

## Education Panel – 25 November 2015

### Transcript of Item 6 – The Role of the Regional Schools Commissioners in London

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Good afternoon, Dr Tim Coulson. Can I welcome you to the second part of our meeting? Dr Coulson, you are the Regional School Commissioner (RSC) for East of England and North-East London. This is the governance structure that was introduced in 2014 by the Department for Education (DfE). I do not know how long you have been with us, but certainly we had some discussions about your role since it has been formed and we had some discussions about it at our last meeting. As you can see, in a general way, the Panel and the Deputy Mayor for Education share similar concerns.

**Andrew Boff AM:** Could you tell me what you see as the key challenges facing schools in your patch of London?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** First of all, can I say thank you very much indeed for inviting me? I am keen to support your work.

I suppose I could answer your question in two ways. One is that I see my work as working with all the other people who might want to answer that question and have views and opinions on what the issues are in schools.

Secondly, I have a very specific role with academies in the part of London that I work in. The number of academies is a relatively small part of the education scene across most of the east London part of the region that I work in. There is in general a smaller proportion of academies than there are in the other parts of the region that I work in.

In terms of the academies that I work with, there are really two main issues. Some of those schools became academies because they were very poor schools in terms of the Government's agenda of very poor schools needing to become sponsored academies. That is what they have become and so they are on their route, we hope, to becoming much better schools. Some are and some are having a slower journey.

The second issue is that in order to meet the Government's agenda, which obviously is set out in the Education Bill currently going through Parliament and which says that multi-academy trusts are the route to school improvement for the poorest schools, one of the biggest issues for me in the schools that I work with is ensuring that the very best schools step forward and take up the opportunity of leading multi-academy trusts.

There is probably a much wider answer to your question, however, than just those two things. Those things are, in sense, the more limited responsibilities and are particularly part of the role that I work in. Some of the wider issues that I have seen in the papers that have been sent to you and certainly that we work on with colleagues across London about some of the performance issues are issues that I see myself as working with others to address. Those issues are well rehearsed, particularly the concern that some of the great improvements that have happened in recent years across London's schools are maintained. Some of the areas of performance that have not improved quite so well are about some of the most able pupils achieving really well and about some of the drop-off that there is after successful General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) and not really taking that forward through to Further Education (FE) and higher education. Your own officers here have been clear about the problems with young people who do not go on from school into employment or FE.

In terms of schools themselves, there is still a mixed bag. There are still areas where parents are much happier for their children to go to a school in the area and areas where parents are only happy if they are able to get

their children into a very particular school that they believe is a good one with other ones less good. We still have some of that. The history of the last few years has been that London has seen that much improved and that has been one of the big features, really.

In terms of what I see as the challenges in London's schools, I see some very specific ones in the areas that are my responsibility around academies and I see another set of issues where I am probably saying pretty much the same things that you will have heard from your previous people.

**Andrew Boff AM:** Thank you. How do you work with the other London RSCs to ensure that there is consistency in the type of advice and range of interventions that are being employed? Is consistency important?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** Consistency is important, and also reacting to the specifics of a particular part of the area. Across the part of east London that I work in, it is not homogeneous in terms of the way that we work with the different schools. In general, schools in Redbridge are considerably higher performing than most of the schools in the other part of the region. It is not the same.

In terms of your question about how we work across London, we spend a lot of time working together and comparing notes. In a sense, the work is all about specific schools and problem solving and trying to come to the right judgement about a particular school. We spend quite a lot of time doing that.

In a way, one of the ways we most get consistency is through trying to have consistency in the way we try to get relationships. Part of what we are trying to do is to work with others to try to make changes. The key people we work with are local authorities, multi-academy trusts in terms of sponsors, some of the teaching schools and then, across London, the Assembly here and London Councils.

I am sure people will have already talked to you about the London Education Group that we have, which brings together what we see as the variety of us who have different roles across London. We do two things, really. One is to try to make a bit of sense of that for people who from the outside think, "It looks a bit crowded. What is everybody doing?"

Secondly, we try to tackle some very specific issues. You will be aware that at the Mayor's conference this week, collectively there is a piece of work being presented about the need for future leaders in London's schools and the fact that, although we have some really great leaders in London, quite a lot of them are probably coming towards the ends of their careers and we will need to find more. At the moment, the pipeline of new school leaders does not look secure enough. Therefore, in terms of working together, we do that very well.

In terms of the three of us who work in different parts of London, we bring together our work. We go to organisations. Where are we going this week? On Monday we have a meeting with London's Directors of Children's Services. That is a London-wide meeting with the local authorities and we talk with them extensively about the way we do our work and look to join that up. There we will be discussing schools that need an academy sponsor, and I do not know whether you are going to go on to ask me about pupil places, but we will also go on to talk about things like pupil places, where the need for new schools will be and those kinds of things.

**Andrew Boff AM:** Could you just tell me a little bit about the London Education Group and who sits on it?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** The London Education Group has representatives from the London Assembly, London Councils, the London local

authorities at both the Director of Children's Services level and the Head of School Improvement level. There is a London Head of School Improvement group. They both have representatives on that group. The three of us who are RSCs are on that group. We have someone who is a headteacher and who is the London regional representative for the Teaching Schools Council, which is the umbrella group for Teaching Schools Alliances. All of us meet each term and when we have something very specific on, like the leadership work that I was talking about, we sometimes meet in slightly smaller groups to take forward bits of work like that.

**Andrew Boff AM:** OK. It is just that I had never heard of it before.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** No, we have not heard of it. Dr Coulson, we have to have a point of clarification. You said the London Assembly but it must be Greater London Authority (GLA) officers.

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** I apologise. I meant the GLA. I am sorry. I am talking to you as the London --

**Andrew Boff AM:** Someone from Munira Mirza's team?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** That is right. I am sorry. Yes. Thank you for putting me right. Thank you.

**Andrew Boff AM:** OK. Are that London Education Group's deliberations in any way minuted or memorialised anywhere?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** We keep notes of our meetings. Probably more significantly, we are looking to produce some work from those discussions and on Friday there will be a report published from that group. That is another contribution to try to improve leadership in particular.

**Andrew Boff AM:** Thank you very much. Can you tell me what steps you have taken to improve the performance of schools in your region in the past 12 months?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** In terms of my responsibilities, there are two main groups of schools that I am responsible for working with. One is maintained schools that reach a performance level where the Government expects them to become a sponsored academy. The other group of schools is academies that are not doing very well. For academies in general, the idea is that my role is not to monitor them, follow them, check on what they are doing or even particularly offer them advice on what they should be doing. An academy trust has been given the independence to run its affairs.

In terms of what I have done in terms of improving schools, the group of schools that I would look at particularly are poorly performing academies. Part of the reason that the role was created a year ago was that academies that have funding agreements with the Secretary of State that states on what basis that funding agreement should ever be terminated - basically if they do not manage the money properly or do not get good educational performance in their schools - can have their funding agreements terminated. My job since I have been doing it in the last year has been to exercise those responsibilities. Across the region, I meet and see a lot of schools in order to try to be content that the trust is doing a good job with their schools.

In about a dozen cases, it has been clear that the academy trust has not been doing a good enough job with the school. In that case, I issue what is called a 'warning notice'. It is similar but not quite the same as what local authorities do with maintained schools; it has a slightly different legal basis but it is a similar kind of thing, which is essentially a warning notice that unless things improve the Secretary of State will exercise her powers

to remove the school from the trust. Over the last year, I have had to issue about a dozen of those and they are all published on the DfE website if people want to see them.

In terms of schools becoming academies, we have continued the work where schools are of a poor enough nature to be required to become an academy and we have found sponsors for them. That has continued over the last year.

What we have seen also in the last year is more schools choosing to take up the opportunity to become an academy within a group of schools. In 2012 when quite a lot of secondary schools took up the opportunity if they were 'good' or 'outstanding' to make the change to become an academy, generally they did it on their own and X School became X Academy. What we are now seeing is people looking to do that in a more constructive way for both financial and educational reasons. Recently, three secondary schools in Newham, all with 'good' Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) judgements, have chosen - they have not been forced - to form together a multi-academy trust. They had already been working together as a cluster of schools and had done some training and things like that together. What they have done is they have come together as a multi-academy trust and their view is that it will both give them financial savings, which they will plough back into the classrooms, and also give them a sharper edge in terms of education. One of the things I have done is very much to encourage that kind of development when schools think it is in their interests.

**Andrew Boff AM:** Thank you. How do you work with Ofsted to support schools to be 'good' and 'outstanding'?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** The relationship with Ofsted is something that we have thought a lot about and we look to have a really constructive discussion whilst maintaining quite a careful distance. Ofsted, obviously, needs to have complete independence from the rest of the system to report on the quality of education regardless of whether it has chosen to become an academy, have a sponsor or be in a multi-academy trust, or not and to report on the education in a school.

When we do have discussions, in general, it is when Ofsted has judged that a school is doing very poorly and so, typically, a school has been judged 'inadequate'. As you know, the school will then have a termly monitoring visit from Ofsted until it is judged good enough to no longer require the special measures. In those cases, we have very good discussions with Ofsted about what it is that is going to make the difference for this school. Obviously, the inspection report details the failings of the school, but in terms of the solution what is going to happen? We often say, "We think this is what we are going to do. We think we have found a sponsor here. We think we are going to introduce it and bring it in". Ofsted will want to know that so that it is able to comment when it next visits on whether or not it sees the progress in terms of that going forward.

Therefore, we have a good relationship with Ofsted in terms of trying to talk constructively in particular about the weakest schools where there are real problems. With other schools, we maintain a bit of a distance and it runs its inspection schedule. We use its information very extensively and, when a report comes out, we read it very carefully and see whether there are things we need to pick up on.

**Andrew Boff AM:** Thank you very much.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** In terms of what we have covered it has been clear, but have you identified any other specific challenges in your first year of operation that you want to share with us?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** Yes, I have. There are two, really, in particular. They are not entirely primary or secondary but, if you want to

stereotype them, first is more secondary and the second is more primary, but you will probably find a bit that some schools are in neither of those categories.

The issue that is predominantly secondary is that in the last Parliament we moved across the country to about 60% of secondary schools now being academies. Some of those, as I was explaining just now, are because they were expected to with a sponsor. Large numbers of those were schools that chose to when the Government gave them the opportunity to be independent and to take that route, and many of them enjoyed that independence.

However, what we are now seeing is that many of those need to move on a bit and to use that opportunity and responsibility to strengthen their governance. What we really now see is that being a school governor has always been a demanding task, but being an academy trustee has significant additional and extra responsibilities on top of what people have always known about a school governor. Therefore, what we are seeing in many academies that have been academies for two or three years and have understood the ropes of the additional responsibilities they have to do is that in a sense, also, the buck really stops with them in terms of improvement. We are seeing the need now to improve governance. We offer a scheme called the Academy Ambassadors scheme, which is looking to assist academy trusts if they have specific gaps in expertise on their trusts in terms of strengthening governance.

The second challenge, which is probably more primary but not exclusively, is that whereas 60% of secondary schools have become academies, only 15% of primary schools have become academies. The message about whether it is a good idea to become an academy has never taken root in primary schools in anything like the same sense. Those ideas of independence and going your own way for many schools was absolutely not what they wanted to do. They were very happy being part of some supportive structure that did many of those things for them and they focused on doing the very best educating they could in their schools.

A lot of primary schools are beginning to have another think about that now. They can see that the Government is very committed to the academy agenda. The Prime Minister talks very clearly about moving towards a system where in due course, he thinks, all schools will be academies. It is causing a lot of primary schools to rethink that. What they are trying to work out is, if they were to take this step and if becoming an academy is the right thing for them, what is it that they will do that will make the difference for their children? Is it finance? Are they looking for some kind of economies of scale? Is it that they are looking for some kind of real edge in education? Good schools perhaps get rather less support from their local authorities than they did in days gone by because the local authorities' resources are so much less than they were in days gone by and, if you are a school doing quite well, are you getting quite the same edge and support and challenge of your work? What is it that they are looking for?

Therefore, what I see in terms of a challenge is the real explanation of the system for primary schools. Where they go in terms of becoming an academy? Our advice is, "If this is the step for you, do it with other people. Form a group. Get some real strength. Get a board of trustees that can govern and manage a group of schools really effectively". The challenge is in primary schools looking to see how they can exploit the opportunity.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Yes, that is a real challenge given the scale of it that you showed us. In terms of your day-to-day, your region stretches from Hackney to Norfolk and you have told us - and we welcome - that you spend time with pan-London groups and that you work or liaise with your other two RSCs. However, if I look at the list, you also cover Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk, Peterborough, Southend-on-Sea, Suffolk and Thurrock and so there is another set of RSCs that you have to liaise with. You are one man. Is that not a challenge?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):**

Fortunately, I do not do it on my own. In terms of the regions that were set up a year ago, we have a small office of about eight of us but we draw on the resources of the DfE. There are three big areas of civil servant colleagues whom we draw on. There is what is called the academies group which has a couple of hundred staff, there is the free schools group which has considerable staff and there is the Education Funding Agency (EFA) which broadly sorts out the money for schools. We work very extensively with all of those organisations because, as you say, we could not possibly get a feel right across that region without their support.

Part of the idea of this new system is to try to make a reality of what some people think is a bit of rhetoric of the Government moving the system to be a schools-led system, to have as little of the funding in education taken by the bureaucracy and as much as possible of the funding going into schools for teachers working with children. That any kind of bureaucracy that is needed to oversee the system and support the system should be as slim and as light as possible.

Certainly the work with academies tries to put that into practice and most of our work goes into the changes needed. When a school becomes an academy, there is some work we need to do. When the relatively small number of academies that we are very concerned about need our attention, we give them attention. However, broadly, we are not expecting to have lots of contact and lots of work with the vast majority of academies. The system is such that they took their independence and are now running their own businesses. Basically, what we are having is a fairly light-touch system that is there to be strong enough if they foul up and do not do their job properly and we can step in and use our powers and responsibilities, but it can encourage those schools that want to now still make that step.

It is a broad region but, so far, it has proved to be about right. I came into this job from having worked for a local authority, which I enjoyed very much. One of the things that we have been able to see across the region is that we have tried to help people work beyond their natural boundaries. Wherever you work, you tend to get to know people in your area and tend to network with them and every now and again you will go to an event where you meet people from wherever is next-door to you in terms of your geographical boundaries. One of the things we have tried to do - and we have had some starting success in this - is to try to say, "Across Norfolk to Hackney, how do we make sure that some of those barriers do not get in the way? How do we try to make sure that we see support going across there?"

We have seen that in terms of London's successful schools. We have a number of successful London schools that would like to take a greater role in leading in the system, in leading multi-academy trusts, in supporting failing schools and in doing better. At the moment, certainly in the part of London I work in, we have a surfeit of schools wanting to do that, to push the boat out and to say, "Yes, we have run an 'outstanding' school but we are prepared to be part of a wider system of leadership". Some of them, certainly when I started a year ago, would come to see me and be rather frustrated that the DfE was not making use of their offer to support schools.

With the boundaries both within the London boroughs and in the wider area, we are beginning to see the 'London' and 'non-London' bits change a bit. We have some of very strong sponsors in London beginning to say, "We would be just as happy to work just beyond the London as much as we would just inside it". I know that Munira [Mirza, Deputy Mayor for Education and Culture] and her colleagues have a different view about the geographical way that we should set up as RSCs and we have a lot of time for that view. Obviously, London is a really special place and we want to maintain some of the structures that help in London. However, what we are also keen to do is to ask how we can take some of the surfeit of expertise that people want to spread and make use of it beyond London. We now have some good examples of where trusts are working in London and also taking schools into their academy trusts from outside London.

**Andrew Dismore AM:** What about the other way around? You are talking about good practice coming out of London into Norfolk or whatever. What about the other way around?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** That is absolutely right. At the moment, we have not done it quite as much because we have found sufficient high-quality support in the parts of London where we have needed it.

However, certainly, we have had some of those discussions and most recently I can think of a school I visited in the last month, a school in one part of east London that really does need a sponsor, and we are looking over towards Thurrock at the possibility of what looks like some really great practice there in secondary education perhaps coming to London. It is at slightly earlier days than the examples I just gave you, but I agree with you. We hope that we would see more of that as well.

**Andrew Dismore AM:** It just seems to me bizarre that we do not have an RSC for London. That seems to be the general view around them. Do you not find it peculiar?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** No, I do not. In many ways, what London has working across London is three RSCs. In terms of our work, the experience of the last year has been that it has enabled us to work extensively with every single one of the London local authorities.

I suppose one of the reasons I do not agree with that – and I know it is a view you hold – is that some people, not saying yourselves, have a slight sense that the RSC is almost the person running the system. We very much do not see ourselves as running the system. We very much see ourselves as joining this education system, working with local authorities, working with the GLA, working with London Councils, working with the variety of Teaching School Alliances across London and joining that. In a sense, the real work is the nitty-gritty work of improving individual schools.

I accept the alternative view that there is about an RSC across London. However, we came into this role, were given our regions and given our roles and we have looked to make it work. Over the last year we have seen benefits from the way it has been set up. We have not found, or have been confronted with issues that we felt we have not been able to deal with because of not having just one.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Thank you. Dr Coulson, we cannot have you here without asking you about resources. In your annual report, if you produce an annual report, would you have to show the resources behind your particular piece? Is there an annual report for all RSCs? In that report, would you be outlining key performances?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** The requirement to date in the legislation that governs all of the academies is that the Secretary of State produces an annual report on the academy programme and the development of academies. The latest one was produced. There are discussions going on about whether or not we should do more on a regional basis. What we did for the current annual report, the last one that was produced, was contribute to it from each of the regions.

There are key performance indicators that have recently been published, which say the sorts of things that you would probably expect them to say. Certainly over the coming year I suspect that they will get greater scrutiny on a public basis. I do not think we published them until quite recently in terms of those performance indicators. They now have been published and give organisations, including people like you, the opportunity to scrutinise those and to see what you think of them. In terms of an annual report, though, your main question, at the moment it is the Secretary of State who produces an annual report.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** It is just that in all the information I have looked at I was not able to see. In terms of helping your work, I understand you can use consultants. I have no idea how many consultants you are using and the cost of that. In a sense, if you were using a huge amount of consultants, it would add support to my case that maybe the structure is not right and maybe the staffing level is not right.

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** I accept that. Yes, I accept that.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Where would I get that information from?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** At the moment, we are not disaggregated from the DfE's work.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** We cannot tell?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** In terms of that kind of detail, I do not think we have published that level of information. You might well want to say, "You should".

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Do you see my situation?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** I absolutely see your point, yes. I see your point.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** You do use consultants?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** We use two kinds of consultants. All of us in our team are civil servants. We work for the DfE and obviously, in the job I have taken on, I have now become a civil servant. We, my colleagues and I, do most of the work that I have described to you. We have some consultants who are broadly very experienced educationalists whom we tend to use for very specific bits of work. When there is a school that is really struggling and we want to get a good diagnosis of what it is, we will ask one of our consultants to go and do a proper visit to the school, to spend the day in the school and to give us a proper understanding.

The other kind of consultant we use works with sponsors, with multi-academy trusts and with schools looking to join a multi-academy trust. You may well know of schools that have gone through that wrestling about, "Should I become an academy? If I become an academy, which multi-academy trust should I join? What is the difference between this sponsor and that sponsor? How much choice do I have?" There are all of those kinds of things. We have consultants who do that kind of work. We have about five consultants who work across our region at the moment.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Full-time?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** No.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** It is just strange for me because in another department of the Government, say Health, they cannot use consultants but yet, in a new initiative and a new development in another part of Government, it would seem to me that you are dependent on consultants, who are not cheap.

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** The DfE has been through a procurement exercise and has just published the outcomes of that procurement exercise, where essentially it has a framework contract with people it can call on, on a consultancy basis. I hear the point you are making but that is the way we work.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** OK. Thank you very much.

**Andrew Dismore AM:** We have seen improvements in a lot of parts of London's schools but they are still underperforming in areas like white British males. We have high drop-out rates. We have a gap in attainment between free school meal recipients and others. What is being done strategically about these challenges?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** The contribution that we make to that is by looking to identify schools and academy trusts that look like they are the people who are making success in those areas.

A long time ago, I had a very different job. I worked when the Government had National Strategies. You will remember the National Literacy Strategy and the National Numeracy Strategy. In those days, we came up with what we thought was the best way of teaching, a particular pedagogy, and helped and encouraged schools to pick it up. We have moved a long way on from that time and in many ways the Government's approach now is not to tell schools, "This is the way to teach either a particular group of children or a particular curriculum", but to try to identify where it is working well.

In a way, the most important contribution that I am making to the issues you said is to look to find schools that are doing rather better with those issues than the general group of schools, for which those issues are proving pretty challenging in education. Most schools are not finding it very easy to be successful. It is to find those schools that really are being much more successful in those areas and to get them to take on a wider leadership role, typically in a multi-academy trust or a Teaching School Alliance, to spread whatever their expertise is in trying to tackle those particular issues.

In terms of the issues you raise, I recognise them, of course. They are the issues that are still holding back educational performance in lots of parts of the region that I work in. What is interesting is that across the secondary sector in the region we have seen a much stronger desire in the last year to share detailed performance data. The DfE, as you know, publishes performance tables and if you delve into it there is a huge amount of data there for people to get into. One of the difficulties with the data from a school improvement point of view is that for secondary schools, it will not come out in all its glory until probably January, by the time it has been through the mill, all the remarks have happened and all of that kind of stuff. What schools really want is to have it much earlier, soon after results day. If your English results for a particular group of disadvantaged children in your school are not very good, you want to much more quickly find somewhere where they are doing it.

What we now have in place is a data-sharing agreement across many of the secondary schools in the region where they are sharing their data before the end of August. Obviously it is at a headline level, the percentage of pupils getting five GCSEs in English and maths and those kinds of things. It is also trying to make sure schools are linking up over some of those issues that you talked about. How are we finding schools that are succeeding with a particular group of children that in general the system is finding quite challenging? The data-sharing has been a good contribution. Finding some of the best schools to lead the multi-academy trusts has been a good thing.

The third thing, which is in its very early days — I do not know if I can claim much impact yet, but there is possibility — is what I said to one of your colleagues earlier about how those of us in the system are trying to pull it together better. In our work with colleagues in local authorities and in other parts of the London

education system, how do we try to tackle some of those issues that have been intractable over the years where people have tried and not yet succeeded? How do we try to pull together a bit better? I mentioned the leadership report earlier. Some of the issues you have raised, clearly, are some of the other issues we might come to in due course.

**Andrew Dismore AM:** What can the Mayor do about them?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** I am not certain that it is my place to tell you what the Mayor can do.

**Andrew Dismore AM:** Go on.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** OK. Do you want to come in?

**Andrew Dismore AM:** No. I was waiting for an answer.

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** What can the Mayor do? The initiatives that are already taking place we find really helpful. We very much support actions like the Gold Club, which is the recognition of schools doing well with specific groups of children. If I take that as an example of what the Mayor does in terms of using his office to give recognition to tackling key issues, it seems to me a very good example of what the Mayor could do.

**Andrew Dismore AM:** What about raising teaching standards generally?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** What can the Mayor do about raising teaching standards? It seems to me that there are two ways of raising teaching standards. One is getting good teachers in and the second is helping them all develop. There are some quite good mechanisms in place to help teachers develop. You visit schools. We know that teacher supply is not easy. It is a complex issue based on a whole number of issues as to why there are not enough teachers around.

There are real pros and cons of coming to be a teacher here in London. It is a great place to be. It is a quite expensive place to be. It seems to me any help that the Mayor can give in his much wider work that makes London a place for great teachers - often young but not necessarily only young - to want to come and live and work will help raise teaching standards.

**Andrew Boff AM:** Just carrying on from that, we have heard that the LSEF has assisted in better classroom practice. Is that something that you recognise?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** Yes. In terms of the links I have had with the LSEF, I can see that it is being used effectively. I paused because in many ways I do not think I can report at first hand my work with that, but when I hear schools talk about it I hear them talk very positively about the impact that it has had in terms of stimulating development, thinking about their teaching and leading to improvements.

**Andrew Boff AM:** Is that not your job?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** In terms of my role, I do not have a role in the detail and the operation of teachers' professional development. There are many people in the system who do. My job is to make sure that academy trusts work out how they take advantage of the opportunities there are, or come up with their own ways of doing professional development. I do not get involved myself in helping teachers to teach maths better or some very detailed

matter like that. I see the opportunities of funds like that as much more hands-on for specific issues to help do that kind of thing.

**Andrew Boff AM:** There are a number of different funds that can be delivered and used, presumably, to improve classroom practice.

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):**

There is that fund. In days gone by, there used to be a range of ways that grants and different organisations could get hold of funding to do that. There are really two main sources now outside of the work you have described. The main source is the school's own funding. More and more of the funding through local authorities is into schools. The second mechanism is the Teaching School Alliance mechanism, where Government accredits schools that are 'outstanding' to be Teaching School Alliances and gives them a small amount of money, essentially just pump-priming to help them set up as an organisation that can generate revenue to fund specific training activities.

**Andrew Boff AM:** Thank you very much.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** In terms of what the Mayor can do, are you not able to recognise mayoral intervention in land that has been transferred into this sector to provide access to academies and free schools?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** Yes.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Without a Mayor intervening on the Fire Authority (London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority - LFEPA), it would not have happened.

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** You are absolutely right and I should have recognised that much earlier. In those wider planning roles, there has been a very good role. London has seen the biggest number of free schools that the DfE has opened and the DfE has needed all the help it can get in order to secure exactly what you say in terms of land and buildings. Going forward, we are going to need to do it even more in terms of the new schools that are going to be needed across London. I am very happy to say that, of course; that is a key thing.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Earlier you spoke about meeting with pan-London groups. We have to bottom this out and say that pan-London networks and groupings do not happen without facilitation. We can identify that mayoral intervention has absolutely helped create the sort of pan-London grouping and coming together. Is that not something you can acknowledge?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** Of the London groupings that I go to, some very definitely have been precipitated by the Mayor. Others have been in existence for a long time in terms of some of the London local authorities' work. The mayoral facilitation has certainly added to that in a very helpful way.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** In your world when all the schools, primary and secondary, go off to be academies and free schools, their relationships with local authorities weaken. It may well be that then a strategic anchorage is something that would be appreciated. That could only come from a mayoralty.

**Andrew Boff AM:** "Only come from a mayoralty"?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):**

When schools become academies, the way I tend to say it is that their relationship with the local authority

changes. The vast majority of the schools I see remain in a pretty good relationship. There are a few schools that are slight mavericks in terms of their behaviour but that has always been the case --

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** “Changes”?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** -- and they have had less-good relationships with any of the bureaucracy that exists. There are some academies that fall into that category.

The majority of academies I see have a good relationship with their local authority and want a local setup for discussion where they can talk about education issues, talk about place-planning for the future and talk about some of the nitty-gritty issues like how to deal with children with very specific special needs. Across London, facilitation to make sure we are keeping in track together and that we are looking at some of the big issues in terms of people and place-planning is clearly helpful.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Thank you for that. Let me just go on and ask you a question about the criticism about the apparent conflict of interest between advocacy and inspection within the RSC’s role. Do you see that? Do you recognise that criticism?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** I saw it in the papers you sent me, thank you. I recognise it in terms of understanding that it is a view. I suppose I do not see it in practice, no. For me, it is clear that as civil servants we are here to implement the Government’s policy, which does include advocating for the benefits of the academy system, what multi-academy trusts can bring to the system and the improvements that that will support in the system. We are also very clear that for that to be successful there needs to be the right level of checks and balances. Our role is to be very clear that there is no excuse for poor performance, including in academies.

I recognise the advocacy role. I do not recognise the inspection role. The inspection role, for me, is very clearly Ofsted’s role. Our role is effectively to be a regulator. It is to act where poor performance has been identified. Typically, Ofsted will be one of our main sources of that information. Not only; sometimes there will be other sources of information like performance data and occasionally some other crisis in the school, but typically Ofsted will be the most significant source of that information. Our job then is to regulate according to the funding agreement. In terms of the question about whether there a conflict between those roles, I cannot say that in practice I have seen that.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** OK. Thank you very much for that. The last question from me is: what is your process for recruiting private sector sponsors?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** Over the last year in the region that I work in, we have moved from about 80 sponsors to just over 100 sponsors. Almost all of those sponsors are ‘outstanding’ schools that have moved from a school to developing a multi-academy trust and being a state school. We are interested in other organisations from all kinds of backgrounds - whether it be private sector, a charity or other kinds of organisations - that have the capacity and the skill to be a sponsor.

The approval process we go through for whatever background they come from, whether from the private sector or from an ‘outstanding’ school, is a sponsor application process. The sponsor application process has, first of all, an application form that asks a whole load of questions about governance and financial capacity, but crucially educational experience and experience of having made a difference and knowing what supporting schools is like.

Since this regional work was set up, we have a headteacher board across the region. The headteacher board looks at all of those sponsor applications and scrutinises them, asks questions. Sometimes when the questions are not very clear, they defer their decision and ask colleagues to go back and talk with the applicant further before coming to a view. The headteacher board will come to a view on whether it believes the applicant sponsor is financially worthy, has the kind of governance that will hold schools to account and will do that effectively and has the educational experience and capacity to make a difference that will help a school improve. That is the process we go through.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Thank you very much. The headteacher board is made up of headteachers from academies and free schools?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** That is correct.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Yes, I am just confirming that. Thank you. That has been very informative.

**Tony Arbour AM:** You have the power to oblige a coasting school to become an academy. It is possible, is it not, for a coasting school to have 'outstanding' results? Why, therefore, would you want to make it into an academy?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** I do not think it is possible for a school to be judged 'coasting' and to have 'outstanding' results.

**Tony Arbour AM:** Really?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** A school will be described as 'coasting' in 2016 if it has three years running of results where children do not reach their potential. In terms of not reaching their potential, there are numerical quantitative figures outlined.

If I take a secondary school, in order to be described as 'coasting' a school will have to have met all of these criteria. In 2014, it would have to have had less than 60% achieve five GCSEs, including English and maths, and its progress levels in English and mathematics both have to be below national averages. It is the same in 2015. In 2016, when we move to the new Progress 8 level, it will be the Progress 8 level being below the national rates that are seen by schools in general.

You could have schools below 60% where children are making remarkably good progress. If there are children coming from very low starting points in the school, achieving 55% perhaps is a great achievement. In those schools, you would expect the progress the children are showing in their English and maths to be above the national average figures. For a 'coasting' school, it would have to be below all of those figures. If you were below all of those figures, I would not call those results 'outstanding'.

**Tony Arbour AM:** That is very interesting because of course, in common parlance, 'coasting' means in effect that a school or indeed an individual is continuing at the same level all the time. It is the basis on which I posed the question. It is possible for there to be a school that has a very high level in terms of objective achievement by its pupils. I understand that it may well, by your terms, not be achieving its full potential but may be achieving high levels of GCSEs that might well be the envy of neighbouring schools. However, because it is returning those results year after year, under normal parlance that would simply be seen as 'coasting', would it not? It simply turns out the same good results year in and year out.

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** 60% is close to what is now the national average. If a school is consistently achieving below those figures and is not a school with children with very low starting points, then I do not think we would describe those as great results.

**Tony Arbour AM:** In effect, you could have a school that has very good results but because the value added is lower than you think is appropriate, such a school you would wish to intervene in?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** In terms of what 'coasting' says, what will happen in 2016 is that a school either will be 'coasting' or it will not be 'coasting'. There will be a definition. There is then not an automatic process that that school will become an academy. What it means is that that school will receive an additional degree of scrutiny and it will be my responsibility to see whether or not that school, with support, has the prospect of making good progress, the kind of progress I am sure it would want itself to make. If after a period of time it does not appear possible for the school, even with support, to make that kind of progress, then what the Bill does is allow for the power to insist that the school becomes an academy.

**Tony Arbour AM:** Has that ever happened? Have you done it?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** No. It is not possible before 2016.

**Tony Arbour AM:** I see. For it to happen, would you be obliged to consult? Suppose you had a school that was in that position. Could you simply do it by fiat or would you have to consult?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** You are asking about the current Education Bill going through Parliament, which of course has not been concluded. All I can tell you is what is in the current draft of the Education Bill, which obviously could be changed in Parliament. The current draft of the Education Bill says that if that is what I believed was the right thing to do, it could happen without consultation.

**Tony Arbour AM:** OK. That is really what we were looking for.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** You have no current consultations outstanding? The consultation that is going on now is about the draft Bill?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** That is right. At the moment there are three things happening. The Education Bill is going through Parliament and is going through that process. The detail of the 'coasting' definition, which I have just outlined, there is currently a consultation on.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** That is what I was thinking. That is still out there, is it not?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** That is still out there. I mentioned the secondary school one. There is a similar one, but obviously with appropriate primary school measures, in primary schools. There is also a third exercise going on. There is a consultation on what is called the 'Schools Causing Concern' guidance, which is what up until now has governed local authorities' work with poorly performing schools. What the Education Bill does is to make that something that both local authorities and the DfE could use if they thought it was appropriate to. The DfE has published what it thinks is the guidance, but is inviting views under the consultation.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** That is lovely. Our work is about informing as well. For anybody watching this and wanting to get involved in the consultation, where will they find that consultation?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** If you go to the DfE website, [www.gov.uk/dfes](http://www.gov.uk/dfes), on that page you will see in the top right-hand corner a little menu bar. You go to 'Consultations'. If you go into that, you will find those consultations.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** I will tweet that after this meeting as my bit of help in the wider consultation.

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** Thank you.

**Tony Arbour AM:** I will retweet it.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** You will retweet it? Thank you. Dr Coulson, thank you for your openness and for sharing with us your work. If we have any questions arising when we look through our minutes, is it OK if we come back to you just to seek further clarification?

**Dr Tim Coulson (Regional Schools Commissioner for East of England and North-East London):** If there is anything I can do to help your work, I would be very pleased to.

**Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair):** Thank you very much and good luck with your big job.