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Researching the advantages and disadvantages of a variety of formal and informal partnerships and collaborations

As you may be aware, the political landscape for the future of all schools, nationwide, has changed and is continuing to change. The current government made a commitment in its White Paper – Educational Excellence Everywhere (March 2016) – that all schools would be forced to become academies by 2020. Shortly after this announcement the government made a U-turn, announcing that schools would not be forced to academise and the White Paper was withdrawn. Instead the government has reaffirmed its commitment to see schools convert in cases where the local authority “can no longer viably support its remaining schools”, for instance if a “critical mass” of academy schools already exists or where local authorities are seen to be failing in raising educational standards.

The last eight years of Government educational policy has resulted in a significant reduction in the capacity of all local authorities to provide educational services and support to schools. As more schools have become academies they have sought the procurement of services from the commercial sector to gain efficiency in savings or tailored services for their individual schools. A decrease in the number of schools procuring services from authorities has resulted in increased costs for those remaining. Furthermore the government is making a significant change to the way schools are funded from 2018/19. Currently maintained schools receive their budget directly from local authorities. Local authorities, on average, ‘top-slice’ 10% of a school’s budget to support their administrative educational functions, for example providing School Improvement teams. From 2018/19 all funding will go directly from central government to each school. Local authorities will only receive ‘high needs funding’ – that is, funding to support vulnerable pupils and pupils with significant needs. This funding change will therefore continue to place pressure on local authorities to downsize their educational support services to schools. Increasingly, funding to support school improvement work is only being made available through the National College and the Academies Programme. Funding to support capital investment projects, for example improving school buildings, has already been removed from local authorities. The majority of educational capital investment funding can now only be accessed if a school is an academy.

National studies have shown that there is some evidence to suggest that schools benefit from working in partnership with one another. However, partnerships can take various forms, and they can be formal or informal. It is important that schools that are considering forming partnerships carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of the full range of possible models before deciding which – if any – is the appropriate choice for their particular circumstances.

There are two main types of formal partnership, Federations and Multi-Academy Trusts. A Federation is a formal partnership of maintained schools who come together under a single governing body to maintain high educational standards and continue to be accountable to a local authority. A Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) is a single entity established to undertake a strategic collaboration to improve and maintain high educational standards across a number of schools. A group of schools form a single MAT which has primary responsibility for their governance, although each school within a MAT can, and often do, retain their own governing body. Both types of formal partnership potentially provide an opportunity for schools to work more closely and successfully together to further raise and maintain educational standards, at a time when the role of local authorities in supporting schools is diminishing.

Some national studies have evidenced schools benefit from working in partnership with each other, particularly within formal partnerships. Other studies show that this evidence is as yet inconclusive.

There are some less formal collaborations which can also be established. These less formal collaborations can include arrangements similar to the relationships we have in our existing family of

schools. Less formal collaborations potentially provide an opportunity for schools to work together to raise and maintain

educational standards, for example, each school has its own governing body, however, the partnership may have joint governance/strategic committee(s) without delegated powers.

Without question, local authorities have and continue to be valued by local communities for their support of schools. Local authorities have provided invaluable support and guidance to school leaders and parents. It is, however, prudent and part of a governing body's due diligence to ask whether the quality of support and guidance from local authorities will continue and if it does not, what the implications of this may be for their school.