



Department  
for Education

# Evaluation of the School Improvement Offer 2019 to 2020

Research report

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This report presents findings from an evaluation of the School Improvement 2019 to 2020 Offer (the offer). The offer extends to schools currently rated Requires Improvement (RI) and is structured into three tiers:

- **Tier 1:** schools with a single RI judgement are eligible for up to three days' National Leader of Education (NLE) support to help leadership teams identify and implement improvements within the school
- **Tier 2:** schools with two consecutive RI judgements can access up to three days of NLE support and up to £16,000 to help address the needs identified by the NLE
- **Tier 3:** schools with three consecutive RI judgements can access up to three days of NLE support and up to £24,000 to help address the needs identified by the NLE.

Starks Consulting Ltd was commissioned to deliver an evaluation of how schools interacted with the offer. This report presents findings related to:

- the engagement process
- schools' decisions whether or not to engage with the offer
- the effectiveness of the matching processes
- schools' perceptions of the NLE support
- the development and approval of the recommended action form (RAF)
- challenges and facilitators in accessing support.

## Method

Qualitative, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a sample of senior leaders from schools/multi-academy trusts (MATs) engaged in the offer, as well as those who chose not to engage. Interviews took place between the end of January and mid-April 2020. The sample numbers achieved has been affected by the pre-election period and by the school closures resulting from the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

The target initially was for 104 interviews to be completed. A total of 53 interviews were completed, these were conducted with:

- 28 engaged schools
- 7 non-engaged schools

- 12 NLEs
- 6 Teaching School Council (TSC) members.

This reduced sample size impacts on our ability to look at any variability in findings by different school contexts and characteristics and by tiers of support accessed. However, the sample size is sufficient to draw out themes regarding schools' experiences of the process for engaging with and accessing support through the programme.

## Key findings

### Engaging schools onto the programme

- Most schools felt they had been provided with sufficient information by the LA or MAT about the offer to enable them to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.
- TSC members reported that the engagement process was manageable, though complicated by the stock and flow of schools as schools became eligible for support during the academic year.
- Delays in the launch of the DfE Portal (through which TSCs identified schools that had agreed to participate) caused delays in the engagement of schools and matching of NLEs.
- Targeting support to schools in need was complicated in some areas by Opportunity Areas<sup>1</sup> also delivering NLE support. A coordinated approach between TSCs, LAs, and MATs was, adopted in some areas.

### Schools' decision to engage in the offer

- The majority of schools interviewed that had decided to engage did so voluntarily and were eager to receive support to help their school improve.
- Schools' motivations for participating in the programme were mainly driven by a need to improve performance in a particular area. Common areas for improvement included developing pedagogy, the curriculum and strengthening leadership. For a smaller number of schools, being able to access financial

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<sup>1</sup> The 12 [opportunity areas](#) (OAs) are areas of low social mobility where the DfE is prioritising resources, and bringing local and national partners together, to develop specific initiatives. The core objective is to improve outcomes for children and young people from early education through to employment.

support to pay for continual professional development (CPD) was a key motivator for involvement.

- For schools that chose not to engage, there were reservations about the benefits of engaging, with the timing of the offer being a key reason. Some schools had already put support in place since their last RI judgement and were not attracted by an NLE's diagnostic role. A few schools reported that the offer was not flexible enough with regards to the support that was on offer.

### **Effectiveness of the matching process**

- TSC members reported the matching process to be reasonably straight forward, matching NLEs with schools primarily based on phase (primary/secondary) and then on specific experience such as Pupil Premium.
- NLEs reported they were well-matched with schools and most had been matched with one or two schools throughout the programme.
- On the whole, schools were satisfied with their NLE match. There were examples of schools working with an NLE that schools themselves had identified and with whom they had a previous working relationship.
- Where issues with matches were raised by schools, this was usually related to delays in the NLE contacting the school and providing support, or schools feeling that the NLE's experience did not match their school context e.g. small rural schools being matched with larger inner-city schools.

### **Schools' perception of working with the NLE**

- Some schools reported experiencing delays in accessing NLE support. This was in part due to delays in the launch of the portal and the pre-election period. However, there was evidence that some NLEs were unable to schedule the first visit to schools promptly. Some schools experienced delays of two to three months between engagement and the first visit from an NLE.
- When support was received, headteachers valued the open and honest discussions with NLEs and spoke positively about the thoroughness of the NLE's approach in determining the focus of support.
- It was common for NLEs to review key school documentation and data during the diagnostic stage, in addition to speaking to senior and middle leaders and undertaking learning walks.
- In the majority of cases, support from the NLE was in its early phase, although there were examples of some interventions having begun. Common foci in

primary schools included strengthening middle leaders, support with phonics in early years, reading and maths. In secondary schools, the foci included subject-specific curriculum development, middle leadership development, pupil premium, behaviour, and governance. TSC members commented that they were disappointed not to have had more requests for support with governance.

### Developing the Recommended Action Form (RAF)

- Schools that had agreed their RAF with the NLE were generally positive about the interventions they had identified and how they would contribute to school improvement. However, none of the schools interviewed had had their RAF approved and had not, therefore, begun any funded interventions.
- Common problems relating to the RAF development and approval process included:
  - the quality of RAFs submitted by NLEs was variable according to TSC members; with the level of detail needed often missing leading to delays in approval. NLEs reported that the process for completion was onerous and took a significant amount of time
  - the training available through the national programmes not meeting the full range of school needs, or there being challenges in being able to access some of the programmes e.g. due to a lack of availability or because many schools had already engaged with this suite of offers. This compelled NLEs to source provision that was not on the approved list leading to delays in developing the RAF
  - some NLEs not collaborating effectively with schools in the development of the RAFs leading to plans which did not reflect schools' needs and schools asking for revisions to be made
  - TSC members reported that the process for RAF approval was cumbersome and time-consuming, with approval roles being split across the TSC, the DfE and NLEs. This contributed to delays in the process, particularly when RAFs had to be revised by the NLE before approval was given.

### Challenges and facilitators in accessing support

Challenges and some facilitators evidenced through the research included:

- **Schools paying for training prior to RAF approval:** Delays in RAF approval had led to some schools deciding to proceed by funding the recommended

training themselves prior to RAF approval. Whilst potentially putting them at a financial deficit, schools felt that the benefits of being able to access timely improvement support outweighed this risk.

- **Challenges in working with academies:** according to a few NLEs, some MATs have specific school improvement strategies and approaches. Support needs to be coordinated and tailored to match with a MAT's ethos and priorities. Joint meetings were, therefore, held between NLEs and CEOs alongside headteachers.
- **Engaging Tier 3 schools was perceived to be a greater challenge:** the level of support required for these schools was more intense and complex, due to the improvement issues within schools being more entrenched. TSCs reported NLEs were sometimes reluctant to work with tier 3 schools as the demand on their time was much greater.
- **Uneven access to English and maths hubs:** has prevented some schools from accessing support for pedagogy due to capacity issues. In these situations, NLEs have tried to meet the needs of schools by brokering alternative tailored solutions.
- **Financial constraints in some schools prevented the take-up of support:** this was felt particularly where the model of support required staff to travel for support or where schools could not claim for cover to release staff for support. One TSC was reviewing this rule to allow schools to claim for travel in special circumstances.

## Concluding remarks

The offer of support has been welcomed by schools and the support from NLEs, particularly for Tier 1 schools, has been valued. There were challenges in delivering the offer to schools, exacerbated by factors that delayed delivery (i.e. the portal, pre-election period and the coronavirus outbreak).

For Tier 2 and Tier 3 schools, interacting with the offer was more problematic with regards to getting the RAF approved. There is a risk that the logistical and administrative issues with the delivery of the programme (for Tier 2 and Tier 3 schools particularly) infringe on the willingness of the NLEs to want to support schools. Therefore, the DfE should look at streamlining and rectifying some of these issues with the processes to ensure that engagement and buy-in to the programme from NLEs and schools continues.

# Introduction and background

## Introduction

The DfE launched its school improvement offer for the academic year 2019 to 2020. The offer was available to all schools that were currently judged to be Requires Improvement by Ofsted.

In September 2019 Starks, Consulting Ltd was commissioned to complete an evaluation of the offer of support to understand how schools interacted with the offer.

## Background

The DfE's school improvement offer for 2019 to 2020 involves the coordination and deployment of NLEs to help schools understand their improvement needs and how best to address them.

In the 2019-20 programme, the offer was structured into three tiers:

- **Tier 1:** for schools with a single Requires Improvement (RI) Ofsted judgement. These schools were eligible for up to three days' support and advice from an NLE to help its leadership team identify and implement improvements within the school.
- **Tier 2:** for schools with two consecutive RI judgements. These schools could receive up to three days support from an NLE and up to £16,000 to help address the needs identified by the NLE
- **Tier 3:** for schools with three consecutive RI judgements. These schools could receive up to three days support from an NLE and up to £24,000 to help address the needs identified by the NLE.

The programme was delivered through the eight regional TSCs on behalf of the DfE, who were responsible for engaging the eligible schools, liaising with the local authority or multi-academy trust and matching the NLEs with the schools.

NLEs were tasked with working with senior school or trust leaders to identify improvement areas and to agree on a plan of actions and interventions to address these. The prescribed interventions were to be delivered through evidence-based support programmes and high-quality system leader support.



## Evaluation Aims

The aims of the evaluation were to evidence:

- **whether the overall process was clear, easy to understand and well communicated** - did agencies (e.g. the TSC or local authority (LA) provide clear information on why the school was selected and the nature of the support?
- **the reason schools chose to engage with the support** – what in particular encouraged them to engage with the offer? Why did some schools choose not to engage in the offer of support?
- **how schools experienced the matching** - did headteachers feel they were matched with a suitable NLE with relevant knowledge and experience?
- **how schools perceived working with the NLE** - how timely was the support and did the NLE provide additional insight into the school's improvement challenges?
- **what challenges and facilitators there were to implementing the recommended actions** - how timely was the support and was the offer sufficiently tailored to the school's improvement needs?

## Method

Qualitative, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a sample of senior leaders from schools/Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) engaged in the DfE's 2019 to 2020 school improvement support offer and also with those who had chosen not to engage. Interviews took place between 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020 – 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020.

Interviews were staggered to take account of the different stages that schools were at in terms of the support they were receiving through the school improvement support offer. Where possible, interviews were conducted towards the end of the support that the school were receiving. However, due to delays in the RAF approval process (as detailed in the Key Findings) interviews with Tier 2 and 3 schools, in particular, were conducted at a point where funded training support had not started.

## Sampling

The DfE provided a list of engaged schools (eligible for the offer and accepted) and non-engaged (eligible for the offer but declined). A sample of 150 schools was initially contacted, via an engagement letter, to ensure coverage across the primary stratifiers (see sample framework below). Due to the timing of the research and challenges with

recruiting schools, another 150 schools were contacted to help boost the response. The engagement letter informed participants of the nature of the study and requested their participation in the research.

A sample framework was agreed to ensure representation across regions, the tiers of support, school size, school type (e.g. maintained/academy) and geography (e.g. rural/urban).

It was agreed to aim to complete a total of 104 interviews split as follows:

- 60 interviews with engaged schools (20 Tier 1, 20 Tier 2 and 20 Tier 3)
- 20 interviews with non-engaged schools
- 16 interviews with NLEs (two from each region)
- 8 interviews with TSC members (one from each region).

A detailed sample frame is included in Annex A.

## Sample achieved

The overall sample numbers achieved have been affected by a delayed start to the research study and early curtailment of fieldwork. The original plan was to begin the recruitment of research participants in November 2019. However, the November 2019 election, the pre-election period and the Christmas school holidays prevented any recruitment of schools in the research until January 2020.

Also, fieldwork was due to continue up to the end of April 2020. However, in March 2020, the DfE decided to pause all fieldwork with schools as a result of the challenges presented to schools by the coronavirus (COVID-19) Although some interviews that had already been agreed went ahead after schools closed, some headteachers declined to be interviewed and it was not possible to engage any further schools. This led to a lower number of interviews being conducted than had been originally planned.

A total of 53 interviews were completed, these were conducted with:

- 28 engaged schools
- 7 non-engaged schools
- 12 NLEs
- 6 TSC council members (referenced in the report as TSCs).

**Table 1.1** shows the completed sample.

**Table 1.1: Achieved Sample of Interviews**

Schools	Engaged	Non-engaged
<b><u>Tiers of support</u></b>		
Tier 1	11	4
Tier 2	12	3
Tier 3	3	0
Multiple (MAT with more than one school participating)	2	
<b><u>Region</u></b>		
East Midlands and the Humber	4	1
East of England and North-East London	2	0
Lancashire and West Yorkshire	3	0
North of England	2	0
North-West London and South-Central England	7	1
South West	1	1
South-East England and South London	2	3
West Midlands	7	1
<b><u>Schools by phase</u></b>		
Primary	16	5
Secondary	9	0
Multiple (MAT with more than one school participating)	2	1
PRU	1	0
Special School	0	1
<b><u>School type</u></b>		
Maintained	13	4
Academy/MAT	13	3
Voluntary-aided/foundation	2	0
TSC members	6	n/a
NLEs	12	n/a

This shows that there is representation from across the three tiers, although only three schools from Tier 3 as they seemed to be harder to engage with the research. There is also representation from all regions, although only one participating school from the South West. More primary schools than secondary schools participated, which is in line with a greater number of primary schools nationally and within the programme itself. There is a good split of maintained and voluntary/foundation schools. Seven interviews with TSC members were completed alongside 12 NLEs from an original target of 16.

## Methodological considerations

There are several important methodological considerations to note when reading the findings provided in this report:

- **Delays to schools' access to support:** challenges around the government portal for monitoring information meant that many NLEs did not begin working with schools until January 2020.
- **Representation across the sample:** the plan was to adopt a targeted approach to recruitment against the sample framework in the second half of the fieldwork. This was not been possible due to the early curtailment of the study.
- **Issues with non-engaged data:** there were some problems with the data on non-engaged schools being out of date or not accurate. We had several responses from schools when invited to interview as a 'non-engaging school' which stated they were waiting for an NLE to contact them and/or they had not refused support
- **Generalisability of findings:** due to a smaller sample size being achieved that originally expected care should be taken in the interpretation of the findings. This smaller sample size makes it difficult to make any comparisons by tier of support and school characteristics.

**Appendix 2** provides the interview schedule agreed by the DfE.

## Key Findings

This section draws together the key findings from across all the interviews with schools, TSC members and NLEs. It details how they perceived the various processes involved in delivering the school improvement programme.

### Engaging schools onto the programme

The process of engaging schools involved two key activities:

- Local authorities or MATs (who receive the list of eligible schools from the DfE) contact each school to introduce the offer and to determine a school's willingness to engage
- The TSC is informed of a school's acceptance of the offer via the government's portal. The TSC makes contact with the school, either through a telephone call or an email to introduce the programme in more detail, and to discuss the proposed match with an NLE.

In the majority of cases, schools were not surprised they had been approached. Some were aware of the offer through the national press and/or had close working relationships with their LA adviser or MAT CEO and knew about the programme from the previous year.

Evidence indicates that, on the whole, the initial communication with schools provided sufficient information about the offer to enable schools to decide whether or not to participate. Schools had a clear understanding that they would receive three days of support from an NLE, and if entitled, a financial package of support. Although schools were generally aware of the different tiers of support within the offer, very few schools knew about the range of national programmes on offer at this point.

In a small number of cases, headteachers who were engaged through their local LA did not fully understand why they had been approached or that the offer was voluntary. One admitted that they felt a little uncomfortable when thinking that conversations were going on about their school's performance without their knowledge.

“I was a little unsure and felt it was a little threatening at this point” (Tier 2, primary, maintained school).

One NLE reported that clarity over the offer could be improved.

“The TSC is not able to give clarity of what the programme involves and this has led to tensions with schools (NLE).

A small number of schools that were RI had not been approached by anyone and the headteachers had sought out the opportunity to receive support themselves by contacting their local authority. One TSC member confirmed that schools were much more proactive in seeking out the support this year.

TSC members reported that, since the previous years' programme, they had organised themselves into small teams to manage the engagement process. They have designated portal managers who check the list of engaged schools, and staff who contact schools to introduce their proposed NLE match. They reported that the process was manageable but challenging due to the stock and flow of schools ('stock' being a school entering the 2019 to 2020 academic year with an RI judgement for overall effectiveness, and 'flow,' being schools receiving an RI judgement during the 2019 to 2020 academic year, so becoming entitled to support). This was somewhat exacerbated by the delayed start (details of engaged schools were not released to teams in early October as originally planned). It appears that matching NLEs with the 'long list' of potential schools did not happen until there was confirmation through the portal that the school was engaged. Matching NLEs was further delayed as there was an instruction from the DfE not to match before NLEs had been trained.

“We knew who the stock of schools was and we could have been engaging schools much earlier in the academic year. We had a lot of catching up to do when we came back in the new year and things got extremely busy” (TSC member).

Engagement of schools was particularly challenging where the schools were in an Opportunity Area. Here, there was an increased need for LAs/MATs and the TSC to coordinate their approach to a school's engagement, rather than proceeding sequentially.

“It can be incredibly complicated, but it has worked better where we have got everyone in the room (TSC sub-regional coordinators, Local Authorities and MATs)...local intelligence and relationships are crucial” (TSC member).

Despite these challenges, TSC members reported the engagement process was successful and resulted in a high level of take-up from eligible schools.

## **Schools' decision to engage with the offer**

Of the 28 schools we spoke to that had chosen to engage, the vast majority were eager to engage and wanted the support.

“We are a double RI school...I’d be mad to turn away support of this nature” (Tier 2, secondary maintained school).

“I am really keen to move forward with the school. I’m a new head here and I’m interested to hear from someone else about how we could improve our performance” (Tier 1, primary maintained school).

Three schools reported they initially felt obliged to engage because they were rated RI by Ofsted, but that this reluctance dissipated when they spoke to the TSC and NLE.

“Once the TSC called me up and explained what the programme was about and how it would work, that it was up to me if I decided to engage, I thought that it sounded like a really good idea” (Tier 1, primary maintained school).

This was confirmed by two TSC members who stated that when they called the schools to discuss their match, there was a lack of understanding about the offer and, in particular, about the voluntary nature of the programme.

“It’s really important that schools understand this and engagement is right. There is a lot of attention on schools that require improvement and heads can get sensitive to external people coming in to look at their school. Upfront, the nature of the programme has to be really clear and the initial engagement by LAs could definitely be improved” (TSC member).

Schools were asked what was their key motivation for participating in the programme:

- Many schools stated that it was to improve performance in a particular area that they had already determined. Common areas included developing pedagogy, the curriculum, and strengthening middle leadership.

“We had already agreed with the LA advisor that we were focussing on reading and going to introduce the Power of Reading programme. This is what we’ve agreed to focus on with the NLE (Tier 1, primary maintained school).

“This year's support offer is still being agreed on, but the plan is to focus on teaching and learning in maths, science and English specifically looking at revisiting schemes of work, and QAing (quality-assuring) pedagogy” (Tier 2, secondary maintained school).

- eight schools stated that it was about getting access to the financial support (16 were entitled to Tier 2 or Tier 3 support).

“We’ve taken on schools with quite significant deficits... [the DfE] releasing funds to enable our schools to access training and CPD has potentially huge benefits. We saw this as a real opportunity” (CEO MAT).

- four schools stated it was to review their school priorities and to develop a clear plan of action.

“I wanted the expertise of the NLE to come in and have a look at my priorities and to challenge me...to bring a different perspective. I’ve never worked with an NLE before and thought it was a great opportunity (Tier 2, maintained primary school).

Headteachers that were most keen for NLEs to review their school priorities were either new to headship or were headteachers that had been in post for a few years and were struggling to move the school forward. The challenge and expertise that NLEs could bring were valued. However, not all headteachers were strongly motivated by this aspect of support. Some headteachers had a clear idea of where they wanted to take the school and were committed to it and as such did not feel it was necessary for an NLE to develop their plan. Instead, they saw the role of the NLE as reviewing their identified priorities and providing assistance in strengthening their plan if this was deemed necessary.

## Schools choosing not to engage in the support

Of the seven schools interviewed who chose not to participate, all had reservations about how the programme would benefit them. Reasons given included:

- the timing of the support not being right
- the type of support not meeting the school’s needs
- NLE support not adding value.

### **Example: Tier 1, Special School**

The timing of the offer of support was the key reason for the school choosing not to engage. They had been contacted six months after their RI grading and had already put action plans in place with their Trust to support improvement. However, when the offer of support came in, the Trust CEO did respond to it to ask if they had an NLE



who had experience of the new Ofsted framework and expertise in a Specific Learning Difficulty context. She was told that they only had a primary NLE who had some Special Education Needs (SEN) experience, but not the level of SLD experience that they would need to be able to support a special school. The CEO, therefore, turned down the support because of the timing and because of a lack of suitable NLEs who would be able to work in their special school context.

**Example: Tier 1, secondary, maintained school**

The executive headteacher worked across two schools that were RI. He felt he already had a clear understanding of the improvement priorities within those schools and had already been actively commissioning external support to address those needs. As such he did not feel that the three days of generic NLE support that was on offer would meet their schools' needs. He felt there was an inflexibility in the offer that meant it did not align with the support he currently needed for his schools. For example, many of their improvement priorities were at a middle manager/curriculum level rather than a senior leader level, and that the generic NLE support was not able to address these. He felt, therefore, that it was counterproductive to have an NLE coming into school to ratify the improvement needs that he had already identified and was proactively acting upon.

**Example: Tier 2, primary, maintained school**

The headteacher had taken over her role in September 2018, at which point the school was a double RI with a large budget deficit. Before the headteacher joined, the school had received input from several LA school improvement advisors which had led to some anxiety amongst staff - *“staff were disillusioned and overwhelmed with it because of the conflicting information they were getting”*. On appointment as headteacher, she did so with the agreement that the school would work through the issues systematically. On receiving the offer of support, she already knew from a recent Ofsted monitoring visit that the school was on an upward trend. The headteacher was confident that she had a clear vision for the school and what needed to be improved and, therefore, did not feel that she needed to take up the offer of support. She consulted with the head of governors about this decision and they agreed.

These cases evidenced the reasons for turning down the offer were related to the school's circumstances or characteristics and were not related to limitations with the offer per se.

## Effectiveness of the matching process

TSC members reported the matching process to be reasonably straight forward. Matching schools with NLEs was done using information about the school (e.g. their Ofsted report, school data alongside a discussion with the LA/MAT). This enabled the TSC lead to establish the key challenges facing the school and main areas of support required and to consider an appropriate match. TSC members mentioned using their NLE survey<sup>2</sup> to access detail about an NLE's background.

“We feel we have been able to respond to school's needs in most cases, some just take longer to match than others because of their characteristics and who they are prepared to work with” (TSC).

One TSC member mentioned loaning out their NLEs to another region where there were problems in matching NLEs with schools. This was due to some schools being in remote areas and closer to NLEs in a neighbouring region, or an issue with the supply of NLEs in certain areas. Most NLEs appeared happy to travel some distance to support schools, but this caused more problems for the schools and their staff if they needed to travel.

NLEs agreed that they had been well-matched with their schools and understood why they had been approached to support the schools. NLEs were matched within phases and with relevant experience. For example, an NLE with SEN experience had been matched with a school requiring support in this area.

“It appears to work well, I am contacted and asked about my capacity and whether I feel a particular school is a good match for me. It seems to work fairly smoothly in my region” (NLE).

Most NLEs appear to have been matched with just one or two schools throughout the programme. Some NLEs reported that they could have supported more schools, while others stated that working with the higher tier schools was more time-consuming, and therefore, limited their overall capacity to work with multiple schools. A few NLEs suggested the three days allowed to prepare the RAF was insufficient and the process of getting the RAF approved was stressful. A few TSC members also observed that some NLEs were more cautious of being matched with higher tier schools.

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<sup>2</sup> TSC members reported that they asked NLEs to complete a skills and experience survey that they used in the matching process to effectively match schools with appropriate NLEs.

The TSC member consulted schools on their proposed match and schools were able to influence the matching process in some cases to be able to work with their chosen NLE, where this was permitted (e.g. the NLE was not from within the same MAT). In some cases, schools had requested to work with an NLE from the local teaching school alliance (TSA) and with an NLE with whom they had a pre-existing relationship.

“I asked if we could use an NLE I knew was an expert in PP [pupil premium] and conducting reviews in this area. I've worked with her before and I wanted someone who would give us an open and honest PP review...a warts and all review, I didn't want someone that would tell us that it wasn't a problem" (Tier 1, secondary academy school).

For two-thirds of schools, the match was considered to be good.

“They matched us really well. He's (NLE) been fantastic. It has very much been a shared approach. He has been a head a lot less time than me but we are very similar. He (NLE) is head of a primary school with two-form entry, so we have similar numbers. The schools have similar levels of deprivation and are similar communities...He also went to school in the same locality that I went to school and I feel we share a similar moral purpose; he understands the importance of aspiration and opportunity (Headteacher, Tier 1 maintained primary school).

However, two schools reported there was no evidence of any matching having been considered; one of the schools was a primary matched with a secondary NLE and one was a small rural school matched with an NLE with no rural experience. One headteacher from a MAT, who was also an NLE, received conflicting information as to whether he could perform the NLE duties for schools within his MAT.

Several schools were frustrated at the amount of time it took from initial engagement to their first face-to-face contact with an NLE. Several schools reported that the NLE with whom they were matched was appropriate but did not appear to have the capacity to complete the support in a timely way.

“I heard from him initially in December which was weeks after I was told about the match; then I heard nothing again until the end of January, then we had our first visit in February, and I am still waiting for the proposed plan to be sent to me two weeks after the visit” (Tier 2 secondary, maintained school).

One headteacher from a Tier 3 school reported significant delays in receiving their first contact from the NLE. One of the TSC members (who was also an NLE) matched himself with a Tier 3 school, as none of the NLEs he approached would accept the match due to the remote location and challenges of the school.

TSC members acknowledged greater challenges in matching Tier 3 schools with appropriate NLEs. These schools, according to TSC members will already have experienced many, if not most of the school improvement offers of programs and training, and finding appropriate solutions is incredibly difficult. They present greater challenges to NLEs in terms of identifying improvement strategies that schools will readily engage in. Therefore, NLEs are more reluctant to take up the match if it is for a Tier 3 school.

“The three days to scope and write a plan will be full-on, with schools themselves reluctant to revisit programs or offers which they have already done and perceived as failed. The offer will need to be very bespoke and NLEs will be aware it is likely to need constant adaptation and could be an uphill battle” (TSC member).

In two small rural schools, the headteacher and CEO of a MAT reported dissatisfaction in the matching process. Some headteachers reflected on their experiences of working with the NLE after the match, which impacted on their opinions of the quality of the match, as well as the process.

#### **Tier 1 and Tier 2, small secondary academy schools**

The CEO reported the matching process was variable at each school. There seemed to be no attempt to match for experience. For example, in one school, the NLE offered was from a large urban inner-city school and the school needing support was a very small rural school. The CEO did not think this was an appropriate match and, therefore, turned it down. The CEO is now (February 2020) in contact with the TSC to identify a more appropriate local NLE match to provide the support. He felt that this process has taken too long.

#### **Tier 2, secondary academy school**

*“I was contacted by the NLE's PA in October. I didn't feel that this was a good start to the contact as would have expected the NLE to ring me directly. I felt that they were getting off on the wrong foot.”* The school was asked to suggest some dates, but they could not agree to a meeting until the beginning of December. *“I felt that the timescales were too long”*. They met and all seemed to go well in that initial meeting. However, in January there had been no further progress. *“I had to chase at the end of January to see where things were up to. After a couple of days of no response, I was*

*then emailed an oversight of support which did not reflect the conversations we'd had at the initial meeting. It was essentially a list of interventions that the NLE's school could provide which completely did not meet the needs of the school.” (Headteacher)*

CEOs of MATs reported being actively engaged in the selection of their NLE, wanting as few NLEs as possible working across their schools and wanting to make sure the NLE understood the culture and characteristics of their schools.

## **Schools' perceptions of working with NLEs**

### **Identifying school priorities**

The majority of headteachers reported developing a good rapport with the NLE and appreciated the open and honest conversations they were able to have. Most were positive about the initial NLE diagnostic phase. NLEs reviewed all key documents (e.g. Ofsted report, School Improvement Plan (SIP), Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) and school data). They agreed that the NLE's approach in determining the focus of support was thorough.

“She took a forensic approach: looked at our data, our SEF, SIP and had a conversation with the chair of governors and our head of behaviour and other curriculum leads” (Tier 2, secondary, academy school).

In several schools where the headteacher wanted support in identifying their priorities, this phase of activity was in-depth and involved NLEs completing learning walks, looking at students' workbooks, and talking to senior and middle leaders and, in some cases, governors.

Headteachers who had been in post for several years were keen to get a fresh pair of eyes on their challenges and valued the full NLE diagnostic to help determine the school's priorities.

NLEs reported that new headteachers brought in to post to move the school forward, may already be developing their improvement plan and implementing priorities and a lighter touch was required. This was corroborated in a few interviews with schools.

“I already knew that I needed to focus on my middle leaders and phonics. This didn't really add anything and just took up valuable time” (Tier 1 primary maintained school).

Here, the NLE's role was more about quality assuring the school's approach against the Ofsted report and other evidence and supporting the school in ratifying their priorities.

Also, according to NLEs, headteachers from Tier 3 schools can become overwhelmed with the support and challenge they sometimes receive from their LA and other people invited into the school. They may not feel that another diagnostic intervention from an NLE is what they need.

“We have to be so mindful of the situation and the context of the school. If they already have a lot going on, the last thing they want is for us to come and throw it all up in the air. We have to work intelligently and align our support where possible” (NLE).

CEOs of MATs interviewed were also less likely to perceive added value from working with an NLE and NLEs raised this as a challenge when working with schools within a MAT. This was particularly the case where they themselves were an NLE.

“Why on earth would I want an NLE from outside my MAT to come in to talk to one of our schools when they know very little about us? We had to double up to ensure he got the full picture. Essentially, he was filling out the paperwork” (MAT of CEO and NLE).

## **NLE support delivered**

In the majority of cases, support from the NLE was in its early phase at the time of the interview. Following the initial discussion and agreement of the key improvement areas, NLEs had made one or two visits. In a few cases, Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs) from the NLE's school had been deployed to support middle leaders and subject leaders.

These schools reported focussing on a range of activities that NLEs had delivered to date that had been helpful. Common foci in primary schools included strengthening middle leaders to enable them to become more effective, phonics, reading and maths. Two primaries mentioned support with governance, but this did not seem to be common.

### **Tier 1, primary maintained school**

*“Our main focus is on developing our middle leaders to become more effective. The NLE has met with them to go through the action plan and has already undertaken some coaching with them” (headteacher).* There were plans for the NLE to bring in some SLEs to work with the school's middle leaders with a particular focus on

reading. The NLE had a lead teacher at his school with experience of implementing the Power of Reading programme. The teachers at the Tier 1 school were able to visit the NLE's school and see how the lead teacher implemented the programme in the classroom. There was then a reciprocal visit from the lead school to support the Tier 1 school to implement the programme.

**Tier 2, primary maintained school**

The NLE has delivered two half-days in the Tier 2 school and had undertaken some focussed work with the leadership team. This had involved looking at different character traits in leadership and looked at people's qualities and linked with their roles. *"This supported me massively as there is a challenge in the school as some people don't fit with the roles that I need. But rather than go for a formal restructure I would like to see that they can be trained into these roles, so this is why we decided to take the approach. It was very useful"* (headteacher).

**Tier 2, primary, maintained school**

*"She (NLE) looked at our SIP and SEF and data and she has focussed on the Ofsted recommendations around governance. We have had a review of governance with the LA and governance adviser and this has been helpful. We now have a new chair of governors."* They (NLE and school) have linked the staff together and put on read-writing training and this has been successful.

In secondary schools, the focus of the NLE's support was on a range of issues including curriculum, middle leaders and subject leaders, pupil premium, behaviour, and governance.

### **Tier 3, secondary foundation school**

The last Ofsted report asked the school to pay greater attention to how well they progress their more able students. The NLE brought in two SLEs to do curriculum review and another subject leader to do a science review. *“She [the SLE] was very sharp. She spent the day with the head of department and looked at books and talked through lots of issues in science and drew up a plan for the RAF...They shared lesson plans and resources and we have been developing lesson plans and worksheets that will stretch our students in science.”*

### **Tier 1, secondary, academy school**

The headteacher already knew, before the NLE visit, that she wanted to focus the three days of support on a Pupil Premium (PP) review. Prior to the support, the NLE discussed with the headteacher about why she wanted the review, what specifically she had concerns about. The NLE requested all data from the school including PP data. According to the headteacher, the NLE was very useful in suggesting improvements to her pupil premium (PP) support. For example, she identified that, as a school, they spent too much time procrastinating about PP pupils instead of taking action, also identified that some heads of year needed to know their students better. The headteacher particularly valued the experience it brought for senior and middle leaders, particularly those that had not previously been through an Ofsted inspection; their practice was questioned, but in a way that was done through a coaching model and was supportive. More generally, it provided the time/capacity for someone to look at PP students; the headteacher knew it was an issue but didn't have the time to focus on it herself.

A few research participants (including schools, NLEs and TSC members) felt that there would be a greater impact in tier 1 schools if there was some flexibility for that support to be extended over a greater number of days. Three days was felt to be insufficient to allow the NLE to review progress to make sure the schools were implementing and embedding the recommended changes. To extend the support, there was evidence of NLEs signposting schools to other networks of support such as the teaching hubs and linking them in with other local schools, but the support networks appeared to be patchy.

## **Developing and approving the RAF**

Fifteen schools in the sample (12 x Tier 2 and 3 x Tier 3) schools were entitled to funded support. Schools that had agreed their RAF with the NLE were generally positive about the interventions they had identified and how they would contribute to school improvement.



” We have only one of our middle leaders that has been on the NPQML and so to be able to get another one qualified is really good” (Tier 2, primary maintained school).

However, the major finding in respect of the RAF process was that the approval process resulted in lengthy delays According to one TSC, “nearly all RAFs are returned to NLEs” on the first submission. When the TSC forwards the RAF to the DfE, the DfE takes two weeks to respond. If the RAF is rejected by the DfE it is sent back to the TSC who returns it to the NLE, for a second time. At the time of the interview, some schools had been waiting four weeks to hear about their RAF. None of the schools interviewed had engaged in any funded training activity as the result of their RAF being approved.

One of these 15 schools did report positively about funded training delivered to her school, but this was training delivered through the 2018/19 School Improvement programme. The school had since received another RI and was entitled to further support in this year’s programme.

Common problems relating to the RAF approval process included:

- poorly developed RAFs
- available training not meeting the full range of schools’ challenges
- quality of RAFs submitted for approval
- cumbersome RAF approval process

### **Poorly developed RAFs**

At the time of interviewing schools, many schools were unaware of the national programmes they could access through the school improvement programme. Only a few schools were already linking-up with their English and maths hubs and most had not previously worked with an NLE. Therefore, the SI programme offered NLEs the opportunity to raise awareness among schools of the network of support available. This did not appear to be happening either by LAs, TSC members or NLEs. NLEs were not always consulting with headteachers on the available training options when developing the RAF. Two schools were unaware of the development of any RAF but understood they were able to access considerable support from their NLE.

To address this lack of knowledge among schools, one TSC member produced a short online video for schools explaining what was available through the programme and how they could complete a RAF.

A small number of schools commented that they felt the plan was ‘done to them’. They felt the NLE had developed a plan which did not reflect their school’s needs, and they

did not fully understand how the proposed activities were going to meet their challenges.

NLEs were briefed in the start-up phase of the programme on how to work with schools and complete a RAF. The majority of NLEs reported the training sessions were a useful reminder of how to approach supporting RI schools. For a few NLEs, without prior experience, the training helped them understand how the offer could be adapted for schools and how to complete the RAF. One NLE reported that she had gone to a training session outside of her region but that this focus of the briefing was “very heavily local-based and a lot of the material wasn’t relevant. We needed more clarity on the funding and what you do and don’t get funded” (NLE).

For a few NLEs, the process seemed complicated and they had to keep returning to the guidance to review the required approach.

“There was so much to take in, it was too complex and too much information. It feels very complicated, to the point where I would refuse to take part. There was a huge amount to take in...A lot of work was required to familiarise with the process before we can start to think about the school’s needs and what each programme is offering and whether this meets their needs. There isn’t clear guidance as to how you can tailor the support; there is nothing on this in the guidance. What do they want us to spend it on? I have no idea” (NLE).

### **Available training not meeting the full range of schools’ challenges**

TSC members observed that some schools were requesting support from the prescribed list of training: support from maths and English hubs alongside middle leader development (NPQ ML/NPQH) were frequent requests. A few schools were requesting support for challenges with pupil behaviour. TSC members remarked that it was disappointing that governor training was not being more widely promoted by NLEs and that resource management was also not a focus.

Although NLEs and schools requested support from the approved list of national programmes, there were concerns that the list placed too many restrictions on NLEs and schools to meet the level and range of challenges schools face today.

“I found the programmes list was too restrictive. At the first meeting, we started to fill in the paperwork and I was disappointed with the options, we were already using them, we have gone beyond the national programmes and I feel this needs updating” (Headteacher, Tier 2 secondary academy school).

“English hubs don’t operate equally across the regions. Whenever you get a ‘one size fits all’ approach, you’re going to run into problems” (NLE).

Although there was the flexibility within the programme for NLEs to offer evidence-based suggestions for support outside of the approved list of programmes, NLEs often struggled to get alternative suggestions approved.

Some schools felt that leadership programmes were not appropriate as they believed that their staff were not yet ready to take on that level of training and required support at a lower level. Here, NLEs have tried to broker a training response to meet the school’s needs. Where schools wanted support with their curriculum development, the offer included support through the local maths and English hub. However, due to delayed programme start, it was reported that some hubs had limited spare capacity to support schools. Also, an NLE and a school confirmed that the one behaviour programme offered through Tom Bennett was no longer available, although an alternative programme was being offered by him.

This presented challenges for NLEs. In many cases, they have tried to fulfil the training needs of the school by using the expertise from their own school(s). However, this approach led to criticism by a few headteachers who were concerned that the majority of the financial benefit from the programme had transferred to the NLE’s school(s).

**Tier 2, primary maintained school.**

The headteacher had been in post for nine years before accepting support in October 2019. The match took a while as she is a one-form entry rural primary and wanted an NLE with similar experiences. The first meeting with the NLE took place in January 2020.

Prior to the initial meeting, the NLE was sent the last Ofsted inspection report, the SEF and school development plan (SDP). The NLE came to the meeting with a member of his MAT that leads on early years. They had a general conversation about the journey the school had come on and the MAT early years lead went on a tour of the school’s early years provision. The head spent time with the NLE discussing their priorities and what support she considered was going to be useful.

One of the priorities listed in the school’s Ofsted report was about adapting the wider curriculum to challenge children that were high attaining. The headteacher wanted to look at another school that had worked on adapting the curriculum for higher attainers. *“I wanted my teachers to see teachers that were good”* (headteacher).

Since that meeting, the NLE put a proposal together and sent it in an email. He had allocated 12 days of support from the Early Years leaders, four days of support from the headteacher of a school that she is interested in visiting and six days of the NLE. There was very little information about what the visits would involve and she had requested greater clarity on them.

*“Could we visit other schools in the trust, is the cost covered for supply and expenses of travel. All these are essential for me if I can take up this offer” (headteacher).*

As a result, she felt there was a lack of transparency about what was on offer through the programme and a lack of sharing of the resources. *“I had assumed wrongly that the funding wouldn’t mean I was going to be out of pocket. I do value people working alongside my staff, to be able to draw on the experience, this is really valuable CPD, but this is costly for a one form entry school. We are at a stalemate.”*

### **Quality of RAFs submitted for approval**

TSC members reported that very few RAFs had been approved before January 2020 due to quality issues, and that the process was moving forward very slowly. This was the result of two factors:

- NLEs submitting RAFs with missing data
- changes to the system for completing and submitting a RAF.

NLEs were being asked to provide considerable detail about each proposed intervention alongside a justification as to why the intervention was necessary and how the impact would be measured. NLEs struggled to provide the level of detail required.

From the TSC members’ perspective, the real challenge came when the evidence the NLEs submitted in the RAF did not match with a national programme, and alternative interventions were being requested. Typically, the request was accompanied with insufficient detail.

*“Sometimes costs are not clear enough, specifics of measurability are not included and timeframes can be missing. They are also not good at saying how they know that this is going to have an impact” (TSC member).*

A key area of weakness was reported to be a lack of SMART (specific, measurable achievable, realistic and timebound) indicators which would allow schools to understand the impact of interventions.

“There is a low level of importance that has been put on measuring impact” (TSC member).

NLEs reported that completing the RAF was an onerous exercise and took a significant amount of time.

“Anything that requires 20 pages of guidance is over complicated. It becomes more complicated when you think that every school is different” (NLE).

The original plan to use an online RAF submission process, which would not have allowed RAFs to be submitted with missing data. However, this was not implemented due to technical problems and an Excel spreadsheet was used in its place. This has, according to TSC members exacerbated the quality issues, resulting in many RAFs being sent back to NLEs.

### **Cumbersome RAF approval process**

TSC members reported that the process of gaining RAF approval was cumbersome. When NLEs submit an incomplete RAF to the TSC, the TSC has to return it to the NLE explaining why it has been rejected. According to one TSC member, the NLE does not always make the necessary amends before sending it back.

“So I get the RAF back, sometimes unchanged, and I have no other recourse than to forward it on to the DfE. Then, when the DfE refuses to approve it, it comes back to me. That has already taken two weeks and we are no further on. What am I supposed to do in those situations? The NLE has already refused to amend the RAF. I’m just a go-between. Should I make the amends on behalf of the NLE?” (TSC member).

There was a request that the DfE’s regional delivery directorate (RDD) sends the RAF straight back to the NLE instead of using the TSC as a go-between. There was also a request that the RDD could suggest text which could be accepted to speed up the process instead of NLEs having to guess what was required. This has been done on occasion but is the exception rather than the rule.

TSC members and NLEs agreed that the system was not a sustainable process.

"It's time-consuming, it's over bureaucratic and NLEs will not do this in the future if this does not change" (NLE).

All schools entitled to Tier 2 and Tier 3 support were frustrated at the length of time it was taking to get moving with training. They were also not always kept in the loop by the NLE as to what was happening and had to chase for information. It was not unusual for weeks to pass before there was any news, and typically, the RAF had been rejected. CEOs of trusts that had taken on failing schools with considerable deficits were particularly frustrated with the process.

"You have to go through so many hoops to get the support, we are wasting a lot of money on different levels of people that have to be involved. The needy schools have re-brokered into the trust and I cannot stump up the money. They desperately need this support now". (CEO)

According to a few NLEs, things were beginning to improve and regions were starting to address the problems with the process. Local communication was improving among NLEs and the TSC on what was required, RAFs were beginning to be approved and brokering of support was beginning to happen.

## Challenges and Facilitators

The challenges and facilitators highlighted throughout the research included:

- **Providing a coordinated approach to school improvement within regions:** a few TSC members reported challenges in identifying and engaging schools within their region where OA was present. Without a coordinated approach, engagement ran the risk of overloading schools with support and reducing the potential effectiveness and efficiency of the SI programme. One region reported bringing key agencies together in a room (LA school improvement advisers, MAT CEO, NLEs) to share knowledge of schools and discuss how to proceed with engagement, taking into account schools needs and current involvement in support.
- **Delays in getting the RAFs approved:** as described above, Tier 2 and Tier 3 schools had not progressed with their funded training due to the delays in getting RAFs approved. To mitigate the impact of the delays, a few schools had moved forward with their training by funding some of the

training themselves and were planning on claiming back the cost of the training once the RAF was approved. Some NLEs had agreed to deliver support to schools before getting the RAF approved. They were aware they were risking losing money (if the RAF was not approved) but felt they had to make progress this academic year and before the next Ofsted inspection. “We have been asked to make rapid changes and just not been possible through this model of working” (Primary, Tier 2 Academy)

- **Challenges in working with academies:** according to a few NLEs, some MATs have specific school improvement strategies and approaches. Support needs to be tailored to match with a MAT’s ethos and priorities. Some headteachers may also be cautious about opening up about the challenges within their schools. Also, some CEOs may be concerned about the information given to DfE if they engage in the offer. NLEs need to work with CEOs and headteachers to ensure the engagement and support takes this into account.
- **Engaging Tier 3 schools was perceived to be a greater challenge:** the level of support required for these schools was more intense. It was recognised that support had to be joined up with what was already going on. Where these schools were part of a MAT, the CEO, the NLE and the headteacher came together to ensure there was a coordinated approach to the support and an honest reflection of the challenges.
- **Access to support through English and maths hubs:** some schools struggled to access support from hubs due to capacity issues. In these situations, NLEs have tried to meet the needs of schools by brokering tailored solutions and with support from their SLEs who have expertise.
- **Financial constraints in some schools prevented the take-up of support:** this was exacerbated by a model of support that required teaching staff to travel to receive an intervention. Where schools could not claim for cover, this was causing concerns as to how the schools could access the support. One TSC member reported they were moving to allow for schools to claim for cover in special circumstances.

# Conclusions

## Initial contact and engagement in the offer

The school improvement programme offer of 2019-20 is a model of support aimed at improving the performance of RI schools through National Leader of Education (NLE) support. Local authorities or senior trust leaders have been tasked with carrying out the initial contacting of schools to introduce the offer and the TSC to review the schools' characteristics and improvement needs, and to deploy a suitable NLE to work with the school.

On the whole, this initial process appears to have been carried out reasonably well across schools. This was despite the challenges with the delayed start caused by issues with the portal and followed shortly after by the Pre-election period in November. TSC members have been organized into teams with support staff who regularly checked the portal for eligible schools and made contact with schools.

In areas where Opportunity Areas were in operation, LAs/MATs and TSC members recognised the need for a coordinated approach to engagement to ensure the support was targeted at the right schools. Even though some schools knew very little about the offer at the engagement phase, a high conversion rate was reported by TSC members, with the vast majority of eligible schools, who were offered support, accepting the offer.

## Why headteachers chose to engage

Schools reported their primary decision for engaging with the programme was influenced by wanting to improve performance in a particular area, for example, pedagogy, the curriculum and middle leadership. Fewer schools wanted the NLE to help them develop a plan of action as they had already committed to a particular set of priorities or had a clear understanding already of the improvement priorities for their school. However, all schools were willing to have their plans reviewed and challenged and to have NLEs adapt their approach. All key documents such as Ofsted reports, SIPs and SEF and school data have been shared and some interventions had begun.

Some schools chose not to engage due to the timing of the offer. For some schools, their last Ofsted inspection was six months to one year ago and the NLE's diagnostic was felt not to be needed: priorities had already been determined and the school felt they were on their improvement journey. For other schools, there were concerns about the flexibility of the provision and whether the offer could support middle leaders who were not ready



to complete the national professional qualification (NPQML), and curriculum development.

### **Matching process**

Evidence suggests the matching of NLEs was determined firstly on phase, and secondly on areas of expertise where schools required support in specific areas, for example, SEN or pupil premium. Location was also considered as some NLEs did not want to travel long distances (and some schools would not want to be matched with an NLE too far away). Some schools identified their own NLE where this was permissible (i.e. not from the same MAT) as they had existing relationships and/or the NLE had relevant experience. In a few cases, CEOs were frustrated at not being able to be matched with their schools. They felt they were best placed to respond to their school's needs, rather than have some external person come in who did not know their schools. There is evidence that TSC members have struggled to match small rural schools in a timely way. This was due to a lack of NLEs available with relevant experiences.

### **Schools' perception of working with the NLE**

In most cases, schools had received up to two days of NLE support before the support was halted due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. In some cases, schools had just begun their initial engagement with NLEs. Many schools experienced delays of between two to three months from the initial engagement and the NLE's first visit. This was caused by delays in the release of schools onto the portal which caused delays in matching NLEs. There were also reports that some NLEs struggled to respond to schools in a timely way. Some schools reported progress was slow throughout.

Where support had begun, NLEs had delivered some coaching and focused work with the leadership team and middle leaders. Much of the support has focused around early years, reading and phonics, pedagogy, and developing middle leader effectiveness. Schools have been linked-up with maths and English hubs and NLEs have deployed SLEs to work with schools around subject-specific issues and curriculum development. For Tier 1 schools, the support was progressing well from a slow start.

### **Developing and Approving the RAF**

Tier 2 and Tier 3 schools have had a less positive experience of the offer. These schools reported that they were mainly motivated by their financial entitlement of £16,000 and £24,000 respectively. NLEs and schools used the three days' NLE support to design the RAF according to the school's challenges. Generally, schools were unhappy with the time

it took to agree the RAF (between the NLE and school) and to get the RAF approved. At the time of the interview, none of the interviewed schools had an approved RAF, and as a consequence, no funded interventions had begun.

Training that had been delivered to Tier 2 or Tier 3 schools was either delivered as part of the three-days' NLE support or was being delivered 'upfront' of getting the RAF approved. Schools were keen to start moving forward and were risking the possibility of not being able to claim back the cost of training.

Problems with the development of the RAF were mixed, but there was evidence of:

- delays with the RAF being sent to schools by the NLE
- schools perceiving the proposed RAF did not reflect their needs
- delays in RAF approval due to missing data
- a somewhat cumbersome process of gaining RAF approval.

TSC members reported many RAFs were submitted by NLEs with missing information. Specifics around the cost of training, dates for the completion of training, and SMART measures were missing. NLEs reported the extent of information required to complete the RAF was extensive. They questioned why their professional judgement in determining appropriate interventions was not sufficient. The issue seems to be exacerbated by the DfE's prescribed set of interventions (e.g. national programmes) which did not always meet schools' needs. Tailoring the RAF, however, became a very difficult exercise and NLEs failed to fulfil the DfE's requirements to justify alternative interventions.

The process for getting the RAF approved involved three actors (NLE, TSC and RDD). If the RAF was rejected by the TSC, the process started over again, and consequently took longer. Schools, it seems, were largely unaware of this process and became frustrated with the delay. Concerns were also expressed by a few schools that the interventions were being delivered largely by NLEs (and therefore the funding was going directly to the NLE's school). It was permissible for NLEs to provide up to 50% of the interventions. The problem appeared to be in schools reporting a lack of detail regarding what the intervention would entail and how it would meet the school's needs. NLEs were also responding to the issues related to a lack of capacity in the hubs to meet schools' needs.

## **Concluding Remarks**

There were clearly challenges in delivering the offer to schools, exacerbated by factors that delayed delivery (i.e. the portal, Pre-election period and Covid-19). This evaluation was completed at a point where schools were just starting to engage in the support. The offer of support has been welcomed by schools. However, there is a risk that the logistical and administration issues with the delivery of the programme infringe on the willingness

of the NLEs to want to support schools. Therefore, the DfE need to look at streamlining and rectifying some of these issues with the processes in order to ensure that engagement and buy-in to the programme from NLEs and schools continues.

# Appendix 1: Case Studies

## Case Study A

### Academy, Secondary, Tier 1

The school had received its RI Ofsted judgement in January 2019 at which point the Headteacher had only been in post for a short amount of time.

### Background to engagement

The head initially became aware of the offer in November 2019 after being contacted by the TSC about the offer. She was particularly keen to engage with the offer as the school had had no other external school improvement support for a year. On agreeing to engage with the offer, the NLE got in contact with the school very quickly about the support starting.

The head knew that she wanted the NLE support to focus on pupil premium; this was an area that she knew was an issue, but did not have the capacity and time to focus on.

### Experience of the matching process

The head agreed with the TSC that she was able to work with a specific NLE that she had previously worked with and who she knew was an expert in pupil premium and conducting reviews in this area.

Although the head already knew prior to the NLE's first visit that she wanted the focus of the three days of support to be on conducting the pupil premium review, at the initial meeting the NLE still had a discussion with the head about why she wanted the review, and what specifically she had concerns about in this area. The NLE requested all data from the school including PP data.

### Views of the process of engagement and support

The NLE conducted a 2-day pupil premium review which involved her speaking to the head, the wider Trust, governors and pupil premium students. The NLE also observed lessons and produced a 10-page report on her findings.

The head found the process very useful in the insights the NLE produced around the suggested to pupil premium. For example, the NLE had identified through the review that as a school they spend too much time procrastinating about pupil premium students

instead of taking action. It also identified that some heads of year needed to know their students better. The head particularly valued the experience of the process for senior and middle leaders and particularly those that had not previously been through an Ofsted. She felt that the process had questioned their practice, but in an approach that was based around a coaching model that was supportive. More generally the NLE support provided the time and capacity for someone to look at pupil premium students.

All the ideas and suggestions from the pupil premium review have been shared with staff and there has been a meeting with governors to discuss the findings. The school have been able to implement some suggested quick wins from the review e.g. paying for travel for pupil premium students where needed instead of seeking approval. The Head commented that there were longer-term actions such as changing the mindset of staff or looking at how pupil premium students were supported in class that would take longer to implement.

The head praised the support they had received from the NLE - *"It's the best support we've ever had"*. She commented that as a school they had not received any support from their trust in this academic year and therefore the NLE support had been timely and invaluable.

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## **Case Study B**

### **Maintained, Secondary, Tier 2**

The school had received its last requires improvement Ofsted judgement in October 2019.

The headteacher received a call from the local authority to say they were eligible for the support offer. At that point, the head was happy with the offer of support and has expected it as they had received two requires improvement judgements. The head felt that it was a proportionate way of approaching schools as it did not feel judgemental - *“When I read the documentation I thought it was a proportionate way of approaching it, because sometimes you can feel like you’re being done to. I liked the tiering, it felt non-judgemental”*.

The head had a clear view of what they wanted to do with the offer of support prior to meeting the NLE, with the head wanting to focus on middle leadership and curriculum - *“I was really looking for someone who could bring a fresh pair of eyes to it and how that person would make me achieve those priorities as quick as possible”*

### **Experience of the matching process**

Just after October half-term, the school were given an NLE match. This was someone local who the head knew quite well as they were from the local area. The head valued this as it meant that the NLE had a good understanding of the local context.

The head valued the NLE’s approach to the support offer, commenting that he felt the NLE took a ‘very respectful’ approach - *“his approach is very much I’m here to assist you. It felt like it would be a very good partnership and relationship”*.

At the initial meeting, the NLE looked at Ofsted report, SIP and other data. The NLE also met with deputy head and undertook a learning walk around the school.

### **Views of the process of engagement and support**

The school and the NLE are still working on the overall focus of support although some areas have been decided upon. For example, the focus of support on day two was interviewing middle leaders which did identify some additional priorities including standardising accountability across the faculties and tightening up protocols. After day 3 the NLE will be putting together a plan for the next year.

The head does have some frustrations around the funding allocated to the support and particularly not being able to access the money directly and there being restrictions

around the money. The Head did not agree that the money should have to be spent on DfE programmes because they might not be appropriate to the support needs of the school – *“there seems to be a bit of a restriction on the money”*. However, the head did recognise that some of the funding they were eligible for was going to be used for SLE support from the NLE’s MAT, rather than from the DfE programme.

Overall, the head did have some concerns about the lack of pace around access to the funding, feeling that it was not timely enough, with too many restrictions associated with it.

*“As soon as we understand that we were going to be RI we don’t waste any time in putting a plan together and where we were going and we were open to support. My only concern would be is that if a school was dithering a bit what would happen? Also, my understanding is that he will develop a plan and share it with me and that seems quite a slow process. My concern would be is that it lacks a bit of pace. If you were a weak RI it would need a lot more pace behind it”*

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## **Case Study C**

### **Maintained, Primary, Tier 2**

The school had received its RI ratings in 2015 and 2017. The school received a good rating in October 2019.

The head had been aware of the offer from their local authority improvement advisor, approximately in September 2019. At that point, the head stated that she was not told explicitly why as a school they had been targeted for support and it wasn't clear what the full nature of the offer was, other than it would involve support from an NLE.

Prior to meeting with the NLE, the head had already identified two specific areas in their school development plan that they wanted to focus on as a school; one being boys writing and the other being girls performance in maths.

### **Experience of the matching process**

The head already knew of the NLE that she was matched with which she felt was positive as the NLE already had a good knowledge of the school context; which limited the time that was needed at the beginning around familiarisation.

Prior to the first meeting, the head and the NLE had an initial telephone conversation where the Head was asked to think about what she wanted from the support, expected outcomes for pupils etc. There was no data or other documentation was provided to the NLE before that meeting, it was just discussed at the first meeting.

The head felt that she had gone to the initial meeting with the NLE with a clear idea of what she wanted the support from the NLE to be focused on.

### **Views of the process of engagement and support**

The work with the NLE is still ongoing. The main focus of support has been on developing middle leaders to become more effective. The NLE has met with middle leaders already to go through the action plan and has already undertaken some coaching of them.

The NLE has also broadened the scope of support to include parental involvement as the feedback from their Ofsted was that they needed to strengthen their parental involvement. There are plans in place for the NLE to bring in some SLEs to work with the schools' middle leaders as well. Throughout the support undertaken so far there has been a strong focus on the level of challenge.



The school is listed as a Tier 2 school, but the school had no knowledge of the NLE completing a RAF or of them having completed a RAF. The school had no knowledge of the funding available as part of this package of support. Her understanding was that she would be getting around 5 days of support from the NLE.

### **Challenges**

The head did feel that the time commitment required for the support was a challenge, particularly for middle leaders. As a very small school, with one-form entry, the NLE had requested middle leaders attended meetings and spent time out of class which the head felt was excessive and was potentially detrimental to pupils. She felt that this was compounded by the fact that the support had to be finished by Easter, which she felt was too small a timescale for the work to take place and for it to make a difference.

## Appendix 2: Interview Schedules

<b>Evaluation of DfE's School Improvement Offer for 2019 to 2020 Telephone interview schedule for Headteachers/senior leaders (engaged schools)</b>
<b>A. Background to engagement</b>
1. When and how did you first become aware of the school improvement support offer 2019 to 2020?
2. Was the full extent of the offer made clear to you in order for you to make a decision on whether to participate? a) If not: What would have improved your understanding of the offer?
3. How did you feel about your school being invited to participate? (Willing to engage and wanted support/challenge from an expert; had reservations of the added value; Felt obliged to engage due to challenges?)
4. Confirm level of support the school accessed (Tier 1, 2, 3)
5. Why did you agree to the support? a) Is your school receiving any other interventions? i.e. through OA teams or RSCs b) Did you have any concerns around additional burden on top of other interventions/support?
6. What did you hope to achieve through your engagement with the school improvement offer? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To improve performance in a particular area?</li><li>• To help determine your SI priorities?</li><li>• To get access to the additional CPD support on offer?</li></ul>
<b>B. Experience of the support from the NLE</b>
7. When did the NLE first contact you? (only ask if not already spoken about NLE) a) Was this shortly after the initial engagement or longer?
8. How appropriate do you feel the match was between your school and the NLE? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• NLE's experience of similar school challenges?</li><li>• Prior knowledge of the school?</li><li>• Understood the context?</li><li>• Did you have an existing relationship with the NLE?</li><li>• Are you aware of teaching schools and have you had any support from a teaching school previously?</li></ul>
9. What was the process for determining what the work with the NLE would involve? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Process for diagnosing issues/areas to focus on</li></ul>

- Use of SIP, data, observations etc

**10. How did the NLE help to develop to identify any additional improvements within the school?**

- Why was it useful? Did the NLE conduct a diagnostic? Did other members of the NLE's school help identify priorities?
- Did the NLE use your existing SI plan? Did you already have areas you wanted to focus on? How had you identified these areas?

**11. What areas of support/activities did the NLE deliver through their three-days of support (for Tier 2/3 - prior to accessing the additional funding entitlement)?**

- How did they structure the support across the three days?
- Did the school access wider support from the NLE's school? E.g. through HoDs/SLE

**12. How did the support from the NLE meet your improvement needs?**

– probe on: why the support delivered was useful, how it added value/insight, where it was focussed and what if anything is an outcome from this support? Were there any gaps in the support?

### **C. Developing the RAF (Tier 2 and 3)**

**13. What areas were identified as needing support? (Delete as appropriate and provide a brief description of each area of focus)**

Area 1

- Leadership
- Governance –
- Curriculum/pedagogy (whole school/subject specific)

Area 2

- Reading
- Maths
- Behaviour management
- Computing
- Science

Additional areas?

SEND  
Workforce

**14. Did the range of support on offer in the national programmes meet (some/all) of your school's improvement priorities?**

- Yes – met some/all of the school's improvement priorities – which ones and probe how they addressed SI priorities
- No – explore the reasons

**15. (If tailored support outside of the list of approved interventions was needed) How was it decided with the NLE that tailored support was needed?**

- Was it an NLE recommendation or school-led?
- Explore what additional training or resources were identified and included on the RAF

### **D. Progress and challenges in implementing changes (all schools)**

**16. What progress have you made in implementing the recommended actions?**

**17. Did you / are you experiencing any particular challenges in implementing the recommended actions?**

- Provider capacity to deliver the training
- Releasing staff for training/CPD
- Providing cover for staff
- Travelling time/distance
- Funding the actions?
- NLE/partner school staff capacity
- School to school staff relationships
- Other

**18. How/have you overcome these challenges?**

**D. Overall views of the process of engagement and support on offer**

**19. We are interested in your overall views of the process of accessing support. Reflecting on process from initial engagement to receiving support, what was your experience of the programme in terms of?**

- a) Understanding the process?
- b) Paperwork?
- c) Range of support on offer
- d) Timeframes that you were able to access the support?

**20. Could you make any suggestions as to how the processes involved in delivering the school improvement offer could be improved?**

**Final comments**

**21. Thank you for your time. Before we end, is there anything else you would like to say about the DfE's school improvement offer?**

**Evaluation of DfE's School Improvement Offer for 2019 to 2020  
Telephone interview schedule for National Leaders of Education (NLEs)**

**A. Background to their role**

**22. For how long have you been designated and undertaking the role of an NLE?**

**23. Are you primary or secondary based?**

**24. Do you support primary or secondary schools or both?**

- a) Primary
- b) Secondary
- c) Both

**25. Did you deliver any support on the previous School Improvement offer (2018/19)?**

- a) Yes – roughly for how many schools?
- b) No – why not?

**B. Briefing and deployment of NLEs in the 2019 to 2020 programme**

**26. How did you feel about the briefing provided on how to support schools and complete the RAF?**

- a) Which briefing event did you attend?
- b) Was the briefing event useful? What were your thoughts on its content?
- c) Were the guidance materials helpful?

**27. How many schools have you supported to date on the 2019 to 2020 programme?**

- a) What tiers of schools have you supported?

**28. What has been your experience of being deployed to provide support, how well does this process work?**

- a) Is the process timely?
- b) Are you always engaged through the TSC or through other 'agents'?
- c) Have you approached the TSC with a suggested school to provide support?

**29. What information do you receive regarding the schools from the TSC?**

- a) Is this sufficient? Was anything missing that could have been helpful?
- b) How did you receive this information?
- c) How did it help you shape your approach with the school?

**C. Matching**

**30. How well do you feel you have been matched with the schools you have supported?**

- a) Very well – what makes a good match?
- b) Not well (in each/every case) - why not?

**31. Have you been able to respond to (each of) the requests for support from the TSC?**

If not, explore how many requests they received and how many they've not accepted

- a) Did you have to overcome any particular challenges to provide support to a school? If so, what were these and how do you overcome them?
- b) May this have led to you not delivering support?

**32. What are the reasons (if any) you've declined to provide the support?**

- a) Time/capacity
- b) Not a suitable match
- c) Knowledge of the school in a different capacity – not appropriate.

**33. Are there any improvements you feel could be made to the process of matching and deployment of NLEs?**

#### **D. Views of the support available**

**34. What is/was the process for determining what your work with the school/s would involve?**

- Process for diagnosing issues/areas to focus on
- Use of SIP – reviewing/developing the SIP
- Use of other information - data, observations etc
- How did you prioritise the schools' requirements?

**35. How did you use the (up to) three-days of deployment to identify a school's improvement needs and develop a plan (complete the RAF where appropriate)?**

- Explore for each tier of support
- How much of a focus is leaderships, governance and finance in their deployment?
- Do you revisit the school following the implementation of any interventions? If not, why not and would this help?
- Was there enough time to do everything you felt was needed?

**36. Do you feel the range of support on offer through Tier 2 and Tier 3 meets schools' needs?**

- a) If not – what is missing
- b) Do you recommend alternative forms of support (e.g. different providers or resources) for the school?

**37. Do you consider that the time it takes for schools to have their RAF approved is reasonable?**

- a) Is the process clear, timely and efficient?
- b) How could it be improved?

**38. Do you feel the time it takes for schools to access the support available through Tiers 2 and 3 (once the RAF is approved) is reasonable?**

#### **E. Challenges and facilitators in implementing change**

**39. How well are schools progressing with implementing the recommended changes?**

- a) Are you able to monitor and support schools after the initial deployment? (For all Tiers or just for Tiers 2/3?)

**40. What are the barriers and enablers that impact on schools progressing with their recommended actions?**

- Aligning recommendations with the SIP?
- Agreement from SLT?
- Provider location?

#### **Final comments**

**Evaluation of DfE's School Improvement Offer for 2019 to 2020**  
**Telephone interview schedule for Headteachers/senior leaders in school who declined the offer**

**A. Background to engagement on the school improvement support**

**41. Please can you begin by telling me when and how you first became aware of the school improvement support offer?**

Year / month. Method of engagement (LA, TSC, TS, NLE, MAT, Opportunity Area)

**42. How did you feel about being identified as being eligible for support?**

- a) Explore positive/negative feelings around this – did they feel that it was appropriate/or not that they should have been identified for support?

**43. When you were initially contacted about the offer by either the DfE or the Teaching Schools Council, did you understand the full extent of what the offer could include, what your involvement would be?**

- a) If not: what would have improved their understanding of the offer?

**B. Reasons for not taking up support**

**44. At what point did you decide to decline the offer?**

- c) When initially approached?  
d) When contacted by NLE?

**45. How did you make the decision to decline the offer?**

- As the headteacher
- Through governance process
- At MAT level or school leadership?

**46. Did you explore the support the NLE was able to provide and did this initial engagement allow you to make an informed decision as to whether or not to proceed with the offer?**

Didn't explore support, declined without consideration – if so, explore further  
Did you meet with the NLE face to face or over the telephone?

**47. What were the key reasons for deciding not to take-up the programme's offer?**

Prompts to be used as needed:

Time/capacity

No suitable match

Receiving existing support from other schools/experts

Recent changes to SLT/school leadership

Perceived risks relating to pupils or to the school as a whole

The nature of the offer

Other

**D. Views of the engagement process**

**48. Is there anything that could have been changed that would have influenced or encouraged you to take-up the support offer?**

- a) Matching process  
b) Offer of support  
c) Timing of support  
d) Other

**Final comments**

## Evaluation of DfE's School Improvement Offer for 2019 to 2020 Telephone interview schedule for TSCs

### A. Background to their role and responsibilities

49. We're speaking to you as a representative of the TSC, but could you please tell us a little more about your role and responsibilities in relation to the SI offer 19/20?

50. How long have you been carrying out this role?

### B. Engaging schools

51. What type/level of information do you get regarding the schools entitled to support and what do you do with this information when you receive it?

d) Is this sufficient?

52. What is your process for engaging schools?

a) On average, how long after you receive the list of schools entitled for support do you contact schools?

b) How do you manage the engagement of schools with NLE resources?

c) Is initial contact always through the TSC or are schools engaged through other 'agents'. How well does this work?

d) Overall, how long does the process for engaging schools take?

e) How well does the process for engaging schools work? Probe on whether emails or calls work better in securing engagement

53. What information do you provide to schools regarding the support on offer?

a) Do you have a standard engagement email which contains information on the offer of support?

54. Why do some schools choose not to engage in the support?

- Support on offer not meeting their needs
- Already working with an NLE
- Timing of the offer
- Probe for reasons they're given by schools for not engaging vs their views on why as a TSC member they think some schools choose not to engage

55. What do you believe could be done to improve the engagement process of schools?

### C. Matching NLEs with Schools

56. What criteria do you use to match NLEs with schools?

a) Do you look for existing relationships when you try to find suitable matches? If yes, how do you find out about these existing relationships?

57. Are you able to provide suitable matches in all cases?

a) If not, why not? What are the constraints of matching you have to work within? (e.g. NLE availability, education phase or experience)

b) Do you have any examples of matches that have not been successful – why was that? How did you find out about these matches that have not been successful?

c) How do you identify the most appropriate NLE for the schools?

58. Do you/can you offer schools alternative NLEs if they are unsure of the suitability of the match?



- a) how does this process work? Does the school or NLE inform you of the unsuitability of the match?
- b) how do you agree an alternative

#### **D. Deploying the support available**

59. Can you tell me about how you deploy an NLE to a particular school?

- a) Is this a straight forward process?
- b) Is it efficient?
- c) What paperwork is involved?

60. Are NLEs able to respond to their match within the given timeframes (2 weeks making contact and in 4 weeks have a date agreed?)

- a) If not, why not?

61. How do you quality assure the NLE's performance?

62. How do you track the funding/days of deployment provided to schools?

#### **E. Approving the Recommended Action Form (RAF)**

63. Is the process for getting RAFs approved working as intended?

- a) How does the process work for getting them approved?
- b) What has worked well?
- c) What are the blockages and how can the system be improved? (*Note to researcher – ensure discussion covers wider blockages than issues with portal*)
- e) Are there any lessons learned regarding the approval of RAFs on behalf of schools?

#### **F. Tier 2 and Tier 3 Funded Support**

64. Does it appear from the RAFs submitted that the list of DfE-funded national programmes meet the needs of schools?

- a) Are there particular trends in NLEs making recommendations for programmes not included in the DfE funded national programme? If so, what are they?

65. How are programmes that are not on the national programmes approved?

66. What additional NLE/school to school support is being offered to Tier 2 and Tier 3 schools?

67. Do you feel the time it takes for schools to access the support available once the RAF is approved is reasonable?

- a) If this varies what are the factors that affect this?

#### **F. Areas of improvement**

68. Do you feel there are any ways the process involved in delivering support to schools can be improved? If so, where?

- a) If you are able to compare the processes that operated in 2018/19 offer, how do the processes compare?
- b) Have the changes from last year made the process better or worse?

#### **Final comments**



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