## 1 Background and context

1.1 The creation of new unitary councils to replace the county council brings the opportunity to consider new ways of working between the local authority and its school leaders (head teachers of schools and academies in West Northants, and chief executives of local academy trusts).

1.2 However, it can be argued that the relationship between local authorities and schools form is only one of several, as the ‘middle tier’ role – that is, the tier sitting between the government and individual schools – has for some time been far wider than was the case for most of the twentieth century. Then, the middle tier comprised the local authority, and Church of England (CoE) and Roman Catholic (RC) dioceses in respect of church schools.

1.3 In the context of the 2020s, the whole notion of local authority / schools structures seems old-fashioned. It is based on a notion of the local authority role in education that is outdated, as the historic role of councils as the ‘middle tier’ between schools (the direct providers), and the government (the legislator and funder) is now complemented by a much wider range of organisations.

1.4 One useful study is by Toby Greany (see [here](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02680939.2020.1792554)), which explains the development of the second tier in England in the context of both school-level autonomy and national oversight increasing significantly since the 1970s (but particularly since the early 1990s following the implementation of the Great Education Reform Act,1988 – see [here](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/contents)). Greany notes that ‘by 2009 school leaders in England were ranked among the most autonomous in the world in terms their decision making powers’ (OECD [2011](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02680939.2020.1792554)).

1.5 In the next sections, the middle tier is described before arrangements for the future that ensure good communication across all parties concerned with the education of children and young people in West Northants – and specifically, the constitution and remit of such a group – are set out.

## 2 The middle tier in the English education system

2.1 Middle tier organisations and agencies now include, in addition to ‘top-tier’ local authorities, the regional schools commissioner (RSC), multi-academy trusts (MATs), diocesan boards and teaching schools. The middle tier role comprises:

* finance (allocating funding and monitoring expenditure);
* accountability (including holding schools accountable and providing improvement support);
* access (planning and allocating school places, ensuring provision for children with additional needs or at risk of exclusion);
* people (professional development, employment and performance management);
* school effectiveness (support and challenge for schools of concern); and
* The development and maintenance of agreed area principles, aims, objectives and strategy.

2.2 The middle tier agency responsible for these functions is set out in the table below.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **role** | **agency** |
| finance | schools forum – formally a council committee, but independent of it |
| accountability | the LA (maintained schools), the RSC (academies) and MATs (trust schools) |
| access | the LA (exclusively responsible for these functions in its area) |
| people | the LA (maintained schools), MATs, teaching schools, market providers |
| School effectiveness  | The LA for maintained schools, the RSC for academy schools |
| strategy | all agencies, schools and trusts, co-ordinated by the local authority |

## 3 Proposed group constitution

3.1 The main groups requiring representation are head teachers (both maintained and academy schools), Northampton college, academy trust chief executives, the early years sector, the regional schools commissioner, the university, independent schoolsand a teaching schools’ representative (taking account of new teaching schools arrangements to be announced by the government).

3.2 The LA, as the middle tier organisation with the majority of powers and duties relating to maintained schools and academies, should be responsible for the management and administration of the group. This includes the chairing of meetings, compiling and circulating meeting agendas, taking and distributing meeting notes and ensuring actions are followed up.

3.3 The LA should be represented by a single senior officer – the group chair, the statutory DCS, with the assistant director for education the deputising officer. The lead member should have the right to attend, and the following LA officers should be available to attend meetings where required:

* the assistant director of education;
* the head of school effectiveness;
* the head of SEN;
* the head of pupil place planning and admissions;
* the assistant director, children social care (or her / his representative)
* the business partners for finance and HR; and
* the consultant for public health.

3.4 There should be consideration given to representation from other local agencies that, while not being ‘middle tier’ organisations responsible for education, are relevant – for example, Northamptonshire police and local NHS services.

3.5 The table below sets out the proposed constitution for discussion.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Body and rationale** | **no** |
| Group chair (the DCS) and lead member | 2 |
| primary maintained and academy head teachers and governors | 4 |
| Secondary academy head teacher and governor | 2 |
| Special school head teachers | 1 |
| Alternative provision head teachers | 1 |
| FE colleges | 1 |
| Diocesan representatives (Church of England and Roman Catholic) | 2 |
| Trust chief executives (primary, secondary and special sectors) | 3 |
| The office of the east Midlands RSC (representative to be appointed by the RSC) | 1 |
| Teaching schools in West Northants | 1 |
| Schools forum representative | 1 |
| Universities | 1 |
| West Northants independent schools  | 1 |

3.6 While the formal board should be constituted as above (21 members), all trust chief executives and head teachers (maintained and academy) should be on the circulation list for agendas and meeting minutes, and invited to attend all meetings as observers.

3.7 Meetings are proposed to be twice termly, which is a total of 12 meetings per school year. This can be adjusted, but given the range of issues in the remit, is realistic.

## 4 Proposed group remit

4.1 The group remit should cover:

* agreeing general priorities, and monitoring progress and achievement with West Northants education providers;
* the five broad areas listed below in section 2 above – finance, accountability, access, people and strategy;
* issues affecting children and young people generally, including health, safety and wellbeing; and
* Inclusion, transition and NEETS.

4.2 In covering this broad remit, the group must consider the work of other groups. For example:

* schools forum is responsible for advising the council on the allocation of the dedicated schools grant (DSG) and while this group might make its view know to schools forum members, it has no direct role in budget allocation to schools or academies;
* Fair access panel – which has the aim to place a young person in the most appropriate environment to support their learning and development, taking cognisance of the impact on each individual school and education in West Northants;

4.3 Meetings will be:

* scheduled once termly;
* be limited to one hour 30 minutes; and
* clerked by the PA to the assistant director for education.

4.4 Agendas will be:

* agreed each term at the beginning of each term; and
* circulated to members, plus all other maintained and academy school head teachers and trust chief executives**,** with the minutes and action notes of the previous meeting, at least five working days before each meeting.

4.5 Meeting records will be:

* sent to all members and attendees of meetings for comments and proposed amendments within seven working days of the previous meeting; and
* circulated to all members, plus all other maintained and academy school head teachers and trust chief executives, within 10 working days of the meeting; and
* circulated along with agenda for the next meeting.

3.6 All meetings will start with recording attendees and apologies for absence, the final agreement and signing by the chair of the previous meeting’s minute, and discussing and recording progress against any agreed actions. There will not be any other business on agendas.

## 5 Meeting venue

5.1 Initial meetings will be arranged via Teams. This is highly cost-effective in terms of time and travel, and has worked well for reference group and other meetings. It is the only realistic means of enabling an open invitation to all school leaders and trust chief executives.

5.2 However, it is the case that meeting physically has advantages, and, once convened, the group will be asked if it wishes to retain Teams meetings, move to a mix of on-line and venue-based meetings. Given the proposed size (21 members), it is likely that most meetings will be via electronic media.

Chris Kiernan
assistant director for education
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