

From fragmented centralism to connected localism

The future of Area-Based Education Partnerships

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We would like to thank Anton Florek, Lead Associate at The Staff College, for coming up with the phrase we have used for the report's title: 'from fragmented centralism to connected localism'.

Executive Summary

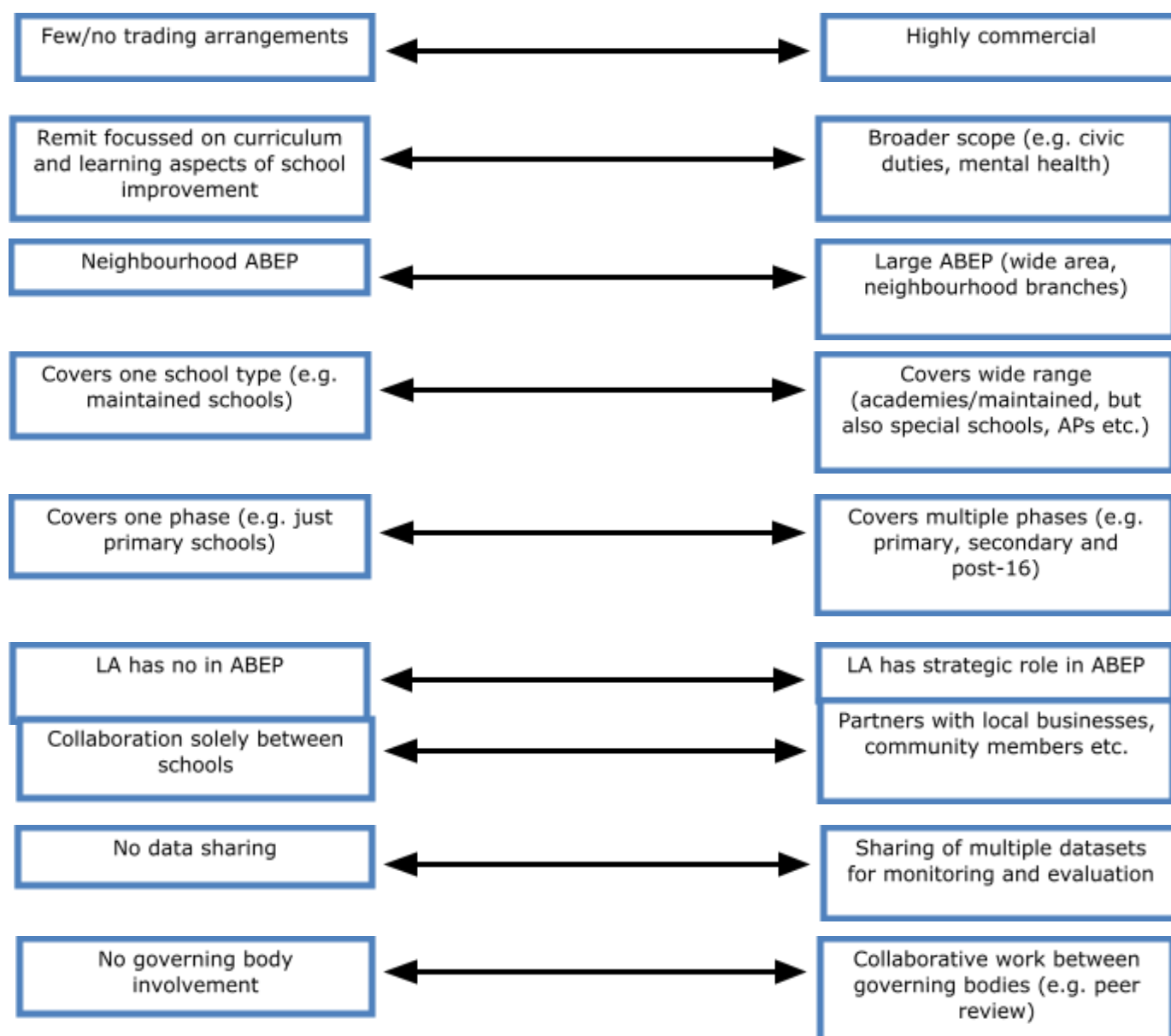
This report examines the place of Area-Based Education Partnerships (ABEPs) in the English school system. Christine Gilbert, co-chair of the Area-based Education Partnerships Association (AEPA), describes ABEPs as “school-led, local organisations that include all types of schools but with the central purpose of raising standards” (Gilbert, 2021a, p26). In taking collective responsibility for improving quality, they also attempt to bridge divides and broker connections between different school types, sharing existing and developing new practices. Put simply, ABEPs are local alliances that support school improvement (and often wider goals) across a locality, but do not have any direct control of, or power over, schools or multi-academy trusts (MATs), or direct accountability for school outcomes.

Research on ABEPs is limited and primarily based on the views of those actors involved in founding and leading such partnerships. This report adds a broader perspective, drawing on a number of interviews with both ABEP leaders but also stakeholders who offer insights into the demand for collaborative structures (MAT and school leaders) as well as national and local policymakers and other experts.

A number of historical forces – in particular, the decline in local authority (LA) powers and responsibilities from 1988 and the rapid growth in academisation from 2010 – created the context for ABEPs to emerge. However, the formal creation of these organisations can largely be traced to around 2016, stimulated by a White Paper that, although abandoned, suggested a direction of travel that would remove entirely any statutory school improvement role for LAs. Spotting a potential gap in local support, many LAs responded by nurturing the creation of ABEPs.

ABEPs vary in scale, scope and governance but share features of collaboration across school types within a locality (and sometimes further afield), as well as a root in traditional school improvement structures.

A categorisation of different forms of ABEP



There is professional consensus but less empirical evidence pointing to the benefits of place-based collaborations between schools. Our interviewees also pointed to wider impact through the role ABEPs played in helping to develop and implement local area strategies.

We found that, more recently, ABEPs are evolving in two important ways. First, they are changing their funding models for schools, from a reliance on grants to subscription or membership models. Second, many are developing their 'bridging potential', brokering: between schools and MATs; between different MATs; between MATs, schools and other services; and between national priorities and local contexts.

In the short- to medium-term future, ABEPs are considering other ways to sustain the work they offer schools:

- Moving away from school improvement towards offering other functions, particularly civic functions that link schools to other services supporting young people.
- Geographical expansion, either to neighbouring localities or towards national service provision.
- Becoming MATs in order to support school improvement as part of the accountability system.

In the longer term, questions and challenges remain. What unique role can ABEPs offer to the schools system that other local or national actors may struggle to fulfil? Is there a way in which national government can nurture ABEPs to fulfil those roles? Where does the mandate for ABEPs in a given area come from? Is some form of ABEP needed in all localities in England?

This report identifies four key features of an increasingly unpredictable policy landscape that will shape the ways in which ABEPs evolve and operate:

- The uncertain pace of academisation.
- The centralisation and 'contractualisation' of initial teacher education and continuing professional development.
- The locally minded reviews of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and children's social care.
- The possible paradigm shift of the *Levelling Up* White Paper.

The Department for Education's (DfE's) drive towards greater centralisation and the hollowing out of the LA role over decades have left a system with groups of schools isolated from one another and from the local people and organisations who are involved in supporting young people. We need a school system that is connected to both local and national actors and priorities. Place, and the relationships between actors in places, matter. Local actors have a unique understanding of the issues affecting their area. They may lean on national resources to make positive changes, but without a sensitivity to the dynamics of place, approaches might not be suitable and implementation may be weak.

ABEPs already exist in many places and in this uncertain landscape they could play a key role. They have the trust of schools, acting independently of more formal accountability structures, with responsiveness to the needs of local schools (and the communities they serve) hardwired into their way of working. Second, their voluntary nature is key. They are able to galvanise collective local purpose and act as 'honest brokers', helping to solve problems that schools and MATs struggle to find the capacity or internal expertise to solve alone.

Although there was not unanimous agreement among our interviewees about the scope of ABEPs, our report concludes that there are three functions they should **not** take on:

- Playing any statutory role in school improvement.
- Setting up MATs or sponsoring particular MATs.
- Assuming any existing or new LA statutory functions (for example, around SEND or social care).

While ABEPs are, of course, free to evolve as they see fit, the report identifies three potential bridging roles for ABEPs:

i) Bridging between the current fragmented system and an uncertain future of academisation, aligning their work to the pace at which academisation happens in their locality

For example:

- Brokering school improvement support for maintained schools causing concern.
- Brokering temporary (but rigorous) two-way support relationships between schools, academies and MATs.
- Brokering collaborations and possible mergers between small MATs.

ii) Bridging between schools, MATs and other services and organisations to support local civic priorities and wider outcomes

For example:

- Supporting collective efforts to increase community cohesion.
- Building on the work of Cultural Education Partnerships to provide a more comprehensive and better-targeted cultural offer for young people.

iii) Bridging between broader national priorities and local contexts

For example:

- Moving into other areas where LAs are finding it increasingly difficult to meet schools' needs, such as supporting SEND provision.
- Supporting aspects of the Levelling Up agenda where schools can contribute but are not the central players, for instance around local economic growth.
- Supporting national strategies around reducing youth offending.

In addition, our discussions with ABEP leaders in particular gave a sense that ABEPs may have the potential to bridge between an 'as is' and an 'as could be' approach to education reform. Our analysis suggests that ABEPs go both with and against the grain of England's approach to school improvement. They support schools in traditional ways to improve outcomes, aligned to our current systems and orthodoxies on how school improvement happens. However, many are subtly subversive in their approach:

- Liberated from formal 'upwards accountability' to the DfE and Ofsted, they enable schools to nurture forms of 'lateral accountability' where, as professional peers, they can review and support improvement – in the widest sense of the word – in less formal but powerful ways.
- Liberated from the constraints of being part of an LA with declining direct responsibilities and budgets, they can be more entrepreneurial in their approach to building partnerships between schools and local organisations and supporting innovative practices.
- Liberated from the constraints and day-to-day pressures that individual MATs face, they can draw on local assets and infrastructure to provide opportunities for learners and teachers that address the particular needs of groups and draw on the particular strengths of otherwise unconnected schools in a locality.

If these bridging roles represent the potential for ABEPs to continue to add value locally and nationally, six questions are worthy of further interrogation:

- 1. What role might the DfE play in steering or commissioning ABEPs?**
- 2. How might ABEPs best support the parts of our education improvement infrastructure that appear to be underperforming?**
- 3. How can localities that might be considering establishing an ABEP best be supported?**
- 4. How might other local structures be better amalgamated under a single local ABEP?**
- 5. How can we better understand what school leaders want from their locality?**
- 6. What are the implications of the current fiscal situation?**

These questions are designed not as recommendations but to provoke further discussion.

To access the full report, please visit www.cfey.org.

Next Steps

CfEY is now beginning a new phase of work on Area-Based Education Partnerships. This work will produce two key outputs:

1. Description of the supply side through a visual map covering every LA in England

CfEY is building a descriptive visual map that captures the different forms of collaboration that exist at LA-level, informed by the insights gained through our Phase 1 report. We are conducting both desk-based and direct data gathering to get an insight as to the ABEPs and other forms of collaboration that exist at the LA-level (for instance, teaching school hubs; cultural education partnerships; regional or sub-LA partnerships).

2. Analysis of the demand side through a survey of school and MAT leaders.

CfEY believe that a fuller understanding of the value that school leaders place on 'the local' could usefully inform ABEP development and broader education policies. A short school leader survey will reveal perceptions on questions like how schools already collaborate with other schools in their locality; what enables or prevents local collaboration; and what role these local organisations play in supporting school improvement and wider outcomes.

For information about the second phase of our project, please contact billy@cfey.org.

This project has been generously supported by the Association of Education Committees.

Introduction

Education reformers around the world have had a longstanding interest in school-to-school collaboration. Partnerships between schools can stimulate school improvement through the sharing of resources, joint professional development opportunities and coordinated teacher recruitment and retention. Beyond this, partnerships may help schools give young people support that goes beyond academic outcomes, for instance addressing wider issues such as mental health and careers education, or supporting the most vulnerable young people in a locality.

In England, although there is widespread consensus that school-to-school collaboration is a key enabler of a self-improving school system, the role the Department for Education (DfE), local government, multi-academy trusts (MATs) and other actors should play in such collaborations is more contentious. This is typified by the government's current and much-contested ambition to have all schools join (or be in the process of joining) a MAT by 2030. This aim, outlined in the 2022 Schools White Paper (DfE, 2022a), may appear to be the inevitable end to a long-term decline in LA control since the 1988 Education Reform Act. However, in reality, the schools landscape is more plural and complex.

School collaboration occurs through local authorities (LAs) and MATs but also through arrangements that exist outside these formal structures, including Area-Based Education Partnerships (ABEPs). Christine Gilbert, co-chair of the Area-based Education Partnerships Association (AEPA), describes ABEPs as "school-led, local organisations that include all types of schools but with the central purpose of raising standards" (Gilbert, 2021a, p26). In taking collective responsibility for improving quality, they also attempt to bridge divides and broker connections between different school types, sharing existing and developing new practices. Put simply, ABEPs are local alliances that support school improvement (and often wider goals) across a locality, but do not have any direct control of, or power over, schools or MATs, or direct accountability for school outcomes.

ABEPs vary in scale, scope and governance, always influenced by pre-existing relationships. While the government champions MATs as 'families of schools', ABEPs also embody this ethic. Having emerged organically and voluntarily through schools and other actors perceiving a need for partnerships, ABEPs can draw on a range of community assets that go beyond the school gates to take a truly place-based approach to improving outcomes. Moreover, their distance from the formal school accountability system can provide opportunities for innovation and greater attention to a wider range of outcomes. While ABEPs do not feature in the government's current schools policy outlook, they embody the localising spirit of the *Levelling Up* White Paper (DLUHC, 2022) and the reviews of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (DfE, 2022b) and children's social care (MacAlister, 2022).

This report combines a rapid literature review with interviews with more than 20 senior education leaders: ABEP leaders (6), MAT chief executives (4), other local leaders (5), national policymakers (2) and other experts, including school leaders (4). We review the ABEPs' origins, motivations, purposes, structures and impact, as well as the challenges and limitations they face. We discuss ABEPs' place in the current and future educational landscape before considering possible next steps for ABEPs, and those who can influence their direction.

1 The emergence of ABEPs

Four long-term trends have shaped the context in which ABEPs have emerged:

- A changing role for the LA in terms of schools, broadly shifting away from the direct provision of education while retaining a commissioning role.
- A shift in accountability for school performance and pupil outcomes, away from LAs and towards MATs and central government.
- Growing autonomy for schools in decision-making over budgets for school improvement activities, albeit shared for those schools in MATs.
- Rapid but patchy changes to school governance structures, with some schools being isolated, and others left with few opportunities for school-to-school collaboration, especially at the local level.

According to Christine Gilbert:

“Interest in [area-based education] partnerships was stimulated by the indication in the White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016), that local authorities were to lose their statutory responsibilities for school improvement. Although this could have produced a negative and defensive base for planning, the proposal in the White Paper generated widespread interest and positive engagement in developing new models for area improvement, often led by local authorities themselves.” (Gilbert, 2017, p4)

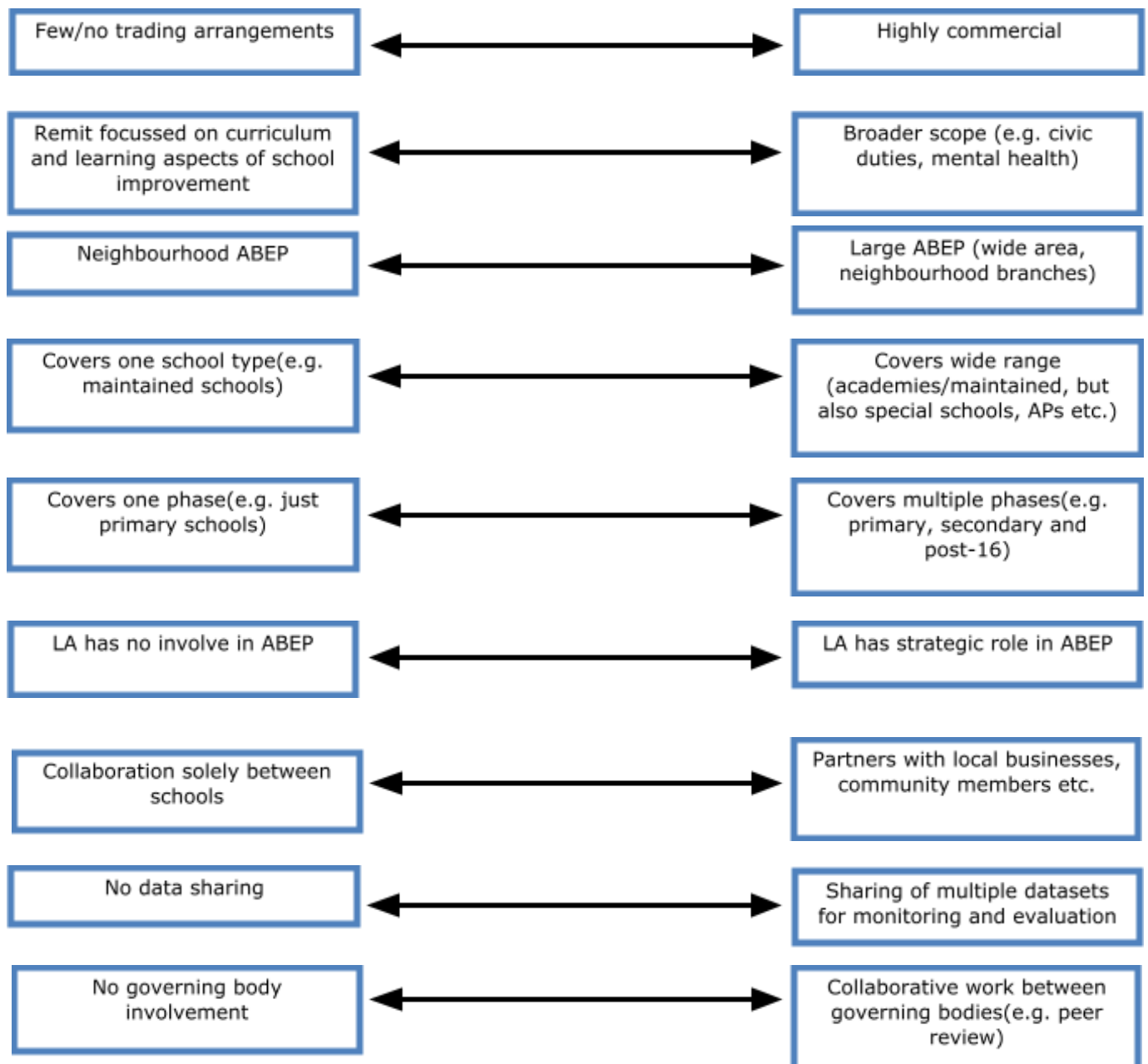
The changing locus of school improvement work, alongside the government’s more recent move towards a school system where all schools are in so-called “strong MATs” (DfE, 2022a, p51) (what this report calls ‘MAT-isation’), have motivated LAs, schools and other local stakeholders to think creatively about how they can work with one another on a more voluntary basis. ABEPs provide a means of doing this.

Sam Freedman claims that many LA-seeded organisations, like Camden Learning, “were set up with the explicit purpose of becoming MATs had the 2016 reforms been followed through” (Freedman, 2022, p30). However, our conversations with ABEP leaders indicate that this was rarely a motivation for their establishment. On the contrary, some ABEPs were established partly to provide a form of school-to-school collaboration that would reduce the perceived threat of forced academisation. For instance, Herts for Learning grew out of a strong LA, with concerns that with MAT-isation, the strong school improvement and traded services function of Hertfordshire County Council would be lost. Forming an ABEP allowed these functions to operate independently. Elsewhere, Tower Hamlets Education Partnership (THEP) was established in 2016 to ensure that the LA’s successful school improvement expertise could be kept in the face of MAT-isation. THEP retained many of the structures and individuals that school leaders valued while shifting governance from the LA towards the ABEP.

While the context of MAT-isation was key to the foundation of some ABEPs, partnerships were more often established to address local challenges that required coordinated action. Here, the voluntary nature of ABEPs is key (Gilbert, 2021b). As one ABEP leader put it, ABEPs have to earn the trust of members, deriving strength from their schools-led approach. One national expert on school systems explained that the best ABEPs rally behind a shared vision and moral purpose, creating a “dialogue space” for schools. This voluntary status means partnerships can take a range of forms and fulfil a variety of functions, responding to the needs of their localities.

ABEPs have emerged organically as a means of schools taking a place-based approach to school improvement and wider outcomes concerning young people, such as employment, civic engagement and mental health. The schooling make-up of different areas and demand for partnerships vary locally, so it follows that the structure of these partnerships differs too. Figure 1 exemplifies the various forms that ABEPs take.

Figure 1: A categorisation of different forms of ABEP



1.1 Why is there such variety?

The UK government intends to have all schools join, or in the process of joining, “strong MATs” by 2030 (DfE, 2022a, p51). Where MAT-isation is an explicit national government objective, ABEPs have grown in a range of localities, responding to perceived community needs. Here, place-based factors have shaped not just whether an ABEP emerges but also the type of partnership formed (see Figure 1 above). As an ABEP leader noted, place moves the conversation away from individuals and towards a local system, with space for collaboration, the cultivation of a shared voice and collective responsibility for local pupils.

The variation in ABEPs has emerged partly from pre-existing local school improvement structures. In a 2014 DfE-commissioned study, Sandals and Bryant tracked changes in 10 LAs, categorising them as ‘timely adapters’, ‘slow movers’ or ‘sudden reactors’ in their response to their reduced role set out by central government (Sandals and Bryant, 2014). The resulting picture was of a variable system in which school leaders were increasingly looking for partnerships but had decreasing confidence in the capacity of local systems to meet the needs of vulnerable children (Cousin and Crossley-Holland, 2021). For example, Greany and Kamp’s detailed case study of the formation of the ‘Bampton Alliance’ in one particular LA notes that, after 2010, “the LA was seen to have largely disintegrated in the face of academisation, budget cuts and rapid staff turnover”, with one headteacher reporting that (prior to the establishment of the ABEP) “there was no school improvement, you just did your own thing” (Greany and Kamp, 2022, p103). Elsewhere, the headteacher of a maintained secondary school in one of our interviews suggested that a lack of statutory services capacity in the LA led the ABEP to expand its scale and scope.

This variety of local context and history drove the development of different models of partnership, as Figure 2 outlines.

Figure 2: The establishment of various ABEPs

Locality	Establishment, structure and work
<p>Barking and Dagenham</p> <p>(Gilbert, 2021a, p8)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historically there were close relationships between schools in Barking and Dagenham and the council. As LA school support roles diminished, the need to preserve and build on these relationships became more apparent. While relationships were good, the quality of services offered to schools was not always consistent and needed to be professionalised. Over 12 months, the schools and the council explored options together, ultimately deciding to create a school support company. Barking and Dagenham School Improvement Partnership (BDSIP) launched on 1 April 2018 as a not-for-profit social enterprise, 81% owned by 56 local schools, with the council retaining the remaining 19% stake.
<p>Camden Learning</p> <p>(Gilbert, 2021a, p10)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An initial decision to form a school-led partnership was made in 2015. Proposals were then developed in response to government changes to LAs' statutory role in improvement and responsibilities for schools. Camden Council had a radical vision for Camden Learning and saw it as part of its drive to move public services into the 21st century, investing heavily but also respecting its independence. For long-term stability, Camden Learning is established as a legal entity, a company limited by guarantee, with an independent chair.

<p>Haringey Education Partnership (Gilbert, 2021a, p14)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Haringey Education Partnership (HEP) was established as a company by local schools in partnership with the council in December 2017. • Its creation was driven by: (i) the existing LA service being financially unsustainable with the end of the Education Services Grant; (ii) the government's 2016 White Paper advocating academisation for all schools (DfE, 2016) raising fears that the system locally would become more fragmented; and (iii) the realisation that further improvement in the education of all of Haringey's children would be best accomplished through a schools-led model.
<p>Herts for Learning (Primary research)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Herts for Learning was set up as a collaboratively owned school company (with a majority owned by Hertfordshire schools) and operates as a social enterprise. • It grew out of a strong LA education department, with concern that MAT-isation would see the end of Hertfordshire County Council's strong school improvement/traded services function. • It has no statutory responsibility but helps deliver some statutory functions for the LA – e.g. training for special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs). • It sees its future as adding additional value where MATs need it.

<p>Learn Sheffield</p> <p>(Primary research)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn Sheffield is convened by Sheffield Council. • It fulfilled LA grant funding for its first three years, with statutory responsibility for school improvement, before moving to a hybrid subscription model. • It offers a local package that different school types, including big national MATs, subscribe to. • It has helped to develop a five-year strategy that takes a wider view, including a focus on better outcomes for vulnerable young people and engaging in wider issues such as health.
<p>Portsmouth Education Partnership</p> <p>(Primary research)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portsmouth Education Partnership was set up after a critical inspection of the LA. • With the former Director of Childrens' Services (DCS) 'leaning into academisation', they were keen to keep some form of school partnership that existed outside of MATs. • Sense of identity as a city with clear boundaries. • Different schools and MATs working in different areas (e.g. restorative justice, inclusion quality mark). • The only school payment is for an independent chair of the partnership.
<p>Rochdale Pioneers</p> <p>(Primary research)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rochdale Pioneers was stablished to bring together a diverse schooling context, including maintained schools, pupil referral units (PRUs), a special school, faith schools, schools in smaller MATs and a large national MAT that had recently moved to the area. • It meets a local desire to join up work with the local voluntary and community sector (e.g. tackling substance misuse among young people in specific localities within the LA).

<p>Schools North East</p> <p>(Primary research)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools North East was founded in 2008 as a registered charity, built on existing networks of primary and secondary headteachers. • It was set up by headteachers. • Trustees are elected by partner schools. • Wanted schools to be empowered to make their own decisions surrounding school improvement, and there was a sense of frustration that QUANGOs were investing in education without involving schools in the North East. • Schools North East covers 1,150 schools in 12 LAs. • Schools pay a contribution based on school size.
<p>Tower Hamlets Education Partnership</p> <p>(Primary research)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tower Hamlets Education Partnership was established in 2016 to help sustain the borough's school improvement journey. • It wanted to fend off MATs by ensuring school improvement work remained a Tower Hamlets entity. • It received seed funding from the LA in its first three years to carry out its statutory school improvement function. • It has moved towards a school payment model, with 90 out of 96 schools signed up, including 20 academies and five MATs. • The partnership offers a peer review model, including professional learning and leadership support.
<p>West Somerset Behaviour and Education Partnership</p> <p>(Primary research)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The West Somerset Behaviour and Education Partnership was established as part of the legacy of the West Somerset Opportunity Area. • Informed by the fact that there are no PRUs in West Somerset, schools receive this funding from the partnership to support young people who might otherwise attend such a unit.

Partnerships at different scales

Some forms of ABEP have emerged with a focus on groups of LAs. Schools North East was set up as a regional partnership in 2008, with 1,150 schools in 12 LAs. The partnership drew on existing networks of primary and secondary headteachers, alongside a sense of shared frustration across the region that policy and practice developed in Westminster did not always translate into ideas that worked in the particular context of schools in the North East.

Schools North East has three key purposes:

- 1) Strategic – advocating for the North East in Westminster, developing policy and suggesting alternative practices.
- 2) Collaborative – establishing and growing networks within the region, encouraging schools out of silos, sharing and developing practice.
- 3) Signposting to external resources.

Alongside these key purposes, Schools North East also exists to help reduce an information deficit in the region regarding academisation. 45% of schools in the North East currently retain LA-maintained status, and headteachers are reportedly reliant on Schools North East for information about:

- What becoming an academy might entail.
- What the implications of joining any particular MAT might be.
- How best to collaborate in a regional system where this lack of information exists.

A more recent development is the LocalEd pilot in the North Tyne Combined Authority, which is seeking to explore ways in which combined authorities might play a role in school improvement. Susan Cousin and Jonathan Crossley-Holland's (2021) report recommended exploring a combined authority model as a potential mechanism for local place-based partnerships. Their research suggested that, by operating across a number of LAs, such partnerships might:

- Achieve economies of scale.
- Identify a wider range of potentially beneficial practices and innovations.
- Coordinate work in schools with that of a wider set of local and supra-local skills and economic activities.

1.2 What do we know about ABEPs' effectiveness and perceived benefits?

Proponents of ABEPs claim that they offer a range of potential benefits to the school system. Gilbert (2021b, p227) believes that ABEPs "have greater potential than other partnership models currently existing in England to connect autonomous schools and create system-wide impact". Partly, this is because they can "inject energy locally that builds the professional and community capital to support learning and achievement" (*ibid.*, p221). In the same paper, Gilbert notes that many ABEPs worked productively during the Covid-19 pandemic, supporting schools to combat common challenges and connecting schools with other agencies and stakeholders.

The accounts of ABEP leaders in our interviews and the case studies presented by Gilbert and others suggest that ABEPs can have a positive role in supporting school improvement and wider outcomes. However, there is currently a lack of empirical evidence concerning their impact. This is a wider issue. Although almost all schools collaborate in some way, Armstrong's review of collaboration and partnerships for school improvement found a "sparse" knowledge base, mostly derived from evaluations of specific government initiatives (Armstrong, 2015, p3). Similarly, a recent literature review for an Opportunity Area argued that there was "limited evidence surrounding the change process and the development or maintenance of relationships when schools enter into collaboration" (York Consulting, 2022, p17). The strongest evidence surrounded "the indirect impacts that inter-school collaboration can have" (*ibid.*, p17). The review concluded that evidence was even more limited regarding this collaboration's direct impacts on pupil outcomes, "although there [was] some suggestion that school level performance improves with school-to-school support" (*ibid.*, p18).

That said, the professional consensus appears to be that collaboration is a key part of school improvement (see, for example DfE 2022d). In a similar vein, those of our interviewees who worked in or with ABEPs outlined the following perceived benefits:

School improvement. For an ABEP in Yorkshire and the Humber, school improvement was evidenced by improved outcomes, such as better Ofsted ratings and wider changes in the area's schooling offer, according to one ABEP leader. Elsewhere, one ABEP in the East of England had reportedly overseen improvements in staff recruitment and retention. It had done this by filling gaps in staffing across the county, talent-spotting for leadership roles, improving signposting between schools to provide pathways for teacher career progression, and linking schools in areas of expertise. Another example came from Schools North East's impact in improving frontline practice and continuing professional development (CPD) across the region. In the South West, another ABEP leader explained that the ABEP was an external body "built on goodwill", trying to drive school improvement regardless of school type. Their approach was reportedly "colour blind to MATs, academies or maintained schools", and aimed to improve educational outcomes in a plural system.

Wider outcomes. Some ABEP work went beyond attainment outcomes. For instance, one ABEP leader felt that their work had improved the area's enrichment offer. Elsewhere, another leader of a regional partnership pointed to their role in creating a sense of community through hosting events, convening groups, running state-of-the-region surveys and having effective communication with local MPs, the DfE, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the media. Similarly, a MAT leader explained

that issues like wellbeing, employment and careers can be better addressed through local collaboration.

Civic role. ABEPs' civic engagement was another key theme across our interviews. For instance, one MAT leader explained that they had engaged with non-school bodies locally on issues such as the cost of living, family support, early intervention and housing. They maintained that there was value in local leadership groups and that ABEPs had a role in local strategic thinking, with the trust leading the local primary association on the strategic planning group for the LA. An ABEP leader noted that their partnership "came into its own" during the Covid-19 pandemic and that existing relationships were a foundation for a range of rapid collaborative responses, such as infection control.

This chapter has outlined the myriad ways in which ABEPs have been established and the different approaches that have been taken to strategy, governance and operation. It has offered some reflections on ABEPs' effectiveness and perceived benefits. The next chapter turns to how ABEPs are evolving in a changing landscape.

2 The evolving role and potential of ABEPs

ABEPs have had to evolve to remain viable and add value. The next few years will likely prove crucial in determining their future. With the progress of both the Schools White Paper (DfE, 2022a) and the levelling-up agenda uncertain, but with the school system likely to continue to move towards MATs and away from LA influence on school improvement, this is a crucial juncture to consider where ABEPs fit in the times ahead. This chapter draws on our conversations with more than 20 national and local leaders to understand their evolving roles and possible futures.

2.1 Filling the gaps in the system: how ABEPs have evolved to address the needs of schools in a changing policy context

Our interviews highlighted two important shifts in the ways ABEPs have organised themselves:

1. A gradual shift from grant funding to subscription models.
2. Meeting demand from schools to develop 'bridging potential'.

Changes to funding models

In spite of a consultation that revealed significant concerns, the DfE is removing the LA School Improvement Monitoring and Brokering Grant and also plans to "include provision in the School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations for FY 2022-23 which would allow councils to de-delegate for all school improvement expenditure, including all core school improvement activities, from maintained schools' budget shares" (DfE, 2022e, p4).¹ Many ABEPs are financially reliant on a commission from the LA that the LA grant has enabled.

In our interviews, we consistently heard about the challenges posed by the removal of the school improvement grant from LAs. In every ABEP we spoke with, at least some of the grant had been used to fund ABEP school improvement activities. The removal of grant funding had prompted many ABEPs to:

- Introduce a subscription model in which schools pay a nominal amount to the partnership in return for access to services/resources/networks; and/or
- Strengthen existing subscription arrangements, for example by raising the cost of subscription.

Many ABEPs (for example, Learn Sheffield and Haringey Education Partnership) had seen a significant proportion of local schools paying in. However, even in those trusts with high levels of paid membership, subscription funding was seen as only a partial solution. Many were considering cutting back their operations. For example, in Tower Hamlets, funding pressures were leading to the ABEP considering scaling down to consulting only.

The headteacher of a maintained secondary school in Rochdale found that some services, such as curriculum design, offered by Rochdale Pioneers (the ABEP her school was a member of), had been less useful to the school, so they had been less involved in

¹ In the consultation, 70.6% disagreed that the government's proposals would "enable councils to ensure they are sufficiently funded to exercise all their core school improvement activities" (DfE, 2022e, p10).

this work. She explained that, at first, decisions to opt out of particular services made relationships within the partnership feel fragile but that this had improved over time as trust within the partnership grew. Similarly, one MAT leader explained that their MAT had looked at curriculum approaches offered by ABEPs that their schools were part of but opted out as they did not need that support. She acknowledged that getting outside views as part of peer review processes was helpful.

One national policymaker suggested that ABEPs should bid for school improvement grants, while others, such as Learn Sheffield, had begun to bid for public grants in other areas (such as youth violence reduction). One ABEP bucked the trend towards subscription: in the Portsmouth Education Partnership, the only payment was for the time of an independent chair, to which all schools/MATs contributed.

Filling gaps and developing 'bridging potential'

ABEPs are also changing their offers to meet different demands from schools. Interviewees pointed to three key evolutions:

1. Bridging between the current fragmented system and an uncertain future of academisation, aligning their work to the pace at which academisation happens in their locality.
2. Bridging between schools, MATs and other services and organisations to support local civic priorities and wider outcomes.
3. Bridging between national priorities and local contexts.

Bridging between the current fragmented system and an uncertain future

A common theme across our interviews with ABEP leads (as well as some of those representing MATs) was the support ABEPs gave headteachers and MAT leaders who wanted help with navigating change. Learn Sheffield was able to help schools and MATs find alignment (in terms of culture or ethos) as more schools joined MATs. Similarly, Kyra Learning Community helped schools and MATs to navigate the landscape of geographically isolated schools and small MATs in Lincolnshire. ABEPs are uniquely placed to gain a deeper understanding of schools' ethos through the hands-on nature of engagement with schools, informing insights into which MATs might suit particular schools. One large national MAT lead saw the value in ABEPs acting as independent local brokers between schools and MATs. This leader recognised the importance of informal networks and alliances of headteachers.

Bridging between schools, MATs and other services and organisations

Some ABEPs are also supporting MATs to bring in external support to bolster their school improvement capacity. In Portsmouth, the ABEP was reportedly able to remove the competitive barrier between MATs that might lead to a stagnation of ideas where school improvement expertise came only from within the MAT. This danger was especially clear in smaller MATs, where it was more difficult to generate internal capacity and expertise. While the DfE strategy for these smaller MATs is a gradual merger into larger MATs, in the interim, ABEPs have been providing resources and expertise for those small MATs. For example, in Lincolnshire, Kyra was providing support for a MAT with seven schools, seeking fresh eyes from beyond the MAT for peer review.

Another MAT leader agreed on the need for ABEPs to broker local services for MATs. He pointed to the need for neutral local brokers, mitigating the risk that individual schools or smaller MATs would avoid collaborating with larger MATs or bodies such as the National Institute of Teaching (created by four large, national MATs), which might be perceived as offering support with strings attached.

Bridging between national priorities and local contexts

Some ABEPs had begun to offer support for LAs to deliver other statutory services, most notably on SEND and admissions. For example, Herts for Learning offered complementary training to augment LA SEND services. Meanwhile, in Rochdale, the LA paid for secondments for 'inclusion deputies' to lead the ABEP's work on SEND, attendance and managed moves. Learn Sheffield saw part of its future as meeting an appetite from MATs and schools to tackle wider issues such as:

- Young people's mental health and wellbeing.
- Supporting vulnerable young people beyond school.
- Raising levels of engagement in education and attendance.

For some, expansion away from school improvement also extended beyond education. In West Somerset, the experience of being part of the Opportunity Areas programme taught those involved in local partnerships the importance of alignment across policy areas. The West Somerset Behaviour and Education Partnership reportedly needed to ensure that it aligned with various local and national programmes, including family hubs and local community networks. They recognised the importance of understanding a place as it is experienced by its community rather than through the lens of policy siloes.

As such, these moves represent ABEPs' potential to bridge national priorities and local needs. Analogous to Opportunity Areas and Education Investment Areas, ABEPs are existing bodies that can act as a hub for local schools, other state services and other civic actors to coalesce around an agreed plan for the locality.

2.2 Short- to medium-term evolution of ABEPs in the current context

Our interviewees described how ABEPs planned to respond to policy changes in the short to medium term by:

- Continuing the trend of moving away from school improvement towards offering other functions – in particular, civic functions that linked schools to other services supporting young people.
- Geographical expansion, either to neighbouring localities or towards national service provision.
- Becoming MATs in order to support school improvement as part of the accountability system.

Supporting civic functions

Some ABEPs planned to move beyond school improvement and support services to lead collaborations across different civic functions in their locality. For example, Learn Sheffield had taken steps to link up with other civic institutions to develop a 'Sheffield Priorities' civic education strategy.

One MAT leader also saw the value of their schools engaging with non-school bodies locally – for example, collaborating across sectors on issues such as the cost of living, family support, early intervention and local housing, all of which have an impact on young people’s education. For one ABEP leader, these kinds of civic functions depended on finding alignment between LA, school and MAT priorities and the ABEP’s capacity to bridge these and offer support beyond what the LA was able to offer.

Expansion to other geographical areas

Several ABEP interviewees spoke about future plans involving stepping beyond the boundaries of their LA. A small number spoke about delivering services or offering support to schools in neighbouring authorities. In one case, plans (now halted) had involved delivering a similar scale of support to a neighbouring LA. For two others, plans involved supporting a small number of schools within a neighbouring LA, but that served pupils from within the ‘home’ authority of that partnership. Another set of plans offered nationally available services or resources to schools, such as running CPD nationally or making resources available to schools anywhere in England.

Becoming MATs

Several ABEPs were considering, or had considered, setting up a MAT. For most of those we spoke with, those plans had been shelved. Interviewees highlighted two key barriers to becoming a MAT: first, the conflicts of interest for ABEPs (such as Herts for Learning) that offered traded or commercial services; and second, the perceptions of local political or DfE opposition, especially given the possibility of an ABEP-led MAT becoming dominant in a local area.

2.3 Understanding and supporting MATs in the longer term

The evolution of ABEPs raises a number of questions about the future of these partnerships. For our interviewees, these questions related both to their existence and to their purpose within the educational landscape.

What unique role can ABEPs serve?

The key question for some interviewees was the extent to which the various functions of school improvement, or wider partnership work, required a local element. For one national policymaker reflecting on school improvement functions, the priority was accountability, requiring a level of ownership over the success or failure of school improvement measures in a school. For many, the voluntary nature of ABEP membership meant that while some elements of school improvement support could be delivered locally, the task of the overall coordination of school improvement lay with those directly responsible for school performance.

Similarly, for one MAT leader, the question remained over knowledge (in this case relating to school improvement) running the risk of remaining “trapped” in organisational boundaries. While many of the ABEPs we spoke to reported drawing on expertise from beyond the locality, some questioned why, given the possibility of sourcing expertise from a national pool, coordination of such expertise needed to be local.

Finally, interviewees raised a question about the role LAs played in many ABEPs. A national policymaker noted the risk that ABEPs might replicate gaps in school improvement expertise by drawing on a limited number of experts within LA boundaries.

Is there a role for the government in embedding the work ABEPs already carry out?

ABEPs are not currently high on the agenda for national policymakers. With this relative invisibility in policy, is there a case for the DfE to enable a more systematic or formal role for ABEPs in the school improvement landscape?

Many interviewees felt that ABEPs should not be part of the formal accountability system or take statutory responsibilities for school improvement. Interviewees recognised the power of both of the following:

- Voluntary collaboration around a moral purpose in a local context.
- The element of local accountability for ABEPs resulting from their existence relying more and more on schools' willingness to contribute (financially and in other ways) through membership or subscription models.

Some interviewees suggested, however, that there may be a role for the DfE to utilise its softer influence. Leads of ABEPs made some suggestions about what this role might look like:

- Enabling ABEPs to bid for school improvement grants.
- Explicitly recognising ABEPs (for example, mentioning them in ministerial addresses).
- Acknowledging that existing ABEPs are helping to drive local collaboration (for example, mentioning them in guidance on school improvement/collaboration).

There are some specific questions. For example, how does the DfE reconcile Education Investment Areas (EIAs) with ABEPs? One ABEP leader suggested that there will be similar priorities and overlapping relationships where ABEPs and EIAs co-exist, but formal co-opting into the DfE-funded EIA programme might alter relationships.

Where does the mandate for ABEPs come from?

Our interviewees strongly agreed that ABEPs' voluntary nature was a strength. They referenced the power of a common vision and purpose rooted in local identity, which motivated leaders to collaborate in them. In some cases, this motivation was a response to ABEP-led improvement in an area. In other cases, it reflected and identified the need for future improvement. In both scenarios, there was a perception that effective collaboration occurred when ABEPs spent time creating a watertight statement of purpose or vision. This was because the process of creating that purpose was an important part of cementing local buy-in. However, as ABEPs respond to the changing policy context, there are questions about whether a mandated role (for example around the requirement on MATs to collaborate locally) might see them lose the benefits derived from their voluntary set-up.

There were also differing views about how commercial ABEPs should be. As we set out in Chapter 1, different models currently exist, with some ABEPs offering traded services, others charging fees for membership and others developing resources that are (or could

be) commercially available beyond the partnership. On the one hand, some thought that offering traded services would allow them to diversify and expand their sphere of influence beyond LA borders (as was the case with Herts for Learning). On the other hand, some felt that traded relationships might create disincentives to engaging with local needs if statutory duties are to the company, not to schools.

In either case, many interviewees believed that ABEPs will have to justify their existence and usefulness to schools in order to survive. Schools (and MATs) may not contribute financially or give up their time to contribute to ABEPs unless they perceive benefits that they cannot derive elsewhere (for example, through MAT-led school improvement work or through national resources or expertise). As one ABEP leader put it:

“We need to outline a set of things that the local system needs and then convene those partnerships. [The ABEP] needs to make its mandate or licence for doing activity really clear. Why is it better placed than others?”

Are ABEPs needed everywhere? Should LAs be encouraged to facilitate or set up ABEPs?

Our interviews highlighted how local collaboration varied from place to place. One MAT lead told us not to underestimate the extent to which some schools in their MAT were isolated from other local schools. Another described how their schools were involved in partnerships “where local authorities had set something up” but that there were some areas with very little happening. The form ABEPs take in any given place will vary depending on local needs, existing collaborative infrastructure and the distribution of school types within the area. Through this report, we have seen ABEPs emerge organically in response to local need, drawing on the professional perspectives of school leaders and other stakeholders.

2.4 Conclusion

ABEPs have evolved considerably since their initial emergence, partly to adapt to a changing policy environment and partly to build on their achievements and grasp new opportunities. Their early focus on supporting traditional school improvement models, previously the domain of LAs, has been squeezed by new responsibilities and funding offered to MATs and contracted to some national organisations (see section 3.2 below). ABEPs have found new ways to engage in school improvement and a wider set of responsibilities. The next chapter briefly considers how these future evolutions might fit the wider policy context.

3 ABEPs in an evolving policy landscape

This chapter aims to analyse what is known about the emerging landscape, exploring how some shifting policies might impact the future of ABEPs.

3.1 The uncertain pace of academisation

The 2022 Schools White Paper restated the government's aim that "By 2030 all children will benefit from being taught in a school in, or in the process of joining, a strong multi-academy trust" (DfE, 2022f).² It is unclear whether the Schools Bill (even if revived) or any accompanying incentives will force the pace of academisation and MAT-isation, which was slowing down before the Covid-19 pandemic and continues to stall. The government has also made it clear that academisation will not be compulsory for any school deemed good or outstanding.

The government is also creating an option for LAs to create (with other partners) new MATs "where too few strong trusts exist" (DfE, 2022c, p5). The DfE has given reassurance that these trusts will have the same powers and accountabilities as any other MAT, including the right to expand beyond their own LA boundaries. It is also removing the current 19.9% cap on the percentage of trust members who are "local authority associated persons", but is keeping the cap on trust boards "to reinforce the separation between the role of the LA and academy trustees in the management of the MAT and to minimise conflicts of interest" (*ibid.*, p6). The DfE expects these trusts to initially serve fewer than 11 schools.

The concept and practice of LA-initiated MATs are still under construction. A 'test and learn process', in advance of a wider rollout, will involve high-performing LAs and is likely not to involve sponsorship of underperforming schools. LAs will need to secure agreement in principle from schools (none of which can be underperforming) and consult parents. 29 councils applied for the test and learn pilot, and it is as yet unclear whether any of these involve existing ABEPs.

3.2 The centralisation and 'contractualisation' of initial teacher education and continuing professional development

In May 2022, the government awarded the contract to lead the new National Institute of Teaching to the School-Led Development Trust, a consortium of four MATs with 12 additional MATs as 'associate colleges' and 13 delivery partners, only one of which is a university. This marks the culmination of a series of policy shifts towards far greater standardisation of initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD), built on the foundations of a more prescriptive set of standards throughout teachers' career paths, from ITE to a new Early Career Framework (ECF) and leadership National Professional Qualifications (NPQs). It follows the consolidation in 2021 of 650 teaching school alliances into 81 teaching school hubs, with a tighter set of contracted specifications. The DfE also announced the evolution of Oak Academy (set up during the pandemic to provide remote lessons to pupils) into an arm's-length curriculum body.

² This quote is from the accompanying DfE press release.

Taken together, these changes reinforce the DfE's central control of teaching and learning, especially since most of these opportunities are free to schools. But there is concern that a preference for central, subsidised initiatives may crowd out the space and demand for other CPD and leadership programmes. This may stifle alternative approaches, less prescriptive and reductive than many critics are suggesting the DfE offer amounts to. The implications for ABEPs, many of which offer CPD, are as yet unclear. Many teaching school alliances are also attempting to survive at a local level and may possibly feel liberated from the contractual relationship with the DfE that often prevented them from offering a more expansive set of CPD programmes. As potentially key local players, we need a better understanding of how these alliances interact with ABEPs, or possibly even form the basis for new ABEPs.

3.3 The locally minded SEND and children's social care reviews

Two other important policy developments may also impact ABEPs. The SEND review suggests new local SEND partnerships will be convened by LAs and draw on a diverse range of representatives across different phases and providers of education, as well as non-educational providers, such as health and social care and youth justice. The government intends to be "mindful of current local partnerships and not wanting to duplicate other partnership arrangements including Integrated Care Partnerships" (DfE, 2022b, pp29–30). Similarly, the MacAlister review of children's social care recommended that all LAs create multidisciplinary support services to support families in need. These changes, while clarifying and adding to LAs' statutory powers and responsibilities, may also have implications for ABEPs. Many already take on responsibilities that support new local approaches to both SEND and social care.

3.4 The possible paradigm shift of the *Levelling Up* White Paper

The government has also outlined its long-term strategy to reduce inequalities in opportunity and outcomes. The *Levelling Up* White Paper set various objectives covering multiple departments and priority areas (DLUHC, 2022). In education, this included a new 'mission' for improved outcomes in primary schools.

The White Paper also introduced 55 Education Investment Areas (EIAs). EIAs follow the government's Opportunity Areas scheme, which gave funding and strategic support to 12 areas of low social mobility, creating local coalitions of stakeholders from education and elsewhere to ensure approaches are rooted in the local context. EIAs will need to link with "existing strategy groups and dovetail... with existing programmes" to get buy-in from settings (DfE, 2022d, p10) and develop "more devolved partnership model[s], denoting the importance of place ownership with DfE oversight" (*ibid.*, p25).

As a key part of local infrastructure, ABEPs may have various roles to play in EIAs, such as convening stakeholders, providing local insight and helping to allocate resources. Some ABEPs, for instance the Portsmouth Education Partnership, are already in discussions with those establishing EIAs to explore options.

Our concluding chapter assesses the potential of ABEPs to support solutions to these and other issues and asks some further questions to help understand how this potential might best be realised.

4 Conclusion

The DfE's drive towards greater centralisation and the hollowing out of the LA role over decades have left a system with groups of schools isolated from one another and from the local people and organisations who are involved in supporting young people. We need a school system that is connected to both local actors and priorities while simultaneously being aligned with national priorities and structures (such as MATs) that bring together expertise across geographical boundaries.

Place, and the relationships between actors in places, matter. Local actors have a unique understanding of the issues affecting their area. They may lean on national resources to make positive changes, but without a sensitivity to the dynamics of place, approaches might not be suitable, and implementation may be weak. For instance, a model of in-person peer observation between schools may work in well-connected inner-cities, but not in Somerset or Lincolnshire, where transport infrastructure leaves some schools isolated from each other.

The ambition to reduce fragmentation by bringing all schools within the umbrella of MATs is not incompatible with connected localism. Indeed, MATs collaborating at a local level could be a key aspect, enabling a more nuanced approach to local challenges and galvanising local reforming zeal. However, the pace of change towards a fully academised system is likely to be unpredictable, given the resistance of many schools, especially primary schools, and an uncertain political climate.

In this uncertain landscape, ABEPs could play a key role. First, they already exist in many places and have the trust of schools. They act independently of more formal accountability structures, with responsiveness to the needs of local schools (and the communities they serve) hardwired into their way of working. Second, their voluntary nature is key. They are able to galvanise collective local purpose and act as 'honest brokers', helping to solve problems that schools and MATs struggle to find the capacity or internal expertise to solve alone.

ABEPs have, to some extent, emerged to solve challenges facing schools isolated in fragmented local systems, but how they are evolving might allow for a more sustained role even in a more connected system. Imagine a locality where every school is in one of a number of MATs that serve that locality. Some of those MATs might only have a local footprint, while others might have networks spanning many LAs. We believe that there is a role for a local body that can:

- Act as a neutral convenor to enable collaborations.
- Make connections between MATs, between schools in different MATs, and between MATs, schools and other local services, businesses and voluntary and community sector organisations.

Although there was not unanimous agreement among our interviewees about the scope of ABEPs, we believe that there are three functions they should **not** take on:

- Playing any statutory role in school improvement.
- Setting up MATs or sponsoring particular MATs.
- Assuming any existing or new LA statutory functions (for example, around SEND or social care).

In all three cases, moving into statutory responsibilities would erode their ability to act as independent brokers within the school system. It would risk undermining the power of the locally rooted sense of collective responsibility that has led to their formation and generated sustained engagement.

While all ABEPs are free to evolve, and many will take on roles that are needed in their area, what appears common to all of them at the moment and for their potential future contribution is their local bridging roles. We can identify three distinct forms of bridging:

i) Bridging between the current fragmented system and an uncertain future of academisation, aligning their work to the pace at which academisation happens in their locality

For example:

- Brokering school improvement support for maintained schools causing concern.
- Brokering temporary (but rigorous) two-way support relationships between schools, academies and MATs.
- Brokering collaborations and possible mergers between small MATs.

ii) Bridging between schools, MATs and other services and organisations to support local civic priorities and wider outcomes

For example:

- Supporting collective efforts to increase community cohesion.
- Building on the work of Cultural Education Partnerships to provide a more comprehensive and better-targeted cultural offer for young people.

iii) Bridging between broader national priorities and local contexts

For example:

- Moving into other areas where LAs are finding it increasingly difficult to meet schools' needs, such as supporting SEND provision.
- Supporting aspects of the Levelling Up agenda where schools can contribute but are not the central players, for instance around local economic growth.
- Supporting national strategies around reducing youth offending.

In addition, our discussions with ABEP leaders in particular gave a sense that ABEPs may have the potential to bridge between an 'as is' and an 'as could be' approach to education reform. Our analysis suggests that ABEPs go both with and against the grain of England's approach to school improvement. They support schools in traditional ways to improve outcomes, aligned to our current systems and orthodoxies on how school improvement happens. However, many are subtly subversive in their approach:

- Liberated from formal 'upwards accountability' to the DfE and Ofsted, they enable schools to nurture forms of 'lateral accountability' where, as professional peers, they can review and support improvement – in the widest sense of the word – in less formal but powerful ways.
- Liberated from the constraints of being part of an LA with declining direct responsibilities and budgets, they can be more entrepreneurial in their approach to

building partnerships between schools and local organisations and supporting innovative practices.

- Liberated from the constraints and day-to-day pressures that individual MATs face, they can draw on local assets and infrastructure to provide opportunities for learners and teachers that address the particular needs of groups and draw on the particular strengths of otherwise unconnected schools in a locality.

If these bridging roles represent the potential for ABEPs to continue to add value locally and nationally, this leads to six questions that are worthy of interrogation. These questions are designed not as recommendations but as questions to provoke further discussion.

1) What role might the DfE play?

Without systematising ABEPs, there could be a commissioning role for government: incubating and embedding national interventions across a whole locality, ensuring that a diversity of schools engages and that these interventions are informed by and adapted to local contexts. To take two examples: If the Covid-19 pandemic provokes a new national focus on social and emotional learning (Granada et al, 2022), might ABEPs be better placed than LAs, MATs or individual schools to develop locally led approaches? And could the DfE provide guidance for MATs around working with ABEPs to meet the proposed collaborative standard?

2) How might ABEPs best support the parts of our education improvement infrastructure that appear to be underperforming?

Some interviewees suggested that the current deployment of the National Leaders of Education (NLEs) and Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs) system was inefficient, with mismatches between supply and demand. Could the DfE commission ABEPs to take on this important allocation role and fully sweat the asset of the hundreds of well-trained but poorly utilised NLEs and SLEs?

3) How can localities that might be considering establishing an ABEP best be supported?

Six years on from the initial establishment of ABEPs in a small number of localities, how can new areas make wise, sharp, rapid decisions on the basis of learning from their predecessors and their own context? The Area-based Education Partnerships Association (AEPA) might play a key role here in sharing practice and ideas with those in localities currently without partnerships. There may also be a role for the DfE to collaborate with the AEPA to provide guidance for localities on establishing an ABEP by identifying local challenges, pinpointing assets and stakeholders, agreeing a vision, working through challenges and opportunities in local party politics and creating a sustainable strategy.

4) How might other local structures be better amalgamated under a single local ABEP?

There is scope for ABEPs to be the glue in the system for a wide range of services. This might include initiatives such as STEM hubs, Cultural Education Partnerships, careers hubs that attempt to connect schools with the wider (local) world, or developing strategies (for example on mental health and wellbeing) that require the coordination of local services and charities, as well as actors from outside local boundaries, around an agreed strategy.

5) How can we better understand the demand side?

There is still a need to understand what schools and MATs require from local partnerships and where the gaps are in collaboration across England. Which local areas would benefit most from greater collaboration? How can ABEPs best secure long-term engagement from schools in those areas? What do schools and other local actors want from local partnerships in different contexts where improving wider education and youth outcomes may require an approach that is different but does not impede the drive to improve academic standards?

6) What are the implications of the current fiscal situation?

Given that most ABEPs are now funded through a membership or subscription model, their sustainability rests more and more on the willingness of schools and MATs to buy their services. Given this, is there a risk that the current and forecasted budget pressures on schools will cause a short- to medium-term challenge to ABEPs' survival? If so, what will help them survive this difficult period?

Addressing these questions could be the next step to understanding how ABEPs can best begin or evolve to contribute fully to improving outcomes for children and young people. A second phase of this project aims to explore these questions in more detail. ABEPs' bridging potential is clear; we now need to understand how best to quickly realise that potential in an ever-changing policy context.

Next Steps

CfEY is now beginning a new phase of work on Area-Based Education Partnerships. This work will produce two key outputs:

1. Description of the supply side through a visual map covering every LA in England

CfEY is building a descriptive visual map that captures the different forms of collaboration that exist at LA-level, informed by the insights gained through our Phase 1 report. We are conducting both desk-based and direct data gathering to get an insight as to the ABEPs and other forms of collaboration that exist at the LA-level (for instance, teaching school hubs; cultural education partnerships; regional or sub-LA partnerships).

2. Analysis of the demand side through a survey of school and MAT leaders.

CfEY believe that a fuller understanding of the value that school leaders place on 'the local' could usefully inform ABEP development and broader education policies. A short school leader survey will reveal perceptions on questions like how schools already collaborate with other schools in their locality; what enables or prevents local collaboration; and what role these local organisations play in supporting school improvement and wider outcomes.

For information about the second phase of our project, please contact billy@cfey.org.

This project has been generously supported by the Association of Education Committees.

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