other forms of school grouping, it is argued, have the potential to develop ‘federal’, as opposed to ‘individualistic’ school improvement strategies (Chapman and Salokangas 2012) which will provide, within a context of accountability to central government, an adequate basis for the improvement of the system as a whole. However, even if such strategies were widely developed, it does not follow that they could, on their own, adequately meet the improvement needs of the system as a whole. Evidence on the positive performance of school federations and chains is mixed (Chapman et al 2009; Chapman et al 2011; Chapman 2013; Muis et al, 2013), and in any case it is probably early to draw robust conclusions. However, as Chapman and Salokangas (2013) argue, whatever the performance of specific federations and chains, there is a requirement for ‘inter-dependence for capacity building across chains and the wider system...and [the creation] of joint

responsibility for all children in a locality rather than only those on roll in one school/chain' (p. 484). It is arguments such as these – as well as concerns about democratic accountability (Lubienski, 2014) – that lead other commentators to advocate a continuing role for the LA - the second vision.

The House of Commons Education Committee expresses the case for a continuing role for the local authority clearly:

'Local authorities still have a critical role to play in the local school improvement system, in particular through creating an "enabling environment" within which collaboration can flourish... The role of local authorities is still evolving and some clarification of what is expected of them is needed.' (House of Commons 2013, para 80)

As this statement implies, exactly what this role should be is contested, and reflects wider questions about the place of local government in England more generally (Shaw, 2012; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). Debates in this area have concerned both the administrative role of local authorities, relating to the quality and equity of service provision, and the nature of their democratic mandate, relating to the ways in which local communities can secure a voice in influencing those factors that determine their life experiences. In relation to the former, particular consideration has been given to the degree to which local councils should continue to provide services directly or act as 'enablers' or 'ensurers' of services that might be provided by themselves or others (Lowndes and Squires 2012; APSE, 2012; Hatcher, 2014; Boyask, forthcoming). With respect to the latter, questions have been addressed concerning both the risks to democratic control where the emphasis is increasingly concerned with 'technical efficiency' aspects of service delivery and the implications of various forms of forms of democratic control in a changing environment of governance (Hatcher, 2012; Sweeting and Copus, 2012; Copus et al, 2013).

In education, much of the literature designed to influence policy has focused on issues of quality assurance and school improvement, but with the LA playing a facilitative rather than directive role. There has been less detailed discussion in this literature on questions of democracy beyond general statements about the democratic mandate of the local authority (Crossley-Holland, 2012; Parish et al, 2012; Academies Commission, 2013). The role advocated may involve brokering effective school-to-school partnerships and assisting in the commissioning of services (Parish et al 2012), although this begs the question of how LAs can hold schools formally to account for underperformance if the majority are academies or free schools and LA resources are reduced (Hatcher 2014). Others propose it should be more than this. Both the Academies Commission (2013) and the NFER (Aston et al 2013) see the LA's key role as 'articulating a local and aspirational vision for education' (Academies Commission 2013) and 'develop[ing] a long-term vision and strategy for teaching and learning that

moves beyond compliance to central government pronouncements and to which all partners can sign up' (Aston et al 2013: 7). Such a role assumes that the LA area retains meaning as a focus for educational aspirations and policies and one that is subject to negotiation and agreement among the parties involved. Such a vision might involve the expression of shared values which should inform schooling locally, a commitment to the maintenance of local 'voice' in the local schooling landscape, and a view about what kinds of school patterns are most likely to serve the needs of their whole local community in relation both to ensuring the quality of schooling and equity in provision. All of these aspects are embodied in the stance that an LA chooses to take in response to decisions about the future of schools and school groupings as the academisation process evolves locally and imply a process through which public value can be asserted (Hodgson and Spours, 2012; Fielding and Moss, 2011; Woods, 2011). It is this stance which the rest of this article explores.

Methods

The project of which this article is a part seeks to gather evidence as to what new order is emerging at the local level and the factors affecting this. To do this we have sought information and perspectives on local developments in three LAs chosen to provide a variety of geographical, historical and policy contexts: a large metropolitan authority (City), a large rural authority with a dispersed population (County), and a smaller unitary authority centred on a town (Town)³. Within each we interviewed people in senior posts in the LA and in schools, especially those likely to have an LA-wide perspective, or at least (in the case of the headteachers we interviewed) one well beyond their own school. Between 2011 and 2013 we conducted 23 hour long semi-structured interviews (7 LA executives, 15 headteachers and one chair of governors). This article draws primarily on the interviews with the senior officers from each LA who, as key informants (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998), were selected for interview because they had overall responsibility for schooling in the authority and/or for engaging in the process of negotiation through which decisions were made about future school status. For one primary informant in each LA, after initial interviews late 2011/early 2012, we conducted a second set of interviews in mid-2013⁴. This enabled us to trace the ways in which key themes and issues played out over the first three years following the General Election of 2010. The interview strategy combined an interview guide and conversational approach (Patton, 1987, 116). A framework of questions was used which explored respondents' perceptions of what was happening in their area, the LA's responses to the changing policy environment, the values and purposes that underlay these, their judgments about the key issues that would need to be addressed in the future. Every attempt was made to make the interviews as conversational as possible to draw out respondents' thinking. Where a second interview was undertaken with a respondent, a particular focus was on exploring the changes that had taken place over the intervening period since the first interview and the interplay of factors that had influenced these.

The analysis used an approach broadly derived from grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). All the interviews were transcribed and analysed, using a combination of deductive analysis deriving from our initial interview schedule and inductive analysis which sought other, unexpected themes from the transcripts. These were clarified through reading and rereading of transcripts. Concepts and themes were identified which were both cross-cutting between schools and LAs (for example, differing perspectives on the emerging local school landscapes and the ways in which school perceptions of LA services were influencing both school and LA actions) and specific to one or the other (for example, heads' accounts of how and why they were choosing to respond to the changing national and local policy environments [AUTHOR 2014]). One of the LA-specific themes concerned the subject of this article. Components of transcripts relating to this theme were then isolated, revisited and further analysed for sub-themes. Three emerged: the principles on which LA policies were claimed to be based, the brokerage role of the LA and LA's power and influence in relation to that of other actors.

The three LA areas

City is a residentially segregated city with contrasting areas of affluence and poverty. The performance of schools across the LA at all phases had been below national average since 2007 and there was pressure on the LA to improve those results. The LA, which is Labour controlled, had traditionally been an interventionist administration with a strong policy over many years to nurture families of schools and pyramids of primary and secondary schools within local communities. They had largely kept services to schools in-house, and, although schools' perceptions of the quality of these services varied, there was a strong sense of loyalty among most schools and school leaders towards the idea of a local system of education that needed to be led and managed in the interests of all the children in the city. Consequently, in 2010, the large majority of schools (apart from church schools) remained community schools, although three schools had become forced academies associated with national chains under New Labour's policy.

County is a large, mainly rural county with an increasing level of deprivation and pupil mobility. The performance of schools across the LA has been above national average since 2007. The County is one of only 14 LAs in England (out of 150) that have an explicitly selective grammar school system in most of its area. Prior to the push towards academisation in 2010 the County was already struggling with some difficult structural challenges. One follows from the selective system which means that even for small towns there needs to be both a grammar and at least one secondary modern school instead of just one comprehensive. In addition, being a rural county, large costs are incurred in transporting the village population to the secondary schools. A third is that it has a great many small

primary schools which are costly to run. In contrast to City, County, which is Conservative controlled, has been traditionally a low interventionist administration and has attempted to minimise the activity and impact of the local state by giving as much autonomy to schools as possible. However, partly in response to the challenge of small schools, the Council has sought to encourage federations of various kinds and allocated some funding to prime the process.

Town's population is rapidly growing and, like City, quite polarised in socio-economic terms. Politically, it is under no overall control. Although results are above the national average, they are below that of the adjoining shire counties. Parents in Town can access selective (grammar) schools in the adjoining authorities with one of those authorities operating bus services to ferry pupils to their selective schools. There are also several well regarded private schools within range. LA relations with schools have undergone radical change in the last decade, with an early period of difficult relationships when many of the secondary schools opted for foundation status. The current LA officers have worked on improving their relations with schools, and set up a strategic partnership group to facilitate this and in our interviews a fruitful sense of partnership was voiced by both sides.

In summary, the contexts of County and Town made it more likely that the process of academisation would take off more quickly than in City. County had a tradition of encouraging school autonomy while Town's recent difficult history had encouraged distrust of the LA among some schools. Consequently, prior to 2010, a higher proportion of schools in County and Town than in City had taken on and become used to the enhanced responsibilities and freedom associated with foundation status⁵. In City, in contrast, there were stronger cultural and political pressures within the schooling community towards the maintenance of a coherent local system despite the pressures of national policy. By September 2013, the percentage of primary and secondary academies respectively was 12% and 62% in City, 21% and 81% in County and 11% and 75% in town.

The local authority as an actor in school reorganisation

Determining principles

All the officers that we interviewed in the three LAs, in explaining how they responded to pressures on local schooling created by the Government's policy of academisation, emphasised their statutory and moral responsibility for all children and young people in their area. This was independent of how interventionist the authority's overall strategy had been in relation to its schools or the number of academies in its area. For example, in least interventionist County:

They are [County] children and therefore I'm interested in their outcomes regardless of what type of school they go to... because I have the statutory duty in relation to all of those children. (County 1, interview 2)

Officers in City, which had the most proactive history, while expressing similar general views went further, translating these into a continuing commitment to encourage and support schools to buy into a shared vision for education in the city and to work together:

So one of the kind of key design principles that emerged from that period [of discussion of the future role of the LA] was to sign up to a vision of a school system within [City] that was built around families of schools that still saw a school as playing an integral role within the community and also that schools would have a common vision around educating the city's children and then by definition, you know, you correct any impulses around certain groups being worse off because of the changes. (City 2, interview 1)

So for City collaboration was seen as something to be encouraged because of its potential to enhance schools' relationships with and commitment to the community, whether this be viewed as the local community of the school family or the wider city community.

For County, despite its general non-interventionist stance, collaboration was also seen as very important. Here, however, the underlying rationale was somewhat more concerned with practicality than principle. It was seen as an important way of countering some of the dangers associated with the geographical characteristics of the authority area.

[We've got] loads of federations... particularly small, primary, rural schools...[but] a whole mix really. ..[And we] have used that as a mechanism for school improvement traditionally...[Such collaborations will be] even more important moving forward. [County]'s always had a bit of a sort of hands-off approach in terms of governing bodies decide and we'll facilitate and encourage and offer carrots. In the new world, federations, mergers, collaborations [are increasingly seen as solutions]... The only way [small rural] schools are going to continue to provide sustainable education is through partnerships and federations and collaborative working. (County 1, interview 1)

So unlike City, while collaboration is seen as an important tool for school improvement (a position echoed in Town), it was also – and perhaps more significantly - seen as a means 'to increase the viability of our small schools' (County 1, interview 2).

Brokering the academisation process

Whatever their views about desirable patterns of relationships between schools, and consistent with their overall values, all the authorities saw themselves as having a responsibility in supporting schools towards academy solutions that were in the best interests of their children. The word ‘brokerage’ was used by all our respondents. For example:

I think part of the LA role is in brokering those local solutions and developing that capacity, so it kind of essentially has to leave any ideological objections at the door really and work with those schools to get the best solution for the children really and that I think fundamentally is the LA’s role going forward. Now it’ll be more difficult where [the LA] has less leverage, but I think there’s a strong sense here that the right role here now is to advocate for children, young people or families. (City 2, interview 2)

LAs began adapting to living with academies as part of their local stock of schools when the original New Labour academies were established. Small numbers were established at that time, and all the authorities echoed the view of one respondent: ‘I think we had a fairly pragmatic solution to each and every one’ (County 1, interview 1). For one LA, the result of this experience was not entirely positive. Two national chains were brought into the LA, but experience led the LA to view them as having very different levels of commitment to the community values of the authority:

With one of them their call is to their central organisation all the time. So the central organisation comes first and [the city] comes second and they see themselves as merely an educational provider – i.e. they’re there to teach children and not to do anything else – whereas with the other they see themselves as a community school and the organisation adds additional capacity to that school in order to enable it to run very, very well within its context... We’ve learned a huge amount from those relationships about what we would want and what we wouldn’t want. (City 1)

In response, City developed a set of criteria against which to judge potential school sponsors. The ability to effect improvement in the sponsored school(s) was the primary one, but there was also a strong concern about the values of the sponsor such as a commitment to inclusion (‘I think there’s lots of nervousness around inclusion and more vulnerable groups’ [City 2, interview 1]) and to the school’s local community:

[N]o matter how many schools or where else they’re based, [sponsors] must be dedicated to [the city] and they must have values and ethos as well as practice that we can see that

demonstrates that they will connect to the local community and take the issues of the community, see themselves as a community school in terms of their level of engagement with the feeder primaries, with the parents and with the wider community around their school.
(City 1)

Wariness about large academy chains was not limited to City. An officer in Town also said:

[W]ho are these governors of the future who are prepared to take on these real and personal liabilities, but also serve the local community. Because if they're parachuted in from national academy chains then their commitment to the local needs may not be as strong...I think the quality and how we develop locally strong governance and governors [is] an area of concern.
(Town 2)

In County, there appeared to have been less direct attention given to which chains operated local schools, but there was a feeling that this needed to change. Interestingly, however, the emphasis was on the chains' potential contribution in helping ensure sufficiency of school places and bringing more capital into County. Here the approach to the potential contribution of chains was more rather different.

I think now that we understand the academy position in a bit more detail ... [We] want to understand [the chains'] strategic ambitions for [County] and how we can work through because they may actually, through the free school route, be able to help me with my secondary problem [of sufficiency of places]... It's almost like [we] need now to have a strategic relationship ... with some of the other players as well and we're just beginning to start that politically as well. (County 1, interview 2)

Perhaps in part because of concerns about chains, but also because of the broad philosophy of localism discussed earlier, City was prioritising attempts to develop local solutions through which outstanding local schools were encouraged to sponsor weaker schools. By September 2013 there were three such arrangements, two primary schools sponsoring other primary schools and a secondary school sponsoring another secondary school and two primaries. However, it was recognised that, while there was a preference for such local arrangements, with performance levels of schools lower than in the other two authorities, there might not be enough high performing local schools to fulfil that role - capacity might be an issue:

I think the kind of starting position for the Authority was that if schools were to become sponsored academies within [City], then it'd be better that they were local sponsors. That was

the starting position, but then it begs the question whether we've got the capacity in the system to be able to do that. (City 2, interview 1)

Interviewees in Town also propounded local solutions, but particularly in relation to the development of new schools in an authority with a rapidly expanding population.

County, in contrast, was more pragmatic:

In terms of the approach [County's] always had a very diverse approach and always left governing bodies to decide what's best, so we've not strategically led that sort of mix. ...[As a broker we] need to consider geography, ... skills, ... capacity... a whole range of things... [So] one solution in one area wouldn't be appropriate for an urban area and a rural area. So I think it's positive that you have that fluidity of arrangements. (County 1, interview 2)

In County, therefore, while sharing the concern of the other LAs that the solutions developed should serve the aim of school improvement, beyond this each case needed to be considered on its merits. A non-interventionist stance, a complex pre-existing pattern of school organisation (including selection), together with a large and diverse geographical area, all combined to militate against any sense of 'preferred approaches' for the area as a whole.

Patterns of influence

Whatever their general stance, however, all interviewees were clear that they could only influence, not determine, outcomes of restructuring processes, and the degree of influence they had depended on the context in which the brokering was taking place. Schools which were well-positioned could largely take their own decisions, although the LAs normally had views. In contrast, where a school's performance made them candidates for 'forced' conversion as a sponsored academy, the Department for Education was a key player and sponsors also became more proactive:

For schools that are sponsored it's a very different type of process ... The brokerage is obviously a lot more sensitive because the Department will come with proposals... and also when a school goes into special measures what you tend to find now is that there are a number of sponsors that come forward and, you know, directly express interest either to the LA or to the Department... Now the LA has limited influence when a school goes into special measures. There's no point beating around the bush on that. That is the case. And the Department will come with a fixed view about the options for that school. It carries out its

own due diligence with the school and then, you know, will put one or two options in front of governors. (City 2, interview 2)

All the respondents gave examples of cases where the LA had tried to influence the DfE, with varying degrees of success. As one put it: ‘Now the trick the LA has to turn I think is to be part of those discussions and those negotiations, otherwise the danger is the Government bypasses [the LA]’ (City 2, interview 1). Developing good relations with the DfE, therefore, was seen as crucial:

And I utilise my statutory role as the DCS [Director of Children’s Services] with statutory responsibility for the well-being of children. And because I impart a level of credibility about delivery of improved standards and Ofsted outcomes and that sort of thing, the DfE colleagues are prepared to listen. I think there are some other LAs where that isn’t the case and [the DfE] are literally going into schools without alerting the Director of Children’s Services and having conversations with governing bodies about sponsors and so on. I would be extremely unhappy if that were the case. (Town 2)

Between these two extremes lie those schools which do not meet the requirements for ‘forced’ conversion but which are vulnerable. It is perhaps here that LAs have the most potential to influence emerging patterns of organisation by linking their brokering role with their responsibilities for school outcomes and improvement across their area. A respondent in City expressed it well:

[S]ome schools’ll just do their own thing, but there are a number of schools where we’ve had the conversation with them and actually they don’t want the distraction of finding a sponsor. .. [T]here’s a large group of schools who are just above floor⁶ who are anxious and worried because they know how hard it can be. You know, they could just dip under for a year and where would that leave them? So they’re worried and so they’ll want a sponsor that they’ve chosen as protection for the future, as kind of future-proofing them. So I mean there’s a number of schools have said, you know, “Can you help us?”, and then there’s other schools who we’ve said “We can help you if you want us to.” (City 1)

Discussion

Senior officers in our three local authorities, then, shared a view about the importance of their continuing role as actors in their local school landscapes which was underpinned, not just by the legal requirements placed upon them, but also by a moral purpose relating to a perceived responsibility for all pupils in their local areas. They saw this role, in part, in being embodied through active engagement in the process through which decisions are made about the future status of schools.

However, they recognised that they were only one actor in this ‘brokering’ process and their power to influence outcomes depended on the local circumstances in each case. There were at least four other actors, or potential actors, in the arena: the school whose future was being considered (the focal school); other schools which might have an interest in the decision, perhaps because the focal school was a potential partner in a federation or chain; other chains, not led by a school, which might wish to bring the focal school into their fold; and the DfE. The LAs recognised that each of these actors would bring their own values and purposes to the decision-making process and would be able to exert differing degrees of influence on the eventual outcomes. High performing schools had a high degree of power to determine their own futures and had little need to take account of the views of the local authority. However, as the case of City demonstrates, LA influence may be critical in persuading such schools to engage as sponsors in local organisational solutions designed to support less successful schools. In the case of the poorest performing schools, where academisation was mandated and sponsorship required, all the LAs recognised the overriding power of the DfE, although they hoped and expected to be listened to. For schools between these two extremes the potential for LA influence was strongest, especially where schools sought to be helped to solutions that they would find amenable and would protect them from later imposition of outcomes over which they might have no control. Beyond this, however, in all the interviews there are clues to officers’ recognition of the constraining power of central government and its policy frameworks - indeed, the imbalance of power between the centre and the localities - whether it concerns ‘leaving ideological objections [to policy] at the door’ (City 2, interview 2), the importance of officer credibility in influencing the DfE, or the reliance on academy chains or free schools to resolve key local strategic issues such as the shortage of school places.

The Academies Commission (2013) has argued that ‘local authorities should embrace a new role in education, not as providers of schools or school improvement services, but as champions for children’ (p 11). As we have noted, all our interviewees explicitly shared that aspiration. However, it meant significantly different things to the respondents in each of the LAs. At one extreme, represented by County, it meant ensuring the best deal for pupils in each school while also acting as a champion for individual pupils, especially vulnerable groups. At the other, while encompassing these, it also meant trying, so far as is possible to maintain a school ‘system’ at local level which embodied a shared vision of and commitment to the community. City articulated this position most clearly.

Hatcher (2014) notes this potential difference in interpretation of an LA’s role and distinguishes three possible types of ‘strategic vision’. A ‘preventative/remedial’ vision would focus on addressing issues of school improvement and the ways in which the needs of parents and pupils are addressed, but ‘restrict themselves to being local relays of the government’s performance agenda’. A ‘developmental’ strategic vision would go beyond this, placing preventative/remedial concerns within

a broader framework that attempts to embody locally determined shared assumptions about how schooling should meet local needs. A critical vision is one that puts into question neo-liberal education policy. Like the LAs which Hatcher studied, the visions of our three LAs can best be described as either remedial/preventative (County) or developmental (City and, to an extent, Town). None showed a strong inclination to adopt a critical stance. It is tempting to link these varying positions to the differing political compositions of the Councils: both have strong one-party majorities – Labour in City and Conservative in County – while Town is under no overall control - and the views expressed about the visions for schools in each case reflect wider value positions concerning the role of the local authority within the public realm. However, it would be dangerous to assume that party colour alone determines the position an authority takes in relation to its schools and wider and deeper research would be necessary to explore this issue further⁷.

The changing structure of schooling has been the subject of analysis and debate often as part of wider discussions about the nature of governing and governance in the public sector (Rhodes 1997; Kjaer 2004; Frederickson 2005; Bell and Hindmoor 2009). Much of the debate has addressed the relative importance of, and relationship between, three organisational forms: hierarchies, markets and networks. Ball has argued that new forms of educational governance can be described as ‘heterarchies’ which represent ‘a new mix of hierarchy, market and network which is replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy, and/or divergent but co-existent patterns of relations’ (Ball 2009: 100). Much of Ball’s work concerns the national picture, but his ideas may also be applied to localities. Elements of hierarchy, market and network can be identified in local school landscapes which are being shaped by centrally prescribed performance measures, the ‘new hierarchies’ of some school chains, the dual process of creating ‘independent’ schools and reducing LA power, and the increase in forms, and influence, of school-to-school collaborations. A key issue that emerges from our findings concerns the potential role that LAs can play within this context and what effect, if any, differing LA responses to the academisation policy will have on the landscapes of schooling that emerge locally. Will more ‘developmental’ approaches result in less local fragmentation and a greater sense of shared local values and commitment across schools and school groupings and between academies and those schools that remain as community schools within the LA ‘family’?

The evidence here is weak but not negligible. Many academies in our LAs are free standing and doubts have been expressed about the degree of motivation towards collaboration among many such schools (Academies Commission 2013; House of Commons 2013). Further, the wide variety of groupings that are emerging – many of which have geographical reach beyond the LA area or are weakening the attachment to the ‘family’ of neighbouring schools – are threatening to create local landscapes with little coherence. In addition, competition is no longer only between individual schools, but between a variety of different players, from individual schools to large chains with

different kinds of loyalties and drivers. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to support LA influence insofar as national and regional chains have penetrated further into County with its more pragmatic approach to brokering than they have in the other two LAs, and City in particular has had some success in working with local schools to develop collaborations that are locally embedded.

However, the answer to this question of the results of LA strategies does not just lie in the degree of influence that LAs can exert on decisions concerning individual schools, for example in brokering local school-based partnerships of various kinds or favouring sponsors who are committed to engagement with the local community. It also depends on whether LAs attempt to develop new local structures and processes that engage schools collaboratively in addressing local strategic issues and what the results of these strategies will be. City and Town have given greater priority to developing such structures although how successful they will be in maintaining a sense of shared purpose across their schools remains to be seen. These broader aspects of LA strategies need to be studied alongside the more specific issue of brokering. When this is done (see, for example, Hatcher 2014), issues arise around the potential for maintaining what Hodgson and Spours (2012) call democratic localism through which decentralised provision is combined with local organisational mechanisms through which public value can be constructed and embedded in provision. Our findings suggest that such an aspiration has maintained a foothold through the continuing role of LAs, but their role as independent actors has increasingly been compromised by the power of the central state and by the emerging power of other actors such as high performing schools (Coldron et al 2014) and school chains and their sponsors. In the longer term, therefore, if the policy framework remains unchanged, the power of LAs to prevent fragmentation of the local school system is limited and the potential for an effective middle tier to emerge remains problematic.

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¹ There other alternatives, for example the concept of a local school commissioner (Hill 2012), a post more locally – and possibly democratically - grounded than the regional commissioners proposed by the DfE.

² TES Breaking News at <http://news.tes.co.uk/b/news/2013/12/05/dfe-advertises-for-163-140k-a-year-commissioners-to-oversee-academies-and-free-schools.aspx>.

³ The three areas for our study were chosen to provide diversity and explore the interaction between context and outcomes in terms of emerging patterns of schooling. They do that. However, it would be dangerous to suggest that their experiences can be taken as an adequate representation of patterns nationally. It is likely that elsewhere both local and regional factors will drive rather different emerging patterns.

⁴ Quotes are attributed to the first or second interview with each interviewee. Where there is no such attribution there was only one interview with that respondent.

⁵ Foundation schools continue to be funded through the local authority but have greater freedom than community schools.

⁶ The Government establishes 'floor standards' for student attainment. Schools that fall below these standards are at risk of compulsory conversion to academies.

⁷ It is recognised that the views reported here represent officer views and that deeper political perspectives might have been obtained by interviewing local politicians and drawing on policy documents.