

Speech: Lord Agnew: By working together we can achieve so much more

It's a great pleasure to be here today at the North Academies Conference.

It's also great to be back at the DfE. I feel a bit like an old football manager who has been dusted down and brought back onto the pitch.

An event like this is a great opportunity to celebrate your successes, share what works and what you have learnt through your journeys. You are on the front line of what this government is trying to achieve in education. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for the incredible work that you do.

This is the first academies conference I have attended since being appointed minister and I'm delighted that one of my first official speaking engagements is in the North. As an ex-chair of a trust I'm excited to be able to continue work to improve schools but on larger scale.

I am enthused to hear about the work being done to drive up standards and would like to thank MATs and sponsors that are taking on struggling schools into their trusts and turning them around.

This is hard work. I know that having taken on seven schools in Special Measures and two with Requires Improvement myself. Five years ago I had a full head of dark hair and weighed four stone more than I weigh today!

It also drives our Secretary of State for Education – the first Secretary of State for Education ever to go to a comprehensive school, and that's probably why she is so passionate about social mobility.

In 2010 the academies programme was built on the principle of contributing to the school-led system through increased autonomy, independence from local authority control and the freedom to set your own curriculum, as well as a greater opportunity for collaboration.

Sharing ideas is powerful; indeed, I'm a bit of a magpie here! On that point, consider putting good local MAT CEOs or chairs onto your own boards. This is something I did with my trust. I managed to persuade Cathie Paine, Deputy CEO of Reach 2, and David Earnshaw, Chair of Outwood Grange, to join us. They gave us a really hard time, which was just what we needed.

I am delighted to see the great progress achieved by Maura Regan and her team at Carmel Education Trust, with over 100 Grade 9s in Maths and English in this year's GCSEs and a former sponsored academy (St Michael's) now showing a KS4 Progress 8 comfortably above the national average. I remember exhorting her to expand from her original school three or four years ago and now we see the educational power of her original school spreading across the region.

From my personal experience as an academy sponsor, I have seen at first-hand

how one can harness the energy of individual teachers and deploy them across several schools. This is because they are seeking career advancement not readily available in an individual school, or because they have such strong skills that we have wanted to share their best practice with others.

In your region there are 66 MATs of two or fewer schools and 86 SATs. I want to encourage any of you here today to think seriously about teaming up to create bigger MATs. I speak as someone who has gone from one school to 14 and I can say, without hesitation, that the collective firepower of a bigger group makes a huge difference.

I believe the sweet spot is perhaps somewhere between 12 and 20 schools, or something like 5,000 to 10,000 pupils. I know this means a certain loss of autonomy but I am certain it is the way to strengthen educational provision. Using my own experience again, by doing this we have created a full time director of music, six specialist subject leads who we have used to develop our own curriculum, and we have extended the school by three hours per week. I don't believe these things would have been possible as a small trust.

At its best, the MAT model has the potential to be the most powerful vehicle for improving schools quickly. Great examples of rapid school improvement here in the North include Zoe Carr of WISE Academies, and Rob Tarn, CEO of Northern Education Trust.

In Zoe's case, Bexhill Academy's primary pupil outcomes have increased year on year over the last four years, from 22 percentage points below the national average to 11 percentage points above the national average. I am challenging all the RSCs to give me many more examples like this.

I know that Jan has mentioned the Strategic School Improvement Fund and the MAT Development and Improvement Fund. I want to make two points on these: whoever is bidding for the funding must prove that they have a strong track record in school improvement; secondly, you must prove that the school receiving the support will be able to carry on this work when the funding ends.

These are specific funds that the Department has created to help support the great work trusts are doing in school improvement. With your local knowledge, you are the people best placed to address the regional and local disparities which exist across the country.

The North is a unique region. It is geographically large and covers a very diverse school landscape. This region has an interesting mix of urban, coastal, and rural communities – not unlike my own area, Norfolk – which each bring their own unique strengths and challenges that affect how national policy can be delivered.

It was fascinating to hear from Jan in my first week in the job about the characteristics of this region and how the programme has grown over the last few years – from the challenges faced by small faith schools in the rural areas of the region, to the work that is being done in the North Yorkshire Coast Opportunity Area.

By working together we can achieve so much more. And ultimately, this helps every young person to realise their full potential. So thank you again for all that you're doing.