

Reforming how local authorities' school improvement functions are funded – CCN Response



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County Councils Network



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1. The CCN represents 36 English local authorities that serve counties. The 23 county and 13 county unitary authorities that make up CCN are the largest part of the local government family. They represent all four corners of England, from Cumbria to Cornwall, Durham to Kent, North Yorkshire to Suffolk, Derbyshire to Essex. The essential services our members provide touch on the everyday lives of residents and businesses across 86% of England's landmass and 47% of its population.
2. As part of this, county and unitary councils have a number of critical responsibilities for delivery of education to children and young people, including school place planning, home to school transport, and school improvement, the latter of which has traditionally been delivered through the School Improvement Monitoring and Brokering Grant.
3. This work has been vital in ensuring that councils' can fulfil their role to drive up school performance across their areas, delivering a local school system that meets the needs of pupils and parents, ensuring that children and young people have access to a high-quality education that will give them the skills they need for the future.
4. The County Councils Network wishes to make the following points in response to the consultation:
 - 4.1 The proposals to remove the School Improvement Monitoring & Brokering Grant from local authorities is likely to disproportionately impact on the stability of school improvement services within county areas.
 - 4.2 Although CCN recognises the Government's long-term ambition for an 'end-state' of Academy Schools operating within Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), we are currently still on the transition journey towards this state at present. There remain a significant number of maintained schools which face barriers to being taken on by a MAT – often due to their size and the fact that they serve more remote or isolated communities in sparsely populated rural or coastal areas. These schools are over-represented in County Councils which are where many of these communities are situated.
 - 4.3 In view of the Government's levelling up agenda it is vital that these schools are appropriately challenged to provide high quality education. School improvement is key element in ensuring this happens. Whilst these schools remain outside the MAT system the local authority is the vital means by which this process of improvement and monitoring can be provided.

- 4.4 However, although CCN supports the intention in the consultation for greater alignment between the functioning of MATs and LAs, there is a principal difference in the way that services are financed. MATs topslice their schools directly in order to fund activities such as school improvement without consultation, whereas if moved to the same 'de-delegation' principle LAs would need to agree such budgets with the input of their schools forum. Given it is unclear whether – given the opportunity to object – schools forums would be willing to allocate money from their own budgets in order to fund activities which ultimately hold them to account, at least at the same level that a MAT imposes upon its own schools.
- 4.5 Furthermore it is important to understand that school improvement is the vital 'canary in the mine' which warns when a school's performance may be beginning to deteriorate. Even Good and Outstanding schools need continuing monitoring and challenge to maintain their status in the periods between inspections. The absence of local authorities exerting their statutory intervention powers does not necessarily correlate that the school improvement process is less necessary – indeed it could conversely be argued that the lowering levels of statutory intervention represent just how effectively school improvement processes are presently operating within counties.
- 4.6 Finally, we would particularly urge the Government to consider the timing of these proposals. The last eighteen months have seen unprecedented upheaval and change for schools just as everywhere else in society. Whilst schools have risen to this challenge, they have also been arguably more reliant on support from local authorities than before the pandemic not less. The withdrawal of 50% of the grant in 22/23 before ending it in 23/24 risks destabilising the maintained schools sector at a particularly crucial period before full recovery from Covid has been achieved. As such CCN would urge that the Government considers delaying these reforms, or at least phasing them over a longer time period.