THE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL PEER REVIEW

NAHT

FOR LEADERS, FOR LEARNERS

This summary is the first step towards establishing clarity of understanding amongst the profession on the characteristics of good peer review.

Foreword

Last year, the Accountability Commission reported that the way in which schools were being held to account for standards was doing more harm than good. In our report, Improving School Accountability, we concluded that to unleash potential across the country we need to rebalance holding schools to account with helping them to improve.

Peer review was identified by the Commission as a potentially positive way in which schools could help one another to improve. Yet we reported that too few schools engaged in peer review, and not enough was known about the essential characteristics of effective peer review and the conditions in which it has an impact.

This paper is in response to that finding. In early 2019, NAHT convened a small group of peer review programme providers to establish what evidence exists on what makes a successful peer review. I would like to thank those providers – Ambition Institute, Challenge Partners and Education Development Trust – for their contributions to the development of this document, alongside the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) who checked the references and sourced some additional evidence that the group drew on in their development of the key principles.

The intent behind publishing The Principles of Effective School-to-School Peer Review is threefold:

1. To raise the profile and awareness of what good peer review is and challenge misconceptions that might exist.

2. To provide insight to schools that are either constructing their own peer review approaches or are considering investing in external peer review support.

3. To enable peer review providers to assess their own programmes against the evidence available as part of ongoing development and improvement.

It is hoped that this summary is the first step towards establishing clarity of understanding amongst the profession on the characteristics of good peer review. It is not intended to be the final word on the matter and will evolve over time as evidence becomes clearer and practice becomes more widespread. I hope all providers of peer review engage with this and feedback to NAHT improvements for future iterations.

What remains less clear is where peer review should fit within the wider school improvement landscape and more broadly, how best to support schools on their journey from good to great. To help answer these questions, NAHT will convene a Commission in autumn 2019 to look at system leadership and school improvement, which will report by summer 2020.

Nick Brook
Chair of the Accountability Commission and NAHT deputy general secretary

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Introduction

To become a fully self-led system, where teachers and school leaders are able to exercise their professional capabilities towards a common goal of improving the life chances of all young people, we believe peer review and collaborative working must be the norm, not an exception.

Emerging evidence shows that by working together in a structured way towards actions and outcomes, teachers and schools can improve faster and more sustainably. Lateral accountability means that school performance becomes part of a system-level professional expectation, enabling a culture of continuous improvement and shared responsibility for outcomes across schools. This reduces variation in educational provision and so helps ensure all children have access to high-quality education and it then aligns with an inspection regime which is focused on identifying where the system is failing[1].

The principles described in this document are drawn from experience and evidence of school-to-school peer review and emerging findings from Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) and Teaching School Alliance (TSA) level peer review. While the focus here is on school-to-school peer review, we believe that in the main the same principles can be applied to other forms of collaborative practice, such as MAT-to-MAT reviews, TSA-to-TSA or between subject departments.

> "By working together in a structured way towards actions and outcomes, teachers and schools can improve faster and more sustainably."

Key principles

We have identified the **key principles for good school-to-school peer review**, which are the following:

1. **Committed to better outcomes for all** – There is a shared responsibility to establish improvement across all schools and not just one's own, including the sharing of good practice identified in reviews. The desire for mutual gain is imperative for success.[2]

2. **Action focused** – Peer review is set up with the intention of acting as a result of the review, whether to address a deficit or to get even better. Peer review provides evidence of strengths and areas for improvement but is not a standalone activity. Reviews must be part of wider processes that provide sustained support for evidence-based improvement.[3]

3. **Rigorous and objective** – The team should always consist of peer leaders with the professional distance to give a truly honest appraisal of where the school is in its journey and the experience to insightfully present evidence.[4]

4. **Structured and robust** – The approach used in the review should have a clear structure so that the evidence collected is impartial, defensible and is action-focused, with all actions owned by the reviewed school.[5]

5. **Expert and evidence led** – The reviewers should be given the training and support to be(come) experts in peer review; their diagnosis of school performance should be rooted in evidence, as should any suggestions about potential actions.[6]

6. **Done with, not to, the school** – Peer review drives more transparent and honest self-review. It should engage as much of the school workforce as possible and always be reciprocated.[7]

7. **Open and trusted** – The reviewed school is able and willing to expose its vulnerabilities, in order to elicit new perspectives on the challenges it faces.[8]

8. **Builds deeper relationships** – Peer reviews lead to abiding collaborative partnerships which can evolve over time to enable stronger, closer working in local clusters. There is also an opportunity to share more widely as part of a national drive for improvement.[9]

9. **Commitment to continuous improvement** – Peer review itself should always be kept under review and providers of peer review programmes must have embedded structures and processes to evaluate the effectiveness of the process and commit to continuous improvement.[10]

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It is likely that good school-to-school peer review programmes and processes will also contain:

10. A clear review **framework**, aligned to local and national accountability methodologies, which is understood and signed up to by all.[11]

11. **Training and development** to ensure all involved gain expertise in evidenced peer review practice and a shared understanding of the process and intended outcomes to build trust and transparency.[12]

12. A set of defined **protocols** which guide peer questions and dialogue.[13]

13. A method for collecting and presenting **evidence** on reviews and for capturing agreed actions stemming from them.[14]

14. A clear **methodology** for ensuring reviewed schools can access robust and evidenced-based sources to determine actions against the review findings.[15]

15. A process for following up on **actions** and revisiting reviews.[16]

16. A wider **partnership** of support and challenge on the local and national levels, which is itself strengthened and reviewed by the collaborative process.[17]

Peer review and collaboration are not easy options. Doing this right requires commitment, expertise, designed processes and abiding partnerships in order to provide robust challenge but also the support of professional communities locally and nationally. In this way, peer review provides sustainable and sustained school improvement as well as continual leadership development for those that take part.

We would expect the best quality peer review approaches to contain all the elements described in this report. Peer review should not be seen in isolation, its purpose is to sharpen the assessment and targeted improvement of schools, to provide professional learning for educators and to build local and national networks of like-minded school leaders.

In setting out what good peer review is, we also thought it would be useful to define **what peer review isn't**:

- It's not an informal chat but does provide robust challenge in the best interest of the school and its community.

- It's not something done to you by your local authority, MAT or a consultant, but done with you in a supportive and developmental process.

- It's not about top-down accountability, performance management or trying to catch you out, but is about the horizontal accountability and support which peer practitioners can provide for each other with the best interest of pupils at heart.

"Doing this right requires commitment, expertise, designed processes and abiding partnerships in order to provide robust challenge but also the support of professional communities locally and nationally.

In summary then:

WHAT PEER REVIEW IS	WHAT PEER REVIEW ISN'T
A focus on improvement	A focus on proving
Based on an agreed framework	A mock inspection
Reciprocal and inclusive – for all schools wherever they are on their improvement journey	Strong schools reviewing 'weaker' schools
Underpinned by a coaching approach, done in a culture of enquiry, learning and growth	Giving advice or being judgmental
Focused, planned with feedback based on evidence and the analysis of data	A 'learning walk'
Peer review leads to a written or verbal summary collaboratively agreed between the reviewer/s and the host school	Concluded with a report written by an external reviewer in isolation

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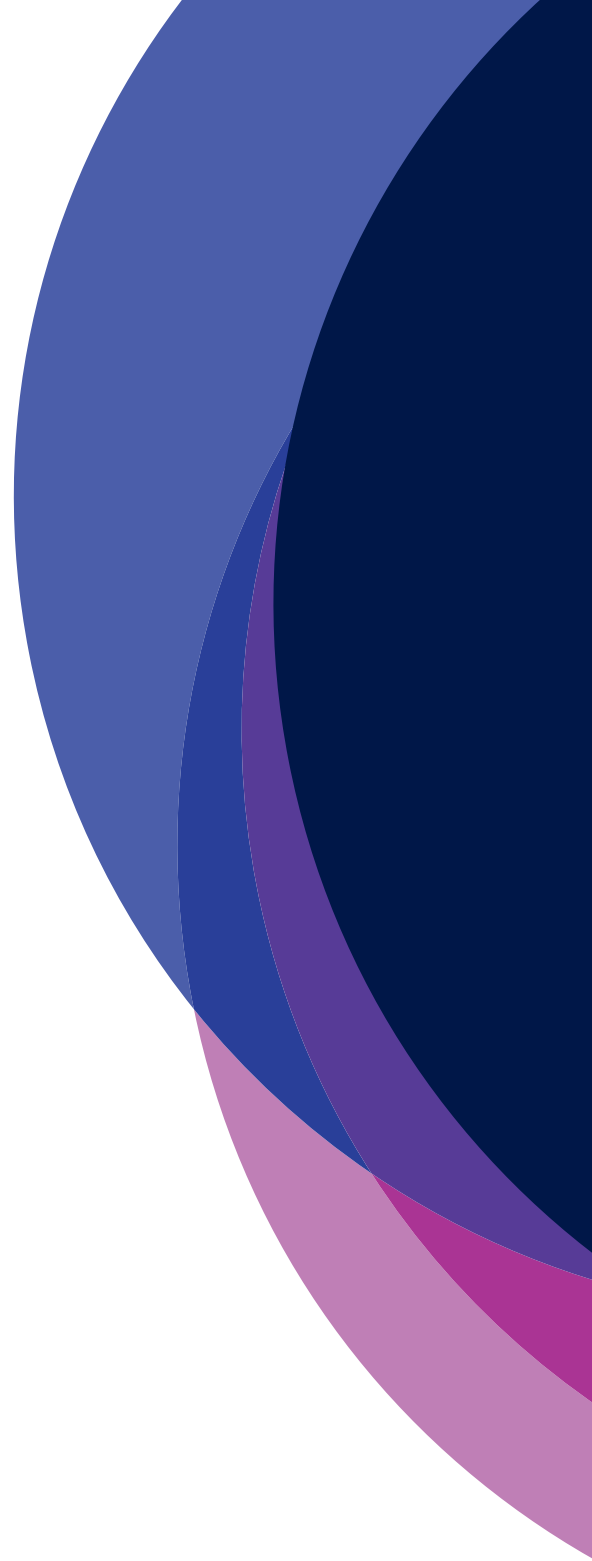
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Endnotes

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