

New Relationship with Schools: Evaluation of Trial Local Authorities and Schools

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National Foundation for Educational Research

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and Schools*

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and Peter Rudd*

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Foreword

DfES Foreword to NFER's Evaluation of the Trials of the New Relationship with Schools in 2004-2005

This report relays the findings of NFER's independent evaluation of the trials of the New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) in 2004-2005.

DfES gave NFER an unusual and challenging commission. We needed an evaluation which would generate findings quickly, so that those findings could influence decisions that had to be taken during the course of the year. This meant we could not ask for an exploration of the impact of NRwS on attainment, because the time lags involved in achieving such impacts are too great. And we could not hope for much on NRwS's impact on the overall operation of schools and associated services.

Important changes are being made in NRwS as it shifts from trials to roll-out, drawing on the experience gained from the trials. And some of the key features planned for NRwS could not be implemented in the trials. For both these reasons, the trials had important differences from what is now happening in the roll-out. So evaluation findings reported from the NRwS trials should not be assumed to carry across to the NRwS roll-out.

The main changes that are being brought in or substantially enhanced as NRwS rolls out are:

- a requirement that primary School Improvement Partners (SIPs) be nationally accredited – in the trials, only SIPs working with secondary schools were accredited;
- improved data for schools, inspectors and SIPs, including extensive data on children's well-being;
- substantial simplification of funding streams to schools and of the associated planning requirements on schools;
- provision of systematic regional support to SIPs through the National Strategies.

We are delighted with the way in which NFER has carried out our somewhat unusual remit, and grateful to the Foundation for its work.

Executive Summary

Background

This summary outlines the key findings from a national evaluation of the first-year trials of the New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) carried out by a team at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The trials took place in the period September 2004 to July 2005 and involved 93 schools in eight local authorities.

The New Relationship was first announced in January 2004 after schools and the DfES had highlighted bureaucracy as an ongoing issue in both primary and secondary schools. The DfES identified the need for a new relationship between the DfES, LEAs and schools and a need for closer alignment of national and local priorities. The joint DfES / Ofsted document entitled '*A New Relationship with Schools*' set out details relating to this new development and proposed: '*A cluster of interlocking changes that will affect school inspection, schools' relations with local and central government, schools' self-evaluation and planning, data collection from schools, and communications with schools*' (DfES / Ofsted, 2004a, p.1).

The findings are based on a questionnaire survey of all NRwS headteachers and two waves of in-depth interviews carried out as part of school and local authority case-study visits. The evaluation focused on the four school reform strands of the NRwS: School Self-Evaluation; the School Profile; the Single Conversation (including the notion of a 'single plan') and the School Improvement Partner (SIP). The study also aimed to look at the processes behind the implementation of these strands, including an assessment of the extent to which the NRwS had:

- helped schools to raise standards
- reduced bureaucracy in the current system
- more closely aligned national and local priorities
- released greater local initiative and energy in schools.

Key findings: NRwS school reform strands

Self-evaluation

Although it is probably true to say that the great majority of schools involved in the NRwS already had efficient and effective approaches to self-evaluation prior to the trials, there can be little doubt that the NRwS provided a new impetus for this work. The main new developments in self-evaluation activities were: consultation with the School Improvement Partner, the use of Fischer Family Trust data and the introduction of the Self-Evaluation Form

(SEF). There were also signs of a greater emphasis on seeking the views of pupils and parents in self-evaluation under the NRwS, though there was felt to be scope for further development of this aspect. Respondents also reported that they had plans to distribute self-evaluation activities around the school, especially to heads of year and key stage heads.

Overall, responses to the survey indicated a positive perception of the SEF, with the majority of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the SEF is: 'more detailed'; 'more rigorous'; and 'more effective'. The vast majority of respondents (94 per cent) agreed that the SEF had either a 'very important' or a 'quite important' part to play in their overall self-evaluation programme. There was also some indication, however, that completion of the SEF had placed an additional burden on school staff, with the majority of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that completion of the SEF was 'quicker to compile', and the majority agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was 'more onerous to complete' than previous forms.

Over three-quarters of respondents indicated that 'Ofsted / DfES guidance' (81 per cent); local authority 'written guidance' (76 per cent) and 'SIP verbal guidance' (76 per cent) had been 'very helpful' or 'quite helpful' during the trials. The vast majority (87 per cent) of respondents took the view that the role played by self-evaluation data in their next Ofsted inspection would be 'much more important' than previously, thus acknowledging the greater emphasis on self-evaluation since the introduction of the NRwS.

The School Improvement Partner

Questionnaire respondents took an overwhelmingly positive view of their SIPs, with the majority recording favourable ratings on a range of statements concerning perceptions of the SIP's work. There were, however, some distinctions between secondary and primary respondents, reflecting the different ways in which SIPs were introduced into these sectors. Whilst secondary headteachers considered a SIP to be more challenging and more of a critical friend than previous local authority link advisers, primary respondents were less satisfied that their SIP was able to offer such challenge under the NRwS. However, it should be noted that during the trial, primary SIPs were all drawn from existing link advisers, with little training in new ways of working.

Interviewees in schools expressed the opinion that a SIP should have a background in school improvement and prior headship experience, with many stating the importance of appointing SIPs with very recent (but not necessarily current) headship experience. It was considered important that a SIP should help a headteacher to prepare for an inspection and to provide robust challenge, as well as making validating and confirmatory judgements. The main challenge for local authorities was reported to be the ability to appoint appropriate SIPs to accommodate all schools within the authority.

The Single Conversation

Amongst the case-study interviewees, there was an initial lack of clarity about exactly what the Single Conversation was supposed to be and those who felt that they did have a good grasp of the concept sometimes expressed a view that the name is inappropriate. Having said this, at the beginning of the evaluation, there was recognition that the Single Conversation could have a major impact on relationships between schools, SIPs, local authorities and, potentially, the DfES.

By wave two of the evaluation, however, a majority of interviewees continued to harbour doubts over the concept of a Single Conversation. Some interviewees reported that so far they had not experienced a true Single Conversation – they were conversing with both the SIP and the local authority. Others questioned whether the notion of a Single Conversation would ever become a reality – could one person, in the SIP role, deal with all the necessary issues and provide sufficient support to a school? At the same time, there was evidence that, in some areas, practices had been ‘sharpened’ and schools were being more effectively challenged. The diversity of views and experiences surrounding the Single Conversation may reflect the different contexts of the trial local authorities – some had already adopted comparable systems, for others, the NRwS may have represented a more significant development, requiring considerable change.

The School Profile

The vast majority of school interviewees had found the process of compiling the profile relatively easy and much less burdensome than the process of putting together the annual governors’ report. The more succinct format, as well as the use of pre-populated data, was seen to aid the compilation process. At the same time, one of the most frequently voiced concerns was that the streamlined format did not allow for the personalisation or customisation of its content. Some respondents suggested that more flexibility is perhaps needed in order for schools to expand or customise particular sections and, for example, to include links to school websites for further details.

Key findings: NRwS processes

In addition to looking at the main strands of the NRwS, the evaluation also considered some of the key processes behind NRwS developments. These included consultation processes, the perceived role of the local authority, early considerations of impact and perceptions regarding bureaucracy.

The consultation process

Views on the consultation process were found to vary. Some headteachers and local authority representatives felt that the development of the NRwS had

been fluid and that the DfES had responded appropriately to feedback from the trial schools. Other interviewees, however, observed that the level of consultation had declined as the trial year progressed, though this was perhaps to be expected, given that the consultations started some time before the trials were actually introduced.

Internal consultations between headteachers and other staff members appeared to have increased as the NRwS developed over the trial period. For example, staff were asked for their feedback on the School Profile and were also becoming increasingly involved in the self-evaluation process. School governors still had limited involvement with the NRwS. They were, however, consulted on the School Profile and were kept up-to-date on the developments of the NRwS informally through the headteacher.

Local authorities and the NRwS

It was evident from the first wave of data collection that there was an initial uncertainty about the role of the local authority. There was also some evidence to suggest that local authority advisers sought further clarification on their specific role within the NRwS. Such issues, however, were largely considered to have been clarified as the trial progressed. The perception was that the local authority would continue to play a fundamental role in supporting schools since they retained responsibility for employing and managing SIPs.

There appeared to be a number of ways in which local authorities had changed their practice since the inception of the NRwS. For some local authorities, the NRwS entailed contact with more schools (not just those that needed intervention and support). Generally, local authorities were considered to be more streamlined and were working more strategically, with a greater emphasis on partnerships with schools. For example, local authorities were described as being more proactive in their relationships with school staff and in providing training for school staff, including additional self-evaluation training for governors.

Despite an increased awareness of the role of the local authority under the NRwS expressed during the second case-study visits, it was evident that further clarity on some aspects of the NRwS would help local authorities to understand how they can further assist in the development of the New Relationship. These areas included how SIPs will be funded, local authorities' responsibilities relating to the SIP and the role of Capita.

Impact

Whilst some respondents found it difficult to identify any major impact of the NRwS on standards, interviewees were able to comment on the changes in practice that had occurred during the trial period. However, for some, it was

difficult to ascertain whether such changes were brought about through the NRwS or would have occurred anyway.

Within schools, the NRwS had mainly impacted on senior management, although there was some evidence to suggest that other staff members were becoming more involved in NRwS practice. The impact on pupils, parents and governors, in terms of their direct involvement in NRwS activities, was negligible during the trial period, but was expected to develop further subsequently. Local authorities had developed strategies to accommodate certain aspects of the NRwS although some authorities were undergoing relevant changes anyway. On the whole, local authorities were thought to be more streamlined under the NRwS.

Reducing bureaucracy

There was widespread recognition that, firstly, more time was needed before firm judgements could be made about the issue of bureaucracy; and, secondly, that in a trial year, where new mechanisms are being put in place and guidance has to be issued, there may be a need for an increase in 'appropriate' bureaucracy before the levels of paperwork can be expected to decrease.

Respondents were able, however, to make some useful comments about this issue, and these may be helpful in terms of addressing this aspect of the NRwS as it develops further. To an extent, there were different emphases in the questionnaire and interview responses. In answering the key questions about levels of bureaucracy in the questionnaire survey, respondents were mostly positive; interviewees, however, gave more mixed responses.

A minority of survey respondents felt that bureaucracy had increased since the introduction of the NRwS: for example, 36 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the New Relationship 'has added unnecessary bureaucracy to the process of external accountability', compared to 51 per who disagreed or strongly disagreed. Furthermore, 57 per cent agreed that the NRwS had led to a lot more meetings and paperwork. Encouragingly though, when asked to consider whether the NRwS would cut down on duplication and bureaucracy in the long term, nearly two-thirds of respondents (62 per cent) expressed a view that this would be the case.

The interview data revealed that, even by the second wave of case-study visits, the majority of interviewees had not yet detected any significant actual reduction in bureaucracy (for schools or the local authority). The predominant view in interviews seemed to be that *'the jury is out'* on this issue.

Methods

The findings summarised above are based on both survey and questionnaire data. The **questionnaire survey** was despatched to all 93 participating schools in February 2005 and 68 completed questionnaires were returned: a

73 per cent response rate. There is evidence that the respondents to the survey (of whom 88 per cent were headteachers) were very experienced: respondents had averages of 28 years teaching experience and seven years in post. (It seems reasonable to expect that the next cohorts of headteachers are not likely to be as experienced as the first-year trial cohort of headteachers).

The **case-study visits** were carried out in all eight local authorities, and visits were made to 16 schools, two schools in each area. The visits included face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, where possible, with (i) a SIP within the local authority, and two other appropriate local authority representatives; (ii) two senior managers within each school, and a governor representative. Each of the local authorities and schools were visited twice, once in the autumn of 2004 and again in spring 2005.

Telephone interviews were also conducted with ten key national personnel (representatives from DfES, the Office for Standards in Education and the main educational unions / professional associations). These interviews were carried out so that the evaluators could acquire an understanding of how the NRwS was viewed at a national level.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is clear that the evaluation of the first-year trials, thanks to the contributions of participating schools and local authorities, has produced many relevant findings for both practitioners and policy makers. There have been a number of positive findings, most notably in relation to the SIP role and self-evaluation processes, along with a number of constructive comments about potential issues and challenges.

A central concern expressed by interviewees was the need to provide guidance and training to both schools and local authorities so that they would fully understand certain elements of the NRwS, including, notably, details regarding the role of the SIP, and the process aspects of the Single Conversation. It was also noted that schools with less well developed self-evaluation practices may struggle to accommodate the changes brought by the NRwS, thus training on self-evaluation would be useful. The SIP was seen to play a pivotal role in the NRwS and, as a result, the need to recruit 'quality' SIPs, who then received 'quality' training, was frequently emphasised.

As well as equipping schools and local authorities with the necessary knowledge and skills, successful implementation was also felt to rely on the degree to which the NRwS was viewed, overall, as a positive and progressive development for schools. Thus, some interviewees expressed a view that time and thought needs to be given to promoting the NRwS nationally, raising its profile and making sure that both schools and local authorities are fully on board with the principles underlying the NRwS.

1. Introduction

1.1 Evaluating the New Relationship with Schools

This report presents the findings from a national evaluation of the first-year trials of the New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) carried out by a team at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The trials took place in the period September 2004 to July 2005 and involved 93 schools in the following eight local authorities:¹

- Hampshire (secondary)
- Lincolnshire (secondary)
- Liverpool (secondary)
- Manchester (primary)
- Newcastle (secondary)
- Newham (secondary)
- Redbridge (primary)
- West Sussex (primary and secondary)

This report draws, in particular, from a questionnaire survey of all NRwS headteachers, and from in-depth interviews which formed part of school and local authority case-study visits, carried out in two waves, mainly towards the end of 2004 and in the spring of 2005. All eight local authorities were visited along with 16 schools, two schools in each area. The use of these methods allowed the researchers to develop a detailed picture of practitioner perspectives relating to the various elements of the NRwS prior to the anticipated further roll-out of the NRwS to 27 local authorities in September 2005, and to all schools in September 2006.

The evaluation focused on the four school reform strands of the NRwS as it was being implemented in schools within these eight local authorities. The four strands are as follows:

¹ In order to reflect recent changes in local government organisation, the term ‘local authority’ (LA) is used throughout this report in preference to the phrase ‘local education authority’ (LEA). Exceptions occur, however, where respondents or documents have made direct reference to an ‘LEA’.

- **School Self-evaluation** – to secure effective self-evaluation in all schools to help drive the school improvement cycle
- **The School Profile** – an annual document that provides high quality information about schools to parents and the general public
- **The Single Conversation** - a process to help schools think more explicitly and directly about school improvement, including the notion of a ‘single plan’
- **The use of a School Improvement Partner (SIP)** – a ‘critical friend’ assigned to each school to carry out the single conversation.

1.2 Aims and objectives

This NFER evaluation has been largely formative in nature and has aimed to generate independent evidence-based information to support and inform the development and roll-out of the NRwS. An interim report, based mainly on the interview evidence collected from the first round of school and local authority visits, was submitted to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in January 2005. This provided a ‘baseline view’ of the implementation of various aspects of the NRwS and, as well as summarising the perceived strengths of the NRwS, included a number of suggestions regarding possible further support for both schools and local authorities. This report draws from the findings of the interim report, but also incorporates new research materials, including the findings from a survey of all NRwS headteachers, from the second wave of case-study visits and interviews, and from telephone interviews with key national personnel.

The study aimed to assess the extent to which the implementation of each of the four strands of the NRwS (listed above) has:

- helped schools to raise standards
- reduced bureaucracy in the current system
- more closely aligned national and local priorities
- released greater local initiative and energy in schools.

In addition to this, the evaluation has also considered the extent to which the NRwS has been perceived as ‘joined up’, to assess the extent to which the various strands have been brought together, in this first year of operation, in a coherent way. Linked with this, consideration has also been given to the

question of how the NRwS has been implemented alongside other school-based developments, such as the requirements of the workload reform agreement.

1.3 Methodology

As noted in the previous section, there were three main elements to the evaluation:

- **Case-study visits** to the eight local authorities carrying out the NRwS trials, along with visits to a representative sample of schools, consisting of two schools in each local authority.
- **A questionnaire survey** of headteachers in all 93 schools involved in the trials to assess developments and changes in school self-evaluation and related areas.
- **Telephone interviews** with 10 key national personnel.

The **case-study visits** included face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with (i) a School Improvement Partner within the local authority, and two other appropriate local authority representatives; (ii) two senior managers within each school, and a governor representative. Each of the local authorities and schools were visited twice, once in the autumn of 2004 and again in spring 2005.² The interview schedules used for the first wave of visits covered the four school-reform strands, along with a number of other topics, including the following:

- the school's / local authority's practices before joining the NRwS
- the perceived early impact of the NRwS
- suggestions for further support.

These schedules were updated and adapted for the second round of visits, so as to cover progress over the course of the school year and a number of potential new issues which had arisen, including:

² In line with the NFER's *Code of Practice*, all interviewees were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, and hence no individual schools or LEAs are named in this report. In some instances, usually where a request was made by a school or LEA respondent, interviews were conducted by telephone rather than through face-to-face visits.

- more detailed perspectives on the role of the SIP
- latest experiences of the process of updating the Self-Evaluation Form (SEF)
- the role of governors
- reactions to the School Profile
- experiences of the NRwS as a consultative, policy development process.

The **questionnaire survey** provided an opportunity to request information from all schools taking part in the NRwS trials, allowing them to feed back their views regarding the success (or otherwise) of the self-evaluation strand. The survey was despatched in February 2005 and schools were asked to respond by the end of March 2005. Questionnaires were sent to all 93 participating schools and 68 completed questionnaires were returned from: 44 secondary schools, 22 primary schools and two special schools. The survey figures presented in this report are based upon these 68 returned questionnaires, which represent a 73 per cent response rate. Although this was a very pleasing response rate, it needs to be borne in mind that this is still a relatively small sample and caution needs to be exercised with respect to any generalisations made from the responses. A summary of returned questionnaires by school sector is shown in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1 Returned questionnaires by school sector

	Total	Secondary	Primary	Special
Sent out	93	61	30	2
No. returned	68	44	22	2
Response rate	73 %	72 %	73 %	100 %

Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005

Response rates were consistently high across all eight trial local authorities, ranging from 67 per cent to 86 per cent. This was particularly encouraging, given that the local authorities would have been involved in many other educational activities, and some of the schools were already taking part in the larger NFER case-study evaluation, as well as in other NRwS research commissioned by the DfES during the trial period.

In the tables based upon this survey, as featured in subsequent chapters, the percentages used refer to the combined number of schools (i.e. the percentages are based on 68 questionnaire returns) unless stated otherwise. In general there were few major differences between primary and secondary school

responses, and where there were differences of this sort these are highlighted either in the text or in more detailed tables relating to particular questions. Comments from the Special School respondents are provided at a number of points in this report.

The NFER team conducted a basic analysis of the contexts of the survey respondents' schools. About two-thirds of the secondary schools surveyed were large schools, with more than 1000 pupils on roll. A quarter had 600 to 1000 pupils on roll and the remainder less than 600 pupils. The majority of the schools were co-educational, although seven schools (six secondary and one special school) took girls only. The majority of schools were also local authority maintained – 11 schools (nine secondary and two special schools) had foundation or voluntary-aided status. A representative variety of types of catchment areas were also represented. It is also worth noting that three-quarters of the secondary schools in the sample had Specialist School status.

There is evidence that the respondents to the survey (of whom 88 per cent were headteachers) were very experienced: respondents included school staff with a minimum of eight years and a maximum of 42 years teaching experience, and an overall average of 28 years teaching experience. The minimum and maximum number of years in their present post were one and 21 years respectively, with an overall average of seven years in post. It may be important to bear these levels of experience in mind as the NRwS is rolled out to more schools and local authorities in 2005-2006 and beyond: it seems reasonable to expect that the next cohorts of headteachers are not likely to be as experienced as the first-year trial cohort of headteachers.

Telephone interviews were conducted with 10 key national personnel. These were carried out so that the evaluators could acquire an understanding of how the NRwS is viewed (and shaped) at a national level. The respondents consisted of key personnel from the DfES, Ofsted and representatives from the main educational unions/professional associations. These individuals, to varying extents, were able to comment on how the NRwS was formulated, the initial implementation of its strands, the perceived extent of 'joined up thinking', the place of NRwS in the policy process and, particularly, the impact upon their own organisation. It should be borne in mind that each of these interviewees viewed the NRwS from a particular perspective, and also

that they were not usually involved in implementation of the NRwS on a day-to-day basis.

1.4 Structure of the report

This report makes combined use of data obtained from all of these methods and sources to present a comprehensive overview of perceptions of the first-year trials. Responses to either the interview or survey questions are used to illustrate the key findings and themes of the evaluation. The following chapter sets out the context for the implementation of the NRwS. It provides a brief account of the implementation of the New Relationship from its beginning up to the announcement of the national roll out by the Minister of State for School Standards and 14-19 Learners in July 2005.

Each of the subsequent four chapters deals with one of the school reform strands of NRwS: Chapter 3 covers self-evaluation, Chapter 4 looks particularly at perceptions regarding the role of the School Improvement Partner, Chapter 5 examines respondents' perspectives on the Single Conversation, and Chapter 6 considers the development, and ongoing perceptions, of the School Profile.

Chapters 7 to 10 deal not with specific strands but with the broader processes and outcomes of the NRwS in the first-year trials. One important subsidiary aim of the trials was to encourage consultation of, and feedback from, practitioners, as the NRwS was rolled out, and Chapter 7 looks at these processes and examines the extent to which practitioners felt they had been able to shape implementation. Chapter 8, based on respondents' comments, considers the role of the local authority in New Relationship processes. Chapter 9 makes an assessment of the perceived impact of the NRwS after one year of operation and Chapter 10 focuses particularly on the issue of reducing bureaucracy, something which the respondents made many comments on.

The two final chapters bring all the evaluation data together in order to summarise the main successes and issues arising from the first year of implementation, to report a number of recommendations about the next steps relating to NRwS, and to set out some of the policy implications that may need further consideration as the NRwS is rolled out to all local authorities and schools.

2. Implementation

2.1 Origins of the New Relationship with Schools

The New Relationship with Schools was first announced in January 2004 by David Milliband, after schools and the DfES had identified ‘bureaucracy’ as an ongoing issue in both primary and secondary schools. The DfES identified the need for a new relationship between the DfES, LEAs and schools, with a need for closer alignment of national and local priorities. The joint DfES / Ofsted document entitled ‘*A New Relationship with Schools*’ set out more details. It proposed:

a cluster of interlocking changes that will affect school inspection, schools’ relations with local and central government, schools’ self-evaluation and planning, data collection from schools, and communications with schools (DfES / Ofsted, 2004a, p.1).

Consultation and evaluation have been important aspects of the trial period:

Both the recommendations of the IRU [Implementation Review Unit] and the evaluation of the trials will lead to adjustments and revisions of the new policies before we attempt to undertake a national roll out of the new relationship with schools (DfES / Ofsted, 2004a, p.14).

As noted in the previous chapter, the policy has four school-reform strands. These are as follows:

- **School Self-evaluation** – to secure effective self-evaluation in all schools
- **The School Profile** – an annual document that provides ‘high quality’ information about schools for parents and the general public
- **The Single Conversation** - a process to help schools think more explicitly and directly about school improvement
- **The use of a School Improvement Partner (SIP)** – a ‘critical friend’ assigned to each school to carry out the single conversation.

2.2 The Next steps

As the NRwS progressed, the DfES sent all trial schools and local authorities various new documents to support them in their work. The specific documents issued were as follows:

- School Improvement Partners Brief (DfES, no date)
- A New Relationship with Schools: Next Steps (DfES, 2005a)
- New Relationship with Schools: Improving Performance through School Self-Evaluation (DfES / Ofsted, 2004b).

During the second wave of visits to schools and local authorities, researchers were able to ask respondents what they felt about these documents and how useful they had been in terms of assisting their NRwS work (see Section 7.2). The *Next Steps* document (DfES, 2005a), issued in January 2005, was particularly important: it aimed to build upon the experiences of the NRwS during its first term of operation and to offer practical advice for schools and local authorities. It also noted that: '*Schools... want to produce a single plan to suit all their planning and accountability purposes*' (p.16).

In July 2005, as the first-year trials were close to being completed, the New Relationship with Schools was the central theme in a speech made at a Local Government Association conference by Jacqui Smith, the Minister for School Standards and 14-19 Learners. One of the central considerations of her speech was the role of local government:

I know that some people in local government are not convinced by everything in the new relationship. But I believe that it will win them over. It will let school leaders and teachers focus on improving teaching and learning. It will allow schools to offer more to their local community. And it will enable local authorities to be clearer about their responsibilities and take on an even more important role – in fact, a key role. (DfES, 2005b, p.3).

In this speech the Minister also restated the three guiding principles of the NRwS: reduced bureaucracy, sharper challenge and more effective support (p.4). She also announced an expansion of the use of School Improvement Partners: '*27 local authorities will have School Improvement Partners working in 700 schools from this September. Over the next two years, they will start working in every local authority in every school*' (p.7).

It is in this context, one of an ongoing emphasis upon the importance of various dimensions of the New Relationship with Schools, that the evaluation set out to look carefully at practitioners' viewpoints of developments in school self-evaluation processes, the developing role of the SIP, as well as other, related, aspects of the NRwS, such as the School Profile, the Single Conversation and local authority perspectives on these matters.

The following four chapters address each of the four school-reform strands in turn, detailing the findings from the case-study visits, the questionnaire survey and the interviews with key national personnel, in order to gain a holistic insight into the successes and challenges of the NRwS trials.

3. Self-evaluation

Key findings

- The main new developments in terms of self-evaluation activities were more consultation with the School Improvement Partner, the use of Fischer Family Trust data and the introduction of the Self-Evaluation (SEF) Form.
- There were also signs of a greater emphasis on seeking the views of pupils and parents in self-evaluation under the NRwS, though there was much scope for the further development of this aspect of self-evaluation.
- Respondents reported that they had plans to distribute self-evaluation activities around the school, especially to heads of year and key stage heads: just under a third of respondents stated that they had plans to involve secretaries, administrative staff and teaching assistants in future evaluation work.
- Overall, responses indicated a positive perception of the SEF, with the majority of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the SEF is: 'more detailed'; 'more rigorous'; and 'more effective'. The vast majority of survey respondents (94 per cent) agreed that the SEF had either a 'very important' or a 'quite important' part to play in their overall self-evaluation programme.
- Over three-quarters of respondents indicated that 'Ofsted / DfES guidance' (81 per cent); local authority 'written guidance' (76 per cent) and 'SIP verbal guidance' (76 per cent) had been 'very helpful' or 'quite helpful'.
- The vast majority (87 per cent) of respondents took the view that the role played by self-evaluation data in their next Ofsted inspection would be 'much more important' than previously, thus acknowledging the greater emphasis on self-evaluation since the introduction of the NRwS.

School self-evaluation is a key dimension of NRwS and it is seen as an important means of raising standards in schools. The self-evaluation strand endeavours to secure effective self-evaluation to help drive the school improvement cycle, enabling schools to identify priorities for improvement and build on their existing strengths. This chapter is based mainly on the detailed findings from a self-evaluation survey of all 93 schools taking part in the NRwS trials, though it also draws upon the interview data relating to this area where appropriate.

3.1 Self-evaluation practices

Responses to the survey were received from 68 of the 93 schools (see Section 1.3 for further details). In the majority (88 per cent) of the schools surveyed the headteacher was reported to have overall responsibility for self-evaluation. In eight schools (six secondary and two primary schools) other members of staff were reported to have overall responsibility.

Although many of the same sources of information were reported by respondents to be used both before and after NRwS, there were some notable exceptions (see Table 3.1 below). For example, almost three times as many schools (both primary and secondary) were reported to be using Fischer Family Trust data after NRwS compared to the situation before the introduction of NRwS.

Table 3.1 Use of information prior to and after the introduction of NRwS

	Sources of information used before NRwS		Sources of information used since NRwS	
	No.	%	No.	%
School produced data	68	100	67	99
LA produced data	63	93	63	93
PAT / Autumn package	57	84	56	82
Fischer Family Trust data	22	32	61	90
ALIS / YELLIS	18	26	17	25
Other commercial software package	9	13	11	16
PANDA	67	99	64	94
LA / Consultant reports	51	75	52	76
Teacher assessments	59	87	59	87
Lesson observations	66	97	65	96
Work scrutinies	50	74	50	74
Department / subject audits, reviews	62	91	62	91
Performance management for staff	63	93	61	90
Training / INSET evaluations	55	81	56	82
Other sources of information	30	44	32	47

N=68

Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005

Similarly, whilst only a few schools reported using a Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) before NRwS, the majority (both primary and secondary) reported using a SEF within the NRwS trials. At the same time, the number of schools using an S4 form or an LEA form decreased following the introduction of NRwS. None of this is particularly surprising, given the timing of the introduction of the Fischer Family Trust data and the SEF.

There was also an increase in the number of schools utilising discussions with the local authority or School Improvement Partner (SIP) and using parent and pupil input into self-evaluation (although increased student input was mainly indicated by secondary respondents). Overall, this reflects the greater emphasis on seeking the views of pupils and parents in self-evaluation in NRwS.

Respondents were asked which sources of information were considered to be the most helpful for the purpose of school self-evaluation (see Table 3.2). The following (based on the percentage of respondents across the full school sample selecting the ‘very helpful’ category) were identified as being the four most helpful sources of data:

- school produced data (90 per cent)
- lesson observations (82 per cent)
- department / subject audits, reviews (74 per cent)
- Fischer Family Trust data (69 per cent).

It may also be worth noting that although 38 per cent of respondents found PANDA information ‘very helpful’, there was also a minority of respondents (12 per cent, or 8 schools) who said that this information was ‘not helpful’.

There were some differences in the views of primary and secondary school respondents (not shown in the table). Teacher assessments and work scrutinies were reported to be ‘very helpful’ by the majority of primary respondents. The unhelpfulness of the PANDA was mainly highlighted by secondary school respondents, whilst the unhelpfulness of the Pupil Achievement Tracker (PAT) was identified mainly by primary respondents. Responses from primary schools also suggested that local authority / consultant reports were less helpful.

Table 3.2 Usefulness of sources of information

	Very helpful		Quite helpful		Not helpful		Not used or no response	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
School produced data	61	90	7	10	0	0	0	0
LA produced data	26	38	26	38	2	3	14	21
PAT / Autumn package	22	32	30	44	6	9	10	15
Fischer Family Trust data	47	69	11	16	2	3	8	12
ALIS / YELLIS	9	13	8	12	0	0	51	75
Other commercial software package	4	6	6	9	0	0	54	79
PANDA	26	38	32	47	8	12	2	3
LA / Consultant reports	18	26	32	47	3	4	15	22
Teacher assessments	39	57	20	29	1	1	8	12
Lesson observations	56	82	10	15	0	0	2	3
Work scrutinies	39	57	12	18	0	0	17	25
Department / subject audits, reviews	50	74	13	19	0	0	5	7
Performance management for staff	35	51	25	37	3	4	5	7
Training / INSET evaluations	27	40	27	40	2	3	12	18
Other sources of information	14	21	11	16	0	0	43	63

N=68

Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005

Due to rounding, percentages may not always sum to 100

The previous paragraphs summarised respondents' views about the usefulness of different *sources* of information, but there was also a question asking schools which *processes* were the most helpful for school self-evaluation (see Table 3.3).

The following (based on the percentage of all respondents selecting the 'very helpful' category) were identified as being the four most helpful self-evaluation processes:

- monitoring against School Improvement Plan (72 per cent)
- discussion with LEA link adviser / School Improvement Partner (59 per cent)
- completion of Ofsted SEF form (46 per cent)
- pupil surveys / consultation (41 per cent).

Table 3.3 Helpfulness of various self-evaluation processes

	Very helpful		Quite helpful		Not helpful		Not used or no response	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Monitoring against School Improvement Plan	49	72	12	18	1	1	6	9
Completion of Ofsted S4 form	15	22	21	31	0	0	32	47
Completion of LEA form	15	22	16	24	2	3	35	51
Completion of Ofsted SEF form	31	46	15	22	0	0	22	32
Discussion with LEA link adviser / School Imp. Partner	40	59	23	34	3	4	2	3
Parent surveys	21	31	30	44	2	3	15	22
Consultation with student council	20	29	28	41	0	0	20	29
Pupil surveys / consultation	28	41	22	32	1	1	17	25
Governor visits / observations	19	28	26	38	3	4	20	29
Other input	10	15	6	9	0	0	52	76

N=68

Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005

Due to rounding, percentages may not always sum to 100

The table shows that, by the time of the survey, over two-thirds of the schools had used the Ofsted SEF form and none of these had found this process unhelpful. In addition, where there had been consultation with pupils, either via the student council or by means of a survey, nearly all schools had found this process to be very or quite helpful.

Responses to a further question indicated that, in the main, the same categories of personnel were involved in self-evaluation before and after NRwS, with two exceptions. A greater number of respondents reported that parents were involved in self-evaluation following the introduction of NRwS, compared to those who reported their involvement before NRwS (Table 3.4). The number of respondents reporting the involvement of year group and key stage heads in self-evaluation had also increased compared to those reporting their involvement beforehand (this increase mainly occurred amongst secondary respondents).

Table 3.4 Personnel involved in self-evaluation prior to and after the introduction of NRwS

	Involved before NRwS		Involved since NRwS		Planning to involve	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Headteacher	66	97	65	96	0	0
Leadership team	66	97	68	100	0	0
Department heads / subject coordinators	55	81	61	90	5	7
Year group / Key stage heads	43	63	51	75	6	9
All teachers	46	68	51	75	11	16
Teaching Assistants	38	56	38	56	20	29
Secretaries / Admin. Staff	33	49	37	54	21	31
Other staff	26	38	28	41	17	25
Governors	56	82	58	85	5	7
Parents	38	56	46	68	12	18

N=68

Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005

Table 3.4 also provides evidence that there are plans on the part of a good number of these schools to distribute self-evaluation activities around the school: ‘headteacher’ was the only category of staff that saw any sort of decrease in reported before and after involvement (albeit only by one per cent); and just under a third of respondents stated that they had plans to involve secretaries and administrative staff (31 per cent) and teaching assistants (29 per cent) in future evaluation work.

Overall, respondents appeared to be confident about the effectiveness of the self-evaluation practices being used in their schools. All the responses to a question about the effectiveness of self-evaluation practices in helping to identify the school’s strengths and weakness were positive: 68 per cent of respondents expressed a view that these practices were ‘very effective’, 32 per cent said that they were ‘quite effective’ and no respondents selected the ‘not effective’ category.

Respondents were fairly evenly divided between those who thought that current self-evaluation was ‘much more effective’ (29 per cent), ‘a little more effective’ (34 per cent) and ‘about the same’ (37 per cent) compared to previous practice, suggesting that this may depend on individual school circumstances.

Respondents were also asked, by means of an open question, why they had responded to this question in the way that they had. Of those who indicated greater effectiveness of the current system compared to their previous system, many suggested that this was down to having a more focused approach and a more structured and formalised system than before. Some suggested that the better level of focus could be attributed to the use of the SEF or Fischer Family Trust data. One primary headteacher said, for example, that: *'The Fischer Family Trust data is versatile, reliable, and accurate'*.

A few respondents also stated that increased effectiveness was due to SIP input, greater school staff involvement or to self-evaluation being more evidence based. Those who indicated that the effectiveness of current self-evaluation compared to previous practice was 'a little more effective' or 'about the same' often reported that they already had a rigorous system in place prior to NRwS, or that they were adopting the same practices as before.

Respondents were asked to make an assessment of the importance of various factors in terms of encouraging effective self-evaluation. This question included items that asked for perceptions on the importance of support and challenge from the School Improvement Partner. The major finding from responses to this question was that the vast majority of respondents (a minimum of 88 per cent) identified all the factors as being either very important or quite important (Table 3.5). Clearly the respondents' perception was that a whole range of factors and inputs are important in terms of encouraging effective self-evaluation.

Table 3.5 Importance of various factors for encouraging school self-evaluation

	Very important %	Quite important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Not sure %	Total %
Recognising school's strengths	96	4	0	0	0	100
Recognising school's weaknesses	99	1	0	0	0	100
Backing up judgements with evidence	94	4	1	0	0	99
Involving a wide range of staff	81	18	1	0	0	100
Involving parents	47	49	3	1	0	100
Being focused on raising standards	90	10	0	0	0	100
Sharing good practice	74	24	1	1	0	100
Support and encouragement of SIP	47	44	6	1	1	99
Being challenged by SIP	54	34	4	4	3	99
Staff skills to make evaluative judgements	85	13	0	0	1	99

*Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005
Due to rounding, percentages may not always sum to 100*

Respondents were also asked, by means of an open question, whether they thought there were any other factors which were important in encouraging effective self-evaluation. The most frequently noted factor was the involvement of the whole school community (although secondary respondents mainly drew attention to involving students only, whereas primary respondents focused on the involvement of all staff). Other factors identified by more than one respondent (numbers shown in brackets) were as follows:

- a school ethos of openness and trust (6)
- time to collect and consult widely on evidence (3)
- the perception of self-evaluation as an ongoing, continuous process (2)
- the opportunity to share, collaborate and compare evaluations between schools (2)
- having trained managers (2)
- having a focus on qualitative as well as quantitative outcomes (2).

3.2 The Self-Evaluation Form

Those who had completed the SEF (51 per cent of the full sample – 55 per cent of the primary and 48 per cent of the secondary school survey respondents), were asked how this compared to forms they had previously completed for Ofsted or for LEA link advisers. Overall, responses indicated a positive perception of the SEF, with the majority of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the SEF is: ‘more detailed’; ‘more rigorous’; ‘more effective’; ‘involves input from more staff’; ‘lets you be more honest, less defensive’; ‘makes it easier to highlight your own priorities’; ‘puts more emphasis on the next steps / improvement’; ‘links more directly to the School Improvement Plan’; and ‘has a very positive impact on your school’s own self-evaluation processes’ (Table 3.6).

Survey respondents were asked how frequently they intended to update the SEF, and the most frequently selected response was ‘termly’ (40 per cent of all respondents). However, whilst the next most commonly-ticked response by secondary respondents was ‘annually’ (34 per cent of secondary respondents), the next most commonly-ticked response by primary respondents was ‘continuously’ (27 per cent of primary respondents), indicating perhaps a slightly greater disposition within primary schools towards using the SEF in an ongoing way, as a continuously evolving record, as it is suggested it should be within NRwS.

The vast majority of respondents (94 per cent) agreed that the SEF had either a ‘very important’ or a ‘quite important’ part to play in their overall self-evaluation programme. Again, responses indicated a more positive stance amongst primary respondents towards the SEF, with a greater proportion than secondary respondents opting for ‘very important’ (82 per cent compared with 48 per cent).

There was also some indication, however, that completion of the SEF had placed an additional burden on school staff, with the majority of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that completion of the SEF was ‘quicker to compile’, and the majority agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was ‘more onerous to complete’ than previous forms.

Table 3.6 Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) compared with other forms

	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	Not sure %
More detailed	44	22	25	0	3
More rigorous	53	33	11	0	3
Quicker to compile	6	19	56	17	3
A more effective document	42	42	14	0	3
More onerous to complete	22	36	36	3	3
Allows you to paste your own information	14	39	31	11	6
Involves input from more staff	25	42	28	3	3
Lets you be more honest	22	53	11	8	6
Easier to highlight your priorities	28	58	8	3	3
Puts more emphasis on improvement	28	50	19	0	3
Links more directly to School Imp. Plan	28	64	3	3	3
Positive impact on own self-evaluation	33	56	8	0	3
Is an unnecessary piece of paperwork	3	6	58	25	8

N=36*Base: Those respondents who have completed the SEF (N=36)**Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005**Due to rounding, percentages may not always sum to 100*

3.3 The use of data

There was general agreement amongst respondents that the Fischer Family Trust data was either ‘very helpful’ or ‘quite helpful’ (83 per cent chose either of these categories). Only three respondents (one secondary and two primary) indicated that the data was ‘not useful’. (The two Special School respondents did not use, and did not plan to use, the Fischer Family Trust data).

When asked, via an open question, about further data schools would like to receive to support self-evaluation and participation in the NRwS, the following needs were raised by more than one respondent (numbers shown in brackets):

- for data to enable comparison amongst schools in similar contexts (5)
- for good quality data rather than more data (2)
- for training in the use of data (particularly Fischer Family Trust data) (2)
- for information relating to English as an Additional Language (EAL) (2).

One of the Special School headteachers noted that more '*comparative SEN data*' would be useful, and the second Special School headteacher pointed out that using data in that context was '*very difficult*' because of changing individual needs.

A slightly greater proportion of respondents indicated that they had been given advice on data and data packages by their SIP (57 per cent) than indicated that they had not been given such advice (41 per cent). This finding may reflect the fact that the questionnaire was completed only a few months into the trials and some headteachers, at this stage, may not yet have had a chance to discuss these matters with their SIP.

Respondents were asked to indicate the types of activities they used their self-evaluation data and information for. They were presented with a range of options and asked to tick all that applied. As can be seen from Table 3.7 below, the top four responses, nominated by over 80 per cent of respondents each, were 'identifying and tackling areas of underperformance'; 'target setting and tracking pupil progress'; 'curriculum planning / review'; and 'planning CPD / INSET'.

Table 3.7 Uses of self-evaluation data

	Total	
	No.	%
Tackling areas of underperformance	66	97
Target setting and tracking pupil progress	62	91
Curriculum planning / review	60	88
Planning CPD / INSET	58	85
Sharing good practice	48	71
Staff performance management	46	68
Policy review / revision	38	56
Improvement planning	38	56
Other activities	5	7

N=68

Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005

More than one answer could be given so percentages do not sum to 100

3.4 Guidance, advice and training

Over three-quarters of respondents indicated that ‘Ofsted / DfES guidance’ (81 per cent); local authority ‘written guidance’ (76 per cent) and ‘SIP verbal guidance’ (76 per cent) had been ‘very helpful’ or ‘quite helpful’. A smaller percentage of respondents overall indicated that local authority verbal guidance and SIP written guidance had been either ‘very’ or ‘quite helpful’. It is worth noting, however, that, for each type of guidance presented, at least ten per cent of respondents felt that such guidance was ‘not helpful’, pointing to an element of concern amongst the sample (see Table 3.8).

Table 3.8 Helpfulness of various sources of guidance

	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not helpful	Not used	No response
	%	%	%	%	%
Ofsted / DfES	25	56	13	4	1
LA written guidance	26	50	12	10	1
LA verbal guidance	31	28	12	7	6
SIP written guidance	18	43	10	21	7
SIP verbal guidance	44	32	12	9	3

N=68

Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005

A series of single response items

Respondents were also asked if there were any other areas where they would have liked guidance from the DfES. The overarching view was that models of good practice in terms of self-evaluation generally, and with regard to the SEF specifically, would be most helpful.

Over three-quarters (78 per cent) of respondents felt that training to enable staff to be involved in self-evaluation and to make evaluative judgements was required for middle managers, and 60 per cent felt that training was required for the leadership team in their school. In addition, over half of respondents (54 per cent) indicated that training was also required for other school staff, although a far greater proportion of primary respondents considered this to be the case (77 per cent) than secondary respondents (43 per cent).

3.5 Ofsted and the NRwS

When asked to rate the importance of self-evaluation data and information as part of the evidence for their most recent Ofsted inspection, three-fifths of respondents (60 per cent) signalled that it was ‘very important’. A quarter regarded it to be ‘quite important’ and 15 percent ‘not important’.

Interestingly, the vast majority (87 per cent) of respondents took the view that the role played by self-evaluation data in the next inspection would be ‘much more important’, thus signalling the greater emphasis on self-evaluation since the introduction of the NRwS. The remaining responses were equally divided between considering the role of self-evaluation data as ‘a little more important’ and ‘as important as before’. Most respondents (87 per cent) agreed with the statement that ‘self-evaluation as part of the New Relationship will make Ofsted inspections much more straightforward’.

3.6 Views about self-evaluation and the NRwS

General attitudes towards self-evaluation and the NRwS were obtained by asking respondents to signal the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements. It needs to be borne in mind here that the respondents would have had different levels of experience and exposure to some aspects of the NRwS (e.g. use of the SEF form, meetings with SIPs) and their answers will reflect these differences. Additionally, some of the statements presented concerned

the added value of the NRwS to the self-evaluation process and, for contextual purposes, it is useful to bear in mind that 72 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they already had very effective self-evaluation systems, prior to the introduction of the NRwS (See Table 3.9 below).

Table 3.9 Levels of agreement with various statements about the NRwS

Respondents felt that.....	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	Not sure %
Continuous monitoring and evaluation... is a valuable aspect of the NRwS	40	53	6	0	1
It is important to get all staff and governors involved self-evaluation	47	50	3	0	0
We feel that our self-evaluation process is too heavily guided by external demands	9	29	56	3	3
Being involved in self-evaluation provides important opportunities for staff professional development	40	54	6	0	0
The New Relationship has added unnecessary bureaucracy to the process of external accountability	15	21	51	7	6
The New Relationship has helped our school to put a sharper focus on school improvement and raising standards	19	51	24	1	4
Once the New Relationship is well established it will cut down on a lot of duplication and bureaucracy	16	46	26	1	10
We feel real ownership of our school improvement agenda under the New Relationship	19	50	21	1	9
We already had very effective self-evaluation before the New Relationship	40	32	24	1	3
The New Relationship has led to a lot more meetings and paperwork	25	32	35	3	4
Having a dialogue with the SIP has made a real contribution to our self-evaluation	21	49	19	3	9

N=68

Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005

Due to rounding, percentages may not always sum to 100

A series of single response items

Reflecting on the contribution of NRwS, most noticeably, 93 per cent of respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) that ‘continuous monitoring and evaluation throughout the school year is a valuable aspect of the NRwS’. In addition, 70 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the

‘dialogue with the SIP has made a real contribution to our self-evaluation’, and the same proportion (70 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that ‘The New Relationship has helped our school to put a sharper focus on school improvement and raising standards’. All respondents, bar two, agreed that it was important to involve all staff and governors in self-evaluation and similarly high numbers (94 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that self-evaluation provides important professional development opportunities for staff. For all the findings reported in this paragraph, the proportions of positive responses were similar from both primary and secondary respondents: school staff appear to be giving strong levels of support to some of the main aims and principles of the NRwS.

When responding to a related question concerning the school’s ownership of their improvement agenda, 69 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they felt ownership of school improvement under the New Relationship.

It is evident from this chapter that the School Improvement Partner (SIP) plays a crucial role in challenging headteachers and supporting them through the process of self-evaluation. The next chapter looks in more detail at the broader role of the SIP and the extent to which these individuals are able to give impetus to school improvement.

4. The School Improvement Partner

Key findings

- Questionnaire respondents took an overwhelmingly positive view of their SIPs, with the majority recording favourable ratings on a range of statements concerning perceptions of the SIP's work.
- In the majority of case-study schools the headteacher had experienced at least three meetings with their School Improvement Partner since the start of the NRwS trial.
- Whilst secondary headteachers considered a SIP to be more challenging and more of a critical friend than previous local authority link advisers, primary respondents were less convinced that their SIP was able to offer such challenge under NRwS and were more dissatisfied than secondary respondents with their SIP.
- Overall, interviewees in schools expressed the opinion that a SIP should have a background in school improvement and prior headship experience, with many stating the importance of appointing SIPs with very recent (not necessarily current) headship experience.
- It was considered important that a SIP should help a headteacher to prepare for an inspection and to provide robust challenge as well as making validating and confirmatory judgements.
- The main challenge for local authorities was the ability to appoint appropriate SIPs to accommodate all schools within the authority.
- The main issue for headteachers appeared to be the extent to which a SIP was able to challenge a headteacher in order to drive forward the school improvement agenda. This element of challenge, to date, was not always apparent within some of the case-study schools, especially within the primary sector.

This chapter details the findings from the case-study visits, the key personnel interviews and the self-evaluation survey data on the School Improvement Partner (SIP). The SIP appears to play such a pivotal role in the NRwS that each chapter in this report briefly touches on some aspect of the SIP role. This chapter specifically looks at the perceived role of the SIP. It also examines how the role of a SIP differs from a link adviser role and the extent to which SIPs can drive school improvement forward. The chapter also examines respondents' views on the appropriate characteristics for a SIP, and ends by looking at the issues and challenges experienced by schools and local authorities as they have developed the roles and work of the SIPs. Differences between primary and secondary school respondents are highlighted throughout

the chapter and Section 4.5 looks specifically at the primary school perspective.

4.1 Survey findings on the role of the School Improvement Partner

Responses to the self-evaluation survey (which included a section on SIPs) indicated that the SIP role was often undertaken by the school's previous link adviser (35 per cent), followed by a headteacher from within the local authority (22 per cent). The next most popular categories were another officer from their own local authority or another local authority (19 per cent), and a headteacher from another local authority (10 per cent). Twelve per cent of respondents indicated that their SIPs were from other sources. Looking specifically at the primary sample, there was less diversity in the background of SIPs, with over two thirds of SIPs identified as having been the school's previous link adviser, although this is unsurprising as it was the intention that local authority advisers would carry out the SIP function within primary schools trialling NRwS.

The questionnaire respondents were invited to rate their SIP in terms of a number of qualities and characteristics. Due to the differences between primary and secondary school SIPs, as outlined above, responses were analysed by sector.

In assessing the attributes of their SIP respondents were, overall, extremely positive. For example, around 90 per cent of primary respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their SIP was 'helpful', 'challenging', 'supportive', 'easy to talk to', 'has the right level of experience / knowledge' and 'is very good at dealing with data' (see Table 4.1); and over 90 per cent of secondary respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their SIP was 'helpful', 'supportive', 'easy to talk to', 'has the right level of experience / knowledge' and 'is very good at dealing with data' (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.1 Respondents' perceptions of their School Improvement Partner – Primary School Respondents

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not sure
	%	%	%	%	%
Helpful	56	33	6	0	6
Challenging	50	39	11	0	0
Supportive	50	39	11	0	0
Easy to talk to	50	39	11	0	0
Has right level of experience / knowledge	27	61	11	0	0
Knows enough about local circumstances of school	33	50	17	0	0
Makes useful suggestions about self-evaluation	39	44	17	0	0
Is very good at dealing with data	50	39	11	0	0

N=22

Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005

Due to rounding, percentages may not always sum to 100

A series of single response items

Table 4.2 Respondents' perceptions of their School Improvement Partner – Secondary School Respondents

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not sure
	%	%	%	%	%
Helpful	68	27	2	2	0
Challenging	45	39	11	5	0
Supportive	70	25	2	0	2
Easy to talk to	70	30	0	0	0
Has right level of experience / knowledge	57	36	7	0	0
Knows enough about local circumstances of school	39	48	11	0	2
Makes useful suggestions about self-evaluation	45	43	2	2	7
Is very good at dealing with data	41	52	0	0	7

N=46

Source: NFER Survey of self-evaluation in NRwS trial schools 2005

Includes two Special Schools with secondary/middle school-aged children

Due to rounding, percentages may not always sum to 100

A series of single response items

Primary school respondents expressed slightly more dissatisfaction with their SIP than secondary respondents (a more detailed discussion on the primary school perspective of SIPs is provided in Section 4.5 below). There were a small number of areas where respondents from both sectors recorded less favourable ratings: for example, 17 per cent of primary school respondents and 11 per cent of secondary school respondents disagreed that the SIP had sufficient knowledge of the school's local circumstances; 11 per cent of primary and 11 per cent of secondary respondents disagreed with the statement that their SIP was 'challenging'; and 11 per cent of primary and 7 per cent of secondary school staff stated that their SIP did not have the right level of experience for the SIP role. However, it should be reiterated that, on the whole, the survey sample held very positive views about the SIP, their role and their performance so far.

Eight respondents reported that they themselves were SIPs for other schools, and in all but one case these were secondary respondents. Amongst the secondary school respondents, over half (57 per cent) indicated that their SIP also acted as the external adviser for performance management. This was true for just three primary respondents (14 per cent). For those respondents whose SIP had also acted as their external adviser in the past year, the majority appeared to be happy with this arrangement and expressed a preference for the role to be combined.

4.2 Contact with the School Improvement Partner

The questionnaire survey revealed that only four respondents (all primary) from a total of 68 responses had not yet met with their SIP at the time of completing the survey (March 2005). Where meetings had taken place, most commonly, the school manager(s) had met with the SIP between one and three times (primary respondents were mostly likely to have met with their SIP on one occasion, whereas secondaries were more likely to have had two or three meetings). A minority of respondents (13 per cent, all secondary) reported having met their SIP on more occasions (between four and eight times).

Initial visits to case-study areas revealed that overall interviewees welcomed the opportunity of having a SIP to support the school improvement agenda. At the time of the first visits to the trial schools, all headteachers had made contact with their SIPs. Second visits revealed that these relationships had

developed further. Indeed, some headteachers had had seven meetings with their SIP since the autumn term. On average, however, headteachers had experienced three SIP consultations since the start of the trial.

For the majority of primary case-study schools, headteachers had already established a relationship with their SIP through the latter's link adviser role. Typically, the first SIP visit for secondary school headteachers enabled the SIP to familiarise themselves with the school and to establish the context of the school: *'I felt that it was very important that the SIP spent the first visit in the school with no agenda, to get a feel for the school and its context'*. The agendas for subsequent visits were, by and large, negotiated between the headteacher and the SIP, but appeared to be centred on the use of comparative data, self-evaluation, performance management or target setting. SIP consultations tended to last for approximately one and a half hours, although many headteachers also described more informal, intermittent contact via e-mail or by telephone.

The initial visits to schools revealed that it was headteachers who had experienced the contact with the SIPs, while other staff members had little or no contact at this initial stage of the trials. By the time of the second visits, however, it was clear that, in some schools, more staff had attended the SIP meetings. For example, there was evidence that senior staff had attended SIP meetings on target setting, as well as SIPs meeting with governors. This was particularly evident in schools where the SIP had also taken on the role of external adviser for the headteacher's performance management.

4.3 Differences between a SIP and the link adviser role

As was noted in the initial findings from the first case-study visits, the role of the SIP appeared to mirror some of the duties of a local authority link adviser. Indeed, many primary school headteachers made comments along the lines that it was *'difficult to divorce the two systems'* where local authority link advisers had taken on the SIP role. Whilst primary school respondents found it difficult to disentangle the two roles, secondary school headteachers were more welcoming of the new SIP role and identified ways in which the two roles differed. They welcomed the opportunity to have a SIP who was more of a *'critical friend'*, and *'more challenging'* than a link adviser. The

comments set out below broadly represent the views of the majority of secondary headteachers about the role of a SIP:

- *'I have found it more useful than meetings with link advisers'*
- *'The school adviser knows the school really well, but is perhaps not as rigorous as a SIP'*
- *'I don't feel that I have to defend the school [to the SIP] as I want to pick her brains about how to move the school forward'*
- *'The meetings have been particularly focused on the areas I've wanted to discuss. So it's not necessarily been the LEA's agenda; it's been the agenda for the school'*
- *'You tend to get much clearer and more definite support than you would from a link adviser'*
- *'As a serving head, he's more credible, more helpful and precise than the service we received previously'*

A less typical comment from a headteacher echoed the point about SIPs bringing more rigour and challenge to school improvement discussions: *'When I used to meet my link adviser we would talk about football for half an hour and then pat each other on the back!'*

Many local authority respondents were also positive about the role of the SIP, as opposed to that of a link adviser, and usually perceived the former to be broader. One local authority interviewee, for example, said: *'there is more of a time commitment, more shared confidences and an enhanced adviser role.'* A SIP interviewee in one of the trial local authorities described how the dialogue with the NRwS school differed from that with headteachers who were not involved in the NRwS trial: *'I had a different discussion with the head in the New Relationship pilot school than I did with my other schools and I must admit, as a more streamlined conversation, it was useful'*.

One chair of governors remarked that a local authority adviser, in the past, had been: *'helpful but not challenging and had not asked the right questions. You don't look forward to it as you know it won't be of much use. It's entirely different'*. Similarly, a retired headteacher SIP remarked on the change of practice under NRwS and explained that: *'my experience is that heads are grateful to be appropriately challenged. I was a head for 25 years and never once did an LEA officer ever challenge me...I have to say that's not good enough'*.

Under NRwS, interviewees were generally pleased that all schools would receive the same amount of support, in a time sense at least, from a SIP, rather than differential local authority support provided according to the school's presumed needs (reflecting the tradition of intervention in 'inverse proportion to success'). Local authority representatives also felt that the SIP role would enhance the way in which support is triggered and *'has changed the credibility of the service for the better'*. Indeed, one local authority adviser stressed that his opinions on the role of the SIP had changed over the period of the trial. He remarked that, *'I thought that there might be some tensions and difficulties, but actually there haven't been'*.

Despite such a positive response to the SIP role, there was still some apprehension over the perceived relevance of having a SIP as opposed to a local authority link adviser on the part of a number of local authority interviewees who believed that their link advisers had *'always been rigorous and challenging'*. One adviser commented that: *'I've looked at it and looked at it and I can't see how it will be different, in that someone like myself, who was in headship up until 12 months ago, I can't see what a SIP can offer that a link adviser can't'*.

4.4 Selection criteria and characteristics of SIPs

It was commonly stated, both in the self-evaluation survey responses, and in the interviews with key national personnel, school staff and local authority officers, that appointing appropriate SIPs was imperative to the success of the New Relationship.

The majority of trial local authorities had appointed a mixture of existing headteacher SIPs and local authority link adviser SIPs, with a minority appointing only local authority link adviser SIPs. Having experienced nearly three terms of working with their SIP, interviewees from the case-study areas were able to comment on the suitability of practising headteacher SIPs and / or local authority link adviser SIPs.

Many secondary headteachers within the case-study schools had direct experience of working with SIPs who were also existing headteachers and were able to compare this to the experience of working with local authority link advisers. In contrast, primary interviewees mostly only had experience of

working with their link adviser. Despite this however, there were no evident distinctions between the perceptions of primary and secondary staff regarding the suitable characteristics of a SIP: on the whole, staff in both sectors appreciated the benefits of having *'suitably-trained personnel'* in post.

Generally speaking, it was the *'credibility'* of being able to relate more to school-based issues and *'the possibility of bringing the personal touch to the table'* that were the main reasons why certain interviewees cited some preference for existing headteacher SIPs. For example, one headteacher explained that, *'working with someone who knows the job brings a challenging element because it is not easy to pull the wool over their eyes: you are aware that they know the job'*.

Some local authority respondents were less convinced of the advantages of having existing headteachers as SIPs in post. Whilst they acknowledged the benefits of having relevant current experience of headship and *'coming with a new perspective on school improvement strategies'*, many were apprehensive about their abilities to devote time to the post, especially if a school was in need of frequent support and the knock on effect this may have on the SIP's own school. One local authority adviser felt that the headteacher SIP in their authority had experienced difficulties carrying out the dual-role and remarked that, *'they aren't focused on their role as much and aren't in tune with what the LEA want'*. Subsequently, the local authority was considering the nature and format of the training that they will provide for practising headteachers taking on SIP responsibilities. Another local authority interviewee stressed the need for a SIP to be rigorous enough to challenge a headteacher, and suggested that this may not always occur with a practising headteacher SIP: *'sometimes that rigour isn't always there'*. Similarly, one other local authority adviser was concerned that the relationship between a headteacher and a headteacher SIP may:

... simply turn into a lot of cosy chats. It's almost like mentoring, a coaching role where you'd meet a headteacher colleague and share experiences, then you start to ask questions and question why targets aren't met. That's when it gets interesting and uncomfortable and that's why it won't work.

It was evident from the second visits to case-study schools that the characteristics of an effective SIP were not only related to recent headship experience; there was also an appreciation on the part of some interviewees

that other personnel could take on the role of a SIP, as long as they were *'credible'*. It was often stated that: *'headship experience is helpful if the person has the right skill set'*. The second case-study visits revealed more respondents who felt that it was important that a SIP *'should be the best person for the job'* and that both local authority advisers and headteacher SIPs brought different skills to the role and *'employed different skills when needed'*. In the main, the most important characteristics of a SIP included the following:

- an understanding of the circumstances in which the school operates and an appreciation that *'all schools are individual places'*
- confidence in their abilities as well as knowledge of local authority systems and procedures. It was said to be important for a SIP to be able to demonstrate confidence and knowledge early on if the relationship with the headteacher was to be successful
- a genuine open dialogue
- recent headship experience (not necessarily existing headship practice).

4.5 The primary school perspective

Primary schools trialling NRwS were operating a different SIP model to that of secondary schools: the main difference being that local authority link advisers within primary schools were carrying out the SIP function and were not accredited, unlike the SIPs within secondary schools.³ Therefore, interviewees within the six primary case-study schools visited had a slightly different experience of the SIP strand of NRwS. Some of these differences are evident from the findings detailed above. The key distinctions were as follows:

- **Limited SIP visits** - The findings from the initial case-study visits found that interviewees anticipated more frequent visits from the SIP throughout the year to gain a better understanding of the school. Typically, interviewees from the primary trial schools had received three visits from their SIP across the academic year. In comparison, some secondary headteachers had commented that their SIP had visited the school more often, with one headteacher stating that their SIP had visited seven times since the start of the trials. Whilst many secondary headteachers had also experienced at least three visits from their SIP, there was the perception that they could request further support from their SIP if necessary. In contrast, there was the perception on the part of primary school

³ The DfES intention is for primary SIPs to be accredited in the same way as secondary SIPs.

interviewees that if they required additional visits from their SIP this would incur an additional charge.

- **Appropriateness of SIP personnel** – As described earlier, and illustrated in Tables 4.1 and 4.2, more primary than secondary respondents to the self-evaluation survey expressed dissatisfaction about certain characteristics of their SIP (though these were still a relatively small minority of primary respondents). It was also apparent from the visits to the majority of secondary case-study schools that headteachers were being challenged more by their SIP than they had been by a local authority adviser in the past: primary school headteachers were less convinced that their link adviser was more challenging under NRwS. Only two out of the six primary headteachers interviewed felt that they had been suitably challenged since the inception of NRwS. The remaining four interviewees were still to be convinced of their SIP's ability to deliver this element of the SIP role. These four respondents indicated that they did wish to have this element of challenge: one interviewee, for example, was keen to have someone in post who would '*inspire and challenge*' him. He commented that, '*the only way around this is to get high quality personnel in place with a track record of success. The way forward is to get existing heads or retired heads who have that direct experience*'.

Overall, it appeared that staff trialling NRwS within primary schools felt that they were not always being challenged sufficiently in a way which would drive the school improvement agenda forward. However, primary headteachers were still optimistic that the NRwS had the potential to bring about change and held similar views to secondary headteachers on other strands of the trial, as long as appropriate SIP personnel were appointed.

4.6 The SIP and Ofsted

Initial case-study visits found there to be some confusion and questioning regarding the role a SIP would play in relation to the new Ofsted inspection process. Although SIPs have no formal involvement in this process, the opinion was expressed in one local authority, for example, that, as SIPs are nationally accredited, their views should be taken into account during an Ofsted inspection. The re-visits to case-study areas found there to be more definite opinions regarding the role of a SIP alongside Ofsted, although interviewees were still unclear: '*it's a tricky one!*' Some felt that '*it should be complementary*', while the majority felt that the relationship between Ofsted and the SIP should be kept separate: '*Ofsted have a different agenda to ours*'.

It was thought by some that a role too close to the inspection process would negate the notion of *'a critical friend'*. As one interviewee remarked, it would be *'critical, but not so friendly because of the Ofsted link'*. The majority of respondents hoped that the SIP would remain a genuine *'critical friend'* and help a school prepare for an inspection, *'validating their judgements'*. SIPs *'should challenge the school sufficiently to know whether their judgements were robust enough'* and would be *'unable to do this in full inspectoral mode'*.

Two local authority advisers felt that, despite the role of the SIP and that of Ofsted being quite distinct, there should be at least some contact between an Ofsted inspector and a SIP. For example, it was perceived to be *'bizarre'* that a SIP should not join in a discussion with a headteacher and an HMI inspector talking about the key issues: this would be *'a wasted resource'*. One respondent remarked that: *'we are all in this as a partnership to ensure that schools become more effective. Therefore, the SIP is going to know the school and this information could be a useful resource to HMI'*.

4.7 The School Improvement Partner report

SIPs produce a short report after every school visit as a record of their discussion with school staff. Interviewees within the trial schools were asked within the questionnaire survey and the case-study visits to comment on the report, on its usefulness and how it compared to the report produced by the link adviser in the past.⁴

Once again, there were few distinctions evident between interviewees in the primary and secondary sectors. Responses to the questionnaire survey (from 68 schools) indicated that just under half the respondents (47 per cent) had seen the SIP's report: 43 per cent had not seen the report and 10 per cent were either *'not sure'* or gave no response to this question. Of those who had received the report, half of respondents (50 per cent) concluded that it had been *'quite helpful'*, and a further 41 per cent reported that it had been *'very helpful'*. There were only three respondents, all from primary schools, who considered that the SIP's report had not been a helpful document. The

⁴ SIPs are also required to produce an independent report about the school to the governing body. The report should include a commentary on the quality on the school's self-evaluation; a commentary on the priorities and targets in the school development plan and progress on achieving them; a recommendation about the action planned by the school and external support needed (School Improvement Partners Brief, DfES, no date).

leadership team (81 per cent) and governors (56 per cent) were the two groups that respondents had most commonly shared the report with.

During the second wave case-study interviews with both school and local authority staff, researchers took the opportunity to ask interviewees if they had seen the SIP report. How helpful had they found it? Had it been shared with others? How did it compare with previous reports? It was apparent from the responses that in some of the schools the SIP relationship had not progressed as far as the production of a written report. However, those respondents who had seen the SIP report were able to make some interesting responses.

For example, there were mixed responses regarding the perceived usefulness of the SIP report. Some respondents had found them to be *'very useful'* as they provided an opportunity to document the discussion between the headteacher and the SIP and for both parties to agree the report in case, for example, there was tension between a headteacher and their SIP. Other interviewees said that they had not seen their SIP report and there were also some respondents who had not noticed a difference between a SIP report and that of the previous local authority link adviser, *'because it covers similar ground'*.

Similarly, local authority respondents failed to notice many differences between the link adviser and SIP reports now in place, although minor differences were noted, for example, they are intended *'to highlight much more strongly than before, the strengths and weaknesses'*.

In some cases, interviewees remarked that they had shared the SIP report with other school staff as well as governors to keep them informed. There were levels of apprehension, however, over the introduction of a SIP report to the governing body. There was a view, on the part of those who raised this concern, that if a report is to be produced for governors, then it should be a joint report from the SIP and the headteacher, *'which validates each other's opinion'*. One headteacher for example, commented that, *'where an external person is writing to the governing body, there is a wedge appearing that our SIP does not feel comfortable about and I don't either'*. Similarly, a local authority adviser commented that a SIP report to a governing body was not *'normal LEA practice'*.

4.8 Accountability and assessing the performance of SIPs

As noted earlier in this chapter (Section 4.4), many respondents took the view that the appropriate selection of SIPs appears to be imperative to the success of NRwS. As one local authority adviser commented, *'if the SIP is no good, if the SIP does not challenge the school and is frightened to pose the right questions, challenging questions, all of it falls down'*. Some local authority interviewees were considering the ways in which they would monitor the performance of their SIPs, for example through looking at the SIP reports or via one-to-one meetings with a senior adviser within the school improvement service.

Local authority respondents repeatedly mentioned an increased need for training sessions and, in two cases, the possibility of the provision of mentors for SIPs, as well as information exchanges to allow for good communications across the authority. Many local authority interviewees pointed to the support that they would provide for SIPs dealing with schools with serious issues and explained that resources were available if an intervention was needed in order to support the SIP's work with a school.

Headteachers were less aware of any assessment or monitoring of the relationship between a SIP and a headteacher, even though the majority of headteachers felt that this was necessary. One primary headteacher suggested that a representative group of headteachers should meet with the local authority's head of school improvement to provide *'honest feedback on how the SIP had impacted on the school'*. This particular headteacher had spoken informally to senior management within the local authority about the lack of challenge from their SIP, with little action taking place as a result: *'they keep saying "well it's still just a trial", which isn't very helpful'*. Another headteacher suggested that, in order to match SIPs to the *'right head'*, local authorities should propose *'possible'* SIPs for a trial period and *'LEAs should not tell SIPs which schools they are allocated to until it's confirmed'*.

Overall, there was a general perception that the SIP and the headteacher should work in partnership and therefore, accountability, to a certain extent, should be shared: *'I'd like to think that if we had a good Ofsted that we share that success and equally if we receive a poor Ofsted that we take equal responsibility for that as well'*. The role of the SIP was meant to be *'thought provoking'* and the SIP would provide advice, but was not necessarily

accountable: it was thought to be up to the headteacher as to whether he or she took the SIP's advice. Schools that were said to be prepared to be reflective and to self-evaluate and enjoy participating in a challenging conversation, would usually feel accountable. However, in the view of some respondents, accountability in the context of the NRwS still required further clarification and was said to be *'open to interpretation'*.

4.9 Issues and challenges

The main challenge for local authorities was perceived to be the process of *'scaling-up'* and leading and managing the SIP system across a large number of schools. Local authorities were also conscious of the need to provide effective training in addition to the national accreditation process. It was considered important for SIPs, especially those not familiar with local authority procedures, to be familiar with the local authority agenda. As one respondent pointed out, *'it's important to get SIPs thinking in the way that we think...will they do what I want them to do in a problematic situation?'*

Similarly, local authority interviewees were concerned that the time allocated for SIPs to spend in schools would be problematic: some schools were thought to require additional support over and above the five days outlined, whilst other schools may not be in need of so many visits. Other respondents felt that the local authority would still need to fulfil the tasks of a link adviser, for example, dealing with complaints to the local authority about changes in the curriculum and with queries from parents. There was a concern that they would need to provide this additional support to schools which may result in the local authority buying in additional consultants to accommodate the demand, so possibly negating the concept of a Single Conversation.

The initial case-study visits identified certain issues regarding accreditation and the training of SIPs. Although less concern was raised during the second visits, there was still a perception, for example, that on-line assessments may lead to the recruitment of the wrong individuals: *'You cannot assess interpersonal skills on-line. It's better to roll this out slowly with the right people than rapidly with the wrong people'*. Consequently, a number of local authority respondents identified a need for additional training after accreditation to inform SIPs of their roles and responsibilities: *'people can talk-the-talk, but can they walk-the-walk?'*

Some interviewees questioned whether the salary for a SIP was sufficient to entice high quality personnel. As one headteacher pointed out, some headteachers operating as SIPs would need to take a pay cut: *'However altruistic teachers are, people still like to be paid a good salary. It is going to affect recruitment. You need to get the top-level innovation in'*.

The next chapter looks at the concept of a Single Conversation, building on the discussion presented within this chapter, by discussing the role of the SIP within the Single Conversation. The chapter also outlines the impact that having a Single Conversation can have on working practices and the extent to which the concept is sustainable.

5. The single conversation

Key findings

- Amongst the interviewees, there was a lack of clarity about exactly what the Single Conversation was supposed to be. Those who felt that they did have a good grasp of the concept sometimes expressed a view that the name is inappropriate, since it represents an ongoing dialogue, and takes place with a single individual, the SIP.
- At the beginning of the evaluation, there was recognition that the Single Conversation could have a major impact on relationships between schools, SIPs, local authorities and, potentially, the DfES. However, by wave two of the evaluation a majority of interviewees continued to harbour doubts over the concept of a Single Conversation.
- Some interviewees reported that so far they had not experienced a true Single Conversation – they were conversing with both the SIP and the local authority. Others questioned whether the notion of a Single Conversation would ever become a reality – could one person, in the SIP role, deal with all the necessary issues and provide sufficient support to a school? At the same time, there was evidence that in some areas practices had been ‘sharpened’ and schools were being more effectively challenged.
- The diversity of views and experiences surrounding the Single Conversation may reflect the different contexts of the trial local authorities – some had already adopted comparable systems, for others the NRwS may have represented a more significant development, requiring considerable change.
- In terms of a national roll out, some respondents suggested that further clarification is needed about the term ‘Single Conversation’, possibly coupled with a change of terminology. Further consideration should also be given to the question of what the Single Conversation can realistically deliver.

This chapter looks at issues relating specifically to the Single Conversation and should be read alongside Chapter 4 where related issues, to do with the role of the School Improvement Partner (SIP), are discussed. During the first wave of case-study visits, two broad areas were examined: understandings of the concept of the Single Conversation, and the impact or potential impact it was expected to have. By phase two of the evaluation, it was possible to probe interviewees about how the Single Conversation had actually worked in practice; whether it had challenged and supported schools; and whether, based on their experiences during the trial year, interviewees felt it was a sustainable approach. Hence this chapter is structured as follows:

- understandings about the Single Conversation
- the role of the SIP in the Single Conversation
- impact on working practices
- challenge, support and sustainability.

5.1 Understandings about the Single Conversation

In the first round of interviews it was found that there was considerable confusion and misunderstanding about what exactly the Single Conversation was supposed to be, and, with different schools at different stages in their experience of the NRwS, some had a clearer picture than others. Staff in a number of the primary schools, in particular, did not have a firm view of the concept.

The local authorities and schools that demonstrated the best understanding of the Single Conversation almost universally commented that the name was inappropriate, since it was *'neither single nor a conversation'*. Their view was that it was an ongoing dialogue, taking place with a single individual, the SIP, who would be the channel for communications with other agencies. However, there was some lack of clarity even amongst these schools: for example, one headteacher confidently described it as *'a triangulation of school, SIP and LEA views'* and then added that perhaps the DfES was also included in the 'triangle'.

Some schools had much vaguer understandings of the meaning of the Single Conversation, and there were some varying interpretations of the term. There were suggestions that it was:

- having a single contact who would deal with all local authority business, from school improvement to building and health and safety issues
- having a single point of entry for data so that all data could be shared
- pulling everything together into a single document, or having a single plan and a single evidence base
- having a list of all local authority / external agencies working with the school and bringing them together in a single meeting.

While some of the key ideas of streamlining and avoiding duplication are implied in these descriptions, it is evident that some school staff were

struggling to understand the Single Conversation concept, and that they would welcome further clarification, possibly coupled with a change of terminology.

5.2 The role of the SIP in the Single Conversation

Where schools had grasped the idea of the Single Conversation, it was often inextricably linked with the role of the School Improvement Partner. The relationship with the SIP was seen to be crucial in the success of the Single Conversation: this would need to be someone who got to know the school thoroughly over time rather than someone who was *'parachuted in'*. In the dialogue with schools, discussion would be honest and open, the SIP would be able to challenge the school and its staff; and there would be follow up of issues raised, something that had not always happened consistently in the past. Certain issues were identified where there needed to be clarification and transparency about the SIP role within the Single Conversation, including the relationship to:

- the local authority
- links with Ofsted and the inspection process
- funding and control of school improvement budgets.

5.3 Impact on working practices

As with self-evaluation, some schools and local authorities thought that the Single Conversation would mean little difference from existing practice. In three authorities, for instance, there were interviewees (including school and local authority personnel) who regarded the previous system as closely comparable to the Single Conversation and hence were unable to detect any major changes to working practice *'I think it is a good principle but I think it existed before. It was nothing new to us'* (headteacher). However, during the first round of interviews there was also an appreciation that it could have a very major impact, and as one respondent in a local authority operating a large number of initiatives put it: *'a single conversation for us is 'mega', potentially'*. Another local authority interviewee envisaged the Single Conversation being part of the larger plan to link all children's service provision from government departments together. In one school the headteacher emphasised that it would be *'a completely different relationship.'*

One of the aims of the NRwS, and of the Single Conversation in particular, is to reduce bureaucracy and the duplication of paperwork. During the first round of case-study visits there were indications that this objective was likely to be achieved over the medium to long term, with the recognition that schools would no longer be asked for the same thing several times, or to provide the same information to make the case for different purposes.

The combination of the SIP and external adviser role was mentioned in this context, and one local authority official commented that he would expect this to save headteachers an enormous amount of time, as much of the same information and paperwork was required. There was also some feeling that the Single Conversation, combined with more structured self-evaluation, helped to provide more focus to school improvement planning and reduce the number of priorities being pursued at one time. However, in the short term some schools felt that there was considerably more paperwork and in some cases a special role had been created to handle data and the SEF, but it was recognised that these requirements were in the nature of a developmental trial project.

By the time of the second round visits, interviewees in five authorities maintained the view that the Single Conversation had not yet led to a reduction in unnecessary bureaucracy and that there was still a considerable amount of paperwork to contend with. Meanwhile seven interviewees from six different authorities concluded that despite the NRwS, the current system could not be described as a Single Conversation – for example they were still receiving requests for data from different organisations, they were engaging in multiple rather than single conversations and advisers still had to be involved in tasks such as headteacher recruitment.

Three headteachers from different authorities actually queried whether a Single Conversation would ever be possible – for example, could one person (the SIP) really possess all the necessary knowledge and skills to support and advise a school and, could schools, as complex institutions, *'be simplified to a level of a Single Conversation'*.

However, amongst the interview sample, there were also those who felt that the Single Conversation had worked well in practice. In particular, they noted as positive features the good relationships between schools and SIPs, combining the role of SIP and external adviser and a sharpening of practices. Others were clearly in favour of the principles underpinning the Single

Conversation, and had observed some improvements, but felt that the present system still had a way to go: *'The concept and the reality don't fit together... I think people are moving towards getting it better but we're not there yet'* (adviser).

5.4 Challenge, support and sustainability

In order to gauge the impact of the Single Conversation, local authority interviewees were asked whether this aspect of the NRwS had ultimately been effective in challenging and supporting schools. Most interviewees felt that this had been the case. One SIP, for example, explained how weaknesses within a school had been exposed as a result of the Single Conversation, which then triggered the deployment of appropriate support:

In school A we've been able to identify, based on evidence, two departments that are seriously underperforming. Therefore the Single Conversation has enabled the school to bring in capacity from the local authority and elsewhere to address that issue. Before it hadn't been identified and the school would not have dreamed of going to the local authority to ask for help.

Elsewhere the head of an advisory service, believed that the Single Conversation had *'raised the game on both sides'*, in that the level of challenge had improved and schools were expecting that challenge.

It should also be noted that, for interviewees in two local authorities, the level of challenge was deemed to have stayed the same since the NRwS had been introduced, the implication being that previous practices had already offered a satisfactory amount of challenge and the new strategy did not constitute a major development in this respect.

Having experienced the Single Conversation, interviewees in the trial areas were asked whether they felt it was sustainable in the long term. Most interviewees felt that the Single Conversation could potentially be sustainable, but it depended on a number of factors, for example the quality of the SIP, clarity about their role, whether the Single Conversation met the needs of the school, whether there was a manageable remit for the SIP and availability of resources. Hence, until these questions were answered, interviewees felt that they could only speculate about the future of the Single Conversation.

A number of interviewees questioned whether ‘*a single conversation is achievable*’. In the first round of interviews, there was recognition that the Single Conversation could have a major impact on relationships between schools, SIPs, local authorities and, potentially, the DfES. There was expected to be more rigour, with more challenge from the SIP, and more consistent follow up of issues. However, by the time of the second round case-study visits, many interviewees continued to express reservations over the concept of a Single Conversation. Some interviewees reported that so far they had not experienced a true single conversation – bureaucracy had not noticeably diminished and they were conversing with both the SIP and the local authority. Others questioned whether the notion of a Single Conversation would ever become a reality – could one person, in the SIP role, deal with all the necessary issues and provide sufficient support to a school?

Elsewhere the impact of the Single Conversation was seen as being limited because interviewees noticed very few differences to the systems operated previously. For example, schools had retained the same local authority adviser as their SIP and the conversations they previously engaged in had already been streamlined.

There were two local authorities, however, where there was a more positive assessment of the Single Conversation. Here, the new policy was thought to have ‘*sharpened*’ existing practices and to have sent a clear message to schools about their approaches to self-evaluation and school improvement. The diversity of views and experiences surrounding the Single Conversation may reflect the different contexts of the trial local authorities – some had already adopted comparable systems, for others the NRwS may have represented a more innovative and demanding set of changes.

The next chapter details the findings on the fourth NRwS strand evaluated within the trial local authorities, the School Profile and its contribution to school improvement.

6. School Profile

Key findings

- The vast majority of school interviewees had found the process of compiling the profile relatively easy, and much less burdensome than the process of putting together the annual governors' report. The more succinct format as well as the use of pre-populated data were seen to aid the compilation process.
- At the same time, one of the most frequently voiced concerns was that the streamlined format did not allow for the personalisation or customisation of its content. Those involved in completing the profile often felt restricted by the word limits and were concerned that the finished product did not adequately portray the school and its wider context.
- Some respondents suggested that flexibility is perhaps needed in order for schools to expand or customise particular sections and, for example, to include links to school websites for further details.

This chapter examines the contribution of the School Profile as part of the New Relationship with Schools. The profile is intended to *'provide high quality information about schools to parents and the general public which gives them a broad and balanced view about what a school offers its pupils'* (DfES, 2004a). Interviewees' experiences and views are presented in terms of: perceived advantages of using the profile, associated challenges and advice regarding the further development and use of the profile.

6.1 Perceived advantages of the new school profile

In the first wave of interviews respondents were asked to contrast the profile with previous practices of conveying information about the school to parents and the community, for instance through the annual governors' report. By the time of the second wave of visits all participating schools had completed their profiles and some had also sought views from parents on the usefulness of the document. During these visits, therefore, interviewees were invited to comment on how they had found the overall process of assembling the profile; whether they felt the finished product was a valuable document; and what kind of feedback they had received from parents and staff. Their answers to these questions reveal some of the benefits linked to the school profile. These were:

- increased accessibility to the document for parents and the wider community
- a document that is easier and quicker for schools to compile
- the advantage of having pre-populated data
- a more standardised format
- a more succinct document, with specific information
- (the potential for) more up-to-date information about the school
- increased involvement of school staff in compiling the document.

In a number of local authorities a view was expressed that the profile would be more easily accessible for parents, partly through web access and partly because of improvements in presentation. The fact that it was shorter and used graphs to present data visually was felt to increase the likelihood of parents reading and understanding the information.

Across the 16 schools contributing to the case-study research, the vast majority had found the process of compiling the profile relatively straightforward, and certainly an improvement on the annual governors' report. The length of the profile and a more defined focus on what the profile should contain was felt to assist schools in the compilation process. School interviewees described having spent many hours putting together annual governors' reports, which generally received very little interest or attention from parents. The profile, by comparison, was said to be much less burdensome, and could be assembled with relative ease. Another advantage was that the profile came with pre-populated data and this reduced the amount of time spent collating the information. A number of interviewees also expressed relief that they no longer had to convene annual parent-governor meetings, which were said to be poorly attended.

In half of the local authorities there were interviewees (in the first wave of visits) who felt that the data provided was of a better quality, because it was '*crisper*', provided a '*snap-shot*' of the school, was up-to-date and standardised. Parents were said to be more able to compare schools because the data was current (as opposed to surveying old Ofsted reports) and was consistent across schools. One local authority interviewee predicted that the profile may reduce unnecessary communications with parents, because in the event of queries, parents could be directed towards the profile. A deputy head interviewee commented:

The best thing is it's going to be standardised and certainly in the schools I've worked at, depending on your headteacher, it can be anything from a couple of sides of A4, to a mini-booklet of everything you ever wanted to know. I think it will give people a better understanding because it is standardised and it is easy to compare one place with another.

In two local authorities, interviewees noted that the process of compilation was more democratic, in the sense that other school staff (in addition to the headteacher) were now involved in the process.

During the second set of visits, school interviewees were asked how parents had responded to the profile. Several schools explained that they had struggled to obtain any feedback from parents, as had been the case with the previous annual governors' reports: '*We just seem to have a terrible lack of support to anything we send out*' (deputy head). Some sought views through questionnaires to parents, others used the Parent Teachers' Association as a testing ground. Based on the small numbers of parents who did voice opinions about the profile (e.g. 18 parents from 1900 pupils in one school), the sentiment was mostly positive, in that they were happy with the format, and felt that the data was more '*precise*'.

In three schools there were some critical comments. The PTA standpoint in one school was that the profile did not contain enough detail and they disliked the fact that the document was frozen in time. In two other schools (both from the same authority) it was said that the parents responded negatively to the graphical representation of school data. A particular issue for some schools was the large number of parents who did not speak English as their first language, which presented challenges in terms of translation, especially in one inner-city primary school where 59 languages were involved.

Fewer schools seemed to have actively pursued feedback from teaching staff. In the five schools where this had happened the responses were largely positive.

6.2 Perceived challenges

Interviewees were also asked about their concerns regarding the new profile. These can be summarised as follows:

- limited space to convey all the necessary information about the school
- room for improvement in terms of the appearance of the profile
- not all parents have access to a computer, and so cannot access it via the website
- schools may struggle to keep the profile updated
- some information, including test and examination results, being out of date
- technical problems in compiling the profile.

Interestingly, some aspects of the profile which were raised as benefits were also seen as potential drawbacks. Whilst some interviewees praised the succinct nature of the profile, others felt it was restrictive and, in particular, that it did not allow enough room for giving contextual information about the school. By the time of the second wave of visits, this was the most commonly raised criticism of the profile (highlighted by a third of all schools in the sample). Those involved in completing the profile had felt constrained by the word limit and as a result had to omit what they believed were key pieces of information. Furthermore, a local authority interviewee made the point that parents, on viewing a simplistic graph, may jump to the wrong conclusions, and that it was important that they should have sufficient information about the intake, the local area and any other factors which may account for the performance of the school. He commented that: *'Raw data can be a very dangerous tool and the profile needs to be able to contain sufficient information so the context of a school is obvious to the lay reader'*.

Other omissions highlighted by interviewees were that there was no reference to the work of governors in the profile, and one headteacher noted that there was no room to include information about the 'pupil voice'. Some interviewees questioned whether a single document could satisfy every need – they felt that it was a challenge to convey all the necessary information to both established and new parents: *'one size fits all for a comprehensive school is always going to be a challenge'* (headteacher). This may explain why some school staff appeared keen to retain the school prospectus. Others were unclear about the intended audience of the profile – *'is it a prospectus, is it a report for governors?'*

The appearance of the profile was criticised by one interviewee who suggested it looked rather *'dry'*. Some interviewees also raised the question of whether a shortened version of the annual governors' report would be more appealing to

parents. Previous experience had shown that very few parents read the report and the interviewees doubted whether this revised version would make any greater impression: '*With the governors' report, I'd get four requests from a thousand children and I think I'll get the same for the profile*' (headteacher).

Whilst access to the school profile could potentially be extended by making it available to parents through the school website, some interviewees suspected this would make little difference, because very few of their parents owned computers. One of the advantages cited earlier was the fact that the profile would contain up-to-date information about the schools. However, some interviewees were disappointed that the most recent performance data would not be included in the first profile, because it had not yet been validated. In addition, one local authority interviewee recognised that schools were busy institutions and they might struggle to keep the profile as a 'live' document. Lastly, two school interviewees reported some technical computer problems in compiling the profile, which might suggest the need for IT support.

So far this chapter has set out both the advantages and disadvantages of the profile as expressed by interviewees throughout the evaluation. At this juncture, therefore, it would be useful to weigh up the evidence in order to present a clearer picture of its overall contribution, and whether or not the profile was regarded as a positive or negative development. By wave two of the evaluation there were interviewees in 12 schools who held, overall, more favourable views towards the profile, compared to four schools where interviewees were less complimentary (citing some of the challenges signalled earlier). The major benefit, which was recognised by most school interviewees, including those who had other concerns, was that it was much easier to compile.

Meanwhile, amongst local authority level interviewees, comments about the profile ranged from '*the least important part of New Relationship*' to '*valuable*'. Most local authority interviewees, whilst recognising some of its weaknesses, appeared to be reasonably satisfied with the profile. For example, one SIP saw the profile as a '*distinct improvement on the governors' annual report*' and '*user friendly*', but they were not entirely sure it would make any difference to parents. Many interviewees (at both school and local authority levels) saw the profile as a positive development in terms of the compilation process and its simpler format, but had yet to be convinced about its overall

impact. Furthermore, whilst the more streamlined nature of the profile was welcomed by many, it was recognised to have consequences in terms of being able to present a complete picture of the school to parents.

6.3 Advice for development of the school profile

Whilst discussing this particular strand of the NRwS interviewees proposed suggestions for improvement and / or development. These included:

- providing clear links to the school website for further information
- increasing accessibility to the profile, for instance by translating it into other languages or distributing hard copies by post, rather than relying on internet access
- further consideration of the issue of when the profile should be produced
- monitoring and support for the production of the profile by the SIP
- moving performance data from the front of profile.

As already noted, the brevity of the profile was a concern for some, in particular the lack of space for providing a wider picture of the school in terms of its demographics and context. Hence, some interviewees suggested including links within the profile to the school website, so that parents could obtain further details. Alternatively, interviewees felt that the format of the profile could be more flexible, with opportunities to customise it to the school. In its current format, one school interviewee felt that the profile did not adequately portray the human side of the school: *'it gives you the headlines and you need the stories behind them sometimes'*.

There were also suggestions for ensuring wider access to the profile. For example, some interviewees advised translating the profile into other languages so that all parents could read the information. In addition, whilst online availability was seen to assist dissemination, it was also recognised that relying exclusively on this outlet may exclude parents without computer access. Hence, a small number of interviewees suggested distributing hard copies of the profile to parents.

For others timing was an issue. In one local authority, an interviewee explained that data had not been available when schools normally produced

their annual reports (at the end of summer term / beginning of the autumn term) and that there needed to be some thought given to its purpose and timing.

Lastly, individual interviewees suggested that the production of the profile needed to be monitored by the SIP to ensure that schools provided an honest account of their achievements: there were also requests that performance data be relocated from the front of the profile to later on in the document, to allow the profile to set the context of the school first.

The next five chapters build on the discussion of the four NRwS strands already discussed and address in more detail the process of shaping and implementing the NRwS, including the ways in which it has brought about changes in both schools' and local authorities' approach to school improvement.

7. The consultation process

Key findings

- Some headteachers and local authority representatives felt that the development of the NRwS had been fluid and that the DfES had responded appropriately to feedback from the trial schools.
- Other interviewees, however, expressed a view that the level of consultation had declined as the trial year had progressed and, in a few cases, there was a degree of cynicism as to how much '*genuine consultation*' was actually occurring.
- Internal consultations between headteachers and other staff members appeared to have increased as the NRwS developed over the trial period. For example, staff were asked for their feedback on the school profile and were also becoming increasingly involved in the self-evaluation process.
- School governors still had limited involvement with NRwS. They were, however, consulted on the school profile and were kept up-to-date on the developments of NRwS informally through the headteacher.

This chapter looks at the external communication between the DfES and the trial local authorities and schools. In doing so it also tries to decipher whether headteachers and local authority staff felt that such a consultation process was the most appropriate way in which to approach the development of the NRwS. The chapter also discusses the internal consultations that have taken place between local authority staff and headteachers, as well as between headteachers, staff, governors and parents in communicating the developments of the various strands of the New Relationship.

7.1 DfES consultation

It was the intention of the DfES and Ministers to take a formative approach to the development of the NRwS. They wished to consult and respond to the feedback received from local authorities and from the headteachers and governors of the schools taking part in the trials, and invited them to attend national meetings to provide feedback on specific strands of the NRwS. Such consultation began in February 2004, six months prior to the implementation of the trial.

The interviews with key personnel revealed that the NRwS was seen as an opportunity for headteachers to play a part in and influence and shape the development of an important government strategy. However, there was also an element of disappointment arising from a perception that in reality this consultation had not occurred. There was concern from one of these interviewees, for example, that little consultation had taken place with representatives from their organisation on the role of the SIPs.

The second visits to the eight trial local authorities also revealed the perception that this ‘consultation’ had not necessarily been maintained. There was a mixed response from staff in the case-study schools as to whether this consultation had been achieved. For the majority of interviewees from case-study schools, there was a general feeling that there had been opportunities to provide feedback on various aspects of the trial through ‘*well organised, high profile events*’, as well as through e-mail, by telephone and by letter.

A number of headteachers welcomed the opportunity to communicate with key personnel at the DfES. For example, one headteacher explained that he had been: ‘*very impressed with the development of the policy*’. He was pleased to see high level personnel attend the first NRwS meeting and enjoyed the opportunity to discuss strategies with representatives from the DfES. Two other headteachers reiterated the approach adopted by the DfES and felt that there had been much more consultation than they had originally envisaged. One commented that: ‘*It’s clear that the feedback and experiences of those people who are running this on the ground has been valued*’.

However, there were also levels of cynicism amongst a small number of headteachers as to whether the DfES was actually responding to such feedback. One headteacher, for example, said: ‘*how much have we actually shaped and how much have we just gone through a process so that the DfES can say it was consultative?*’ Similarly, there was also a perception from three headteachers that the momentum of consultation had slowed down since the inception of NRwS and that there appeared to be more discourse with the DfES in the months prior to the start of the trial: ‘*there hasn’t been that much substance now that we’re coming towards the end of the trial*’.

Initial findings from the first round of case-study visits found that some local authority respondents expressed a positive view about the consultative nature

of NRwS. One respondent, for example, stated at this initial stage that: *'It is nice to be involved in consultation, to feel part of things as they move on and we can comment on what's happening'*. However, such positive feedback was less evident from the most recent visits to the trial local authorities, perhaps reflecting the differing timescales for consultation and the implementation of trial activities. Out of the eight local authorities involved in the trial, respondents from only three local authorities were complimentary about the consultation between the DfES and the local authority, while interviewees within another two local authorities provided mixed reviews and respondents from the remaining three local authorities were less than pleased with the communications between the DfES and the trial local authorities.

The local authority respondents who expressed a positive view on the consultative nature of the NRwS complimented DfES personnel on their ability to listen to the feedback on the various strands and on how the DfES had adapted the NRwS according to the issues that had arisen. This was illustrated in the comment of one local authority representative who said that the consultation process was: *'Excellent! Absolutely excellent! This has been a key feature of the development of the trial. I've not been happy with every aspect of the New Relationship, but this has been first rate and we feel we've been listened to'*. Others commented on the usefulness of national meetings and conferences to communicate some of the developments of the trials as well as being asked by the DfES for feedback and comments on particular draft documentation. Another interviewee compared these developments to other policy experiences and stated that: *'I think it's been quite remarkable actually. I've made some observations to the national team and they've taken note of them... I've been involved previously in national projects and they've not been as effective as this'*. To this end, these particular local authority interviewees did feel that it had been *'a genuine consultation'*.

On the other hand, other local authority interviewees were less than enthused with the development of the NRwS as a consultative process. For example, a few local authority respondents felt that certain decisions had already been taken by the DfES and aspects of the New Relationship implemented without consulting local authority teams. One respondent, for example, felt that the local authority data team should have been consulted prior to developing aspects of performance data under NRwS. On this issue, the interviewee commented that: *'there is a lot of expertise that should have been used better'*.

Another two local authority respondents queried the involvement of Capita in the New Relationship, noting that there had been no opportunity to consult with the DfES about the Capita contract, and suggesting that this was thought to *'almost negate the initial communication from the DfES'*.

Other respondents from case-study visits were similarly disheartened with the development of the consultative aspect of NRwS. The following quotations are broadly representative of local authority respondents' views:

- *It started off well and I was initially impressed by how much the DfES listened. But as the year has progressed it seems to have become weaker and weaker.*
- *It has been well-led, but pilot LEAs felt out of the loop in terms of what they can give to the development process.*
- *Feedback has been given to the DfES, but I got the feeling that certain decisions had already been taken. We're a little bit disappointed about that.*
- *We were told from the outset that it was a pilot and they [DfES] were there to listen to us and everything was up for grabs and nothing set in concrete. As time has gone on we have felt less and less that that is actually the case and that there is an agenda which they're pursuing and we are just there to make it look as though there is consultation.*

7.2 Support documentation

As the NRwS progressed, the DfES sent all trial schools and local authorities various documents to support their work. The second case-study visits provided an opportunity to ask for feedback on the usefulness of these documents. Four headteachers commented that they had not seen any of the documents, while another was disappointed *'that the LEA are not credited for helping develop the documents'*. For those respondents who were aware of or used the documents, the feedback was generally positive. The documents were: *'helping to put parameters around the issues and setting out the territory for the pilot'*. The responses to specific NRwS documents available at the time of the second case-study visits (covering the period March-July 2005) were as follows:

- **School Improvement Partners Brief** (DfES, no date) – Few headteachers had read this in much detail, and those that had, had not referred to the documentation very much, although the majority were aware of the

document. It was considered to be useful, *'with some good indicators of what people are looking for'*. Local authority advisers had used this document more and considered it to be *'clear'* and *'a way of codifying for anyone new what is going to happen'*, so they would be using it with new schools coming on board. Only one local authority adviser gave negative feedback and felt that it was *'mechanistic and bureaucratic'*, while another felt that although it contained enough detail, *'it doesn't have a long shelf-life'*.

- **A New Relationship with Schools: Next Steps** (DfES, 2005a) – Positive views were received on this document, particularly from local authority respondents who felt that: *'it reflected how NRwS has developed in our schools to a degree'*. Once again, headteachers explained that they had not read it in great detail, but *'it is useful to pick out certain things to refer to'*. Local authority advisers had engaged more with the document. One local authority adviser, for example, stated that, *'this is the best produced document for years. It's full of sense'*. This respondent indicated that the document had been used for governor training on NRwS and self-evaluation. However, there were also local authority advisers who perceived it to be *'okay, but not wonderful'* or *'a bit thin'*.
- **New Relationship with Schools: Improving Performance through School Self-Evaluation** (DfES / Ofsted, 2004b) – There were mixed views on this document. Some respondents found it to be *'extremely useful, as it gave examples and some guidance'* and others who felt that there was still work to do on the document and did not think that the examples were of help: *'I wasn't sure whether this was a working document. It wasn't that useful'*. Although one headteacher did feel that the re-draft was an improvement on the original version: *'the previous guidelines were a bit of a mishmash and the examples looked like they were cobbled together'*.

7.3 Internal consultation within the local authority and schools

The findings from the first case-study visits indicated that it was mainly the headteacher who had been involved in the NRwS at that early stage and little information or involvement had been cascaded through to other school staff. Similarly, governors had played a very small part in the development of the NRwS. However, at the time of the first wave of visits, it was a commonly-expressed view that school staff were becoming more involved in, or at least more aware of, the NRwS process. There was also a perception at this time, that as the NRwS progressed, staff would have more involvement with various aspects of the New Relationship.

Indeed, the findings from the interviews within the case-study revisits proved this to be the case. Evidently, more staff were being consulted on certain strands of the New Relationship, especially self-evaluation, while on other strands, staff were still thought to be largely unaware of developments under the NRwS. The involvement of various stakeholders can be summarised as follows:

School staff – A number of respondents commented on the involvement of more staff in the self-evaluation process under NRwS (see also Chapter 3). It was often stated that more staff within the school had an improved awareness of the need for self-evaluation and were becoming '*more reflective*' and '*sharper than before*'. This meant, in turn, that school improvement planning was becoming '*more cohesive and collaborative*'. School staff had a small amount of involvement in compiling the School Profile and, although they were consulted on the final draft of the document, headteachers often commented that they had received little feedback from staff. Very few staff had been involved in consultation with the school's SIP: a few headteachers explained how a deputy headteacher or relevant member of the senior management team had sat in on a SIP meeting if the headteacher felt it was relevant to do so.

Governors – There was less evidence to suggest that governors were playing a role in the New Relationship. Evidence from the first visits to case-study schools indicated that school governors had little involvement with NRwS. This remained relatively unchanged during the second visits to case-study schools. While the headteachers explained that governors had been consulted on the School Profile and the self-evaluation process, and had often attended courses on self-evaluation under the NRwS, the majority of governors were said to be happy to be kept informed on the policy developments informally through the headteacher.

Parents – Consultation with parents appears to have been limited to opportunities to feed back on the School Profile, but, considering that the NRwS is in its trial stages, this is not entirely surprising. However, there was evidence that parents were more commonly surveyed to receive feedback to feed into the Self-Evaluation Form (SEF).

Local authorities – Consultations within the local authority regarding NRwS were also said to be productive by both headteacher and local authority interviewees. The majority of trial local authorities had developed documentation to support trial schools with self-evaluation and had organised meetings to discuss the development and progress of the NRwS, as well as workshops for headteachers not involved in the trial, as a means to communicate NRwS developments across the local authority.

The following chapter examines the involvement of local authorities in the NRwS in more detail. It discusses how the role of the local authority has been changing as the NRwS trials have progressed, and identifies some of the challenges facing local authorities as they adapt to these new ways of working.

8. Local Authorities and the New Relationship with Schools

Key findings

- The importance of the role of the local authority became more apparent as the NRwS developed over the trial period.
- To a certain extent, local authorities had adapted their strategies to accommodate NRwS practice.
- For some local authorities, the NRwS entailed contact with more schools (not just those that need intervention and support).
- Local authorities were considered to be *'more streamlined'* and were working more strategically, with a greater emphasis on partnerships with schools.
- Addressing the new ways in which local authorities communicate with schools appeared to be the main strategic change. It was considered imperative to disseminate appropriate information to SIPs on the local authority agenda, as well as to work more in partnership with schools in order to take forward the school improvement agenda.

This chapter details the perceived role of the local authority in the NRwS and the ways in which the local authority has supported the schools trialling the NRwS. It should be read alongside Section 9.4 which provides more detail on the perceived impact of the NRwS on local authorities. The chapter ends by outlining some of the challenges local authorities face in taking the New Relationship forward.

8.1 The role of the local authority

It was evident from the first visits to case-study schools and the interviews with key personnel, that for many there was an initial uncertainty about the role of the local authority. There was also some evidence to suggest that local authority advisers sought further clarification on their role within the NRwS. Such issues, however, were largely considered to have been clarified as the trials progressed. The perception was that the local authority would continue to play a fundamental role in running schools since they retained responsibility

for employing and managing SIPs. However, some key personnel interviewees felt that local authorities may still have work to do in terms of restructuring the role of the former link advisers. This would require close examination of whether the SIP would be able to undertake all the elements of the previous adviser's remit.

During the second visits to the eight areas trialling the NRwS, some local authority advisers and headteachers had noted differences in the way the local authority worked, yet were reluctant to state whether the New Relationship was the driving force for these changes or whether such changes had been planned anyway. Some felt that: *'the LEA had always been rigorous in monitoring schools'*, while others perceived that the NRwS had *'reinforced the way the LEA already operates'*. Whether or not the adaptation of local authority practice was as a result of NRwS or not, case-study interviewees noted a number of changes during the duration of the trial and these are discussed in the next section.

8.2 Changes in local authority practice

There appeared to be a number of ways in which local authorities had changed their practice since the inception of the NRwS. Such changes were perceived to be evident across the majority of participating local authorities with little distinction between those trialling NRwS in secondary and / or primary schools.

Local authority practice was mainly said to be *'more streamlined'* and was also described as being *'a more logical way of working'*. In terms of a Single Conversation, for example, one local authority respondent said: *'I think it's going to need to be a shift in the way as an authority we work... It needs to be a lot more joined-up'*.

There was also evidence to suggest that the trial local authorities were trying to provide more support to schools through organising NRwS-related training and conferences. One local authority for example, had produced on-line support and materials in addition to the DfES documents: *'so that when we go in and monitor we've got things that are available as a very useful start, rather than us having to think [as we go along] about what we can produce to*

support self-evaluation'. Another local authority adviser described how they had organised a secondary headteachers conference to support headteachers in completing the Self-Evaluation Form (SEF). A number of local authority respondents commented that the local authority was *'now working in genuine partnership with headteachers'* and perceived there to be more sharing of good practice through joint training courses. NRwS was thought to have brought about *'more networking potential'*.

The introduction of headteacher SIPs was also seen to be a positive move forward. It was often said to be an improvement on the previous link adviser relationship as the new regime was helping establish, *'a peer review relationship'* and would lead to *'more challenge'* as a result. This was illustrated in the comment by one headteacher interviewee who stated that, *'previously we had to challenge ourselves'*. In addition, local authority advisers noted that they were now working in a *'genuine partnership'* with headteachers through the recruitment of SIP headteachers. Indeed, one local authority interviewee felt that they had *'more access to the some schools than was ever afforded to the link adviser. I think he [headteacher] is more prepared to do that because what he sees is a colleague with some experience sitting there and not somebody who's never run a school'*.

Some local authority respondents explained that, over the trial period, they had improved the way in which the School Improvement Service had reflected upon its work and had also given careful consideration to the possible ways in which they could work more effectively with their schools. Generally speaking, local authorities had given attention to the ways in which they communicated with schools and had created a *'two-way conversation'* with SIPs and headteachers *'in order to keep the [single] conversation going'*. It was considered important for local authority advisers to *'keep an eye on things'* as there was the perception that they may have less information about their schools than previously. Communication was considered *'crucial'* to the success of the NRwS and it was through improved communication strategies or *'cultural architecture'* that local authority departments could improve their team working.

Headteachers also noted some changes in local authority practice since the introduction of the NRwS. Local authorities were described as being more proactive in their relationship with school staff, for example providing training

for school staff, including additional self-evaluation training for governors. One headteacher remarked that the local authority had adapted their practice, *'from spending a lot of time talking, to more time taking action and making decisions'*. Some headteachers felt that the local authority was becoming more cohesive in their approach and considering in greater depth what the issues were for schools.

8.3 Challenges and issues

Despite an increased awareness of the role of the local authority under the NRwS, as expressed during the second case-study visits, it was evident that further clarity on some aspects of the NRwS would help local authorities to understand how they can further assist in the development of the New Relationship. Areas which local authorities felt needed further clarification included the following:

- Further clarification on how SIPs will be funded in the future: *'we haven't got any clear idea of how many days a headteacher will be using, and how much they get paid. Maybe if there was a national agreed rate that might be helpful. Because I'm trying to work out our budget, I can't really factor that in because I haven't got the information'*.
- Further clarification and support on using data, monitoring and evaluation and measuring impact: *'it's often talked about but I think it still lacks clarity. How do we measure that [impact]?''*
- Further clarification on the local authority's enhanced responsibilities relating to the SIP, in order for local authority management teams to be able to consider the changes that may need to occur in order to coordinate the diverse group of people coming on board as SIPs: *'It's not going to be easy to manage roll out to all of our schools'*
- Further clarification of the role of Capita in the NRwS, including information on how this will impact on the local authority services.

In summary, the role of the local authority appears to have developed over the duration of the NRwS trial. NRwS appears to have impacted, to a certain extent, on local authorities' practices in order to accommodate the demands of the *New Relationship*. The next chapter discusses the broader impact of the NRwS on schools' and local authorities' practices and how it has brought about change in the trial areas during this first year.

9. Impact

Key findings

- Whilst some respondents found it difficult to identify any major impact of NRwS on standards, interviewees were able to comment on the changes in practice that had occurred during the trial period. However, for some it was difficult to ascertain whether such changes were brought about through the NRwS or would have occurred anyway.
- Within schools, the NRwS had mainly impacted on senior management although there was some evidence to suggest that other staff members were becoming more involved in NRwS practice. The impact on pupils, parents and governors, in terms of their direct involvement in NRwS activities, was negligible during the trial period.
- Local authorities had developed strategies to accommodate certain aspects of the NRwS, though some local authorities were undergoing relevant changes anyway. On the whole, local authorities were thought to be more streamlined under NRwS.

This chapter draws out some of the ways in which the NRwS was perceived to have impacted on practice and how it has brought about change in the trial areas during the first year of implementation.

Although the NRwS was in the preliminary stages of implementation during the initial visits to case-study areas, interviewees did reveal some possible early indications of potential impact. The aim of the second visits to trial areas was to assess more fully the developments and outcomes of the NRwS reform strands. Since respondents had experienced up to three terms of the New Relationship, it was hoped that they would be able to comment on whether the quality of school planning had improved since the introduction of NRwS and on its effectiveness.

The majority of interviewees from the second visits felt that few developments had taken place as the trial had progressed. One headteacher, for example, explained that: *'not much has happened since December. There was a big flurry of initial activity but there's been far less development since then and some of the momentum from the DfES seems to have been lost'*. Similarly, a local authority respondent remarked that *'not much has changed to be honest. We've just scratched the surface'*. Such feedback was commonplace, but it

should also be stressed that many interviewees still felt optimistic about the future impact of the NRwS upon their school or local authority.

9.1 Impact on school staff

During the initial case-study visits the two groups that were perceived to be most affected by the trials were the school senior management team and local authority personnel, though some other relevant groups were mentioned too. This was primarily because much of the contact regarding NRwS was between the headteacher and the SIP, though some deputy headteachers and other senior staff were also becoming increasingly involved.

There was some indication that the influence of the NRwS was beginning to spread through the trial schools in terms of staff awareness and involvement, particularly with regard to self-evaluation. Indeed, there was a frequently-expressed view during these initial visits that as the NRwS progressed staff would have more ownership of school self-evaluation and this was confirmed during the second visits to the trial schools. Similarly, the findings from the self-evaluation survey of 68 schools trialling the NRwS, found that the majority of respondents felt the NRwS highlighted a greater focus on school improvement and / or self-evaluation. A total of 93 per cent of respondents to this survey agreed, or strongly agreed, with the statement that ‘continuous monitoring and evaluation throughout the school year is a valuable aspect of the NRwS’ (see Section 3.4).

The second case-study visits also highlighted more overall awareness of, and reflection on, self-evaluation for senior staff in the majority of the trial schools. A few headteachers even highlighted the involvement of the whole school staff in the self-evaluation process: this was deemed important because all staff were expected to have ‘*shared ownership of the documentation*’. This was also illustrated in a comment made by one chair of governors who said: ‘*it comes from grassroots up and so everyone’s become part of it and taken some ownership. Even people like teaching assistants have had a part to play*’. One respondent said that the NRwS had ‘*made us work in more team situations on whole school tasks*’, while another headteacher encouraged the involvement of staff within the new self-evaluation procedures as a way of:

'feeding their ideas into the discussions as they arise. It's important for all staff to understand how and why certain decisions are made'.

This involvement of staff in the self-evaluation process had also impacted on perceptions of professional development: *'to be part of the process rather than things constantly being done for them... you do have a voice now'*. This had in itself reduced the pressure on the senior management team. For example, in one school the headteacher described how the SEF could be accessed via the school intranet where staff could update sections for their department. This had decreased the administrative burden on the headteacher: *'You lead it, but in a sense you've got to get more people on board because everybody's going to be accountable'*.

Staff had been less involved with the SIP and therefore, less impact was evident for this strand of the NRwS, although there was some evidence to suggest that more staff had met the SIP than was found during the initial visits to case-study schools. For example, in one school, the SIP was said to be keen to meet school staff and often toured the school during their visit. The headteacher explained that this had helped staff feel included in NRwS and *'know that there is support for them too. This all improves the communication and the dialogue'*. However, such examples were rare and many headteachers appeared to have little intention of including other staff members in the SIP dialogue: *'the impact of having a SIP on staff is probably negligible at the moment'*.

A number of headteachers, during the second visits, said that they did not feel that it was appropriate to involve all staff in the NRwS. For example, one respondent explained that the majority of teaching staff had been informed and had a *'basic knowledge'* of the NRwS, but were not actively involved: *'staff aren't that conscious of it yet and it's not appropriate that they should be'*. For these headteachers, there was the intention to involve more staff in the self-evaluation process, for example, towards the end of the academic year when the time came to produce the School Development Plan.

9.2 Impact on pupils and parents

It was evident from the initial visits to case-study schools that the impact on pupils and parents was negligible. One local authority adviser, during one of these case-study visits, commented that there had been: *'no impact yet, but once they become more involved in the evaluation process they will understand it... there will have to be more pupil and parent consultation'*.

Staff in all of the case-study schools explained that they had requested feedback from parents on the school profile, though the response rate varied from school to school. The second set of interviews with headteachers also revealed that schools were more willing to include the student and the parental voice in their Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) than had occurred previously, and they were considering how they would go about this, *'to make them feel more included'*.

9.3 Impact on governors

There was little evident impact on governors from the first case-study visits, with many chairs of governors interviewed during these visits reporting little involvement with the NRwS in the early stages. It was the perception of some respondents at the initial stages, though, that *'governor involvement will be heightened'*. Findings from the second round of visits, however, generally did not reveal this to be the case: *'on paper it looks really good, but from a governor's point of view it hasn't really impacted on us'*. Although fewer governors were interviewed during the second phase of fieldwork, those who were mainly commented that governors still had little involvement in the NRwS.

In some cases, however, there were more signs of governor involvement. In one school, governors were said to have: *'received more reports and student and parent surveys which give them a better feel for what's going on in school'*. A chair of governors also commented that she had been invited to attend more meetings on target setting as the NRwS has developed over the year. She explained that, *'it seems to be more open rather than "this is our business and it's nothing to do with you but I'll report back to you". We were still told before but you didn't know how they got to these numbers... now I*

see the process they go through to get there'. One governor noted that her involvement in the usual cycle of school improvement planning was changing as the self-evaluation aspects of the NRwS were developing, and governor involvement was becoming, *'sharpened and focused'*. Similarly, a local authority adviser commented that:

To many governors the school is just an empty building where they attend meetings and we are really pushing the fact that in order to be part of the process for the New Relationship and the SEF they'll have to be more involved in the daily life of the school. So it's been a lever to get greater governor involvement where we haven't had it.

9.4 Impact on the local authority

There was universal agreement after the initial case-study visits that the NRwS was impacting on local authorities, though, as noted in the previous chapter, there was some variation in views about how this impact was manifesting itself. Some local authority respondents, interviewed during the initial visits, felt that the impact on the local authority would be, *'pretty massive. The LEA is going to have to make huge changes in the way it is managed. It's not just about NRwS, it is also about the wider impact of the forthcoming Children's Bill'*.⁵ However, it was difficult for many interviewees to assess impact after only two terms of NRwS: *'It's very difficult to attribute whether that impact is down to New Relationship or whether it's due to other factors'*. Indeed, one local authority adviser was still sceptical that it was a new way of working. He commented, *'is it genuinely a new way to relate to schools? I've yet to be convinced'*. In the three local authorities where interviewees felt that: *'a lot of what is involved in NRwS we were heading towards anyway'*, less impact was identifiable.

The majority of local authority representatives interviewed appeared to have embraced the NRwS and described the ways in which they had utilised the

⁵ The Children Bill was introduced to the House of Lords in March 2004. It was produced in the light of consultation on the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper to create clear accountability for children's services, to enable better joint working and to secure a better focus on safeguarding children. In particular, the Bill *'places a duty on local authorities to make arrangements through which key agencies co-operate to improve the well-being of children and young people and widen services' powers to pool budgets in support of this.*' (House of Lords, Bill 35-EN).

NRwS to develop strategies and procedures. There was an appreciation that they were able to streamline the practice that they had been developing prior to NRwS, in line with a national agenda, and that the New Relationship had given substance to justify to schools changes in local authority practice. One local authority adviser, for example, welcomed the opportunity to address elements of local authority practice under the NRwS and commented that he had: *'enjoyed being part of the pilot, having the chance to be at the forefront of a development and to try and shape it'*.

For some local authority respondents, the NRwS had *'brought the LEA and secondary heads closer together for a common enterprise'* and had brought about a cultural change in working practice. Another local authority respondent felt that:

If we can become more streamlined in our thinking, schools can become clearer as to what their priorities are... the whole process should in time lead to an improvement in standards, because schools will be putting support into the areas where it is most needed.

There was apprehension regarding the extent to which other local authorities, those not involved in the trial, would embrace the NRwS. Some interviewees segregated those *'imaginative LEAs who will grab and use it to raise achievement in their authority'* from those who *'may feel threatened by it'*. One local authority adviser commented on some local authorities feeling threatened by the role of the SIP. He stated that: *'it's taking over key aspects of what they have done traditionally, and they've generally done badly, and therefore they are being defensive and trying to hold on to what they have got at the expense of schools'*.

9.5 Raising standards

Interviewees were asked to comment on whether the NRwS had helped to raise standards. Not surprisingly, all interviewees took an initial view that it was *'too early to say'*, and this is an area that any subsequent evaluations could usefully address. Some interviewees, however, commented on the perceived impact that the NRwS may have in the future. One local authority adviser, for example, remarked that:

If it doesn't, the whole business of the New Relationship will have failed because it is based on the notion that there are too many schools in the country that are not achieving as much as they could. Therefore, the New Relationship is, in my opinion, identifying with much more accuracy than ever before, the strengths of schools and particularly, the weaknesses.

This interviewee went on to say that *'the New Relationship will be a success if, in addition to identifying the areas for development, it develops strategies for addressing them'*. In the main, the perception across the majority of interviewees was that the NRwS had the potential to raise standards and that the 'conversations' could lead to headteachers having to think further about what they have to do in order to continue to raise standards.

Some local authority advisers were more sceptical of the actual impact of NRwS. One, for example, remarked that: *'I think it started off as something that was really going to be significantly different. I think it's latterly becoming just something else that we have got to deal with'*. Some local authorities felt that they had *'always set schools challenging targets'* or *'I've noticed a change in standards because of the work we've been doing as an LEA, not as a result of the New Relationship'*. Conversely, many more commented that it was not just *'another initiative, but was hitting at a crucial area of school improvement and crucially self-evaluation and ownership of self-evaluation by schools...that's so central'*.

9.6 Impact on other policies

Interviewees commented on the impact that the NRwS may have on other national school improvement policies. The majority of interviewees suggested that other initiatives should fit alongside the NRwS *'rather than NRwS fit in with other initiatives'*, while some respondents perceived there to be little conflict between the NRwS and other government programmes, mainly *'because school improvement is the bedrock of everything else'*. As expressed by one local authority adviser, *'I see it as a genuine attempt to change a culture'*. Overall, the NRwS was thought to go *'hand-in-hand'* with other policies to a certain extent, *'rather than one directly impacting on the other'*.

The main school improvement related policies or programmes mentioned by interviewees were as follows:

- **Every Child Matters** – Where mentioned, interviewees felt that the *Every Child Matters* and NRwS agendas needed to be more streamlined. Local authorities in particular were unclear what the role of the SIP was in terms of *Every Child Matters*. There was concern that SIPs would not be able to achieve a Single Conversation in the time they have allocated: *‘the DfES think that they can chuck everything else into the single conversation’*.
- **Extended schools** – There was some perception that the extended schools agenda could potentially conflict with the NRwS, although it was said to be *‘too early to say’*, especially as local authorities were said to be still considering the ways in which they will support extended schools.
- **Specialist Schools** – A number of respondents felt that there was some tension between the Specialist Schools Trust and the NRwS and a *‘lack of willingness from the Trust to partake in the New Relationship’*. One local authority adviser, for example, stated that, *‘issues around SST still need to be ironed out as they’re not willing to be partners and not acknowledged that SIPs play a strong role in achievement’*.

The SIP was often said to be the conduit for the success of initiatives linking in with one another, encouraging a Single Conversation where this was possible, and helping to *‘ripple out’* aspects of NRwS further, *‘to make it a much more positive experience’*.

Evidently, clarification was required in terms of national policies and programmes and where certain agencies sit within the national agenda. One headteacher for example, requested a *‘management tree’* in order to identify where agencies such as Capita, the Specialist Schools Trust, Academies, the National College for School Leadership and the local authority sit in relation to school improvement and each policy.

In summary, while there was little evidence to suggest that the NRwS had helped to raise standards during the trial period, there was some indication that changes in practice had occurred which could, if sustained, raise school standards given time. The next chapter builds upon the findings from this chapter and details the extent to which respondents felt that the NRwS had helped to achieve a reduction in bureaucracy.

10. Reducing Bureaucracy

Key findings

- An important aspect of the NRwS is the proposed contribution to a reduction in 'bureaucracy' and interviewees were generally enthused by the overall objectives of NRwS to reduce the burden on schools and make things more streamlined.
- Collating evidence from interviews and a survey to participating schools, it was clear that a reduction in bureaucracy had yet to be fully realised. Some aspects of the NRwS however, in particular the school profile, were already being recognised as a step in the right direction.
- In many respects, respondents were still waiting to see if and how bureaucracy would be reduced and recognised that it might not be possible to make a valid assessment of the issue when the new developments are being trialled.

A key long-term aim of NRwS is to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy for schools. In order to assess whether the NRwS has been making progress in this respect, the following chapter pulls together evidence from both the questionnaire survey and the interviews conducted in the eight trial areas.

It is important to set the context here: reducing unnecessary bureaucracy is clearly a long-term goal and the respondents were asked to comment on this goal only a few months into the NRwS. There was widespread recognition that, firstly, more time was needed before firm judgements could be made about this issue; and, secondly, that in a trial year, where new mechanisms are being put in place and guidance has to be issued, there may be a need for an increase in 'appropriate' bureaucracy before the levels of paperwork can be expected to decrease.

Having said this, respondents were able to make some useful comments about this issue, and their comments may be helpful in terms of addressing this aspect of the NRwS as it develops further and more SIPs are put in place. To an extent, there were different emphases in the questionnaire and interview responses. In answering the key questions about levels of bureaucracy in the questionnaire survey, respondents were largely positive; interviewees, however, gave more mixed responses.

10.1 Impact on bureaucracy: evidence from the survey

The survey data provides a wide evidence base as it was completed by 68 of the 93 participating schools. On the issue of bureaucracy there was evidence that a minority of respondents felt that this had increased since the introduction of the NRwS. For example, 36 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the New Relationship ‘has added unnecessary bureaucracy to the process of external accountability’, compared to 51 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed. Furthermore, 57 per cent agreed that the NRwS had led to a lot more meetings and paperwork. Encouragingly though, when asked to consider whether the NRwS would cut down on duplication and bureaucracy in the long term, once it is well established, nearly two-thirds of respondents (62 per cent) felt this would be the case. Thus, whilst the initial implementation period may have generated additional work for some respondents, there seems to be a reasonably strong belief that in time self-evaluation will become more streamlined.

Furthermore, when invited to nominate, in an open question, the main advantages of the NRwS, a third of respondents saw a reduction in bureaucracy as the main advantage. This was a significant finding in that a third of all respondents, with no prompting, in an open question that offered a completely free choice for identifying advantages of the NRwS, selected a reduction in bureaucracy as a key advantage. This was usually expressed in terms of less paperwork, more streamlined systems, the annual governors’ report being replaced by the school profile and fewer requests for information. The second most-frequently nominated advantage related to a heightened focus on self-evaluation and the fact that the self-evaluation process was now perceived to be more effective; several respondents also chose to highlight the fact that the process was now more coordinated and joined up. One respondent expressed the latter view as follows: *‘although there is more work at first, I can see how the intention is for all of this to mesh together. It will decrease workload and be more informative and useful’*.

Whilst responses to earlier questions in the survey pointed to an actual or anticipated reduction in bureaucracy, there were still concerns about the amount of time and work entailed in self-evaluation. When asked to identify the main challenges associated with the NRwS, one of the most frequently registered concerns related to bureaucracy and workload. For example, there

were calls for a continued reduction in bureaucracy; for the DfES to take special care not to place extra demands on schools; and to ensure that the single conversation actually was a genuine single conversation.

10.2 Impact on bureaucracy: evidence from interview data

During interviews in waves one and two of the evaluation, interviewees were given several opportunities to assess the impact of the NRwS on bureaucracy. For example, they were asked:

- Has the NRwS helped to cut down on duplication and unnecessary bureaucracy and paperwork? Will it do so in the future?
- Has the single conversation helped reduce duplication and bureaucracy?
- Will the NRwS achieve its aim of reducing the number of policies, strategies and advice documents for schools, allowing them more freedom to commit to teaching and learning?

By collating interview responses, it was possible to see the extent to which schools and local authorities had already experienced a reduction in bureaucracy or, at the very least, the extent to which they anticipated improvements in this respect as the NRwS became further embedded.

The interview data revealed that, even by the second wave of case-study visits, the majority of interviewees had not yet detected any significant reduction in bureaucracy (for schools or the local authority). Respondents did, though, appreciate that these were trials and that there might be an initial increase in the amount of paperwork before reductions could take place. The following quotations are broadly representative of interviewees' views:

- *I think the jury is out on that one (SIP).*
- *Too soon to say – there has been some increase in work because of the new arrangements (local authority adviser).*
- *It doesn't reduce bureaucracy – we live in hope! (headteacher).*
- *Bureaucracy has not been reduced in the pilot, but perhaps this will come (headteacher).*
- *I would like to think that it will reduce bureaucracy. Initially, we haven't seen much difference (chair of governors).*

- *I wouldn't say it has changed it really, I'm sure it's meant to* (headteacher).
- *Not yet, no. I can't even get hold of the [Ofsted] School Self-Evaluation Form!* (deputy head).
- *Too soon to say... it actually has increased bureaucracy because of the arrangements we've had to put in place* (senior adviser).
- *The only evidence we have of this so far... is the ability not to produce an annual report to parents and a relaxation of the requirement to complete the school Leadership Incentive Grant plan* (headteacher).
- *I've never had so much paperwork in my life! It will not reduce bureaucracy', [but] 'the School learning plan [online] – will reduce paperwork if it goes ahead* (local authority adviser).

Where interviewees elaborated on the view that there appeared not to have been a reduction in bureaucracy, to date, they made a number of points. The fact that the local authority still had to take on functions that resided outside the remit of the SIP was noted in three different authorities. This was said to prevent schools from having a true 'Single Conversation' and local authorities were still picking up elements of the school improvement agenda: *'No it has not [reduced bureaucracy] because some of the issues that surround that work between the link inspectors and schools has got to be picked up by the LEA because this is not SIP core business'* (principal education officer). It was also noted by interviewees that SIPs were not involved in headteacher recruitment, building renovation plans and in the case of a Catholic school, there was no connection between the SIP and Diocese. Thus, some schools felt they were continuing to have conversations with a range of individuals.

Again, from the perspective of the local authority, an officer involved with data collection reported that bureaucracy had actually increased since the introduction of SIPs, as local authority staff were now being asked for additional data analysis by the SIPs.

Meanwhile, individual school staff commented that they continued to receive requests for information from other organisations (specifically mentioned was the Learning and Skills Council) and that the DfES had not reduced the demands placed on schools for data. For example, two headteachers complained that they were still burdened with large amounts of paperwork, referring to school development plans, monitoring reports for the Leadership Incentive Grant and Excellence cluster plans.

A smaller number of respondents were more positive about the impact of the NRwS on bureaucracy. School interviewees who had already detected some improvements linked these to the school profile (with its simpler format), a reduction in paperwork (e.g. not having to re-bid for specialist school status), having the SIP as the external adviser and, more generally, greater coherence. One headteacher felt that the paper work they now had to complete was useful, so this was viewed as a positive development.

Just three interviews at local authority level confirmed a reduction in bureaucracy. One individual attributed this to greater partnership working between the local authority and schools:

I think it's very much to do with the fact you are working in partnership and you are all aiming for the same thing. It means that, for example, rather than me writing reams of monitoring reports, I'm supporting schools reflecting on their own practice, which will be ready if they have an inspection, so its producing fewer documents, that work at many different levels (adviser / SIP).

Another interviewee, from the same authority, explained that the SIP had streamlined liaison with schools by acting as a '*conduit of information between schools and other sections*'.

10.3 Electronic communications

There were mixed views about whether the move towards a greater use of electronic communications was helping to reduce bureaucracy, but some interesting points were made about the role of electronic communications, as in the following comment from a local authority adviser:

There is a lot of fallacy behind this, about things being done electronically, but what do people do when they get an e-mail - print it off. It won't create an awful lot less paperwork because the paperwork will be on the screen in front of you.

Similarly, a headteacher was also sceptical about the benefits of on-line information, stating that: '*We now get less post, but we do not have less paper*', implying that even if information is sent electronically it eventually has to be downloaded and printed. A concern was also expressed that the use

of electronic systems could result in schools missing out on information because school staff only tended to download documents which were 'requirements', rather than guidance documents. Indeed, a headteacher confessed: *'we sometimes miss things, for example, I missed Every Child Matters!'*

10.4 Overview on bureaucracy

In summary, an important aspect of the NRwS is the proposed contribution to a reduction in 'bureaucracy' and interviewees were generally enthused by the overall objectives of the NRwS to reduce the burden on schools and make things more streamlined. Within the NRwS framework, there was felt to be the potential for more joined-up thinking, for example, more coherence regarding national DfES, local authority strategies and individual school developments. The incorporation of school re-designation for specialist school status and external advice for governors on headteachers' performance management were noted.

There was also a view that a reduction in bureaucracy, by means of streamlining information and using common data sets, could only be helpful for schools. This was thought to be dependent on the streamlining of the funding process by the DfES and ensuring that all bids for funding followed the same procedure. A local authority adviser interviewee echoed the thoughts of two or three other interviewees when he said that much depended upon the approach of the DfES:

This is down to the Department [the DfES] and how it streamlines the system. If it gets rid of pots of money and streamlines the process for applications to the Specialist Schools Trust, it will reduce bureaucracy, but if schools are still required to complete a 28-page document it will not.

In many respects respondents were still waiting to see if and how bureaucracy would be reduced and, as stated previously, recognised that it might not be possible to make a valid assessment of the issue when the new developments are being trialled.

The previous chapters have addressed the various strands of NRwS and the ways in which they have manifested themselves over the trial period and what

impact this has had on school and local authority practice. The following chapter summarises the main advantages and challenges of the NRwS and the lessons learnt from the trial that may help direct the way in which the NRwS is rolled out to schools.

11. The Next Steps

Key findings

By collating interviewees' views on a range of questions (e.g. factors hindering the development of the NRwS during the pilot, anticipated challenges for a roll out, future support required by local authorities and schools) it is possible to extrapolate some of the key issues that may need to be addressed during the roll out of the NRwS to all schools and local authorities. These issues included the following:

- Emerging as a central concern was the need to provide guidance / training to both schools and local authorities so that they can fully understand certain elements of the NRwS including, notably, details regarding the role of the SIP, and the process aspects of the Single Conversation.
- It was also noted that schools with less well developed self-evaluation practices may struggle to accommodate the changes brought by the NRwS, thus training on self-evaluation would be welcomed.
- As well as equipping schools and local authorities with the necessary knowledge and skills, successful implementation was also felt to rely on the degree to which the NRwS was viewed, overall, as a positive and progressive development for schools. Thus some interviewees expressed a view that time and thought needs to be given to promoting the NRwS nationally, raising its profile and making sure that both schools and local authorities are fully on board with the principles underlying the NRwS.
- Some interview respondents were critical of the pace of change and requested that additional time should be allowed for the NRwS to be introduced. Several suggested that a more phased introduction might be beneficial.
- It was clearly understood that the SIP has a pivotal role to play in the NRwS and, as a result, the need to recruit 'quality' SIPs, who then receive 'quality' training, was frequently emphasised.

This chapter draws upon respondents' views in order to present a range of issues and suggestions that may need to be considered during the roll out of the NRwS. The discussion relates to three sets of questions: the first of these was to do with the factors that interviewees felt had in some way hampered or hindered the implementation of the NRwS during the one-year trial period; the second set of questions asked respondents what they saw as being the potential key challenges to be faced in the future, as the NRwS is introduced to all schools; and, finally, interviewees were invited to suggest the types of support

that might be required in order for schools and local authorities to successfully implement the NRwS in the future.

11.1 Factors hindering the implementation of the NRwS

In total 21 interviewees (from both schools and local authorities) were able to identify specific factors which they considered to have hindered the implementation of the NRwS. The most-commonly mentioned impediments were, firstly, the workload entailed in implementing the NRwS and, secondly, ambiguities concerning the meaning of the term 'Single Conversation'. Smaller numbers of respondents mentioned the following factors:

- some communication problems between the DfES and local authorities, where *'it was not always as clear as it could have being'* (practical problems such as delays in receiving agendas for meetings were referred to)
- delays in getting SIPs in place (caused by the fact that a number of first wave SIPs failed to achieve accreditation)
- inappropriateness of the SIP training: *'the training and assessment did not enable people to show what they could do or give people opportunities to develop'*
- the loss of key local authority personnel during the early trial period, which was felt to affect the momentum of the NRwS
- fewer opportunities to give feedback as the pilot progressed
- a pressurised timescale for implementation.

Interviewees were also specifically asked whether involvement in other school improvement activities had helped or hindered the development of the NRwS. A majority of interviewees felt either that this was not an issue or that the activities had been complementary and there had been a positive effect. Two interviewees commented that the NRwS was at the heart of everything and so other initiatives fitted around it. Four others hinted that the NRwS could actually assist involvement in other activities or programmes, citing more streamlined practices and the example of SIPs providing support for schools applying for re-designation of specialist school status. On the latter example, a headteacher commented: *'We have recently become a specialist school and I think it assists because you are starting to follow the same practices: in*

terms of providing your evidence, in terms of providing your milestones, and feedback’.

Six interviewees saw some tensions, citing conflicts with, for example, the *Every Child Matters* agenda and particular difficulties for small schools who could struggle to accommodate several initiatives at the same time. Three others questioned the capacity of the SIP role to respond to the full gamut of activities that schools are involved in. For example, a local authority adviser raised the following question: *‘How are they going to SIP the extended school agenda where things may be happening after school hours, how does the SIP get a handle on that?’*

11.2 Roll out of the NRwS: anticipated challenges

The perceived challenges connected with implementing a roll out of the NRwS fell broadly into two categories: the challenges associated with the SIP role; and the challenge of promoting the positive aspects of the NRwS to schools and local authorities.

Several interviewees expressed concerns over whether sufficient personnel could be recruited to the SIP role and, furthermore, whether they would be of the right quality. This may be a particular problem for the primary sector because of the sheer number of primary schools. As a fundamental component of the NRwS machinery, it was felt imperative that SIPs should possess the appropriate skills and expertise (see also Chapter 4). In the case of headteacher SIPs or SIPs from outside the authority, it was noted that steps should be taken to ensure that they were fully briefed on the local context of schools.

The need for local authorities to monitor the performance of these ‘external’ SIPs was also reported to be a challenge. The predicament of local authority officers who failed to achieve SIP accreditation was then raised – what would happen to these individuals? Also, the fact that SIPs could not take on all aspects of school improvement was highlighted, which meant that local authorities were still required to take on non-SIP functions. *Every Child Matters* was specifically mentioned: this was seen as a potential challenge,

especially as it was felt that it would be possible that less funding would now be available to local authorities.

Resistance amongst schools and local authorities to the NRwS was also mooted by a few interviewees. They suggested that some schools may be less willing to engage in the developments associated with the NRwS. Several interviewees acknowledged that where self-evaluation was less of a priority, or where management or evaluation systems were not so well developed, then such schools may struggle to embrace and cope with the changes. Furthermore, one interviewee with experience of working as a headteacher in several authorities believed that some local authorities were antagonistic towards the NRwS and felt threatened by the changes:

When an LEA is on board and sees it as an opportunity, in my experience there's a huge amount of evidence that it is going to make a significant improvement in schools. But where an LEA wants to try and sabotage and block it, everybody is spending too much time on the local politics of it.

It is not surprising, given these concerns, that some interviewees saw the challenge of the roll out as making certain that schools were aware of the NRwS and that it was portrayed in a positive light. A headteacher interviewee said: *'It depends on how it is presented. It has got to be put across as a management tool'*. Thus further promotion of the NRwS was deemed critical: if schools were able to perceive the advantages and see that the NRwS could actually improve their working lives as well as standards in schools, then they would be more open to the proposed changes.

11.3 Further support for schools

Interviewees offered a number of suggestions about the types of support that schools may need in order to implement the NRwS successfully. The most-frequently mentioned of these can be summarised as follows:

- By far the most commonly identified form of support was the need for schools (and governors) to receive some kind of **training, guidance or briefings** about elements of the NRwS. Specifically noted was training around self-evaluation, the role of the SIP, inspection and interpretation of performance data. One headteacher speculated that a *'huge commercial market'* could grow out of SEFs, with companies / consultants offering

advice to schools. More preferable, in her opinion, was for this advice to come free of charge from the DfES.

- A number of respondents made comments about the **pace of change** and the **time required** to implement NRwS developments in their schools: *'give us more time'* (headteacher); *'slow the pace down – the deadlines are unreasonable'* (headteacher). Two interviewees (again both headteachers) advised that schools would find the NRwS much easier to cope with if it was gradually phased in, rather than arriving as a complete package which they were required to implement immediately. It was also said that during the first year of the NRwS schools would benefit from having additional input from the SIP, so that the SIP could guide them through the new procedures.
- During the first wave of case-study visits, a number of respondents made requests for **greater clarity in guidance** relating to the implementation of the NRwS: *'be clear what you [the DfES] want us to do'* (headteacher); *'give us a clearer idea of what is going to happen next'* (deputy head); *'send some very simple guidelines to say – when you are doing your self-evaluation, you need to make sure you have done these ten things...'* (deputy head); *'We would like case studies and examples of good practice on a website'* (headteacher). In the course of the second wave of visits, interviewees suggested that it would be helpful for schools if they were given examples of the SEF form, illustrating different ways in which the form could be completed. Generally, interviewees stressed the importance of schools knowing precisely what the NRwS entailed, having a clear understanding of the different elements (in particular the Single Conversation) and being fully briefed on what was expected of them.
- Another suggestion, but made by fewer respondents, concerned clarification of the **role of governors** in the NRwS, usually with a view to ensuring more direct involvement of governors: *'why are governors not directly involved?'* (headteacher); *'there should be NRwS conferences geared to the needs of governors'* (chair of governors).

Smaller numbers of interviewees mentioned other strategies which they believed would assist schools in the implementation of the NRwS. For example, two interviewees recommended producing a calendar for the year with key NRwS milestones clearly signalled. A move to electronic communications was welcomed by some interviewees, although others reported downloading problems and they suggested that some important documents could also be sent in hard copy format, rather than only being available online.

11.4 Further support for local authorities

The two most prominent suggestions from respondents about further support that might be useful to local authorities were as follows:

- In the broader context of clarifying the future role of the local authority, there should be **further clarification of the role of the SIP**: *‘There are still questions about the role of the SIP’* (local authority adviser). It was also stressed that it was important to ensure that the individuals who took on the role of the SIP had to have the right skills and experience: *‘We want quality people doing the link role [the SIP role] – it is the most important part of the LEA’s work. You need very high quality people’* (local authority senior adviser).
- Linked to this, a number of local authority respondents stressed the need for **better training for School Improvement Partners**. There were indications that interviewees felt that SIP training could be improved in terms of both content and delivery: *‘Training needs to have the right focus’* (local authority adviser). In terms of support throughout the year, one interviewee posited that SIPs may find it helpful to have a mentor, at least during their first year in the role.

It was suggested that during a national roll out, the experience of the trial local authorities should be capitalised on and their insights could be used to support local authorities just starting to embark on the implementation of the NRwS. The point was also made that support should be in place throughout the year, not just at the outset. A local authority officer noted that there had been a lot of activity initially but this dwindled as the year progressed.

In another authority an observation was made that local authorities themselves must be allowed time to become familiar with the mechanics of the NRwS. One local authority officer had found it difficult to support schools and answer their questions, when they themselves were struggling to get to grips with changes. They recommended therefore that local authorities should be afforded the time to get up to speed with the NRwS before it is rolled out to schools.

12. Conclusions

This report has told the story of New Relationship with Schools during its initial trial year, presenting practitioner perspectives on both its successes and challenges. This final chapter concludes this account by reiterating some of the main evaluation findings, as well as offering recommendations in relation to the future development of the NRwS.

- **Self-evaluation.** The general view from respondents was that there were many positive developments occurring in self-evaluation processes. Some of these developments may have originated in activities prior to the introduction of the NRwS, but the New Relationship was certainly contributing to sharper, more rigorous, more focussed self-evaluation work. There was felt to be: *'a better defined cycle of self-evaluation and improvement planning'*. The questionnaire survey findings revealed that 68 per cent of respondents felt that their self-evaluation practices within NRwS were 'very effective'. Over three-quarters of respondents indicated that 'Ofsted / DfES guidance', local authority 'written guidance', and 'SIP verbal guidance' had been 'very helpful' or 'quite helpful' during the trials. The availability of a national pupil database, with individual pupil information, and the use of protocols on data sharing will undoubtedly assist these processes further in the near future.
- **The School Improvement Partner.** The development of the SIP role has probably been the most successful element of the NRwS. The pivotal role of the SIP was clearly understood by all respondents and, as a result, the need to recruit 'quality' SIPs, who then received 'quality' training, was frequently emphasised. With regard to the input of the School Improvement Partner, questionnaire respondents were overwhelmingly positive, with between 86 per cent and 97 per cent recording favourable ratings on a range of statements about the role and work of SIPs. There is clearly much that can be built on as the NRwS progresses, and the predominantly positive view taken of the SIP contains important messages for school improvement generally.
- **The Single Conversation.** Amongst the interviewee sample, there was a lack of clarity about the concept of a Single Conversation – several commented that the terminology was misleading as it was neither a 'conversation' nor was it 'single'. Some interviewees reported that so far they had not experienced a true single conversation – they were having to converse with both the SIP and the local authority. Others questioned whether the notion of a single conversation would ever become a reality – could one person, in the SIP role, deal with all the necessary issues and provide sufficient support to a school? At the same time, there was evidence that in some areas practices had been 'sharpened' and 'focussed' and schools were being more effectively challenged. Overall, however,

given that the phrase continues to cause some confusion, it might be worth considering giving this term less emphasis, and the SIP role more emphasis, in future guidance on the NRwS. An audit of the remaining elements of the SIP and local authority roles, and consideration of how these could be further rationalised and streamlined, might also be useful.

- **The School Profile.** Most school interviewees had found the process of compiling the profile relatively easy, and certainly much less arduous than the work required for the annual governors' report. The more succinct format as well as the use of pre-populated data were seen to aid the compilation process. At the same time, one of the most frequently voiced concerns was that the streamlined format did not allow for the personalisation of its content, such that the finished product was not felt to adequately portray the school and its wider context. In terms of future developments therefore, some further flexibility is perhaps needed for schools to expand or customise particular sections. This reflects a more general point that the NRwS needs, as more schools become involved, to continue to take account of the contexts and needs of individual schools. Both Special School respondents, for example, were very positive about the NRwS generally, but did also raise an issue that was particularly pertinent to their own schools: *'ensuring that NRwS can be tailored to the needs of individual schools'*; *'ensuring that the particular needs of Special Schools are fully addressed'*.
- **Reducing bureaucracy.** A central promise of the NRwS is its proposed contribution to a reduction in 'bureaucracy' and interviewees were very positive about the overall objectives of NRwS to minimise the burden on schools and to streamline administration. However, weighing up the evidence from interviews and a survey of participating schools, it became apparent that, although a minority of respondents felt that there had been a reduction in bureaucracy, a bigger group of respondents took the view that this reduction had yet to be fully realised. In many respects, respondents were still waiting to see if and how bureaucracy would be reduced and recognised that it was not possible to make a valid assessment of the issue when the new developments were being trialled. The ability of the NRwS to significantly cut unnecessary bureaucracy would undoubtedly serve as a potent appeal factor, increasing schools' willingness to implement the changes. Further work is perhaps required to identify and communicate precisely the aspects that can deliver the original promise.
- **The National Roll Out.** Interviewees drew attention to some of the key issues that would need to be addressed during a roll out of the NRwS to all schools and local authorities. A central concern was the need to provide guidance / training for both school and local authority personnel, so that they fully understood the various elements of the NRwS, including the role of the SIP, and the Single Conversation. It was also noted that schools with less well developed self-evaluation practices might struggle to accommodate the changes brought by the NRwS, thus training on self-evaluation would be welcomed. As well as equipping schools and local authorities with the necessary knowledge and skills, successful implementation was also felt to rely on the degree to which the NRwS was presented and viewed as a positive development in school planning and

school improvement. Thus some interviewees felt that time and thought need to be given to further promoting the New Relationship, raising its profile and making sure that both schools and local authorities are fully on board with the principles. Some were critical of the pace of change and asked that more time should be allowed for the NRwS to be introduced. Some suggested that a phased introduction might be beneficial.

- **Coherence.** On the question of the ‘joined up-ness’ of the New Relationship strands, there was a very encouraging finding, in that the majority of survey respondents took a positive view: the strands were considered to work together either ‘very well’ or ‘quite well’ by three quarters (74 per cent) of respondents. Of the remaining respondents, 18 per cent indicated that the strands did not work very well together, and just two respondents (3 per cent, both secondary) were of the view that the strands did not work together at all. Further evidence for a positive view regarding the coherence of the NRwS strands was provided in answers to an open question where respondents were asked to identify the main advantages of the NRwS. In response to this question, several respondents chose to highlight the fact that the process was now more coordinated and joined up. One respondent expressed the latter view as follows: *‘although there is more work at first, I can see how the intention is for all of this to mesh together. It will decrease workload and be more informative and useful’*

In conclusion, it is clear that the evaluation of the first-year trials, thanks to the contributions of participating schools and local authorities, has produced many relevant findings for both practitioners and policy makers. There have been a number of positive findings, most notably in relation to the SIP role and self-evaluation processes, along with a number of constructive comments about potential issues and challenges and the ways in which the NRwS might be taken forward.

It is also clear that the second year of activity will be a key year for the NRwS. This will be the year in which the trial schools and local authorities will attempt to embed NRwS developments, and a whole new cohort of schools in 27 local authorities will encounter the New Relationship for the first time. It is to be hoped that new participants in the NRwS, along with the policy makers responsible for the national roll out, will benefit from consideration of the detailed first-year findings presented in this report.

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