



Understanding the challenges for evidence-informed school improvement support in disadvantaged schools: an exploratory study

Research Report
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Matt Walker, Julie Nelson, Robert Smith (NFER) and Chris Brown (Durham University)



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The EEF aims to raise the attainment of children facing disadvantage by:

- identifying promising educational innovations that address the needs of disadvantaged children in primary and secondary schools in England;
- evaluating these innovations to extend and secure the evidence on what works and can be made to work at scale; and
- encouraging schools, government, charities, and others to apply evidence and adopt innovations found to be effective.

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For more information about the EEF or this report please contact:

Jonathan Kay



Education Endowment Foundation
5th Floor, Millbank Tower
21–24 Millbank
SW1P 4QP



0207 802 1653



jonathan.kay@eefoundation.org.uk



www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk



Executive summary	iv
Introduction.....	1
What are Priority Schools' challenges?	4
The school improvement support activities that schools currently access and desire	7
How ready are Priority Schools to engage with school-improvement support, and what will aid implementation?.....	11
Conclusions and recommendations.....	15
References	16
Appendix: Profile of achieved headteacher sample compared to FFT sample	19

Executive summary

The study

This exploratory study was commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation (the EEF). The report presents findings on the challenges facing schools in disadvantaged circumstances (characterised by the EEF as 'Priority Schools'). Priority Schools, which include both primary and secondary schools, have a high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and have been identified as being most in need of support to raise overall levels of attainment while also closing the gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.¹ The study also explored schools' 'readiness' to engage with external support on evidence-informed approaches to school improvement, including the conditions that are necessary to support this.

The aim of the study was to help inform the EEF's new regional approach to school improvement. This will involve Research Schools acting as training hubs to support near-by schools in understanding the best available research evidence in key areas, and how it can be used effectively as part of their programme of professional development for teachers and senior leaders². A number of studies have demonstrated benefits for schools that use evidence to inform their practice and decision making (Cordingley *et al.*, 2015; Greaney, 2015; Mincu, 2014). The EEF's new regional approach to school improvement aims to support schools to use research evidence effectively in their decision making and practice, through a process of evidence-informed CPD and guidance.

The findings reported here are based on an in-depth programme of qualitative research and an expert review, undertaken by NFER and Professor Chris Brown between February and July 2019. The qualitative research incorporated telephone interviews with:

- 18 'system leaders' (including representatives from local authorities (LAs) (n=9), school trusts (n=3), National Leaders of Education (NLEs) (n=2) and Research Schools (n=4))
- 35 headteachers in Priority Schools (see Appendix for details of the characteristics of these headteachers' schools, compared to the profile in the FFT database).

We also undertook face-to-face case-study visits and telephone interviews with staff in 17 of the schools in which we interviewed the headteacher. Each case study incorporated one interview with the school's CPD lead or equivalent member of the senior leadership team (SLT); a discussion with a group of middle leaders; and a discussion with a group of classroom teachers. All of the interviewees were based in the North East and North West of England. To provide context for the primary research findings, the report also draws on the findings from an expert review of the school improvement literature.

As this is qualitative research, care should be taken in drawing generalisations from the findings. However, as a piece of exploratory research, the study provides valuable insights for policy and practice by deepening our understanding of how different stakeholders view the challenges facing schools in disadvantaged circumstances.

Key findings

Priority Schools face a complex series of interconnected challenges

The main challenges raised by interviewees and confirmed by the literature were associated with four external pressures (those largely beyond the control of schools): 'poverty/deprivation' (Di'az-Gibson *et al.*, 2017); 'austerity/lack of school funding' (Di'az-Gibson *et al.*, 2017; Greaney, 2017); 'accountability' (Ehren, 2019; Greaney and Earley, 2018); and 'staff supply' (Hargreaves, Parsley and Cox 2015).

¹ The Fischer Family Trust (the FFT) compiled a database of schools meeting these criteria for the EEF, which we used for research sampling purposes.

² For further details see: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/scaling-up-evidence/supporting-regional-school-improvement/> [13/02/2020]

While there was some variation between institutions, in general headteachers' reported that their single main challenge was associated with what they perceived as a lack of parental/carer support or engagement (Brown *et al.*, 2015). This in turn was associated with a number of additional challenges, including parents/carers having negative views of education and low aspirations for their children, and children arriving at school lacking basic skills.

System leaders recognised many of the same challenges as headteachers, but they also identified additional issues that they thought schools should be addressing. For example, while system leaders recognised the challenges associated with the accountability system, and why this was leading to headteachers feeling they needed to make rapid improvements, they also believed that schools' needed to set longer-term improvement goals (McWhorter *et al.*, 2019; Sartory *et al.*, 2017). In addition, while headteachers typically talked about the external challenges they faced, system leaders were more likely to focus on factors they thought were within a school's control. These included the need to: improve the quality of teaching; strengthen the quality of middle and senior leadership (Woods *et al.*, 2013); and develop more systematic approaches to monitoring and evaluating their improvement efforts (Woods *et al.*, 2013). In particular, many system leaders reported that school leaders lacked confidence in diagnosing their needs or prioritising their actions, and that they needed to make better use of data to inform these judgements.

Many Priority Schools are already involved in a wide range of school improvement activities

Priority Schools described the wide range of improvement activities in which they were involved, which were designed to enable them to: address the standards agenda; achieve greater consistency of practice; develop/reform the curriculum; and strengthen school leadership, especially at SLT and middle-leader level. These broad aims were addressed through a focus on a range of **themes** such as literacy (including vocabulary and phonics), numeracy, other subject-specific work, behaviour, and attendance. Schools also focused on groups of **learners** such as those in the early years, or learners eligible for the Pupil Premium (PP). Activities were delivered through a range of different **structures** including school trusts, LA networks/services, NLEs, Teaching School Alliances (TSAs), and Research Schools. Where LAs were involved, their focus was usually as an enabler/broker rather than as a direct provider of school support services.

When discussing the impact of such work on school outcomes, headteachers emphasised that progress could not always be attributed solely to one project or initiative. Impact was often achieved only after approaches had become embedded in schools' working practices rather than by pursuing one-off strategies.

Gaps in current provision

Headteachers welcomed the current focus of many existing school improvement activities on teaching and learning, but felt that more attention should be placed on:

- pedagogy and work in specific subjects
- pupil groups where they had experienced a dearth of expertise including: high-attaining learners eligible for the Pupil Premium; and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- the needs of place or context (including schools in rural areas, or pockets of deprivation in more affluent areas)
- pupil wellbeing, for example through work on early intervention to prevent problems relating to behaviour and attendance
- curriculum subjects (in secondary schools)
- school-to-school approaches led by other practitioners who enjoyed credibility among their peers.

Interviewees were generally positive about evidence-based school improvement, but use of research evidence appeared mixed

There was a view shared by some respondents across all of the interviewee groups that effective school improvement activities needed to be evidence-based. However, headteachers acknowledged that the extent to which they and other practitioners used research evidence to support their practice was variable. Around one quarter indicated that they would

engage with research evidence before embarking on changes in their school, and around half of the system leaders and CPD leads recognised the need for practice to take on board evidence-based principles. These findings are broadly consistent with a recent NFER research study, which found that while most teachers are willing to engage with research evidence, this is not consistently translating into evidence-informed decision-making across schools in England (Walker *et al.*, 2019a).

Features of school improvement support that schools desire

Headteachers and CPD leads typically wanted support that was contextualised to schools' and practitioners' distinct needs, and which took account of their level of experience and CPD requirements. They also wanted to understand the rationale or evidence base behind any guidance (although not all used the specific phrase 'evidence base'). Many middle leaders reflected on strengths and weaknesses within their departments or areas of responsibility, the types of support they had already accessed, and the future work they would find beneficial. Some of them expressed a desire for training that would help them to develop their leadership skills to equip them to better support their colleagues. They indicated that they would value external support that provided verification for their practice, alongside ideas for change, helping them to evaluate their work and enabling them to understand the root of an issue. Middle leaders and classroom teachers also emphasised the need for practical resources such as lesson plans and hand-outs that could be used in the classroom. This view was most apparent among classroom teachers, reflecting their immediate priorities as practitioners. System leaders recognised that support staff, as well as teachers, would benefit from additional support and training.

Interviewees identified a number of factors that they believed affected schools' propensity to engage with school improvement support

These related to the provider and/or the support offer itself; and wider factors including the education system, the circumstances of the local communities served by the schools, and the culture and climate within the schools themselves.

There was a high level of alignment between all interviewees, regarding *school improvement provider/offer features* that they believed would maximise schools' engagement. A major theme was the importance of providers working **collaboratively** with schools, to understand their challenges and needs, and to tailor their offer carefully to these (this was also reflected in the findings from the expert review (e.g. Brown and Flood, 2019). Through this collaborative process, system leaders and headteachers, particularly, wished for a 'challenge and support' model and the development of a trusting, co-working relationship. Again, reflecting the findings of the expert review (e.g. Stoll *et al.*, 2012), all interviewees said that the offer would need to have a strong focus on the **goal, or outcomes**, that the school wished to achieve, which the provider would need to negotiate carefully with the school.

Some, but not all, interviewees wanted an offer that would be low on time commitment, and quick and easy to implement, with ready ideas for application in the classroom. This view goes against the grain of the evidence on effective professional development, which indicates that sustained programmes are more likely to have impact (Cordingley, *et al.*, 2015). It suggests that providers of school improvement support may need to persuade some schools of the value of a longer-term approach to school improvement, while attempting to understand their reasons for desiring short-term or 'off-the-peg' solutions.

In terms of *system and school-level factors* that enabled or hindered their engagement with school improvement provision, interviewees tended to identify hindering, more frequently than enabling, factors. Almost all interviewees mentioned that Priority Schools faced a number of **resource challenges**, which could affect their ability to engage effectively with school improvement support. These included limited staff capacity and budgetary constraints, leading to problems releasing staff for training and development, or reduced financial capability to enable continuing professional development (CPD). Aside from the financial implication of cover costs, many headteachers were concerned about the implications of staff release on pupil wellbeing and attainment.

There was also, reportedly, **not always full school improvement commitment among all staff** in all schools. This reflected the findings of the expert review, in particular Brown and Flood's (2019) suggestion that school leaders need to be prepared to provide opportunities for school improvement engagement, and that this requires an intentional commitment of resources. Other system leaders believed that **some SLTs provided insufficient support for their staff to engage** in CPD, or went as far as to say that, in some of their schools, there was a poor SLT-staff relationship,

which acted as a barrier to whole-school engagement with school improvement priorities. There was certainly a perspective from some middle leaders and classroom teachers that their headteachers, while having lots of ideas, struggled to convey these clearly to staff, ensure that staff were clear about what needed to be done, or allow sufficient time for implementation. Additionally, a few system leaders believed that **some headteachers lacked agency** regarding their schools' situations (for example, being resigned to poor pupil progress, which was felt to result from challenging home or community issues, over which they felt they had little control).

Conclusions

The challenges facing Priority Schools are numerous, complex and inter-connected. While some of these apply to most schools (for example, the pressures of the accountability system and restrictions on school funding), they are often felt most keenly by schools serving high numbers of disadvantaged pupils and/or disadvantaged areas, because of a pressure to improve results, or to meet a complex array of pupil needs. The specific challenges posed by poverty/deprivation and the staff supply deficit are most acute for Priority Schools, which typically serve pupils whose families face socio-economic disadvantage.

A key theme emerging through the research is that of **agency**. System leaders agreed with headteachers that the external challenges mentioned placed their schools under considerable pressure; and that it was difficult for school leaders to improve their schools when facing such obstacles. However, they also believed that headteachers sometimes failed to see themselves as critical change agents – demonstrating a tendency to focus on the enormity of the external challenge, rather than on the possibilities to make specific, targeted, changes to those elements of a child's school day, over which they could exercise control. They reflected that some headteachers needed support to improve their diagnosis and prioritisation skills. A number of interviewees commented that some schools currently adopted a 'panic response' to Ofsted inspections, trying out a number of different approaches in an attempt to make rapid progress, rather than focusing on longer-term, sustainable goals. While some headteachers were already confident in their diagnostic and prioritisation abilities, and others actively called for more support, some system leaders believed that other headteachers potentially lacked agency or will in this regard.

Introduction

This exploratory study was commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation (the EEF). The report presents findings on the challenges facing schools in disadvantaged circumstances (characterised by the EEF as 'Priority Schools'). Priority Schools, which include both primary and secondary schools, have a high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and have been identified as being most in need of support to raise overall levels of attainment while also closing the gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. The study also explored schools' 'readiness' to engage with external support on evidence-informed approaches to school improvement, including the conditions that are necessary to support this.

Why the focus on 'evidence-informed' school improvement?

The aim of the study was to help inform the EEF's new regional approach to school improvement. This will involve Research Schools acting as training hubs to support near-by schools in understanding the best available research evidence in key areas, and how it can be used effectively as part of their programme of professional development for teachers and senior leaders³.

Recent years have seen an increase in interest in evidence-informed school improvement, supported by a growing evidence-base, which indicates that evidence-informed approaches can help schools to improve (Mincu, 2014; Cordingley, *et al.*, 2015; Greany, 2015). A number of studies have demonstrated benefits for schools that use evidence to inform their practice and decision making. These include: encouraging teachers to engage with information beyond their day-to-day environments; supporting a culture of continuous professional development and the application of new knowledge; encouraging systematic approaches to innovation and experimentation; and helping schools to identify promising approaches, which have a chance of improving outcomes. It is well known that high quality teaching has one of the most direct impacts on pupil outcomes, especially for disadvantaged pupils (Mincu, 2014). Research has shown two relevant factors that can improve teaching quality: evidence-informed practice, and evidence-informed continuing professional development (CPD) (Cordingley *et al.*, 2015). The EEF's new regional approach to school improvement aims to support schools to use research evidence effectively in their decision making and practice, through a process of evidence-informed CPD and guidance.

Why a regional focus?

The study focused on the North East and North West of England. These regions were selected by the EEF as areas in which to concurrently develop initial plans for their regional offer, and to undertake the exploratory research study. The North East and North West were selected because, at both primary and secondary level, there is evidence to suggest that disadvantaged pupils in the North of England⁴ fare worse than their disadvantaged peers in London (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education Select Committee, 2018; Northern Powerhouse Partnership, 2018), and that disadvantaged pupils in several areas of the North East and North West are falling behind their peers by as much as two years by the end of secondary school (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2018). The need for evidence-informed school improvement support was therefore felt to be particularly pressing in these regions.

It is important to be aware that there is some variation in the proportions of different types of school in the North East and North West compared to other parts of England. According to school census data (DfE, 2019), in 2019 the proportion of academy schools in England was 32 per cent for primaries and 75 per cent for secondaries. However, in the North East and North West regions, larger proportions of schools were maintained by Local Authorities (LAs). In the North East, only 26 per cent of primary schools and 64 per cent of secondary schools had academy status; while in the North West, these figures were lower still – 15 per cent of primary schools and 59 per cent of secondary schools were academies. It is important to bear in mind that these differences in school structure may have influenced the challenges perceived by headteachers, and the types of support they received, and desired, in meeting these. For these reasons, and because this study is based on qualitative research, care should be taken in drawing generalisations from the findings reported here. However, as a piece of exploratory research, the study provides valuable insights for policy and

³ For further details see: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/scaling-up-evidence/supporting-regional-school-improvement/> [13/02/2020]

⁴ Three government regions: North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber.

practice by deepening our understanding of how different stakeholders view the challenges facing schools in disadvantaged circumstances.

Research objectives and design

In February 2019, the EEF commissioned NFER, in partnership with Professor Chris Brown⁵, to undertake an exploratory research study to understand, identify and explore two key issues.

1. **The challenges faced by Priority Schools in raising attainment** (and any variations according to phase, school type or Ofsted category).
2. **Priority Schools' 'readiness' to engage with evidence-informed school improvement support** (including the conditions enabling and hindering engagement).

The research was designed as follows. It was conducted over two phases.

Preliminary phase (February 2019)

- An initial desk study (incorporating an expert review of school improvement literature⁶), to provide context for the research.
- A refined research study plan.

Main study phase (March-July 2019)

The main study incorporated one-to-one telephone interviews with system leaders (see below for a definition) and headteachers; and a series of linked school case studies. The primary source was the interview data gathered from headteachers – our target was to interview between 35 and 40. Our experience indicates that this is an optimum number of interviews from which to generate a robust evidence base, which is sufficiently large to provide a full breadth of views and to ensure that the majority of pertinent themes emerge and are captured. Larger numbers of interviews rarely give rise to the identification of additional themes. We also aimed to secure interviews with 18-20 system leaders, to gather wider regional perspectives on the issues raised by headteachers, and to undertake case-studies in around half of the schools in which we interviewed the headteacher (17-20 schools). The case studies were designed to add richness and depth of understanding to the themes identified by headteachers and system leaders, by exploring the views of a range of additional within-school stakeholders.

In order to identify our sampling pool of headteachers for interview, we utilised two databases, constructed by the Fischer Family Trust (FFT) Education Datalab, which identified primary and secondary schools that met selected Priority School criteria⁷. The Appendix provides information about the profile of recruited headteachers' schools compared to the FFT profile of Priority Schools in the North East and North West. It shows that our sample was broadly reflective of the FFT sample.

Between March and July 2019, we contacted system leaders and schools, and set up and conducted interviews and visits. Our achieved samples were as follows:

- **One-to-one telephone interviews with 18 'system leaders'**. These included representatives from LAs (n=9), school trusts (n=3), National Leaders of Education (NLEs) (n=2) and Research Schools (n=4) in the North East and North West. We attempted to secure a balance between interviews with school trust chief executives and LA representatives, but LA staff were more likely to accept our invitations. Schools in the North East and North West were less likely than schools in England to have academy status, which may provide further context for the larger number of LA than school trust staff who took part.

⁵ Then at the University of Portsmouth; now at Durham University.

⁶ Conducted by Professor Chris Brown.

⁷ Priority Schools were identified based on the number of disadvantaged pupils and selected pupil performance measures.

- **One-to-one telephone interviews with 35 headteachers in Priority Schools** in the North East and North West of England (see Appendix for details of the characteristics of these headteachers' schools compared to those in the FFT database).
- **Face-to-face case-study visits and telephone interviews with staff in 17 of the Priority Schools** in the North East and North West of England in which we had interviewed the headteacher. Each case study incorporated one interview with the school's continuing professional development (CPD) lead or equivalent member of the senior leadership team (SLT); a discussion with a group of middle leaders; and a discussion with a group of classroom teachers)⁸.

This report

Between August and September 2019, we analysed all data using the qualitative analysis software, MAXQDA. This report summarises our findings. We have structured the report around the key issues posed by the research, with each section providing a summary of findings regarding a cluster of related research questions.

- **Section 2** – What are Priority Schools' challenges?
- **Section 3** – What school improvement support activities do schools currently access and desire?
- **Section 4** – How 'ready' are Priority Schools to engage with school improvement support?
- **Section 5** – Insights and recommendations for schools and policy-makers.

Project team

Individuals involved in the research study are listed below.

EEF:

James Richardson (Head of Dissemination and Impact)

Triin Edovald (Head of International Evaluation and research lead)

NFER:

Julie Nelson (Project Director and core team)

Matt Walker (Project Leader and core team)

Robert Smith (Fieldwork researcher and core team)

Eleanor Bradley (Fieldwork researcher)

Kelly Kettlewell (Fieldwork researcher)

Peter Binfield (Fieldwork research associate)

Louise Starks (Fieldwork research associate)

Keren Beddow (Research Operations recruitment lead)

Alison Riley (Project Coordinator)

External consultant:

Chris Brown (Project Consultant and literature review lead)

⁸ The case studies were a sub-set of the headteacher interviews. Interviewed headteachers were asked at the end of their interview if they would be willing for their school to be visited as a case study.

What are Priority Schools' challenges?

This section explores Priority Schools' greatest concerns or challenges, and the implications for their school improvement needs. It draws on school-based stakeholders' views, the views of system leaders, the school improvement and evidence-informed practice literature, and the research team's expert perspective.

The main challenges facing Priority Schools

Interviewees described a range of challenges (see Figure 1). These reflected the findings of recent school improvement literature, identified through our expert review. While these were typically discussed in broad terms, the fact that Priority Schools have above average proportions of disadvantaged pupils means that many of the challenges are directly relevant to, or associated with, providing support to these pupils.

The main challenges raised by interviewees and confirmed by the literature were associated with four external pressures (those largely beyond the control of schools): 'poverty/deprivation' (Díaz-Gibson *et al.*, 2017); 'austerity/lack of school funding' (Díaz-Gibson *et al.*, 2017; Greany, 2017); 'accountability' (Ehren, 2019; Greany and Earley, 2018); and 'staff supply' (Hargreaves, Parsley and Cox 2015). All stakeholder groups recognised the problems posed by these external pressures. Figure 1 groups the subsequent school- and area-specific challenges under these four challenges although, in practice, these intersect, meaning that **Priority Schools face a complex series of interconnected challenges**.

While there was some variation between institutions, in general headteachers' reported that their single main challenge was associated with what they perceived as a lack of parental/carer support or engagement (Brown *et al.*, 2015). This, in turn, was associated with a number of additional challenges, including parents/carers having negative views of education and low aspirations for their children, and children arriving at school lacking basic skills.

Many of our parents are in a cycle where they haven't worked for years. Many have never been into the city centre, they stay local. Many didn't have good experiences themselves at school, and they don't see school as relevant [Headteacher 24, secondary].

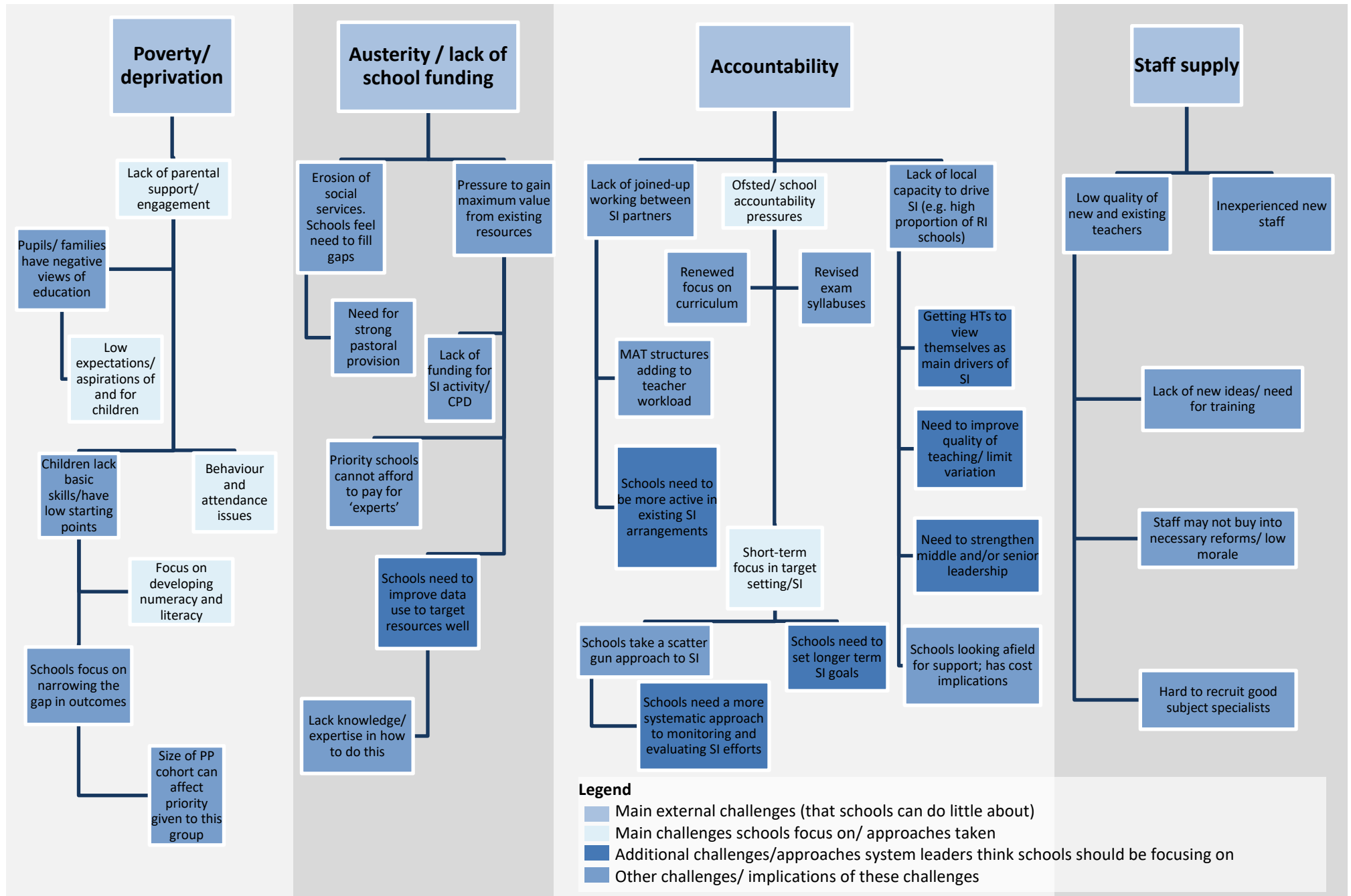
In addition, many headteachers spoke of the pressures associated with Ofsted inspections, and of the need to make rapid progress. As a result, there appeared to be a short-term focus on target setting, which some school staff and system leaders associated with a 'scatter-gun' approach to improvement, whereby a range of school improvement approaches were adopted with limited assessment of what was working and what was no. These approaches sometimes ended abruptly or were not followed through to the end.

There are too many [school improvement] projects, all with slightly different accountability measures, and none of them have delivered what the Trust wanted [Headteacher 11, secondary].

System leaders recognised many of the same challenges as headteachers, but they also identified additional issues (again reflecting findings from our expert review) which they thought schools should be addressing. For example, while system leaders recognised the challenges associated with the accountability system, and why this was leading to headteachers feeling they needed to make rapid improvement, they also recognised that sustained improvement typically takes place over a number of years and that, as a result, schools' needed to set longer term improvement goals (McWhorter *et al.*, 2019; Sartory *et al.*, 2017). In addition, while headteachers typically talked about the external challenges they faced, system leaders were more likely to focus on factors they thought were within schools' control. These included the need to: improve the quality of teaching; strengthen the quality of middle and senior leadership (Woods *et al.*, 2013); and develop more systematic approaches to monitoring and evaluating their improvement efforts (Woods *et al.*, 2013). In particular, many system leaders reported that schools lacked confidence in diagnosing their needs or prioritising their actions, and that they needed to make better use of data to inform these judgements.

Schools are not good at identifying and prioritising what needs to be done. Schools can be data rich but don't often know what to do with it and data isn't always reliable and is based on teacher perceptions...using data wisely is definitely something schools could do with having some help on [System leader 8].

Figure 1. The main challenges facing Priority Schools



System leaders also identified challenges associated with a lack of capacity, at the local level, to drive improvement, as well as a lack of joined-up working between improvement partners. Figure 2 more clearly summarises different stakeholders' perceptions of these and other challenges.

Figure 2. Different stakeholders' perceptions of the main challenges facing Priority Schools

System leaders	Headteachers	Classroom teachers, middle leaders and CPD leads
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of capacity at local level to drive improvement (e.g. high proportion of schools in Ofsted requires improvement (RI) category) Lack of joined-up working between improvement partners / confusion over roles Schools pre-occupied with Ofsted which leads to culture of focusing on quick fixes rather than long-term solutions Inability of schools to prioritise and lack of knowledge of 'what works' Need to improve quality of leadership and teaching and learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of parental support/engagement Pupils and parents/carers have low aspirations/expectations Pupils enter school with low starting points Issues to do with pupil behaviour and attendance Particular focus on literacy and numeracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of parental support/engagement Pupils lack basic skills and 'need to be parented' Pupils and parents/carers have low aspirations/expectations Pupils have social and emotional issues Issues to do with pupil behaviour and attendance Particular focus on developing pupils' vocabulary, spelling, reading skills and/or mathematics

Classroom teachers, middle leaders and CPD leads were largely in agreement with headteachers regarding the main issues facing their schools. However, classroom teachers were more likely to identify challenges associated with pupils' social and emotional learning, as well as their behaviour and attendance (Brown *et al.*, 2015).

Further analysis was undertaken to explore whether headteachers in schools with different characteristics (in terms of phase, Ofsted category and type) were more likely to report experiencing different types of challenges. The findings are summarised in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. The challenges reported by headteachers in different types of school

Phase	Ofsted Category	Type
Primary (n=19): Children having social or emotional issues Children lacking basic skills	Good/ Outstanding (n=24): Subject-specific focus High pupil mobility school trust structures adding to workload	LA maintained (n=25): No discernible differences
Secondary (n=16): Recruiting subject specialist staff Exclusions	Requires Improvement/ Inadequate (n=11): Historically poor leadership Poor teaching quality	Sponsored academy (n=7): Historically poor leadership
		Academy converter (n=3): No discernible differences

In terms of differences by school phase, headteachers in primary schools were more likely to identify challenges associated with a low level of pupil social and emotional and/or basic skills; whereas secondary headteachers were more likely to describe challenges associated with recruiting subject specialists and managing pupil exclusions. Dealing with poor pupil behaviour and managing exclusions was a key challenge for secondary headteachers – it is possible that this was a later manifestation of the low levels of social, emotional and basic skills reported by primary headteachers among younger children.

Headteachers in Ofsted-category good or outstanding schools were more likely to identify challenges associated with specific subject areas, compared to headteachers in RI and inadequate schools. This could suggest that headteachers in good/outstanding schools are better at diagnosing or pinpointing specific challenges or areas of weaknesses. The findings may also support the recommendations made by the FFT in a recent analysis of secondary school performance tables, which suggested that a focus on improving poorly performing subjects/departments may be more effective at

improving pupil attainment than efforts that focus on whole-school approaches (Thomson, 2020). Headteachers in RI and inadequate schools were also more likely to report that their schools had suffered from historically poor leadership. However, some caution needs to be taken when interpreting these findings, as the underlying numbers are small. There were few discernible differences by school type, perhaps owing to the small numbers in some categories. However, it is perhaps not surprising that historically poor leadership was associated with sponsored academy schools.

In addition to the differences between the school-level characteristics shown above, there are other variables, which might affect headteachers' perceptions of the challenges facing their institutions. For example, it is widely acknowledged that rural or coastal schools can sometimes feel isolated, as they have reduced access to available support mechanisms (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2019). Interviewees in such schools confirmed this finding.

The school improvement support activities that schools currently access and desire

This section explores the range of school improvement activities currently taking place in Priority Schools. It also explores interviewees' perceptions of the benefits and outcomes resulting from these activities, their views on any gaps in this provision, and their views on the features of effective school improvement support. It draws on school-based stakeholders' views and the views of system leaders.

Current school improvement activities in Priority Schools

Priority Schools described the wide range of improvement activities in which they were involved, designed to enable them to:

- address the standards agenda
- achieve greater consistency of practice
- develop/reform the curriculum
- strengthen school leadership, especially at SLT and middle-leader level.

These broad aims were addressed through a focus on a range of **themes** such as literacy (including vocabulary and phonics), numeracy, other subject-specific work, behaviour, and attendance. Schools also focused on groups of **learners** such as those in the early years, or learners eligible for the Pupil Premium (PP). Activities were delivered through a range of different **structures** including school trusts, LA networks/services, NLEs, TSAs, and Research Schools. Where LAs were involved, their focus was usually as an enabler/broker rather than as a direct provider of school support services.

Delivery mechanisms for the school improvement work included school-to-school work, providers modelling practice, peer review, as well as participation in within-school professional learning communities (PLCs) and across school professional learning networks (PLNs). Across the Priority Schools, interviewees spoke of moving away from the use of one-off courses, attended by one or two members of staff released from classroom duties, towards more focused approaches such as whole-school delivery or coaching models with individuals or small groups. This was due to a combination of factors including the cost of releasing staff, the discontinuity caused by having to arrange supply cover, and concerns about the quality of some of the provision that staff had accessed when attending courses. It also indicates that schools may have been making evidence-informed decisions. The research evidence is clear in its assessment that one-off courses, with little scope for in-school reinforcement or consolidation, are rarely an effective form of CPD:

Leaders of professional development – whether within school, or with an external partner – should reject one-off activities in which teachers remain passive where these are not accompanied by in-school activity for teachers to engage repeatedly and meaningfully with content and reflect on new approaches (Teacher Development Trust, 2015).

Furthermore, middle leaders and classroom teachers, in some priority schools, believed that the model of attending one-off external courses also failed because in-school processes for cascading the learning were weak, mainly because staff lacked the time to deliver or participate in whole-school or departmental dissemination activities. However, in other

schools, classroom teachers and middle leaders had been encouraged to attend externally-provided courses, and some described effective processes which had been created to enable them to cascade the learning, such as dedicated CPD time where staff were able to present to colleagues.

These findings cohere with those of the expert review. For example, Brown and Flood (2019) found that, an attendance and cascade model was most effective where there was a *system* in place allowing knowledge to spread from one or two individuals to the wider staff. To enable this, school leaders needed to:

- prioritise dissemination activity by providing appropriate resource, such as time for individuals to attend courses and time for them to engage with colleagues
- formalise this activity by building dissemination and engagement with new ideas into the school's vision and policy documents, making it an expectation of how things are done within the school
- choose participants wisely, since ideas promoted by those who are natural change agents within school are more likely to be attended to by colleagues.

The literature also suggests that a distributed leadership approach, when undertaken effectively, can attend to all three of these factors (Bush and Crawford, 2013; Hairon and Goh, 2015). Specifically this involves school leaders empowering individuals to act as leaders, fostering interaction for shared decision making and building the capacity of subordinates to lead (Hairon and Goh, 2015).

Benefits and outcomes of current school improvement activities

Headteachers described changes in approaches to teaching and learning, which had stemmed from their school improvement activities. These included implementing specific changes such as:

- **a focus on mathematics**, such as developing the Singapore Maths Approach, introducing the 'Maths No Problem' resources, or implementing whole-school strategies to achieve greater consistency in how the subject was taught
- **a focus on reading**, such as the introduction of accelerated reading projects to raise expectations, work to increase test scores in comprehension, and to teach reading more explicitly
- **implementing specific projects** to support speech, language, and communication, such as Elklan projects⁹, or changing schools' schemes of work in subjects across the curriculum to match to work in literacy, as a means of improving learners' vocabulary.

School improvement work also included a focus on activities designed to address broader aims including: raising expectations through project work designed to foster ambition and aspiration; changing teachers' use of language to ensure children better understood what was said; improving the quality of marking and feedback to learners; improving meta-cognition; ensuring learning sequences were reflective of strategies which help learners to remember; implementing parenting programmes; behaviour support and management (such as behaviour coaching for staff) and staff training on the use of restorative practice.

When discussing the impact of such work on school outcomes, headteachers emphasised that progress could not always be attributed solely to one project or initiative. Impact was often achieved only after approaches had become embedded in schools' working practices rather than by pursuing one-off strategies. Some headteachers were concerned about the difficulty of sustaining work, noting the limitations of one-off approaches if these did not become embedded in school practice. Some middle leaders and classroom teachers referred to the benefits of benchmarking and school improvement work designed to demonstrate effective practice, but particularly welcomed approaches that drew on the experience and expertise of practitioners from other schools. They emphasised that this was a useful way of nurturing their confidence by providing reassurance and verification of practice.

⁹ Accredited courses for education and other staff working with those with speech, language and communication needs and for parents.

Gaps in current provision

Reflecting the findings of our expert review, interviewees expressed mixed views about the extent to which current provision met their needs. Most interviewees were satisfied by the spread of existing provision (in terms of coverage and offer). However, many felt that more needed to be done to ensure schools were aware of what was available and how it related to the needs of schools, departments/teams and individual teachers. Interviewees (particularly headteachers and system leaders) also noted that schools' needs were evolving (due to changes in curriculum, accountability processes and the need to respond to changing socio-economic conditions). This generated new or different support needs in areas such as:

- **curriculum**, e.g. curriculum modelling/planning, individual subjects, especially in secondary schools
- **learner needs/wellbeing**, e.g. behaviour and preventing exclusions, early intervention, meeting the needs of key groups of learners such as early years, high-achieving PP, and SEND/Additional Learning Needs
- **school leadership**, e.g. whole-school approaches to change, implementation of school QA processes, leading schools in specific contexts such as rural areas with pockets of deprivation, benchmarking school performance compared to statistically similar schools
- **teaching and learning/pedagogy**, e.g. how children learn, understanding the skills/competencies of learners, the meaning of key educational concepts such as comprehension and differentiation, and developing staff understanding of standardised scores so that they recognised the implications for practice
- **school-to-school approaches**, led by other practitioners who enjoyed credibility among their peers
- **the needs of place or context** (including schools in rural areas, or pockets of deprivation in more affluent areas).

Headteachers were concerned about the poor quality of some provision, which they had purchased in the past. They emphasised the importance of robust quality assurance so that they could feel confident in adopting a particular response. As one headteacher noted: *'In the context of school workload at the moment, staff don't want to invest time and energy into something if they don't know it's going to work'*.

Views on evidence-based school improvement

Respondents were asked about the extent to which they used research evidence to support their practice in schools. There is a possibility that asking this question may have prompted a more positive impression of the role played by research evidence in informing schools' improvement activities than might otherwise have been the case. There was certainly variation in interviewee's interpretation of the term evidence-based school improvement. Some headteachers and other interviewees defined this in terms of their **own monitoring activities**, while others were keen to link those activities to the findings from **externally-produced professional research**. In some of the schools, reflecting Coldwell's (2017) evaluation of schools' progress to becoming evidence-informed, the latter was only emerging practice.

All interviewees believed, when asked, that effective school improvement activities should be evidence-based. However, headteachers acknowledged that the extent to which they and other practitioners used evidence to support their practice was variable. Around one quarter indicated that they would engage with research evidence before embarking on changes in their school, and around half of the system leaders and CPD leads recognised the need for practice to take on board evidence-based principles. These findings are broadly consistent with NFER's recent research study, which found that while most teachers are willing to engage with research evidence, this is not consistently translating into evidence-informed decision-making across schools in England (Walker *et al.*, 2019a). Those headteachers who were most convinced of the value of evidence-based approaches to school improvement believed that these offered a way of supporting changes to practice based on what was proven to have worked elsewhere. As one headteacher explained: *'Everyone's understood from the word go that we're doing this because this is the evidence behind it'*. Another said: *'It [the school improvement approach] would need to be strongly evidence-based and not just marvellous ideas'*.

Headteachers also mentioned the importance of evidence being adapted to context. As one noted: *'You take these things and then adapt them to work in your own school'*. Other interviewees emphasised that it was advantageous for

practitioners to see approaches being used in real-life situations rather than having them described to them. This finding is supported by Rogers (1995). In order to facilitate this sharing of practice, system leaders believed there was a need to strengthen the school improvement system's ability to identify the expertise that existed within schools, and to create robust conduits (or brokers) between schools and providers of evidence and research. In relation to this point, system leaders emphasised the importance of ensuring that schools were able to access support networks.

Although a number of interviewees discussed the importance of evidence-based school improvement, some headteachers and system leaders felt that there was a degree of cynicism on the part of some practitioners about its usefulness. They were often slow to engage with evidence and were impatient for results, needing to know what would work quickly and lead to rapid improvements, especially when faced with the demands of external accountability processes such as Ofsted inspections. The literature suggests that school leaders can help to reverse this cynicism. For example, they can instigate an inquiry-led culture in their schools, in which time is provided for teachers to engage meaningfully with research evidence, so that they come to understand that risk-taking and innovation can often result in dead ends and wrong turns before arriving at successful new approaches (Brown and Flood, 2019; Hutchings *et al.*, undated). Support may be required for school leaders, to help them understand how to create such a culture, while at the same time shielding teachers from the immediacy of accountability.

Finally, some interviewees were concerned that it was not always easy to identify the basis and quality of research evidence and argued that more transparency was needed in order to convince practitioners of the merits of particular strategies and their relevance to the contexts in which they worked. One practical suggestion was that serving practitioners could be involved in the work of 'badging' or promoting credible evidence-based organisations and school improvement support packages for other schools, in order to maximise their take up.

How ready are Priority Schools to engage with school-improvement support, and what will aid implementation?

Factors influencing engagement with school improvement support

Interviewees identified a number of factors that they believed affected schools' propensity to engage with school improvement support. These related to the provider and/or the support offer itself; and wider factors including the education system, the circumstances of the local communities served by the schools, and the culture and climate within the schools. We describe these factors in more detail below.

Providers and the support offer

There was a high level of alignment between all interviewees, regarding school improvement provider/offer features that they believed would maximise schools' engagement. A major theme was the importance of providers working **collaboratively** with schools, to understand their challenges and needs, and to tailor their offer carefully to these (this was also reflected in the findings from the expert review, e.g. Brown and Flood (2019). Through this collaborative process, system leaders and headteachers, particularly, wished for a 'challenge and support' model and the development of a trusting, co-working relationship:

It would need to be seen as a package that gets colleagues to think. To not be told 'it's my way or the high way'. It needs to promote collaboration – partnership working that promotes hard thinking, and is routed in research [System Leader 10].

Again, reflecting the findings of the expert review (e.g. Stoll *et al.*, 2012), all interviewees said that the offer would need to have a strong focus on the **goal, or outcomes**, that the school wished to achieve, which the provider would need to negotiate carefully with the school. Linked to this point was the view that support should be **contextualised** to schools' and practitioners' distinct needs, taking account of their existing levels of experience and CPD requirements. All school-based interviewees highlighted the importance of building time for reflection on current teaching practices and outcomes into any support offer. Classroom teachers generally called for support that was targeted to the specific contexts in which they worked (accounting for the socio-economic background of their schools or the specific challenges of their year groups/subjects).

Unsurprisingly, all interviewees said they would need reassurance that the provider had a **strong reputation** as a credible school improvement partner, and that the offer itself would need to be **high quality**. There were various views of what high quality provision meant in practice, but some examples included: evidence based; implementation focused; easy to understand; practical/interactive; and good value for money. Some, but not all, interviewees wanted an offer that would be low on time commitment, and quick and easy to implement, with ready ideas for application in the classroom. As one said: keep it: *'punchy and slim'*. This view goes against the grain of the evidence on effective professional development, which indicates that sustained programmes are more likely to have impact (Cordingley, *et al.*, 2015). It suggests that providers of school improvement support may need to persuade some schools of the value of a longer-term approach to school improvement, while attempting to understand their reasons for desiring short-term or 'off-the-peg' solutions. In order to keep schools engaged, it may be advantageous to build some 'quick wins' into a longer-term offer.

*Overall, the clear indication is that to be most effective CPDL [Continuing Professional Development and Learning] programmes, which aim to bring about significant organisational and cultural change need to last at least two terms. Sustaining CPDL over a period of time and ensuring that it features multiple, iterative activities following the initial input, were identified as extremely important across all reviews (Cordingley *et al.*, 2015, p.4).*

Some interviewees identified additional features of provision that they felt would help to maximise engagement. These included the following.

Design features

Build in support for SLT on managing change in schools, particularly focusing on increasing the capacity of SLT (and other school leaders) to motivate staff and instigate whole-school strategic change. System leaders made this point, believing that support should focus on *'the how, as well as the why and what'*. However, headteachers rarely did. This

indicates an interesting perspective about where support is most needed. It reflects findings from recent literature, for instance Stoll *et al.*, (2015)'s observation that educators can often be frustrated in their attempts to roll out new practices and innovations to colleagues. In part, this frustration derives from a lack of understanding about, or even confidence in, leading change, but it also stems from the notion that people can instinctively oppose change initiatives that are likely to disrupt current ways of getting things done (Battilana and Casicaro, 2013). Fullan argues that there is a need 'to understand change in order to lead it better' (Fullan, 2001, p.34). That said, a number of the middle leaders we interviewed reflected on strengths and weaknesses within their departments or areas of responsibility, the types of support they had already accessed, and the future work they would find beneficial. Some of them expressed a desire for training that would help them to develop their leadership skills, to equip them to better support their colleagues. They indicated that they would value external support that provided verification for their practice, alongside ideas for change, helping them to evaluate their work and enabling them to understand the root of an issue.

Stoll and Brown (2015) note that governments internationally have taken this need seriously. Consequently, change management is frequently included in the leadership curricula prescribed by national or state-level Departments of Education, or other similar bodies. For example, *leading improvement, innovation and change* is one of the *Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's* key professional practices for school leaders. Change leadership is also one of five competence areas for Norwegian school *rektors*¹⁰. Stoll and Brown (2015) found that helping participants to understand and apply theories of change was fundamental to their success in being able to roll out innovations across their schools¹¹.

Aim to 'plug gaps' in the deficiency of social services support (for example, via support for SEND pupils; behaviour issues; mental health issues; and for pupils facing economic disadvantage). This illustrates the importance of a regional/local-network approach to the implementation of school improvement support, and a locally 'joined up' solution to meeting schools' complex array of needs.

Focus on developing all staff within a school (as well as the SLT) and 'tier' training activities appropriately for different types of staff. This point was made by headteachers as well as CPD leads and classroom teachers. Classroom teachers were particularly likely to call for practical resources such as lesson plans and hand-outs that could be used in the classroom, reflecting their immediate priorities as practitioners. The literature suggests that this approach may not be necessary. An alternative might be for school-improvement providers to provide practical guidance for school leaders on how to 're-contextualise' broad messages and guidelines for their schools (e.g. Brown, 2019; Brown and Flood, 2019; Wenger *et al.*, 2011). Teachers also sought sustained support, and approaches that would provide verification of their practice and judgements, as well as identifying areas for change. System leaders recognised that support staff, as well as teachers, often benefit from additional support and training.

Implementation features

Avoid conflict with, or duplication of, other school improvement offers. Priority Schools (especially those in Ofsted categories 3 and 4) are the subject of much attention. There are genuine concerns about the amount of offers directed at these schools. This can take the form of either multiple government programmes, sometimes referred to as 'initiative overload'; or offers from multiple providers. Both can be overwhelming. As one system leader and one headteacher explained:

What is not effective... is where schools become overwhelmed by too much support. For example for a hypothetical school in a MAT [multi-academy trust], you have support coming from the MAT, the DfE and the LA – if those three are giving conflicting information then that can become overwhelming and confusing for school leaders [System leader 5].

[[It's about] not cluttering the school improvement Christmas tree with more baubles! [Headteacher 15, primary school].

¹⁰ A senior official in a Norwegian secondary school.

¹¹ This was an Economic and Social Research Council funded PLN knowledge transfer project. The title was: *Middle leaders as catalysts for evidence-informed change*.

Ensure that the support is accessible. System leaders attached special importance to the need for the support to be accessible or '*pitched at the right level*' (something well acknowledged in the knowledge mobilisation literature, e.g. Cain *et al.*, 2019). Examples illustrated by school staff included that the support should: allow sufficient time for preparation and implementation; take account of the experience of the staff being supported; focus on consistency of practice; and provide a forensic analysis of the school's current situation.

System and school-level factors

When we asked interviewees about system and school-level factors that enabled or hindered their engagement with school improvement provision, they tended to identify hindering, more frequently than enabling, factors. Almost all interviewees mentioned that Priority Schools faced a number of **resource challenges**, which could affect their ability to engage effectively with school improvement support. These included limited staff capacity and budgetary constraints, leading to problems releasing staff for training and development, or reduced financial capability to enable CPD. Aside from the financial implication of cover costs, many headteachers were concerned about the implications of staff release on pupil wellbeing and attainment, as this quotation demonstrates:

When students feel like they've been let down their whole lives by somebody or something, a teacher not being there is a let-down. If a teacher's then out for three or four sessions, they've really let them down... For teachers who are NQTs [newly qualified teachers] and have lots of opportunities to go out and train, it's actually caused more damage [Headteacher 11, secondary school].

There was also a sense, among some interviewees, that there was **not always full school improvement commitment among all staff** in all schools. For example, some middle leaders and classroom teachers commented that a pressured curriculum and a feeling of being over-worked minimised some teachers' capacity or willingness to be involved in CPD. As one said: '*The expectation is that you should have to go above and beyond...We can't set out with that being the expectation...you won't get the time back*' (Middle leader, case-study 10). This again reflected the findings of the expert review, in particular Brown and Flood's (2019) suggestion that school leaders need to be prepared to provide opportunities for school improvement engagement, and that this requires an intentional commitment of resources. A number of possible approaches to the prioritising of time emerge from Brown and Flood's work, including re-allocating what had already been set aside for standard meetings, training and/or planning and preparation. At the same time school leaders may need support – such as coaching or mentoring – to help them identify what possibilities for prioritisation exist. In spite of these concerns, a small number of system leaders explicitly commented that staff across their schools were enthusiastic about professional development and demonstrated good potential to engage, although the resource challenges cited above sometimes dampened their enthusiasm.

Other system leaders believed that **some SLTs provided insufficient support for their staff to engage in professional development**, or went as far as to say that, in some of their schools, there was a poor SLT-staff relationship, which acted as a barrier to whole-school engagement with school improvement priorities. There was certainly a perspective from some middle leaders and classroom teachers that their headteachers, while having lots of ideas, struggled to convey these clearly to staff, ensure that staff were clear about what needed to be done, or allow sufficient time for implementation. This reinforces points made earlier in the report about a 'scatter-gun' approach to school improvement in some schools. It suggests that there is a role for school improvement providers in helping school senior leaders to prioritise and to focus on long-term improvement rather than short-term solutions, and supporting their staff to do likewise.

Other hindering factors mentioned by system leaders and headteachers are outlined below.

- Some system leaders commented that **school trusts sometimes preferred to offer their own CPD**, not wishing to draw on external support, and that this could be a barrier to schools within such trusts having access to fresh, external perspectives. This comment was made by system leaders across two LAs, two school trusts and one research school. It was not solely an LA perspective.
- Other system leaders believed that a school's **position in the Ofsted cycle** affected its capacity to engage with school improvement support. Some felt that when schools moved into category 2, or better, they gained the space and freedom to be creative and to engage with new ideas. However, when they moved into category 3 or 4, this could have one of two effects: enhanced engagement (often because schools 'reached out in desperation') or withdrawal from support as a result of despondency, or feeling overwhelmed.

- Headteachers serving schools in **rural/coastal locations sometimes felt cut off or isolated** from school improvement/CPD provision, because it was invariably delivered in a 'central' location which was time consuming and costly to attend. This was a barrier to engagement for such schools.

Finally, a notable and key difference between the views of system leaders and headteachers on the barriers to engagement was that:

- System leaders were more likely to say that **school leadership quality** was a barrier to progress.
- Headteachers were more likely to identify **external challenges** over which they felt they had little control (for example, teacher supply issues; initiative overload; or a reduction in LA support).

The comments of system leaders (and the fact that headteachers tended not to raise the issue of school leadership quality) suggest that there is potentially an unmet demand for SLT development/coaching. Additionally, a few system leaders believed that some headteachers lacked agency regarding their schools' situations (for example, being resigned to poor pupil progress, which was felt to result from challenging home or community issues, over which they felt they had little control).

Headteachers, and indeed other members of school staff, did not necessarily agree with this assessment, and were often more positive about their agency than system leaders suggested. Figure 4 shows that school staff identified the following features of their current practice as enablers of effective school improvement.

Figure 4: Enabling features of schools' current practice: headteacher and other staff perspectives

Headteachers identified that:	CPD leads; middle leaders and classroom teachers identified that:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> their schools were working collaboratively through CoPs and networks to create mutual learning and support their schools had supportive school trusts which gave them a high level of school autonomy as well as good central support their whole staff was focused on key priorities and open to development their leaders were building CPD and implementation into staff's daily routine/dialogue their leaders were determined to improve Ofsted judgements their leaders were modelling learning and devolving leadership to the wider staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> their schools had a positive staff ethos and a desire to improve their schools had stable staffing their schools had a supportive school trust their SLT provided support for staff CPD their staff were positive about CPD (supporting school priorities; wanting the best for pupils; and wanting to develop). This was sometimes modified by calls for CPD to be proportionate/sensitive to their work-life balance occasionally, some staff were resistant to development, although this was not typical of the whole staff

Fewer interviewees identified these enablers than the barriers previously described. Nevertheless, a number provided positive examples of current engagement, and the factors that enabled this.

Conclusions and recommendations

Key challenges

The challenges facing Priority Schools are numerous, complex and inter-connected. While some of these apply to most schools (for example, the pressures of the accountability system and restrictions on school funding), they are often felt most keenly by schools serving high numbers of disadvantaged pupils and/or disadvantaged areas, because of a pressure to improve results, or to meet a complex array of pupil needs. The specific challenges posed by poverty/deprivation and the staff supply deficit are most acute for Priority Schools, which typically serve pupils whose families face socio-economic disadvantage. They are also more likely than other schools to struggle to attract and retain high quality staff (Allen and McInerney, 2019). Headteachers and other school staff in Priority Schools consistently commented that securing parental support for the work they were trying to do to improve their schools, and outcomes for their pupils, was one of their biggest challenges.

School responses and current offers

A key theme emerging through the research is that of **agency**. System leaders agreed with headteachers that the external challenges mentioned placed their schools under considerable pressure; and that it was difficult for school leaders to improve their schools when facing such obstacles. However, they also believed that headteachers sometimes failed to see themselves as critical change agents – demonstrating a tendency to focus on the enormity of the external challenge, rather than on their ability to act and the possibilities to make specific, targeted, changes to those elements of a child's school day over which they could exercise control. They reflected that some headteachers needed support to improve their diagnosis and prioritisation skills. A number of interviewees commented that some schools currently adopted a 'panic response' to Ofsted inspections, trying out a number of different approaches in an attempt to make rapid progress, rather than focusing on longer-term, sustainable goals. While some headteachers were already confident in their diagnostic and prioritisation abilities, and others actively called for more support, some system leaders believed that other headteachers potentially lacked agency or will in this regard. This group of headteachers may need specific support in 're-thinking' their role.

Some interviewees were satisfied with the school improvement support they had received to date, and could point to specific improvements they had made in their schools as a result, but many identified gaps in provision, or called for new types of support. In particular, they often believed that current school improvement support was too 'generic', and that it needed to be more bespoke to individual schools' situations, taking account of the needs of their local communities or pupils; or tailoring to particular curriculum subjects or phases. They also had a tendency to desire whole-staff, rather than only senior staff-training,

While school improvement providers need to be mindful of such requests, these points raise a question about school leaders' own role in this process, which returns us to the point made previously about their agency. With the right support, it may be that headteachers will feel less inclined to make these requests. For example, it may be possible to help them develop the skills and confidence to take ownership of the process of implementation, by adapting 'generic' learning to their settings, overseeing the creation of tools and resources for their local contexts, and instigating effective monitoring and review cycles. Certainly, some of our interviewees mentioned that it is the **implementation** of learning, rather than learning *per se*, which has the power to create evidence-informed school improvement.

However, providers of school improvement support need to bear in mind that headteachers and other school staff are likely to need support to appreciate the value of, and potential approaches to, co-construction. This is a time-intensive process for schools, and there may not be high levels of initial commitment to it. It is also important to be aware that similar approaches have not always been fully effective. Reasons for this are many, but include the school-level barriers to engagement outlined in this report, which often militate against enthusiastic involvement. These include: resource constraints (time, budgets and staffing); a school's position in the Ofsted cycle; a lack of staff commitment to school improvement or to new approaches; and ineffective SLTs, or poor SLT/staff relationships (Nelson *et al*, 2019).

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Appendix: Profile of achieved headteacher sample compared to FFT sample

Stratifier	Variable	Percentage of North East/North West schools (FFT sample; n=568)	Percentage of headteachers (NFER sample; n=35)
Phase	Primary	62	54
	Secondary	38	46
Region	North West	71	71
	North East	29	29
Ofsted	Category 1/2	63	69
	Category 3/4	37	31

Our achieved sample was relatively small (35 headteachers) so it was not possible to achieve representativeness across all Priority School characteristics. However, we aimed for broad alignment and achieved a headteacher sample that was broadly reflective of the FFT sample of Priority Schools.

- We achieved the same proportion of schools from the North East and North West (29% in the North East and 71 % in the North West).
- We had a lower proportion of primary schools (54% vs 62%), and a higher proportion of secondary schools (46% vs 38%) compared to all Priority Schools in the North East and North West.
- We had slightly more Ofsted Category 1 and 2 schools (69% vs 63%), and slightly fewer Category 3 and 4 schools (31% vs 37%) compared to all Priority Schools in the North East and North West.

Due to the complexities of summarising 'school type' in the FFT database, we have not conducted a comparative analysis. The breakdown of academy and maintained schools in our sample is provided below. Given that our sample had a slightly higher proportion of secondary schools than the FFT sample, it is likely that we have an under-representation of academy schools. It was particularly challenging to recruit headteachers from these schools, as discussed in Section 1.2.

- LA maintained schools (n=25; 71%).
- Sponsored academy (n=7; 20%).
- Academy converter (n=3; 9%).

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The Education Endowment Foundation
5th Floor, Millbank Tower
21–24 Millbank
London
SW1P 4QP

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk>

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