
NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH SCHOOLS EVALUATION

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Introduction

This Research Brief presents the summative findings from the national evaluation of the New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) policy. The evaluation was undertaken by York Consulting Limited Liability Partnership (YCL) on behalf of the Department for Children, School and Families (DCSF).

The aims of this two year study, which commenced in May 2006, were to:

- assess the implementation of five key strands of the NRwS (self evaluation, School Profile, School Improvement Partners, Single Conversation, data¹) and explore how these strands knit together;
- assess the effectiveness of each of these strands;
- explore the effectiveness of the NRwS policy in achieving its objectives;
- assess the factors that influence effectiveness; and
- as a subsidiary element, to explore the new relationship process as a way of developing policy.

Overview

The report presents the findings of a comprehensive two year national evaluation of the New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) policy. The policy, announced in 2004, was recognition of the need to streamline and improve the relationship between the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Local Authorities (LAs) and schools; ensure closer alignment of national and local priorities; and address 'bureaucracy' as an ongoing area of concern at both the primary and secondary phases of education.

Key Findings

- The evaluation demonstrates that a number of the strands of NRwS, both independently and collectively, have supported a move towards the intelligent accountability framework envisaged when the policy was first announced. There is also evidence that these developments are contributing to improvements in quality and standards for some schools and LA areas, particularly in the secondary sector.
- The outcomes achieved place LAs and schools in a good position to respond to some of the challenges set out in the recently published Children's Plan, including those associated with preventative school support, challenge for coasting schools, improving attainment for specific groups and engaging parent's in their child's learning.
- There is, nevertheless, a need for continued efforts at national level to work towards more coherent policy development and delivery across all ECM services and ensure schools have the capacity and necessary support to respond to the significant developments currently affecting the sector. There is also the potential for greater value to be achieved from addressing some aspects of consistency and effectiveness associated with school self-evaluation, data availability and the School Improvement Partner (SIP) programme.

¹ The inspection strand of the NRwS was evaluated separately by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

Key Achievements

There are four areas of improvement that have been seen over the three years since the policy was announced:

- 1) **Improved data availability and use** has enabled schools to undertake sharper data analysis which has in turn supported an increased focus on achieving outcomes for pupils overall and for specific groups;
- 2) **Improved school self-evaluation mechanisms** have resulted in:
 - better assessments of performance and understanding of the action required to address aspects of under-performance;
 - engagement of pupils and parents in achieving progress; and
 - more focused accountability for improving performance amongst middle managers and teaching staff.
- 3) **The challenge and support provided through the SIP programme** has supported:
 - the development of more evaluative and accountable school structures and culture;
 - a more consistent focus across schools on improving pupil outcomes and addressing areas of under-performance;
 - the development of challenging but realistic targets;
 - the identification of school support needs and, for many schools, the provision of advice and support to address priority areas for school improvement.
- 4) **Coherence** has been achieved across the Self-Evaluation Framework (SEF), School Improvement Partner (SIP) Programme and new Inspection Framework¹, including the links made with specialist school designation.

Positive outcomes associated with these strands of the NRwS have been observed over the two-year evaluation period. This is across both the secondary and primary sectors, though achievements are more noticeable in the former particularly in relation the SIP programme which is at an earlier stage of rollout in the primary sector.

Impact on Standards and Quality

The contribution that improved data availability and school self-evaluation have made towards achieving higher standards, quality and value added is apparent from the evaluation evidence. This is both in terms of stakeholder perception and detailed case study assessments. The latter provide a number of examples of how (through data analysis and wider self-evaluation approaches) schools have seen improving outcomes across the school, for particular pupil groups and/or for specific subject areas.

The direct impact of the SIP programme on school standards and quality is more difficult to establish due to the nature of the role which is to challenge and support rather than directly engage in school improvement activities. Nevertheless, there are a small number of evaluation case studies which indicate a link between SIP support for school improvement interventions and better school outcomes.

1. More generally, it is clear that the SIP role is contributing to better school improvement, in terms of:
 - supporting headteachers and senior leadership teams to:
 - understand performance issues;
 - effectively plan and prioritise areas for improvement;
 - focus on outcomes, including for particular pupil groups;
 - improve data use, analysis and self-evaluation approaches;
 - engage pupils and parents in achieving progress;
 - more focused accountability for performance amongst headteachers, senior leadership teams (SLTs), middle managers and teachers;
 - aligning headteacher performance management (HTPM) with school priorities.

Other Areas of Progress

2. Some other areas of progress identified by the evaluation include:
 - the availability of improved data and more effective self-evaluation paperwork mean that, whilst there may be increased workloads for school staff in responding, headteacher perceptions are commonly that this is a more effective and purposeful use of time;

¹ Whilst not the subject of this evaluation, the NFER Evaluation of the Impact of Section 5 Inspections (McCrone et al 2007) found that the vast majority of schools were satisfied with the inspection process, it was generally perceived to contribute to school improvement and it was valuable to confirm SEF findings.

- the SIP programme has, in some LA areas:
 - enabled higher levels of challenge and support for schools that do not require formal intervention;
 - helped to improve LA understanding about school performance and ensure earlier preventative interventions;
 - some schools have experienced a single rather than multiple points of communication about school improvement (this is particularly for higher achieving schools, though also includes some schools receiving a wider range of support intervention);
 - the approaches delivered by some LAs and SIPs are providing some schools with more autonomy to address school improvement in ways that suit their specific circumstances;
 - there is some positive recognition amongst stakeholders of general improvements in communication from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and Local Authorities (LAs), the alignment of some policies and initiatives and the simplification and rationalisation of funding support for school improvement;
 - the School Profile has been completed by most secondary and primary schools and a small majority of headteachers agree that its production is less burdensome than the production of its predecessor, the Governors Annual Report. Where parents have accessed the Profile there are some generally positive views about its usefulness to prospective parents who are choosing a school for their child.
3. The evaluation also identifies successful management and delivery of the SIP programme at national and local level:
- most LAs have developed effective approaches to the recruitment, deployment and performance management of SIPs;
 - the National Strategies SIP Coordinators (SIPCoS) are perceived as positively contributing to LA management of the programme;
 - there are high levels of clarity amongst stakeholders (which have improved over the two year evaluation period) about the core role of the SIP to challenge and support schools they work with;
 - the core challenge and support role being fulfilled by SIPs is, on the whole, deliverable within an average five day allocation;
- changes in the approach to SIP support and training have been introduced over the last year which place a greater focus on local training and continuing professional development (CPD) tailored to the local context and individual SIP needs; and
 - the quality of available SIPs is generally considered (by LA stakeholders) to be high and there is evidence (from stakeholder surveys and corroborated by case study assessments) that the vast majority are equipped to undertake their role given their knowledge, skills and experiences.
- ## Areas for Further Development
- ### School Data Use and Evaluation
4. Whilst many schools are demonstrating good practices, some schools (particularly in the primary sector) are still developing their approaches to data use and self-evaluation and a minority require significant further development. Development is required particularly in terms of:
- accountability for understanding and improving performance amongst middle managers and teaching staff;
 - engagement of pupils and parents in understanding and achieving progress;
 - developing more accurate judgements;
 - evaluative rather than descriptive SEFs which are clearly linked to priorities in school development plans.
5. The introduction of real-time reporting in all secondary schools by September 2010 should help to move towards greater consistency amongst schools in their approaches to engaging parents in their child's learning. It will be important to ensure that schools have suitable support to implement the requirement, particularly in terms of developing schools' ICT systems.
6. More generally across schools there is the potential to improve:
- their evaluative approaches in relation to wider ECM outcomes and the links between these and achievements/standards; and
 - the extent to which self-evaluation incorporates 14-19 collaborative provision and responsibilities for influencing improvement are clear. This is a particularly important consideration in light

of the introduction of new diplomas, many of which are delivered in partnership.

Data Availability

7. The delays in getting RaiseOnline up and running have damaged overall perceptions of the effectiveness of NRW to increase the usefulness of data and reduce burdens on schools. Whilst many headteachers are now positive about the potential of the system, there is frustration that the timing of data availability does not enable them to use it to inform planning when they need to.
8. There is also the potential for greater clarity surrounding specific data sources and some need for more coherent presentation of the range of data overall. This would help to ensure greater levels of understanding around the value and purpose of individual data sets which may help to address some feelings of being overwhelmed.

Brokering School Support

9. Relatively low proportions of stakeholders identify that the SIP programme has been effective in brokering school support needs. These perceptions are influenced by both some lack of clarity around the role of the SIP and different practices in brokering support across LAs and SIP types:
 - **Clarity:** Whilst clarity of the SIP role in brokering support has improved since the beginning of the evaluation, there remains some uncertainty amongst a significant minority of headteachers and, to a lesser extent, amongst SIPs themselves;
 - **Breadth of Support:** Outside the core challenge and support role, the breadth of support (and associated additional resource) provided to those schools requiring higher levels of intervention varies across LAs;
 - **SIP Type²:** There are differences in the support role played by different types of SIP, with those who are full-time LA employees (and to a lesser those employed as external consultants) more commonly capacity building, monitoring

² The report refers to three types of SIP – full-time LA employee SIPs (LA SIPs); SIPs employed as external consultants to the LA (EC SIPs); and serving headteacher SIPs (HT SIPs). For clarity of meaning we refer to individual SIP types using the full reference in the main body of the text, but use the acronyms in any tables/figures to maximise space available. Note that both LA and EC SIPs do include both those *with* previous headteacher experience (LA (w) SIPs & EC (w) SIPs) and SIPs *without* previous headteacher experience (LA (wo) SIPs and EC (wo) SIPs). In some of the tables in Chapter Two and the Appendices we distinguish further to comment on differences/issues associated with those with and without headteacher experience.

progress, brokering and managing support packages than serving headteacher SIPs. In the primary sector, the role of serving headteacher SIPs in identifying support needs also appears to be less significant than for full-time LA employee SIPs.

10. This variance in practice is largely a function of different models of LA delivery for brokering school support. These fall broadly within two types – those where a clear distinction is made between the SIP role to challenge and the LA role to broker support; and those where additional resource is provided to some types of SIP (predominantly those that are full-time employees of the LA) to monitor progress/ interventions and build capacity. However, there is evidence in a minority of LA areas of the potential to improve the coherence of the support offer and role of the SIP in relation to this:
 - in some LA areas, there are perceptions of some duplication of the role being played by the SIP and other LA staff; and a lack of a clear and defined role for SIPs within the overarching LA strategy for school access to support interventions;
 - there is evidence amongst a small number of case study schools that the SIP programme (and/or the LA school improvement approach) is not consistently providing additional ‘support’ resource for schools that may benefit from it.
11. More generally across LA areas there is the potential to improve the effectiveness and consistency of LA mechanisms to ensure that there is a comprehensive understanding of the range of support interventions available and suitability in different circumstances.
12. The differences in the support role played by different SIP types result, as you would expect, in some variance in perception of SIP effectiveness. Those headteachers allocated with serving headteacher SIPs less commonly identify that their SIP has effectively brokered support needs or been a key influence in changing schools’ approach to self-evaluation. Nevertheless, there are practical and pragmatic reasons for giving predominantly full-time LA employee SIPs or other LA staff the brokering and monitoring role. Given the demands of their own schools, serving headteacher SIPs are more constrained than other types of SIP in terms of delivering additional support resource for schools that they work with.

Nature and Scope of SIP Role

13. There is some potential at national and local levels to develop more consistent clarity and focus for some aspects of the SIP role as outlined below. In addressing some of these areas, consideration needs to be given to the ability of SIPs to continue to play a focused role within an average of five days.
14. **Direct Development Support:** In a minority of cases, additional resource has been allocated to SIPs (or they have more flexibility in their capacity to respond to needs) for pastoral and development support which aims to improve self-evaluation processes and deliver targeted intervention support. The view amongst many national and local stakeholders is that delivery of this type of support might impact on the extent to which the SIP can retain his/her independence to play an ongoing challenge role within the school.
15. **Single Conversation:** There is some tension between the concept that SIPs would enable schools to have a 'Single Conversation' and the ability of SIPs to provide focused challenge and support within an average of five days a year. This is evident in some LAs where a range of issues and monitoring/reporting requirements are being channelled through SIPs and this is inhibiting their ability in the time available to fulfil the challenge role. Whilst this is not the case in all areas, these approaches (together with some national expectations and school demands) are perceived (by half of the SIPs surveyed) as contributing to a growth in the SIP role.
16. As the SIP programme has been embedded, a more redefined view of the Single Conversation has developed and there is evidence that in some cases SIPs are enabling schools to have a single point of communication for school improvement. This is particularly the case amongst higher performing schools though there are also some examples where those requiring higher levels of support intervention are experiencing greater coherence in their interactions with external support organisations. Nevertheless there is the potential for improved clarity surrounding the intended SIP role in this respect and the coherence of LA communication mechanisms which might support it.
17. **Changing Nature of Role:** As the SIP role embeds, there is evidence in some case study schools of its changing in nature but SIPs, for example, are starting to interact more with wider school staff and pupils and some are focusing more on capacity building and advice for particular priority areas for the schools concerned. Nevertheless, there remains uncertainty and difference of view about whether some of the activities undertaken by SIPs to moderate school judgements and build capacity should be provided; and whether this impacts on the extent to which the SIP can remain focused (within available resource) and independent to effectively challenge the school.
18. **Flexibility to Respond:** The backdrop of continually developing national priorities and initiatives provides an ongoing challenge for SIPs to ensure an appropriate balance in the use of their time. SIPs need to be able to provide challenge which is focused on addressing a particular school's priorities but within the context of agendas that the schools themselves are responding to. Serving headteacher SIPs have less capacity to respond in a flexible way to emerging national, local or school demands.
19. **Suitability and Effectiveness of Support Interventions:** An increased emphasis is required on the SIP role to ensure the suitability and effectiveness of support interventions. This aspect is likely to develop as individual SIP relationships mature and there is some evidence of this. Nevertheless, there is the potential to raise the profile of this element of the SIP role and for LA mechanisms to develop so that they and/or SIPs can add value in this respect. This is in terms of, for example:
 - integration of the SIP programme within wider LA and children's service support areas;
 - placing appropriate emphasis on the SIP role to evaluate the effectiveness of support and interventions; and
 - creating an environment within which SIPs can appropriately challenge the LA and others about the suitability and effectiveness of support provided.
20. **14-19 delivery:** There is the potential to increase the extent to which SIP challenge and support incorporates a focus on 14-19 delivery and post-16 provision. To date, this has been influenced in some cases by a lack of coherence between the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and LAs/the SIP programme. With LAs now being given the strategic commissioning role for all education and training for children and young people up to the age of 18, there is

the potential to place greater emphasis on performance across 14-19 delivery within a more integrated and coherent framework.

21. **ECM:** There is also the potential for SIPs to play a greater role in supporting specific strategies for the personal development and well-being of pupils or engagement in wider developments relating to the integration of children's services.

Impact of SIPs on LA School Improvement

22. In the majority of cases LA respondents to the survey did not agree that LA decisions over when, how and how much to intervene in schools are more effective as a result of the SIP programme. In addition, half of those responding did not agree that the SIP function is effective for supporting schools causing concern and only one quarter agreed. This is indicative of the fact that schools in these circumstances clearly require additional resource to support their improvement and that the wider LA intervention and support strategies will be critical to effectiveness. Equally, in some LA areas there are concerns that financial constraints impact on their ability to effectively support schools causing concern.

LA SIP Management

23. In a small number of LA areas, there is the potential to improve the effectiveness of communication around the SIP role and the message being received by schools. This is particularly in relation to the accountability of SIPs, the function of SIP visits, use of SIP reports/feedback to inform LA support strategies, and role of the SIP/LA in communicating local priorities and issues. LA survey responses in some areas also suggest the potential to improve the consistency of National Strategies SIP Coordinator (SIPCo) support relating to deployment strategies, reporting frameworks and performance management systems.

Primary Sector SIPs

24. Headteacher perceptions suggest generally lower levels of SIP effectiveness and impact in the primary sector across a series of indicators, though the survey and case study evidence does show that primary SIPs provide effective challenge in most cases. The lower perceptual levels of primary SIP effectiveness and impact are largely a function of the SIP programme

being at an earlier stage of roll-out than in the secondary sector. Positive change in perceptions amongst secondary headteachers between 2006 and 2007 gives some encouraging signs that similar changes might be observed in the primary sector once the programme has been further embedded. However, survey and case study evidence also indicates resistance to change amongst some primary headteachers which may be influencing their perceptions of SIPs. This reflects the more significant culture shift required by the introduction of SIP challenge in the primary sector, given the previous tradition of strong pastoral LA support.

25. There are also some perceptual differences amongst primary headteachers with different types of SIP. Those with full-time LA employee SIPs more commonly identify that their SIP is equipped to fulfil the role, effective and achieving an impact, compared to those that have been allocated serving headteacher SIPs. The limited flexibility that serving headteacher SIPs have to deliver the breadth of support that other SIPs are providing is likely to be influencing these perceptions. There are also qualitative stakeholder views that serving headteacher SIPs potentially face more significant constraints than other types of SIP relating to their breadth of knowledge and experience of challenging and coaching others. One third of LA areas responding to the evaluation survey identified SIP recruitment and retention constraints in the primary sector specifically associated with serving headteacher SIPs (and in some cases external consultant SIPs).

Academy SIPs

26. There are some differences in the Academy SIP Programme which should be borne in mind given the planned expansion of the sector. This includes:
- the potential limits associated with the headteacher performance management (HTPM) and brokering support functions not being fulfilled by Academy SIPs;
 - as Academies mature and there is less intensive support from DCSF Academy Advisors, SIPs will be better placed to play a critical role in maintaining challenge and continued improvement;
 - the process of rapid transformation amongst some Academy schools means that the standard SIP resource may not be sufficient to support effective change; and

- high skills and experience levels amongst Academy Leaders demand that their SIPs require equally high levels of experience and credibility.

Target-Setting

27. Recent national guidance and the line taken by some LAs is leading to perceptions amongst some schools of a top-down approach to target-setting, rather than a more inclusive and bottom-up approach that fits specific school contexts and needs.

Demands of National Policy and Organisations

28. The impact of the NRwS on changing perceptions about the levels of bureaucracy for schools is minimal. Areas where stakeholders feel there are still significant burdens include changes in government policies and initiatives; duplicate requests for data and surveys; and issues associated with specific initiatives and activities including funding, IT, health and safety and assessments for teachers.

29. These perceptions highlight a need for continued efforts at the national level to work towards more coherent policy development and delivery across all ECM services, including steps to:
- achieve greater consistency in and consider the appropriateness of some of the demands placed on schools (including those associated with volume, pace of change, requests for information and reporting requirements);
 - deliver more coherent responses to supporting schools in the delivery of the significant developments taking place including reform of the secondary curriculum, building schools for the future, integrated children's services and any required response to the outcomes of primary sector curriculum review proposed in the Children's Plan; and
 - improve the coherence of communication mechanisms, including developing more effective presentation and signposting of critical information.

School Profile

30. Only 25% of headteachers surveyed thought the School Profile was an effective method of communication and there was generally low awareness of the profile amongst the parents consulted. The research suggests that the School Profile is only one of several

ways in which parents can access the same data and information about schools. Parents and school stakeholders suggest that other sources (Ofsted, parental visits, and newsletters) may be more accessible and considered more useful than the Profile in engaging parents and helping them understand the school.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (DCSF-RR050) are available by phoning the DCSF Publications Orderline on 0845 60 222 60. Reports are priced at £4.95.

This research brief and the full report can also be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.