

Better Together

Exploratory Case Studies of Formal Collaborations between Small Rural Primary Schools

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Eastern Leadership Centre



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Contents

Executive summary	1
1. Introduction	8
2. Aims	11
3. Methodology and research questions	12
4. Main Findings	19
5. Case studies and hypothetical cluster models	
5.1. Norfolk	23
5.2. Cornwall	46
5.3. Northumberland	72
6. Overall conclusions	104
7. Recommendations	106
8. Further reading	107
9. Glossary	108
10. Appendices	109
11. References	132

Executive Summary

Introduction

This exploratory study was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to investigate how formal collaborative models might support small rural primary schools in England to improve their services to children and young people, to remain viable and to generate better value for money.

Key findings

The study identified a number of ways that small schools could collaborate formally, all of which had the potential to improve their services and their future viability. These can be summarised as sharing staff (for example, a school business manager), sharing a headteacher (executive headship), and sharing governance (federation and shared trust). The study schools were already engaged in a rich and complex web of *informal* collaborations and placed a very high value on their benefits. However, they were not familiar with the full range of formal collaborative models which might enable them to strengthen or extend current links.

The study found that existing informal collaborations provided strong foundations for structural, more lasting models. Emerging evidence suggests that the adoption of any of these was likely to improve the schools' long-term viability and effectiveness. In particular, models which involved sharing a headteacher (executive headship) had the potential both to alleviate difficulties of recruitment and to improve substantially the quality of leadership in schools. However, there might in some circumstances be practical difficulties in establishing this model, especially where collaborations involved a mix of church and non-church schools. Shared trusts had considerable potential for putting schools' informal relationships - both with each other, and with external partners - on a lasting, statutory basis. The scope for the co-location of extended services solely within the groups of small schools studied, however, was limited, due to difficulties of capacity, demand and transport.

The models investigated were not mutually exclusive, and might exist in combination. Indeed, there was a likelihood that the adoption of one model might, in time, extend to another. Alternatively, the characteristics of more than one model might be adopted by schools from the beginning.

The benefits that might be brought to small schools in a formal collaborative arrangement include some or all of the following: strengthening links by putting them on a statutory footing; creating time for leadership and management; increasing the quality of specialist support; enhancing opportunities for professional development; widening the range of curricular opportunities for pupils; and improving the capacity to provide more comprehensive extended services.

Definitions

The following key terms are used in this report:

- 'Formal collaboration' describes any arrangement where there is some form of written agreement or which features a statutory or contractual element, for example sharing members of staff, governance or charitable trust. All other forms of collaboration are 'informal'.

- ‘Executive headship’ (or ‘shared headship’) describes any situation where two or more schools are led by a single headteacher.
- ‘Hard federation’ describes an arrangement of two or more schools with a single governing body.
- ‘Soft federation’ describes an arrangement where the governing bodies of two or more schools have delegated decision-making powers to a shared committee.
- ‘Shared trust’ describes an arrangement whereby schools acquire foundation status and adopt the same trust in order to formalise their commitment to working together, and with other external partners, for mutual benefit.

Background

There are around 2600 small primary schools (those with one hundred or fewer pupils on roll) in England. They are to be found nationwide but are heavily concentrated in rural areas. In rural authorities, one third or more of primary schools may be small; around fifty per cent of the smallest schools are to be found in just nine of them¹. Generally, their effectiveness is comparable with their larger counterparts². However, there are signs that the difficulties facing small rural primary schools - including that of recruiting suitable headteachers - are becoming more acute³. Nationally, there remains a presumption against closure of small rural schools⁴; however, they may find it harder to offer services which extend beyond their core function⁵.

Given these difficulties, there are strong arguments to suggest that formal collaborations between schools are likely to yield benefits, and an emerging body of evidence to demonstrate this⁶. This study was an exploratory investigation carried out in a small number of groups of small schools which were collaborating informally but not formally. The overall aim was to determine in each case how harder, more formal models of collaboration might help them to extend and improve the services they offer and generate value for money savings, and therefore enable the schools to be more sustainable (both from their own perspective and from that of their local authority).

Methodology and research questions

Three local authorities (LAs) were selected by the DCSF to participate in this project - Cornwall, Norfolk and Northumberland. Four small rural schools were studied in each local authority. The key criterion for the selection was that the schools, although they might not currently be collaborating extensively, had the potential to develop harder, more formal and more sustainable models of collaboration.

¹ www.edubase.gov.uk. (This site provides a wide range of data on educational establishments, much of it only accessible with a password and, therefore, not available to the general public.)

² NCSL data relating to small primary schools (2008, unpublished).

³ Howson, J (2008) *23rd Annual Report of Senior Staff Appointments in Schools in England and Wales*

⁴ See, for example, the Minister of State's letter to Local Authorities, 31st January 2008

www.maesbury.org/mcg/Jim_Knight_letter_on_Rural_Schools.pdf

⁵ See www.tda.gov.uk/case_studies/remodelling/derbyshire_raising_awareness.aspx?keywords=events for a case study of how extended services might be improved in sparsely populated rural areas.

⁶ See, for example, Ireson, J: *A study of hard federations in small primary schools* (NCSL, 2007).

The questions to be answered by the investigation were as follows:

- What type(s) of collaborations could these schools employ to help them remain viable and extend / improve their services, and in what circumstances is each type most appropriate?
- What specific benefits may be brought to these schools by such partnerships (e.g. financial, administrative, staff-related etc) and what challenges/key enablers involved in setting them up and maintaining the partnership can be identified?
- How might sharing staff and resources improve their sustainability and help them to improve the quality of their service?
- Is there potential for co-locating extended services in these schools, as part of a shared trust collaboration, and what could be the benefits and challenges of this?

The methodology used in this research project comprised seven major elements:

- a desktop audit and analysis for each school in the study, including financial, performance and contextual information;
- meetings with local authority officers with responsibility and/or involvement in supporting small rural schools;
- meetings with the Directors of Education for the Diocese of Truro and the Diocese of Newcastle;
- interviews with the headteachers of nominated schools in each local authority and other members of the school community, including governors and parents where this was possible;
- a second meeting with headteachers (and governors where available) to explore future developments and opportunities;
- focus group meetings with parents and carers in Northumberland (these were poorly attended and the views expressed not taken to be representative); and
- the development of hypothetical models of possible future formal collaborations within each group of schools.

Main findings

Types of formal collaboration

- The study identified a number of ways that small schools could collaborate formally, all of which had the potential to improve their services and their future viability. These may be summarised as sharing staff (for example, a school business manager), sharing a headteacher (executive headship), sharing governance (federation and shared trust).
- These types are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, there is a strong possibility that one way of collaborating formally may lead to another.

- The schools in all three groups were already engaged in a rich and complex web of *informal* collaborations. Many of these had been built up over time, with new initiatives overlaying existing ones. The range was wide and, without exception, headteachers placed a very high value on their benefits.
- Most headteachers acknowledged the temporary nature of many informal collaborations and recognised in principle the advantages that more structural models might offer.
- In all three groups of schools there was considerable scope for formal collaborations, of various types, to be established. Current patterns of informal collaboration had often laid down strong foundations on which they might be built. Therefore, the local context - which included historical and geographical considerations - was likely to play a key part in determining the shape that successful formal collaborations might take.

Key benefits, drivers and challenges

- A range of benefits may be brought to small schools which undertake a formal collaborative arrangement. The most important are: strengthening links by putting them on a statutory footing; creating time for leadership and management; increasing the quality of specialist support; enhancing opportunities for staff professional development; widening the range of curricular opportunities for pupils; and improving the capacity to provide more comprehensive extended services.
- Emerging evidence suggests that formal collaborations can create a climate of innovation which improves schools' capacity for seeking new solutions to established problems.
- A key driver of formal collaborations was the difficulty in recruiting headteachers for small rural schools. Executive headship was seen first and foremost as improving the likelihood of appointing a headteacher of the right calibre. For this reason, executive headship was the preferred model of formal collaboration in all three local authorities, and support of various degrees was offered to schools wishing to undertake this solution.
- Another driver was that the headteachers of the study schools reported that they were finding it increasingly difficult to fulfil their leadership and management responsibilities in the light of new expectations and requirements. Opportunities for delegation were limited: there were few other members of staff, many of whom worked part-time. These problems were particularly evident in very small schools where headteachers spent up to eighty per cent of the week teaching their own classes.
- The benefits of executive headship arrangements would be likely to be further enhanced by federation; alternatively, federation could, in itself, strengthen the capacity of schools to work together and so pave the way for a future executive headship.
- However, executive headships were often seen as provisional arrangements. Where this was so, federation tended to be perceived as a device for confirming the permanence of the arrangement, rather than as a means in itself to bring about institutional change and improvement.
- Where schools share a headteacher, the main financial benefit would derive from dividing the cost of the single head's salary. This would create savings which may be re-invested in a number of ways, for example, improving administrative support and sharing staff across the schools.

- Shared trusts had considerable potential for putting schools' informal relationships - both with each other, and with external partners - on a lasting, statutory basis. Small schools, however, may not welcome the additional management responsibilities which foundation status (a precondition of acquiring a trust) would bring.
- Headteachers noted that collaborations with other schools and with external partners took significant time both to initiate and to maintain, and that this could act as an impediment.
- However, emerging evidence suggests that the advocacy of headteachers themselves has been an important factor both in planning and in sustaining formal collaborative arrangements. Their personal enthusiasm and vision are likely to be crucial in overcoming initial reservations and misgivings that may be felt in their communities. Some headteachers in the study schools suggested that a firmer steer from the local authority would also be helpful in order to give greater legitimacy to formal collaborative models.
- The two Church of England dioceses consulted were, in principle, supportive of plans for executive headships and federations and active in encouraging them. This was so even where the schools were of different categories (for example, voluntary aided church school and community school).
- However, there are issues in relation to school ethos, headteacher recruitment (the maintenance of 'Christian leadership') and governance (the maintenance of a church sponsored majority) which may, in some circumstances, be difficult to resolve.

Specific benefits of sharing staff and resources

- The deployment of staff across schools has the potential to make a significant impact on the capacity of small schools to improve their service in a variety of ways. Formal collaborations, of whatever model, are likely to bring particular opportunities for sharing staff between schools.
- A likely outcome of sharing a headteacher between schools (executive headship) would be to reduce or eliminate the head's own class teaching commitment. This would allow additional dedicated time for fulfilling leadership and management responsibilities and could be expected to lead to a notable improvement both in school strategic planning and in the head's work-life balance.
- An executive headteacher would need to be supported by a senior leader in each of the participating partnership schools, in order to ensure that each school is able to deal effectively with any day-to-day management issues. This would create new opportunities for leadership development within the schools as well as providing a senior leadership structure to support the executive headteacher.
- The widening of the staff pool in schools in a formal collaboration would create new opportunities for sharing expertise and specialist skills; for example, a federation might deploy a special educational needs co-ordinator or a specialist teacher of French across sites. Arrangements for professional development could also be strengthened, for example, by enabling staff peer observation between the schools.

- There is likely to be potential for collaborating schools to rationalise their administrative arrangements to make both efficiency and value-for-money savings, for example by employing a joint school administrator or school business manager.
- Schools in some form of partnership would be better able to make arrangements for their pupils to work together; this would, for example, broaden social interaction and raise the level of peer stimulus and challenge. Likewise, sharing of resources could allow a school to compensate for inadequacies, for example the lack of a hall suitable for teaching physical education.

Shared trusts

- The small schools in the study were, in general, not well informed about the opportunities that might be afforded by the range of formal collaboration options, except where particular local models were in evidence. Of the study schools, none had sufficient knowledge about the possible benefits of trust status for it to be a factor in their planning.
- Schools which had already forged links with external partners, and therefore had the experience of working with them, were best placed to establish a trust. Sharing a trust could underpin these schools' commitment to common aims, for example, developing a rich and relevant curriculum which made extensive use of local expertise and resources.
- Potential external trust partners (for example, health, youth provision, museums, libraries and cultural centres) tended to cover a wide geographical area. Setting up a shared trust which comprised a larger group of schools than those studied (for example a high school and its feeder primaries) could be an effective way to establish partnerships committed to helping the schools move forward, including the improvement and sustainability of extended services.

The potential for co-locating extended services

- The schools had found it difficult to provide access to the full range of extended services. This was largely for three reasons: lack of capacity in the schools and their immediate communities, low levels of demand in the sparsely populated rural areas they serve, and long distances of travel.
- All three groups of schools participated in shared arrangements for delivering extended services; this involved some degree of on-site provision, together with 'signposting' of services which were beyond the resources of the individual schools. There were, however, variations in how effective schools felt this to be in terms of ensuring that their communities had easy access to the full range of services.
- The low levels of demand for some services were exacerbated by poor local transport links. For some services (for example, childcare) it was reported that co-location was not favoured by parents if it involved the service being delivered at a distance. For other services, however (for example, health) parents were accustomed to travelling to the local hub, for example the market town. There was limited scope for co-location of such services solely within the groups of small schools studied.

Recommendations

- Small primary schools should have access to better information and guidance on the potential benefits of different statutory models of collaboration; this guidance should be specific to rural contexts and evidence-based.
- Local authorities, working with dioceses and small schools themselves, should seek to develop a strategic plan for the promotion of formal collaborations, including how they might be brokered and supported.
- Local authorities and Church of England dioceses should extend their co-operation in order to help schools to negotiate potential barriers to the partnering of church and non-church schools.
- Local authorities should pay particular attention to how formal school partnership models can be effectively advocated to governing bodies and local communities.

1. Introduction

1.1 The nature of the research

This research report was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to investigate how collaborative models might support small rural primary schools in England to improve their services to children and young people, to remain viable, and to enable them to generate better value for money.

There are strong arguments to suggest that formal collaborations, such as federations, between schools are likely to yield benefits, and an emerging body of evidence to demonstrate this. For example, Atkinson et al (2007) concluded that collaborations between schools can offer economies of scale, organisational improvements and other wide-ranging benefits for teachers and pupils⁷. However, a DCSF commissioned study on federations⁸ concluded that although the Federations Pilot Programme has allowed schools to explore different forms and degrees of collaboration, in practice most federations have tended to follow a soft governance model rather than a hard governance model. The consequent need to investigate further the potential role of collaborations, specifically hard federations and shared trusts, in helping small rural primary schools to remain viable is the focus of the present study.

1.2 Background

There are around 2600 small primary schools (in 2008) in England, defined as those with one hundred or fewer pupils on roll. They are to be found nationwide but are heavily concentrated in rural areas. In rural authorities, one third or more of primary schools may be small; around fifty per cent of the smallest schools are to be found in just nine of them⁹.

Small schools are esteemed for their family atmosphere, quality of care and attention to children's personal development¹⁰. Pupils make good progress in their learning, especially in their first few years at school; by the time they leave, their attainment matches those in larger schools¹¹. Of course, broad statements like these mask substantial variations, but fewer small schools have in recent years been deemed to be in need of special measures. Indeed, on all counts their effectiveness is comparable with their larger counterparts¹².

But there are challenges. The recruitment of headteachers to small schools is becoming more difficult, with some posts being readvertised many times¹³. In most small schools, particularly the smallest, the headteacher has a class teaching commitment for a substantial part of the week - sometimes as much as four days - and administrative support is limited¹⁴. Small schools can face difficulties in meeting the requirements of national initiatives, such as the provision of extended services¹⁵; their headteachers are less likely to take advantage of

⁷ Atkinson, M., Springate, I., Johnson, F. and Halsey, K. (2007). *Inter-school collaboration: a literature review*. Slough: NFER

⁸ DCSF (2007) *School Federations Study 2003-2007*. RR015. www.dcsf.gov.uk/research

⁹ www.edubase.gov.uk. (This site provides a wide range of data on educational establishments, much of it only accessible with a password and, therefore, not available to the general public.)

¹⁰ NCSL data relating to small primary schools (2008, unpublished).

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Howson, J (2008) *23rd Annual Report of Senior Staff Appointments in Schools in England and Wales*

¹⁴ www.dcsf.gov.uk/valueformoney/index.cfm?action=Benchmarking.default. (This site provides schools with benchmarking data. It can only be accessed with a password, and is not available to the general public.)

¹⁵ See www.tda.gov.uk/remodelling/extendedschools/howtodeliveres/ruralaccess/ for case study guidance illustrating how these difficulties may be overcome.

leadership training¹⁶. Opportunities for teachers to learn from colleagues are more restricted, simply because there are fewer of them¹⁷.

The government has recently reiterated its continued support for rural schools, and there remains a presumption against closure¹⁸. However, they continue to face challenges directly related to their small size, particularly in extending beyond their core function of delivering a curriculum¹⁹.

1.3 Recent studies into collaborations in small schools

A study of hard federations in small primary schools (Ireson, 2007) investigated four groups of schools in different local authorities. In each the headteacher reported that, following federation, there had been a rise in standards. This, the report suggested, is likely to have been related to improvements both in pupils' learning opportunities and in the quality of leadership at all levels. The study also points to the key role that the headteachers themselves played both in creating and in sustaining a vision for improvement in the newly federated schools.

The development of leadership capacity through collaboration in small primary schools (Jones, 2008) researched headteachers' attitudes to collaboration in a sample of small schools. The study focused on the logistics of collaborations in the context of headteachers' multiple responsibilities. It found that, instead of helping them to solve key professional problems, 'networking' often added to the chore of day-to-day management. Heads reported that maintaining the impetus of any new initiative was a constant difficulty; it was affected by temporary funding, limited prospects for delegation and excessive demands for time out of school. In its recommendations, the report called for greater recognition of the complexity of managing change in small schools. In particular, it identified the need for strategies to develop leadership capacity.

How can a local authority best raise awareness and support exploration of the opportunities for alternative models of leadership and organisation with school leaders and governors? (Grimwade et al, 2008) was a study conducted in Cambridgeshire schools, some of them small primaries. The report noted that knowledge and understanding of alternative models of leadership appeared greater in the secondary than in the primary phase; as a result, primary schools were in danger of missing out on a range of opportunities. It concluded that local authorities have a vital role to play: not just in raising awareness of possibilities and challenging schools to think of better ways of doing things, but also in evolving policy through devising a strategic plan.

It noted that improving outcomes for children, not simply succession planning, should be the key driver for changing leadership arrangements.

Can federation help stars to come out? (Ford and McCue, 2008) focused on the structures adopted by schools following federation. The study concluded that, following federation, the schools tended to be more flexible and diverse in their organisation, promoting a culture of creative thinking. This not only offered new opportunities for leadership roles that would not occur in individual schools, but created conditions in which talent could be identified and nurtured.

¹⁶ NCSL data relating to small primary schools (2008, unpublished).

¹⁷ www.dcsf.gov.uk/valueformoney/index.cfm?action=Benchmarking.default. (See note 14, above.)

¹⁸ See, for example, the Minister of State's letter to Local Authorities, 31st January 2008.

www.maesbury.org/mcg/Jim_Knight_letter_on_Rural_Schools.pdf

¹⁹ See www.tda.gov.uk/case_studies/remodelling/derbyshire_raising_awareness.aspx?keywords=events for a case study of how extended services might be improved in sparsely populated rural areas.

An investigation into school federations in the Netherlands asked the question *Does every school need a headteacher?* (NCSL, 2005). The study reported that federated groups of small schools in the Netherlands created more time for leadership and management, greater flexibility in staffing and resources, and stronger structures for advice and support. Other benefits identified included preventing closure of unviable small schools, economies of scale and improvements in headteacher recruitment.

2. Aims of the project

The research project was an exploratory investigation carried out in a small number of groups of small schools which were not known to be collaborating extensively. The overall aim was to determine in each case how harder, more formal models of collaboration might help them to extend and improve the services they offer and generate value for money savings, and therefore enable the schools to be more sustainable (both from their own perspective and from that of their local authority).

The questions to be answered by the investigation were as follows:

- What type(s) of collaborations could these schools employ to help them remain viable and extend / improve their services, and in what circumstances is each type most appropriate?
- What specific benefits may be brought to these schools by such partnerships (e.g. financial, administrative, staff-related etc) and what challenges / key enablers involved in setting them up and maintaining the partnership can be identified?
- How might sharing staff and resources improve their sustainability and help them to improve the quality of their service?
- Is there potential for co-locating extended services in these schools, as part of a shared trust collaboration, and what could be the benefits and challenges of this?

A further objective of the investigation was to provide worked examples of how groups of small rural schools could benefit from models of formal collaboration which were most suited to their context. A range of examples will be published as part of guidance materials to support schools in envisaging and implementing their own collaborative plans.

The investigation was to be consultative and hypothetical in nature: schools were not to be under any obligation to follow the proposed model of collaboration if they did not want to, but might decide to use the findings of the investigation, if positive, to inform their future plans.

3. Methodology and research questions

3.1 Nomination and Selection of Schools

Three local authorities (LAs) were selected by the DCSF to participate in this project - Cornwall, Norfolk and Northumberland. Each of these local authorities has a high proportion of small schools, serving a population which is widely dispersed. Following their selection, initial discussions were held by the research team with each local authority, in which they were asked to identify a group of small rural schools which might be appropriate subjects for case studies. The key criterion for selection was that the schools, although they might not currently be collaborating extensively, had the potential to develop harder, more formal and more sustainable models of collaboration. In each local authority this led to the nomination of four schools that (in most cases) were linked to the same secondary school and which were geographically close to one another; the final selection of the schools was confirmed by the DCSF. The sample included two schools in Cornwall that had just embarked on a trial executive headship and from which it was hoped valuable lessons might be learnt. Members of the research team contacted the headteachers of the nominated schools to discuss their participation in the project. All schools agreed to take part.

3.2 Schools involved in this study

Table 1 Number and size of primary schools participating in this study					
Local Authority	Fewer than 25 pupils	26-50 pupils	51-75 pupils	76-100 pupils	Total
Cornwall	Garras (12)*	St Martin (42)*	Landewednack (75) Grade Ruan CoE (75)		4
Norfolk		Ten Mile Bank (29)	Hilgay CoE (56)	Denver CoE (100) Southery (97)	4
Northumberland	Netherton Northside (18) Branton (16)	Harbottle CoE (23)	Thropton (44)		4
Total	3	3	4	2	12

* executive headship

3.3 Research methods used in this study

The methodology used in this study comprised seven major elements:

- a desktop audit and analysis for each school in the study, including financial, performance and contextual information;
- meetings with local authority officers with responsibility and/or involvement in supporting small rural schools;

- meetings with the Directors of Education for the Diocese of Truro and the Diocese of Newcastle;
- interviews with the headteachers of nominated schools in each local authority and other members of the school community, including governors and parents where this was possible;
- a second meeting with headteachers (and governors where available) to explore future developments and opportunities;
- focus group meetings with parents and carers in Northumberland (these were poorly attended and the views expressed not taken to be representative); and
- the development of hypothetical models of possible future formal collaborations within each group of schools.

Interviews were also held with the receiving secondary school in Cornwall and the receiving middle school in Northumberland. Additional meetings also took place with the headteacher of a second executive headship in Cornwall on the recommendation of the local authority. The approach varied slightly in each of the three local authorities according to the preferences of schools regarding the structure of the meetings; decisions by the research team based on emerging evidence; and the availability of officers, headteachers, governors and others.

Participating schools were compensated for their time through the payment of supply cover costs, or through consultancy support for the completion of the Financial Management Standards in Schools (FMSiS) assessment.

An early emerging finding was that collaborations, whether informal or formal, were unlikely to be successful unless they paid regard to schools' circumstances and aspirations. Therefore, it was deemed important that, wherever possible, the hypothetical models to be proposed in the research were developed in discussion with the schools themselves and were based on a careful analysis of their contexts, including the barriers to progress which they themselves identified.

3.4 Desktop audit and analysis of contextual information for each local authority and school

A desktop review of each school was conducted by one member of the research team. Appendix 1 illustrates this process for Cornwall. This helped to reduce the demands on participating schools while providing a wide range of contextual information on each school and local authority prior to the first visits. The information gathered for each school included:

- School performance data
- Local authority financial information
- The most recent Ofsted inspection report
- The school profile
- Contextual information from the websites of individual schools, for example the prospectus
- Evidence of existing collaborations.

This was supplemented by the analysis of the school’s self-evaluation form (SEF) and school development plan by other members of the research team.

3.5 Meetings with local authority officers with responsibility for and / or direct involvement with supporting small rural schools

Members of the research team met with officers from each of the local authorities in order to explore the support they provide to small rural schools, their policies and plans for the future, and the extent to which they are involved in promoting alternative models of school leadership. A questionnaire (Appendix 2) was used to structure these interviews.

Table 2 - Local Authority Officers interviewed for this study	
Local Authority	Position
Cornwall	Adviser with responsibility for Small Schools Inspector with responsibility for Leadership and Management, including Succession Planning Co-ordinator of SKILL (South Kerrier Initiative for Linking Learning)
Norfolk	Senior Area Development Adviser
Northumberland	School Workforce Adviser Extended Services Co-ordinator

3.6 Meetings with diocesan Directors of Education in Cornwall and Northumberland

Well over half (58 per cent) of small rural schools in England are denominational, including four Church of England schools in this study. Interviews were therefore held with two diocesan Directors of Education about alternative models of leadership in small rural church schools, and to discuss the practical support they provide to schools interested in exploring these options.

Table 3 - Diocesan representatives interviewed for this study	
Area	Position
Cornwall	Director of Education, Diocese of Truro
Norfolk	The Director of Education for the Diocese of Ely was unavailable during the time of this research study.
Northumberland	Director of Education, Diocese of Newcastle

3.7 Interviews with the headteachers and other members of their school communities

An individual meeting was held with each of the headteachers from the schools listed in Table 4. Prior to the meeting, a questionnaire (Appendix 2) was sent to each headteacher to aid his / her preparation, and a request made for a copy of the current school development plan and the self-evaluation form (SEF). These two documents provided information on the

current strengths, weaknesses, priorities and plans of each school, in addition to up-to-date numbers on roll, performance and financial data.

The meetings with headteachers generally lasted about three hours and involved intensive discussion focused around the major questions listed on Appendix 3.

In order to gather governors' views of different forms of school leadership, headteachers were asked to make arrangements for governors to meet with a researcher whenever possible. Table 4 provides details of these meetings. In some schools, governors and headteacher met the researcher together; in other schools they met separately. Where meetings included parent governors or other governors who were parents of children in the school, then their views as parents were also noted. Two focus group meetings were held in Northumberland schools to gather the views of parents. The total number of parents attending these meetings was very small and their views cannot be taken as representative (see Table 4). Their sentiments have nevertheless been recorded in the study report, since many headteachers identified the feelings of parents as a potential obstacle to further collaboration.

Table 4 - Interviews with headteachers and others in the school community			
	Headteacher	Governors	Parents
Cornwall Interviews held in November - December 2008	Garras & St Martin*	Chair of each governing body	
	Landewednack	(Chair of Governors unable to attend)	
	Grade Ruan CoE	(Chair of Governors unable to attend)	
Norfolk Interviews held in October 2008	Denver CoE	Chair of Governors	The Chair is also a parent governor
	Hilgay CoE	(Chair of Governors unable to attend)	
	Southery	Chair of Governors	1 parent governor
	Ten Mile Bank	Chair of Governors	
Northumberland Interviews held in January 2009	Branton	Chair of governors	1 parent attended the focus group, also a governor
	Harbottle CoE	Chair of governors	No parents attended the focus group
	Netherton Northside B	Chair of governors	No parents attended the focus group
	Thropton	Chair of governors	3 parents attended the focus group, 2 of whom were also governors

* executive headship

3.8 Second meeting with headteachers and governors to explore future opportunities and hypothetical models

A second meeting was held with each school individually, with pairs of schools or (in the case of Norfolk) with all four schools together; these meetings were held shortly after the first meeting (from one week to four weeks later). A third meeting was held with the Norfolk schools separately, two weeks after the second collective meeting. Governors were invited to these meetings and some were able to attend. Table 5 indicates the style and attendance at the second and third meetings.

Table 5 - Second meeting with headteachers and others in the school community		
	School	
Cornwall Second round of meetings held in December 2008	Garras & St Martin*	Individual meeting held with the headteacher.
	Landewednack Grade Ruan CoE	Joint meeting with the two headteachers
Norfolk Second round of meetings held in November 2008 (joint) and December (individual)	Denver CoE Hilgay CoE Southery Ten Mile Bank	A collective meeting was held with all four schools. This was attended by the headteacher from each school, the Chair of Governors from Denver, Hilgay and Southery, and a Governor from Ten Mile Bank standing in for the Chair who was unavailable. Individual meetings were subsequently held with all four headteachers.
Northumberland Second round of meetings held in January 2009	Branton	Individual meeting held with the headteacher
	Harbottle CoE Netherton Northside B	Joint meeting with the two headteachers
	Thropton	Individual meeting held with the headteacher

* executive headship

The purpose of the second meeting was to:

- reflect on the information gathered at the first interviews;
- consider ways in which the schools could strengthen any existing collaboration;
- explore hypothetical models of formal collaboration, for example executive headship or federation;
- identify the benefits and challenges of each option.

Discussion at the second meetings was informed by an analysis of the data gathered from the initial interviews and from school documentation. This analysis showed that there were some significant differences between schools and their individual circumstances; this led the research team to adopt slightly different approaches to the second meetings. However, common to all of them was the discussion of hypothetical models for formal collaboration, framed by questions which had been prepared in advance.

In Norfolk, the second meeting involved all four schools at the headteachers' request. In the discussion, headteachers and governors explored their commonalities and differences, with a view to identifying specific areas where they might collaborate in more formal ways. The third meeting with individual heads two weeks later gave them the opportunity to reflect further on the collective meeting's outcomes.

In Cornwall, the second meeting was between pairs of schools, and likewise investigated ways to develop their collaboration further (the meeting with the executive headteacher of Garras and St Martin schools explored plans to sustain the shared headship beyond the pilot period and the possible development of an executive headship and / or federation of three schools).

In Northumberland, the second meeting between Harbottle and Netherton Northside was a joint meeting, focused on developing the real plans they had already agreed for the shared headship. Individual meetings were held with Branton and Thropton because their geographical situation and the history of the schools made it possible that they would seek partners elsewhere. The second meetings with these schools focused on how to develop further areas of potential collaboration with other schools, including the middle school, and how reorganization might provide further opportunities for them to develop different forms of school leadership.

3.9 Interviews with other contributors

The researchers collected data on the perspectives of the headteachers of the secondary schools to which pupils from the primary schools in this study transfer; meetings were held with the headteachers of Mullion Comprehensive School in Cornwall and Dr Thomlinson CoE Middle School in Northumberland. Both discussions focused on current and potential models of collaboration in the local community of schools.

At the request of Cornwall local authority, the research team also met with the executive headteacher of two additional schools in order to gain further insights into the potential benefits and barriers of the collaborative arrangement.

3.10 A note on terminology

The local terminology which has been developed over time to describe school collaborations is a mine of potential confusion. In both Cornwall and Northumberland, a small self-help group of schools which collaborates closely but informally is known as a cluster; in Norfolk this arrangement is a network. Cluster, in Norfolk, is used to mean a group of schools comprising a high school and its feeder primary schools; in Cornwall a regional group of schools is known as a network and in Northumberland a partnership. In Norfolk, the term partnership (or management partnership) means two or more schools with a single headteacher. Cornwall describes this arrangement as an executive headship and Northumberland simply a shared headship. In all three local authorities the term 'federation' was sometimes used loosely to refer to any formalised links between schools.

These differences are in just three local authorities; nationwide, there are likely to be many more variations and permutations. Nor is there consistency of usage in the research literature, though a consensus is now beginning to emerge.

In the fieldwork case studies, local usage has generally only been followed where the comments of interviewees are being reported or quoted. In other respects emerging agreed usage has been adhered to; ambiguous terms have been avoided where possible, or have been explained. However, in the Norfolk case studies the term 'management partnership' has been followed; this is because partnerships are seen there primarily as being about the interdependence of the schools, not simply the role of the head.

Key terminology used in this report is as follows:

- 'Formal collaboration' describes any arrangement where there is some form of written agreement or which features a contractual element, for example sharing members of staff. All other forms of collaboration are 'informal'.
- 'Executive headship' (or 'shared headship') describes any situation where two or more schools are led by a single headteacher.
- 'Federation' (or 'hard federation') describes an arrangement of two or more schools with a single governing body.
- 'Soft federation' describes an arrangement where the governing bodies of two or more schools have delegated decision-making powers to a shared committee.
- 'Shared trust' describes an arrangement whereby schools acquire foundation status and adopt the same trust in order to formalise their commitment to working together, and with other external partners, for mutual benefit.

Readers should refer to the glossary for further explanation about the use of terms in this report.

3.11 A note on fieldwork evidence

The greater part of the evidence used in this report is from interviews and discussions with headteachers, governors and other stakeholders. In recording these, it is generally the perceptions of the interviewees that are being reported (for example, "collaboration in the cluster was very effective"). Where comments have been independently verified (for example, by Ofsted), then the text makes that clear.

As a small scale qualitative study, the findings of this report cannot necessarily be generalised, and should not therefore be interpreted out of context.

4. Main findings

Types of formal collaboration

- The study identified a number of ways that small schools could collaborate formally, all of which had the potential to improve their services and their future viability. These may be summarised as sharing staff (for example, a school business manager), sharing a headteacher (executive headship), sharing governance (federation and shared trust).
- These types are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, there is a strong possibility that one way of collaborating formally may lead to another.
- The schools in all three groups were already engaged in a rich and complex web of *informal* collaborations. Many of these had been built up over time, with new initiatives overlaying existing ones. The range was wide and, without exception, headteachers placed a very high value on their benefits.
- Most headteachers acknowledged the temporary nature of many informal collaborations and recognised in principle the advantages that more structural models might offer.
- In all three groups of schools there was considerable scope for formal collaborations, of various types, to be established. Current patterns of informal collaboration had often laid down strong foundations on which they might be built. Therefore, the local context - which included historical and geographical considerations - was likely to play a key part in determining the shape that successful formal collaborations might take.

Key benefits, drivers and challenges

- A range of benefits may be brought to small schools which undertake a formal collaborative arrangement. The most important are: strengthening links by putting them on a statutory footing; creating time for leadership and management; increasing the quality of specialist support; enhancing opportunities for staff professional development; widening the range of curricular opportunities for pupils; and improving the capacity to provide more comprehensive extended services.
- Emerging evidence suggests that formal collaborations can create a climate of innovation which improves schools' capacity for seeking new solutions to established problems.
- A key driver of formal collaborations was the difficulty in recruiting headteachers for small rural schools. Executive headship was seen first and foremost as improving the likelihood of appointing a headteacher of the right calibre. For this reason, executive headship was the preferred model of formal collaboration in all three local authorities, and support of various degrees was offered to schools wishing to undertake this solution.
- Another driver was that the headteachers of the study schools reported that they were finding it increasingly difficult to fulfil their leadership and management responsibilities in the light of new expectations and requirements. Opportunities for delegation were limited: there were few other members of staff, many of whom worked part-time. These problems were particularly evident in very small schools where headteachers spent up to eighty per cent of the week teaching their own classes.

- The benefits of executive headship arrangements would be likely to be further enhanced by federation; alternatively, federation could, in itself, strengthen the capacity of schools to work together and so pave the way for a future executive headship.
- However, executive headships were often seen as provisional arrangements. Where this was so, federation tended to be perceived as a device for confirming the permanence of the arrangement, rather than as a means in itself to bring about institutional change and improvement.
- Where schools share a headteacher, the main financial benefit would derive from dividing the cost of the single head's salary. This would create savings which may be re-invested in a number of ways, for example, improving administrative support and sharing staff across the schools.
- Shared trusts had considerable potential for putting schools' informal relationships - both with each other, and with external partners - on a lasting, statutory basis. Small schools, however, may not welcome the additional management responsibilities which foundation status (a precondition of acquiring a trust) would bring.
- Headteachers noted that collaborations with other schools and with external partners took significant time both to initiate and to maintain, and that this could act as an impediment.
- However, emerging evidence suggests that the advocacy of headteachers themselves has been an important factor both in planning and in sustaining formal collaborative arrangements. Their personal enthusiasm and vision are likely to be crucial in overcoming initial reservations and misgivings that may be felt in their communities. Some headteachers in the study schools suggested that a firmer steer from the local authority would also be helpful in order to give greater legitimacy to formal collaborative models.
- The two Church of England dioceses consulted were, in principle, supportive of plans for executive headships and federations and active in encouraging them. This was so even where the schools were of different categories (for example, voluntary aided church school and community school).
- However, there are issues in relation to school ethos, headteacher recruitment (the maintenance of 'Christian leadership') and governance (the maintenance of a church sponsored majority) which may, in some circumstances, be difficult to resolve.

Specific benefits of sharing staff and resources

- The deployment of staff across schools has the potential to make a significant impact on the capacity of small schools to improve their service in a variety of ways. Formal collaborations, of whatever model, are likely to bring particular opportunities for sharing staff between schools.
- A likely outcome of sharing a headteacher between schools (executive headship) would be to reduce or eliminate the head's own class teaching commitment. This would allow additional dedicated time for fulfilling leadership and management responsibilities and could be expected to lead to a notable improvement both in school strategic planning and in the head's work-life balance.

- An executive headteacher would need to be supported by a senior leader in each of the participating partnership schools, in order to ensure that each school is able to deal effectively with any day-to-day management issues. This would create new opportunities for leadership development within the schools as well as providing a senior leadership structure to support the executive headteacher.
- The widening of the staff pool in schools in a formal collaboration would create new opportunities for sharing expertise and specialist skills; for example, a federation might deploy a special educational needs co-ordinator or a specialist teacher of French across sites. Arrangements for professional development could also be strengthened, for example, by enabling staff peer observation between the schools.
- There is likely to be potential for collaborating schools to rationalise their administrative arrangements to make both efficiency and value-for-money savings, for example by employing a joint school administrator or school business manager.
- Schools in some form of partnership would be better able to make arrangements for their pupils to work together; this would, for example, broaden social interaction and raise the level of peer stimulus and challenge. Likewise, sharing of resources could allow a school to compensate for inadequacies, for example the lack of a hall suitable for teaching physical education.

Shared trusts

- The small schools in the study were, in general, not well informed about the opportunities that might be afforded by the range of formal collaboration options, except where particular local models were in evidence. Of the study schools, none had sufficient knowledge about the possible benefits of trust status for it to be a factor in their planning.
- Schools which had already forged links with external partners, and therefore had the experience of working with them, were best placed to establish a trust. Sharing a trust could underpin these schools' commitment to common aims, for example, developing a rich and relevant curriculum which made extensive use of local expertise and resources.
- Potential external trust partners (for example, health, youth provision, museums, libraries and cultural centres) tended to cover a wide geographical area. Setting up a shared trust which comprised a larger group of schools than those studied (for example a high school and its feeder primaries) could be an effective way to establish partnerships committed to helping the schools move forward, including the improvement and sustainability of extended services.

The potential for co-locating extended services

- The schools had found it difficult to provide access to the full range of extended services. This was largely for three reasons: lack of capacity in the schools and their immediate communities, low levels of demand in the sparsely populated rural areas they serve, and long distances of travel.
- All three groups of schools participated in shared arrangements for delivering extended services; this involved some degree of on-site provision, together with 'signposting' of services which were beyond the resources of the individual schools. There were, however, variations in how effective schools felt this to be in terms of ensuring that their communities had easy access to the full range of services.

- The low levels of demand for some services were exacerbated by poor local transport links. For some services (for example, childcare) it was reported that co-location was not favoured by parents if it involved the service being delivered at a distance. For other services, however (for example, health) parents were accustomed to travelling to the local hub, for example the market town. There was limited scope for co-location of such services solely within the groups of small schools studied.

5. Case Studies and hypothetical collaboration models

5.1 Norfolk

Summary of main findings

- The small schools in the study engaged in a diverse pattern of informal collaboration which made a significant contribution to staff professional development and the widening of children's learning experiences. Collaborative activity between schools was mostly carried out through the local authority cluster group (a secondary school plus all its feeder primary schools). This provided a strong network of interpersonal and professional support which heads found invaluable.
- These headteachers of small schools reported that it was increasingly difficult to find enough time to fulfill their leadership and management responsibilities. The lack of opportunities to delegate, within a small staff team, was a particular problem. Headteachers of the smallest schools had a substantial class teaching commitment and felt the tension between their different roles most acutely.
- The heads recognised the limitations of loose, informal collaborations. For example, frustrations were expressed about how much time they took to set up and maintain, and how their impact might be dissipated when projects come to an end. Moreover, it was felt that the local authority cluster group of schools was too large and too disparate to enable a strong focus on the needs of individual schools.
- The heads of three of the four schools in the sample were keen to explore opportunities to put collaboration on a more formal and permanent footing. Executive headship was felt to be an attractive model as it would directly address many of the problems which they had identified. Models for sharing staff (other than the head) they saw as potentially beneficial but there were inherent difficulties, such as the tendency for individual schools to put their own interests first.
- The chairs of governors in the sample schools were mostly sympathetic to the principle of formal collaboration, but felt that they were not representative of the governing bodies as a whole. Governors in general did not have a comprehensive knowledge of the range of statutory models which were available to them, or how they might embark on implementation.
- The schools had experienced difficulties in developing the full range of extended services in their immediate locality. This was partly due to the lack of capacity in a small school, and partly due to problems of viability in a sparsely populated area. The schools worked together to ensure that existing services were signposted. Formal collaboration might enable them to develop further their common approach to improving the level of current services.
- Norfolk local authority promoted a model of executive headship ('management partnership') which was felt to be a highly effective response both to struggling rural schools and to headteacher recruitment difficulties; there were eighteen in the local authority and the model was gaining wide acceptance. Management partnerships have helped secure the viability of many small rural schools and built leadership capacity within them. They were supported financially through the funding formula.

- All four schools felt that particular local circumstances (geographical factors, for example) might act as a barrier to establishing formal collaborations, and that local decision-making would be important in finding a compatible partner or partners, and the right form of collaborative model.
- There was potential for creating a number of models of formal collaboration in the Norfolk sample of schools. Executive headships could be advantageous between Hilgay, Southery and Ten Mile Bank in any combination. The financial savings made by such arrangements (see Appendix 9) could be reinvested to develop a stronger leadership team across the schools, thus providing substantial support for the headteacher and strengthening the drive to improve teaching and learning.

The local authority view

Main points:

- Norfolk local authority had a strong commitment to improving the viability and effectiveness of its small schools, which comprised over a third of the primary schools in the county.
- The recruitment of headteachers to small schools was becoming increasingly difficult. This was in part because of the significant challenges in leading a small school successfully. As the demands on schools increased, the pressure on small school headteachers became particularly acute.
- Collaboration at various levels was facilitated and supported through a range of local authority policy initiatives. Support was reflected in the funding formula and through participation in seed-funded national initiatives and pilots. Most small schools were engaged in some form of informal collaboration, though the extent and quality was highly dependent on the effectiveness of leadership.
- Executive headship - two or more schools led by one headteacher and called 'management partnership' locally - was actively promoted and supported by the local authority. The strategy was seen to be not only an effective response to recruitment difficulties but also a key way of improving leadership and educational provision. There was also support for federation though this was less actively promoted.

Small schools in Norfolk

At the time of the study, Norfolk had over 130 primary schools with fewer than one hundred pupils on roll and, of these, forty schools had fewer than fifty pupils on roll. Small schools comprised over one third of the total number of primary schools in the local authority. More than a quarter of them were church schools; of these, about two thirds were voluntary controlled and one third voluntary aided. As a rural shire county, it was recognised by the local authority that small schools would be a significant feature of the educational landscape and there was no overall policy to reorganise or close small schools.

The number of surplus places in primary schools was likely to increase over the next few years as the population of school-age children fell. Some parts of the county were likely to be more affected than others. Many small schools had surplus places (some a high proportion) but this was by no means true of all.

In Norfolk, there was no correlation between school size and effectiveness, in terms of pupils' standards and progress. Statistically, small schools were no better and no worse than larger schools; this reflected the national picture. No small school in Norfolk had currently been judged to be of concern following an Ofsted inspection. An analysis of Ofsted reports showed that the profile of small schools was similar to that of larger schools, for example, a similar proportion of small schools were deemed to be good.

Local authority support for collaboration

The local authority had a policy to encourage collaboration between small schools at a variety of levels. For example, school clusters (high schools and their feeder primaries) were funded in order to promote collaborative training and activities; this was a sum related to the number of schools in the cluster, irrespective of their size. The grant supported a rich pattern of collaborative events and activities - joint residential visits, music festivals, multicultural days, sports events and so on. It was felt by the authority to greatly enhance the curriculum and enabled small schools to tap into resources and expertise that wouldn't otherwise be available to them.

In the recent national initiative to promote Primary Strategy Learning Networks, small schools were designated as a priority in Norfolk and a large number of small schools were enabled to join networks, sometimes beyond their cluster boundaries. It was recognised, however, that such initiatives which received start-up funding often had a limited lifespan and there was no current data on the extent or effectiveness of network activity.

Also largely hidden from view was the extensive interchange of ideas and support which small schools undertook for themselves, often locally but sometimes at greater distances. Although the level (and the effectiveness) of collaborative activity was variable, it was likely that there were few small schools in Norfolk that were working in complete isolation. In a few cases, collaboration was at a fairly sophisticated level, for example, involving a joint appointment of a teacher for modern foreign languages, or working together through the use of ICT. Some clusters employed an ICT technician or a joint SENCo, though these arrangements tended to come and go as budgets and improvement priorities changed.

The evidence of collaborative endeavour in Norfolk suggested that it only worked where there was effective leadership. There had to be a sense of common purpose between the participating schools, and this could only be developed by people with a vision. That was why there were such variations between clusters. The role played by the headteacher of the high school was often a crucial factor, though this was not the only determinant of success. The importance of leadership also explained why initiatives came and went, and why promising developments sometimes went into decline when people moved on.

Following the introduction of School Improvement Partners, the LA had appointed cluster advisers to work with groups of schools; it was also envisaged that the increased emphasis on 'locality' working (Norfolk was divided into five regional localities) there would be more opportunities to support and promote collaboration. There was also a specific 'small schools plan' for the purchase of essential services from the LA.

Formal collaborations and management partnerships

There were a number of formal models being tested which aimed to increase the sustainability of collaboration. One was participation in the NCSL Advanced School Business Manager pilot, in the Litcham cluster, with the aim "to create more time for headteachers and senior staff to focus on raising standards through improving teaching and learning". Another was the co-ordinated and comprehensive response to developing extended services in the Aylsham cluster. A third was the appointment of Parent Support Advisors to all clusters, following a successful pilot.

One specific development over the past six or seven years had been the creation of a formal model of shared headship. In Norfolk this was termed 'management partnership' and was a direct response to the problems of headteacher recruitment and retention which were known to be getting worse. Management partnership was an executive arrangement whereby one headteacher led and managed two or more schools which retained their separate identities; the schools might or might not be federated. Originally involving two pairs of small schools, partnership had now moved beyond the experimental stage and was a recognised strategy to support the viability and effectiveness of small schools in Norfolk. There were eighteen partnerships in the county, with more in preparation. Typically, partnerships were between two nearby small rural schools, though there were some exceptions to the pattern.

Partnerships were funded by the local authority to enable the headteacher to be free of class teaching responsibilities. The additional money was based on the formula for funding split-site schools and was currently around £20,000 a year. In some cases partnerships had led to the creation of a federation (two or more schools with a single governing body) and it was likely that more partnerships would pursue this course.

Each partnership had a different history, making it hard to generalise. The model was designed to be flexible and to meet the local needs of schools and their communities. Originally, partnerships were born of adversity and in four of them one of the schools had been in special measures. They were a pragmatic response to a critical situation, sponsored by the local authority and implemented by governing bodies as a result of informal discussion. They were often seen as a temporary arrangement - a nearby successful headteacher 'caretaking' another school through a difficult time. Increasingly, this was no longer the case. When a new headteacher was to be recruited, the local authority briefing to the governing body included management partnership as a positive option for consideration. There were examples for them to visit and headteachers of existing partnerships who were willing to talk to them.

The governors' decision was likely to be influenced by whether there was an 'eligible partner' in the vicinity. Generally, governing bodies remained keen to test the market in recruiting their own headteacher, though in a few instances, governing bodies had seen partnership as a first choice. In partnerships where the headteacher had moved on (two so far) governors had chosen to sustain the collaboration.

The culture was beginning to shift in the face of evidence of successful practice. The local authority intended to work to encourage this shift, as a key part of its succession planning strategy. It recognised that advocacy must be sensitive to governing bodies' statutory responsibilities and powers. However, the local authority would use its powers of intervention in schools where leadership or provision was inadequate and would arrange a management partnership if that was an appropriate response.

The local authority's analysis of the effectiveness of partnerships in Norfolk had confirmed its benefits. These included higher value added scores, raised expectations, recruitment of better quality staff, wider opportunities for professional development, and more effective leadership (including governance). Norfolk's Primary Strategy for Change submission to the DCSF identified partnership as a key strategy for improving the quality of school leadership in the county.

Sources of information:

- *Interview with a Senior Area Development Adviser, 15th October 2008.*
- *Telephone conversations and email exchanges with other local authority officers and representatives.*
- *Documentation provided by the local authority.*

The four schools - individual case studies

Research focused on four small schools within the same geographical 'cluster'. The schools were located in the Fenlands, close to the Cambridgeshire border, and fed into Downham Market High School.

Denver CoE Primary School

Main points:

- The school was the largest of the small schools in the Norfolk sample. It had a track record of high standards and was consequently very popular, drawing in many pupils from beyond its catchment area. It was geographically separate from the other sample schools because of its close proximity to Downham Market.
- The school was able to support four classes and a headteacher with a relatively light teaching commitment. This was seen as a crucial element in its success and contributed towards its overall feeling of self-sufficiency.
- The school participated fully in the opportunities brought about by informal collaboration within the local cluster organisation. This was felt to be of real benefit to the school, though hard to quantify.
- The governors were keen to preserve the elements of success on which the school's reputation was based, and were unwilling to take any action which might undermine this. There was no strong imperative for increased collaborative activity. Likewise, the school currently perceived little need to seek formal collaboration with neighbouring schools.

Population and context

The school roll currently stood at 100, which was lower than it had been for some time. This was due, however, to variations in year group size and was not expected to represent a downward trend. Most pupils were local, though there was a sizeable minority - more than a quarter - from outside the catchment area. There were four classes and the headteacher had a relatively light teaching load - currently around one or two afternoons per week. Both the head and the chair of governors felt that the school's size - the biggest of the small schools locally - enabled it to offer things which the smaller schools could not, and was a contributory factor towards its success.

However, the chair of governors recognised that it was vulnerable to changes of school population - the recent decline in numbers had been significant and, as their chair commented, "twenty fewer children and we'd be in trouble". The school was very close to Downham Market and shared many of the characteristics of the town, which separated it from the more southerly village schools in the sample.

Standards and quality of provision

The school scored highly in Key Stage 2 tests (100% attaining level 4 and above in English, maths and science in 2008). The school judged the behaviour and attitudes of the pupils to be outstanding, and achievements in sports were very good. The recent Ofsted inspection report (January 2008) endorsed the school's standards and direction and confirmed the head's view that "in terms of the way schools are measured, it is highly successful". However, the headteacher acknowledged that there was a "blip" in standards achieved by pupils a few years ago, when the school's Key Stage 2 test results had been poor. This had largely been due to staffing issues experienced at that time.

Buildings, resources and staffing

In general the school was very self-sufficient. It was well resourced, and the building was fit for purpose, having been recently modified and extended. There was a strong team of teachers, including some recently appointed. There were four teaching assistants, all with HLTA status. In addition, there were four teaching assistants employed to support pupils with statements of special educational need. The school, in the head's view, provided "good" opportunities for further professional training and "adequate" opportunities for leadership development. There had not been major difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff. The head felt that the school's reputation had been a factor in this.

Leadership and management

The current headteacher was relatively new, having replaced a long-serving and highly regarded head who had recently retired. The head shared the school's commitment to high standards and excellence of provision, and was strongly supported by the governing body. At the time of her appointment, governors had been clear that they wished to appoint their own head for the school. They had no wish to respond to the local authority's invitation to consider as an option partnership with another school. Because of the school's long record of success, there had been little impetus for structural change.

Extended services

The school provided a range of extended services through the local cluster organisation. A cluster website was under development, which would signpost the provision of all extended services available in the local area. Downham Market provided the full range of services, and people in the village accessed these as the town was in easy reach. The school did not operate a breakfast club and there had been no specific demand for after-school childcare. However, it did run a wide range of after-school clubs, such as cookery and recorders, which attracted good numbers. The school had also supported a holiday club in the village. Recently, a well-regarded nursery in Downham Market closed and the school was asked if it would accommodate it; however, the application foundered because of difficulties in accessing the premises. There was no health centre in the village but the school had good liaison with the school nurse.

Future priorities

Future school priorities included maintaining standards at their current high levels; improving music provision, specifically by giving Key Stage 2 pupils an opportunity to learn a musical instrument; further improving performance drama; and strengthening community links (especially links with the church).

Current collaboration

The headteacher, who had moved into Norfolk from another local authority, strongly welcomed the significant informal collaboration at cluster level which had provided her with a valuable network of support. She attended the regular cluster meetings of local heads; the activities which these meetings generated were extensive and wide-ranging. They included inter-school sports fixtures, opportunities for staff to meet (for example, teachers of Year 6 pupils), and involvement in mathematics and technology projects. The impetus for collaborative ventures came from the primary school headteachers themselves; priorities were discussed and agreed collectively. The school had participated fully in these initiatives and, the head said, "has always been happy to go along with them". She felt that there has been a beneficial impact in the school, though this was hard to quantify. There was some small-scale sharing of resources (mathematical equipment, for example). The cluster had no history of formal collaboration, such as joint appointments of staff.

School perceptions of benefits of and barriers to further collaboration

The chair of governors acknowledged that in the past the school had been “quite insular” and that the effects of this were still being felt. The school recognised that there was scope for further collaborative activity, for example a more regular opportunity for teachers to observe lessons in other schools. These had sometimes been arranged on an ad hoc basis and had been possible because of the trust which had been built up between the schools through regular cluster activity.

The head was aware that her relative inexperience meant that she was “still finding out what was happening in the cluster” and she therefore had few suggestions for collaborative development. She felt that sharing staff would pose logistical difficulties, and was a response to a need which, for them, didn’t exist. In her view, the complexities of meeting together, in order to initiate and sustain a project, was in itself a barrier to more collaboration. “I don’t see whether there’s time for anything more”, she commented.

School perceptions of attitudes of governors, parents and the community

The headteacher felt that parents “want to hang onto what they’ve got” and that “the abiding impression is that people are generally happy with how it is”. The local community, and the governing body, did not wish anything to happen which might affect the school’s high reputation. “They are very protective about the way things are done and wouldn’t want things to change”, the head commented. She added that this meant that it was difficult to see what kind of formal collaboration would be welcomed by governors; the school above all wanted to preserve its own identity.

However, the head herself remained open-minded and was very willing to take part in further discussion. There was no reluctance to change where change was needed. The chair of governors confirmed this view. He felt that governors would need “a lot of convincing”, though he would not discount some type of formal collaboration, such as shared headship, with another school - “you should never say never”. However, he was aware that a number of potential obstacles would need to be overcome. Governors would be particularly keen to ensure continuity for children in the classroom. The school’s church status would also need to be considered. Parents’ perceptions would be important - governors would have to be very careful how they got the message across if a radical change was proposed.

Sources of information:

- *Interview with the headteacher, Denver CoE Primary, 20th October 2008.*
- *Interview with the chair of governors, 10th November 2008.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and documents researched online.*

Hilgay Village CoE Primary School

Main points:

- The school participated actively in a range of cluster-based collaborative ventures, many of which were regarded as having made a significant contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning in the school.
- The school felt that informal collaboration was not only valuable in itself but also prepared the ground for more structural and lasting collaboration.

- The head considered that arranging informal collaboration was often a complex and time-consuming logistical exercise. He felt that there would be substantial obstacles to organising more formal collaboration, such as the deployment of teachers with specialist skills across a group of schools.
- In the school's view, formal collaboration of some type was desirable and necessary for the future, but this needed vision and a clear trigger to overcome the barriers.

Population and context

The catchment area of the school was very rural, and the population, the headteacher reported, had high indicators of deprivation. There was significant mobility of pupils, necessitating periodic rearrangement of class groups since year cohorts varied greatly in size. The school roll, currently fifty-six, had fluctuated and this had had a big impact on the budget, making forward-planning and continuity very difficult.

Standards and quality of provision

The school prided itself on offering a very high standard of individual care. The school had very small numbers in each year group, but standards were reported to be above average, with children making generally good progress. Pupils had a positive attitude to their work and were keen to do well; it was a school which, the head said, "serves the local community well".

Buildings, resources and staffing

Recruitment of high quality teaching staff had been a significant issue for the school in recent years. Continuity had been affected by staff moving on, by illness and by maternity leave. When the overall staff complement was small, this kind of event had an impact which was much more significant than in a larger school. All teachers had particular skills and expertise, though the small size of the staff team meant that breadth was compromised and the range of responsibilities was too great. For example, the school had a teacher of French-Canadian origin, so was well equipped to teach French. But, conversely, there was no-one with specialist skills in art; here, the head stated, "we just get by", knowing that standards were not as high as they could be.

The building was only adequate, and in some respects not fit for purpose – there was no hall, for example. The school had little flexibility in terms of spending on resources, due to its small size.

Leadership and management

The headteacher commented that being a head of a small school was very challenging. He noted that he alone was at the centre of the enterprise – certainly far more so than in a larger school. "Everything emanates from the head", he said, "and this is an exhausting role". The class teaching commitment (currently three days a week) was a heavy burden, taking up a significant amount of the headteacher's time even when he was not timetabled in the classroom. There was never enough time for leadership activities, nor for the range of management responsibilities which were currently expected.

Extended services

Together with other schools in the cluster, the school had plans to signpost a range of extended services through a website. Some after-school clubs were offered but there was little demand for more comprehensive before- and after-school care. In a small rural community, people expected to travel to the nearby market town to access a range of services, such as health or leisure, which would not be viable in the village.

Future priorities

The school aimed to consolidate its recent gains in order to ensure that it could continue to improve. This included the embedding of recent initiatives such as the revised literacy and numeracy frameworks, and the introduction of new strategies for assessing pupil progress. There was also recognition of the need to develop the roles of key staff in order to diversify leadership opportunities.

Current collaboration

The local cluster was a very important forum for discussing common issues, and had recently greatly improved. There was a much clearer focus on teaching and learning issues, rather than simply management or organisational matters. A good example of this was the recent work with St John's College, Cambridge and the Gatsby Foundation. This had enabled maths and science subject leaders to work together under expert guidance. The most recent focus had been to relate the science curriculum to the creative curriculum. Participation had not only led to good professional development, but had greatly increased teachers' self-esteem. The development of expertise across the cluster had been very powerful, helping to embed change in the school. For example, when one of the key teachers left, another stepped up. It also made a lasting impact on standards in the school, particularly the quality of scientific thinking.

This example also helped the staff to look at what else could be done to develop collaborative approaches. The schools had provided opportunities for Year 6 teachers to work on school transfer issues, and enabled SENCOs and PE co-ordinators to work together. Informal collaboration, it was suggested, could help to prepare the ground for something more lasting: "it gets us talking and working together". There were many small-scale cases of this type. For example, the organiser of the local Silver Band, who had taught music in the school for some time, now also taught in Denver. However, in the head's view "true collaboration" had to bring about durable change. It was not just about management or logistical arrangements like sharing a bus, which was useful but of itself changed nothing. Even a valuable extended programme like the St John's project had left nothing behind in terms of long-term sustainable development.

The head found that informal contact with colleagues was immensely valuable and he ensured that he found time for this as part of his personal professional development. He had also taken part in the NCSL Leading Small Primary Schools programme and greatly valued the opportunity to work closely with two headteacher colleagues. But again the association was temporary, not lasting. Likewise the Primary Leadership Programme provided good opportunities to work closely with other heads, though it was "derailed", the head said, because of staffing problems. All of these experiences were very valuable, but did not in themselves provide a basis for sustainable collaboration.

School perceptions of benefits of and barriers to further collaboration

The headteacher argued strongly for the mutual advantages which collaboration could confer. However, he noted that most current local schemes for collaboration or networking involved bidding for financial support. This in itself discriminated against small schools, where there was often no time to engage in 'extra' tasks. The bidding system did have advantages, he felt, since it secured commitment to the project. However, something more structural was needed for small schools, if the considerable investment of time was to be worthwhile. Schools only participated with commitment if they saw it as relevant to their particular issues at that time. They are cautious, the head commented: they ask the questions "Is it going to mean more work? If so, how much will I have to give?"

Collaboration, in this head's view, was above all an opportunity to broaden the pool of skills. It needed to be conceived as "give and take", so that schools could complement each other. It was easy to agree this in principle, but much harder to establish the mechanisms to make it happen. "All sorts of issues get in the way", he pointed out. The cluster had had recent experience of this, being encouraged by the local authority to appoint a teacher from one of the cluster schools to be a leading teacher for gifted and talented pupils and to work across a group of six schools. The scheme foundered because no school was prepared to release their best teacher for extensive work in other schools when their core purpose was seen as raising standards in their own schools.

The head also saw the differences between schools as a key obstacle; he commented that "they have different histories, different strengths, and different issues". Working alone, "you can't see into each others' boxes", but collaboration opened you out to other schools, and sometimes heads could be fearful of that. The headteacher's view was that collaborative initiatives have to be driven by someone; it needed someone with the passion and commitment to see changes through. The school would be open to proposals for formal collaboration, but "there needs to be a clear trigger" which would overcome all the barriers. "Someone needs to have the vision", he added, "and the belief that it is possible".

School perceptions of attitudes of governors, parents and the community

The chair of governors - the local vicar - was strongly in favour of greater collaboration between schools, pointing out the parallels with recent developments in the Church of England. The headteacher felt that the community would be open to opportunities for shared headship, though there might be some residual resistance from more established families. Parents would definitely need to be kept informed about any formal collaboration plans which may arise. The head pointed out that they are largely unaware of the level of informal collaboration which currently exists. He commented that "they don't generally know that we meet together, talk together" – for example, if they wanted to move their child to another school, they were surprised to discover that there is communication between the heads.

Sources of information:

- *Interview with the headteacher, 16th October 2008.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and researched online.*

Ten Mile Bank Primary School

Main points:

- The school was conscious, as a result of its own recent history, of the vulnerability of a very small school. It was therefore very receptive to the possibility of entering into a formal collaboration with one or more neighbouring schools.
- The school staff, particularly the headteacher, felt under pressure from their wide range of commitments and from the need to preserve the continuity of children's learning. These were potentially inhibiting factors to collaboration.
- The school was confident that it had much to offer other schools as well as gain from them. However, it felt that its openness to change might not be reciprocated by other schools.
- The local authority was seen by the school as playing a potentially vital role in promoting and securing formal collaboration.

Population and context

The school had shrunk significantly in size over time (mainly for demographic reasons related to the decline of the farming population). The current twenty-nine pupils on the school roll lived in the village; a few children were lost to neighbouring schools perceived by parents to be more successful. The village, generally speaking, was still a poor agricultural community; some neighbouring villages were noticeably more affluent and historically, the head noted, there was a “sharp divide” between the village and its nearest neighbour. He added that there were no major industries locally and that “the school is the biggest employer in the village”.

Standards and quality of provision

The school had had some difficulties in the past, but was now greatly improved under the current headteacher. The last Ofsted inspection (2007) judged the school to be satisfactory with good elements. The school, though very small, now functioned very effectively; “children get a good deal here”, the head stated. The staff and governors worked hard to overcome any disadvantages of size, and the community now had confidence in the school. The small size brought advantages, too; it was a very close-knit community, and children were very well cared for. The headteacher had had the experience of being a head in a larger school, so brought an interesting perspective to the issues.

Buildings, resources and staffing

The building, adapted from a cottage hospital formerly sited in the village, was generous in size and more than adequate for the current number on roll. The pupils were arranged in two classes, with a consequent wide age-range in each. Other than the head, there were no full-time members of staff. There were three part-time teachers (working the equivalent of six days between them) and a small but experienced team of teaching assistants. The secretary, who worked twenty hours a week, was currently on maternity leave and had a temporary replacement.

Leadership and management

The head taught four days a week, with only one day for leadership and management. That day was often taken up with obligatory meetings or training, often off-site, leaving even less time for focusing on school business. “People expect to be able to demand your time whenever they want it”, he commented. The school could only afford a part-time secretary, meaning that the head had to spend time doing routine administrative tasks - dealing with requests, dinner money, telephone calls and so on (this was confirmed throughout the interview). The head added that, in trying to build up the school’s reputation, it had been important to ensure that it dealt well with hard-to-reach parents and vulnerable children; all this took time.

The headteacher’s four days’ contact with his class had to remain paramount and, he said, “the pressure to raise standards is relentless”. He was totally responsible for the class - he noted that “all the planning, all the programming, is mine” - even on his one non-contact day. Children in the class looked to him, even when he was not teaching them. Maintaining the balance between roles was a continuing difficulty as, he commented, “you are constantly juggling priorities”. The focus on teaching can mean that other things piled up; he noted that “whenever I come back from a day out of school, there are umpteen stickies attached to my desk”. He felt the job was only possible because of his wide experience.

As in other small schools, there were difficulties in ensuring subject leadership in all areas. “We cover the core, and we do it well”, he pointed out, but not all subjects had clear direction from someone with expertise. These responsibilities, he felt, could be shared between schools.

Extended services

The school took seriously its responsibilities with regard to extended services - the school was the most important focal point of village life. The school had run a breakfast club some years ago, but numbers were very low and it was not economically viable. There was little demand for after school care partly because there were few families where both parents were in full-time employment and partly because there tended to be strong family networks.

There were very few professional families in the village. The school ran a range of after-school clubs, however, which were well attended. The school offered use of its computers to the community, but, he said, “so far there have been no takers”. The cluster’s extended services website signposted all the services in the area which families might want to use - childminders, after-school care in the market town, health services and so on. Most services were concentrated in the market town, which was nearby and which people looked to quite naturally. But he felt that there was certainly scope for “satellite services”, for example a health visitor, which could be located in the school, say one afternoon a week. There had been no consideration of trust status, though the school would be open to any suggestions that could be shown to benefit the community.

Future priorities

Improvement priorities identified in the current school development plan included ensuring that leadership and management, at all levels, was focused on raising levels of achievement. The school also intended to develop further the provision for Foundation Stage pupils and to raise standards in numeracy throughout the school.

Current collaboration

Cluster organisation was very strong and extensive informal links had been forged between the schools. There was, the head said, “a good turnout” to meetings and a lot of cluster events. The school had good links with the receiving high school, though it had recently not been as active as in the past. As a specialist school for technology, it had specific funding for outreach work, but it didn’t share information about how that funding was disbursed. The sports partnership with another local high school enabled sports coaches to visit the school and allowed pupils to attend events at the high school site.

Other collaborative ventures have been arranged independently of the high school. Collaborative initiatives have depended on individuals who have been prepared to take a lead, so they have not been systematic. The smaller schools in the cluster have often relied on the headteachers of larger schools to write bids for collaborative projects; writing a bid was, the head noted, a very time-consuming process. The mathematics and technology projects with St John’s College, Cambridge and the Gatsby Foundation had been particularly valuable. They enabled primary school staff to meet together to pursue common issues. However, there had been frustrations because not all schools, in the head’s view, had an equal commitment to the benefits of working together.

Other collaborative links had been made in response to specific issues. For example, a gifted child in Year 6 had needed a greater level of challenge than a small year group could provide. The head therefore had arranged for him to attend occasional sessions at another school. The head ran cycling proficiency sessions at another local small school, as it didn’t

have the expertise. He felt that there was scope to extend this kind of skill-sharing. He felt that it should be possible for groups of children to work in other schools, to take advantage of their expertise, though, he noted, “moving groups of children around is very expensive”.

School perceptions of benefits of and barriers to further collaboration

In the head’s view, there were “so many benefits” to collaborative partnerships. In the long term, it was a way of preserving a school in the community, by making it viable. “We want to do everything possible to assist the local authority in keeping schools open”, he added. Collaboration clearly had the potential to enhance the quality of education, in all kinds of ways. But he felt that his own school’s enthusiasm hadn’t always been matched by other schools which could be more reluctant to share and wary of greater openness.

There was a lot of unrealised potential for sharing resources, which would certainly help a small school budget. He felt that it should be possible to organise things so that key resources are moved around from school to school, just as they would be in a larger single school. Similarly, there was currently no sharing of staff across the cluster, though the head felt that there was tremendous potential for doing so “if the will was there”. He commented that there was a perception that his school was keener on collaboration because it was “a needy case”, though, he added, “that’s not our view at all”. The school recognised it had gaps, but also key strengths which could add value to other schools. They could offer leadership and administrative experience and expertise in ICT, French and mathematics. In return, it would like science, environmental sustainability, music and shared residential activities. “We’re happy to trade”, he said in summary. However, the head was also realistic about the difficulties, commenting that “there are clear barriers to increased informal collaboration and most of them have to do with time”.

Helping another school was a tremendous development opportunity for a teacher. But collaboration could bring problems if it meant that members of staff are out of school too much. Teachers found meeting colleagues from other schools to be very valuable, but, he added, “they want to be in their classes, teaching”. They knew that too much time out led to discontinuity and loss of direction for their pupils. “Too much diversionary activity is not the answer”, he said; “it does nothing for standards”.

The local authority had sought to encourage collaboration through cluster grants and discussions. The additional cluster funding helped sustain the range of informal liaison. The recent LA surplus places survey suggested some ideas, and there had been proposals at the time of appointment of new heads. But more needed to be done to break down barriers between schools, to be, in the head’s words, “more proactive in pushing collaboration”. Also, to put together formal partnerships would need a strategic plan which included agreement about what to do with incumbent headteachers.

School perceptions of attitudes of governors, parents and the community

The possibilities of a management partnership had been discussed in the school in the past, though the opportunity had not arisen at the right time. The chair of governors was enthusiastic about the benefits that such a partnership would bring - it’s “a logical, a good idea”, he said; “it’s right on the money, exactly what’s needed”. The right opportunity might occur again; the head is eligible to retire relatively soon, and headteachers of neighbouring schools are known to be looking for other posts, so vacancies may well occur. The chair of governors was, however, aware that not all members of the governing body wholly shared his view. There was some convincing to do, both there and in the wider community.

Sources of information:

- *Interviews with the headteacher and chair of governors (who is also a parent), 22nd October 2008.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and researched online.*

Southery Primary School

Main points:

- The school's recent history illustrated the sudden changes in fortune to which small schools can be subject.
- The school was involved in a range of informal collaborative ventures, mostly through the local cluster. These were in themselves beneficial but had little impact on a school's long-term development or vulnerability.
- The governing body recognised the potential which formal collaboration had for strengthening the school. There was a probability that it would be considered favourably in the future.

Population and context

The current roll was ninety-three. Standards on entry, particularly in language and literacy, were below average. Many pupils presented challenging behaviour but there were few who qualified for statements of special educational need. The catchment area had significant elements of rural deprivation and the school reported that parents generally had very low aspirations for their children. Pupil mobility was high, which had led to imbalance in year groups. Ten of the fifteen Year 6 pupils in 2006 had joined the school that year. The school roll would remain lower than in recent years and this might necessitate the reduction of the teaching staffing in the future.

Standards and quality of provision

The headteacher had been in post about four years. The school had been placed in the Ofsted category of serious weaknesses shortly after he was appointed; there had been a lot of development work to be done. However, improvement was rapid. The Ofsted inspection (March 2007) reported "some good and occasionally outstanding teaching", a strong ethos and high quality of care. The significant improvements were noted as "considerable" and standards were on the rise. Recent school progress data confirmed this trend.

Buildings, resources and staffing

The school was sited in the village centre, occupying a restricted site with inadequate playing field facilities. The school had undergone some recent remodeling and redecoration. However, classrooms were small and there was a general lack of space in the school, particularly for withdrawing children who had difficulty engaging with their learning. There had recently been significant staffing changes following a loss of two teachers (that is, half of the total complement). This followed disruption caused by a teacher's absence for a year, and a maternity leave shortly afterwards. The school's recent staffing difficulties illustrated how easy it was, the head said, for a small school "very quickly to go from a position of strength to a position of weakness". Recruitment of high quality staff was not easy in an isolated rural area (and it was particularly difficult to attract male staff) and building a new team took time.

There was only a small pool to call on for supply work. At the moment, recruitment and retention of staff remained the school's biggest challenge. A small school, the head noted, was very vulnerable to sudden change.

Leadership and management

The headteacher did not currently have a class teaching commitment, but covered for colleagues during their planning and preparation time. However, these arrangements varied from year to year, depending on budget priorities, and a non class teaching role was unlikely to be sustainable in the long term. Much time had to be invested, he commented, in "making sure that initiatives are being implemented". A heavy load fell on the shoulders of a small team; the fact that the school has had three newly qualified teachers recently has further increased the burden on others. This situation might represent rapid professional development for some, he commented: "everyone has responsibility for whole school development so everyone has an opportunity to make a mark". But it could be lonely and stressful for those without inner resilience and there was a dearth of role models or people to turn to for advice.

Extended services

The school provided some extended services and signposted others through the cluster's extended services website. After-school clubs were well subscribed. The local playgroup now offered full day-care. The school had offered opportunities for members of the community to make use of its ICT facilities, though no-one had taken up the offer. There had been little response to the extended services consultation. Few children in the school had two parents in work, and much local employment was part-time. The school did not generally serve professional families, there being very few professionals in the village. Extended opening hours also currently posed logistical problems - for example, with relation to who was responsible for cleaning and locking up the school.

Future priorities

The school's improvement priorities centred on the consolidation and continuation of recent gains. There was a focus on raising standards in a number of non-core subjects as well as in English and mathematics. Strategies for improving teaching and learning included providing opportunities for peer observation and widening expertise through class exchange. There was encouragement, in the words of the plan, to "try something new" and to develop more creative approaches to curriculum planning. The school was also conscious of the need to improve leadership and management opportunities for staff through the delegation of key responsibilities and to support this through better self-evaluation processes.

Current collaboration

The head felt that, in general, effective support was provided through the local cluster of schools. There were regular headteacher meetings which, the head said, were "reasonably well attended". They helped to ensure that all schools were aware of local and national developments. They also provided valuable opportunities for contact with more experienced colleagues, allowing a degree of informal mentoring. Regular cluster training was useful, though sometimes not sufficiently specific to school needs.

Any collaborative arrangement, the head noted, tended to be the result of an initiative taken by individual headteacher - when they had time to do so. There were no arrangements for the local authority to be regularly represented at cluster meetings, and the high school had changed its criteria for outreach work so that it now worked with selected schools rather than

with all feeder schools; this change had been rather divisive, leaving some schools with no support and others with an unrealistic requirement to attend frequent development meetings. Nevertheless, overall the school benefited significantly from being a member of the cluster. The additional funding enabled the schools to act on ideas that otherwise would not get off the ground. “Without the cluster funding there would be very little collaboration”, the head noted.

School perceptions of benefits of and barriers to further collaboration

The head commented that “we’ve done a few good things together” and that this “provides a platform for future development”. Nevertheless he felt that there was probably a lot more that could be done together, for example in sharing policies and resources. He was very conscious that all the schools were trying to do the same things individually. Opportunities for subject leaders or SENCos to meet together were highly valuable, though time out of the classroom could compromise the quality of learning there; “development comes at a cost”, he noted. There was clearly potential for key members of staff to work across the schools; the new cluster parent support adviser could provide a model for this.

School perceptions of attitudes of governors, parents and the community

The governing body had discussed a proposal for executive headship with a school in a different cluster, though governors felt that they didn’t know enough to make an informed decision and had therefore been reluctant to proceed. Worries were expressed about not having the headteacher on site all the time, given the current issues in the school. However, governors were alert to the advantages of such a partnership: “it could strengthen the position of any school”, the chair commented, enabling it to provide a higher and more consistent standard of education. Governors felt no sense of rivalry with neighbouring schools; in the chair’s view “any supposed barriers would vanish as soon as the benefits were felt”. However, it would need to be carefully “sold” to the community (including some governors).

Despite recent and current problems, the school was optimistic about the future. Governors had seen how quickly improvement could be effected by a good headteacher. They were firmly committed to keeping the school open, and continuing to provide education in the community.

Sources of information:

- *Interviews with the headteacher, chair of governors and parent governor, 24th October 2008.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and researched online.*

Collective meeting of the four schools and individual school follow-up interviews

At the suggestion of one of the heads of the study schools, a meeting was arranged for all four headteachers, together with governors representing all four schools. The purpose of this meeting was to carry forward some of the ideas generated in the initial individual school visits and to explore areas of commonality. It was intended that the discussion might help to identify what hypothetical models of formal collaboration might be most fruitful. It might also suggest some practical next steps which could take their informal collaboration into a new, more formal, phase. In the event, the latter turned out to be an over-ambitious aim. However, the meeting provided a valuable open forum which covered new ground and raised further the level of trust between the schools.

It was felt to be a particularly valuable experience for governors, who generally had little knowledge of the benefits of alternative leadership arrangements.

A document was circulated in advance, outlining the commonalities and the differences between the schools which had emerged in the initial school visits and seeking to identify some potential areas for growth (see Appendix 4). Below is a summary of key points made during the course of the discussion. This should not be taken to imply that there was consensus about every view expressed, though many points secured wide agreement.

- All four were currently successful schools, serving their communities well. This had not always been the case, and might not be again in the future. Decline might be triggered by a number of unexpected events, such as the failure to recruit a new head or a significant reduction in the number on roll. Schools were very conscious of their potential vulnerability.
- The four schools had a good track record of working together, mostly through the local authority cluster organisation. Headteachers were on good terms with one another and there was much 'sharing and caring' interchange between them.
- There were, one head commented, "so many different ways of collaborating", most of them informal and reliant on goodwill and personal networks. Specific collaborative projects took time to initiate and to sustain, and generally had a fixed lifespan. Informal collaboration therefore remained fragile and temporary, and constantly in need of renewal.
- Nevertheless, informal collaboration "prepared the ground" for consideration of more formal collaboration, and was greatly to be valued. Small-scale collaboration was often in response to a specific need, for example to provide additional challenge for a gifted child.
- The benefits of any collaborative activity had to be seen, by all parties, as clear and immediate. Anything less than total commitment would undermine collaborative endeavour and cause it to give way to other priorities.
- In principle, formal collaboration could be a key way of reducing vulnerability, providing some degree of 'insurance protection' as well as having the potential to increase effectiveness.
- Although the schools shared a similar ethos, they each had a unique identity and individuality which they were keen to preserve. Informal collaboration left the distinctiveness of a school relatively intact. Formal collaborations, on the other hand, necessitated the forging of a new identity.
- There would be no support for a collaborative model which was perceived to compromise the key benefits of small schools, for example, individual attention to children's learning needs, continuity of care, and accessibility of staff.
- Parents, and the community at large, showed great loyalty to their school and generally expressed a wish to keep things as they are. Plans for change were, in the words of one head, "often beyond people's comprehension" and needed to be carefully prepared and explained.

Two weeks later, the headteachers were interviewed in turn and were invited to reflect on their participation in the study - in particular, the extent to which the school might wish to act on the ideas generated. A summary of the key points from the four interviews follows:

- All four headteachers found the experience valuable and felt that it had, to a greater or lesser extent, helped to develop their understanding. One headteacher (who had recently attended a relevant conference in London) felt that the discussions had made him “more positive and less sceptical”, and that he now saw formal collaboration as “an essential move for the future” which would “secure the future of small schools in the community”. Another head principally valued the discussions because he was “already thinking along those lines anyway”.
- The headteachers felt that the discussions had been just as valuable for the chairs of governors. It had “offered a new agenda”, one said, opening up possibilities that they are unlikely to have considered and dispelling some of the misunderstandings they may have harboured. The heads were conscious, however, that not all governors had been party to the discussions. One head foresaw “rifts” in the governing body over issues of formal collaboration, with more recent governors open to new ideas but “established governors ... less inclined to be flexible”. Another head suggested that governors with a professional background might have parallel experience in their own field and would therefore be more likely to be sympathetic to alternative models of organisation.
- All four heads perceived that their job was, in the words of one of them, “just getting harder all the time”. One significant recent development was the increasing accountability demands. It was now necessary not just to do the job well but, one head said, to “keep on proving” that you are doing so. Lack of time for gathering evidence of effectiveness had become another element in a small school’s vulnerability. Two heads felt that the position was particularly tenuous in schools where the head had a class teaching responsibility. One commented that it was the commitment which “tied you to a class”, rather than the time spent teaching per se, which imposed the greatest limitations on the headteacher’s ability to lead.
- Some disappointment was expressed at the apparent lack of progress made at the joint discussion involving all four schools, despite the overt willingness to work together in principle. One head, however, suggested that the issues were too complex to expect a definite outcome. All four heads agreed that the meeting had strengthened trust and developed the culture of helping one another, even if it didn’t lead to an immediate programme of action.
- One headteacher felt that the way forward was “informally at first, with preparations leading to more formal collaboration”. He suggested investigating the feasibility of a cluster school business manager as a next step. A focus on sharing administrative tasks, he thought, would promote joint working in other areas. He also proposed “the development of a sub-cluster” as a smaller working group of schools.
- Another headteacher saw a qualitative difference between collaborations involving joint staff appointments and those involving a unified executive. The former might be a convenient logistical arrangement but it “doesn’t bind the schools together”. The latter, on the other hand, would ensure interdependence of the two schools and enable both to work together for the common good.

- The same headteacher felt that “even the smallest school needs a leadership team” in order to fulfil current expectations. But he recognised how difficult it was for small schools to develop one within their available resources. “That’s why things continue to centre around the head”, he added. Shared headship, he reflected, would automatically bring enhanced opportunities for distributed leadership which would benefit both schools.
- In one of the schools the possibility of a formal collaboration had become directly relevant, as the headteacher had recently secured another post. The governing body had considered the possibility of shared headship as a way forward, and had asked the local authority to brief it accordingly. The headteachers of two of the other schools stated that they might themselves be interested in executive headship if the opportunity presented itself.
- Three of the four headteachers commented on the importance of careful preparation, in order to ensure that a shared headship arrangement was successful. All three foresaw how crucial it would be to secure the support of parents and the community, consulting them, keeping them informed and seeking to allay their fears. One spoke of the need to “tread carefully” and “to get influential people on board”. Another anticipated that the quality of teaching would be central to parents’ concerns. Both saw the expertise of the local authority and of nearby partnership heads to be a valuable resource in persuading the community of the ensuing benefits.

Sources of information:

- *Discussion between the four schools held on 20th November 2008, attended by the headteacher and chair of governors from Denver Primary, Hilgay Village Primary, Southery Primary and Ten Mile Bank Primary.*
- *Follow-up interviews with the headteachers of the four schools, 12th December 2008.*

The way forward: strategies and hypothetical models

This section sketches hypothetical models for achieving more formal collaboration between all or some of the four schools in the sample. The models (and the strategies for moving towards them) are informed by the following:

- The current situation that the schools find themselves in.
- Their own perceptions of their strengths, weaknesses and development priorities.
- Suggestions and ideas generated in the interviews and discussions.
- Potential support which could be offered by the local authority or other agency.
- Knowledge of relevant developments, initiatives or projects, both local and national.

All figures used in these models are mid-range for the school size and do not represent actual salaries of staff in the study schools

Model 1 Federation - Hilgay / Ten Mile Bank / Southery

The sample schools had an extensive track record of informal collaboration. However, they were conscious of the limitations of this and of the potential benefit of seeking a more formal partnership. This could be achieved through federation. A single governing body would open up possibilities for efficiencies in financial management, flexibility in staffing and increased opportunities for collaborative learning (for both staff and pupils). Increased collaboration between the communities would help to prepare the way for possible future executive headships.

Hilgay, Southery and Ten Mile Bank schools could potentially benefit most from the creation of a federation, in a variety of possible combinations (Denver, as a slightly larger and geographically separated school, would be unlikely to choose to be part of this). For example, the federation might be between Hilgay and Ten Mile Bank (the two smallest schools), or between Southery and Hilgay (the two southernmost schools) or between all three schools.

Federation would enable the three schools to address the individual weaknesses they had identified in their provision. For example, Ten Mile Bank could share the use of the hall and outdoor space which Hilgay and Southery lack. Pupils learning together across the three schools would widen learning opportunities through peer interaction; this could be especially beneficial for gifted and talented pupils, which had been a specific issue for Ten Mile Bank. All the headteachers would have greater opportunities for monitoring and evaluating learning and teaching across the schools through carrying out observations with their peer headteachers. Similar opportunities for peer learning could be created for other teachers, again addressing a concern expressed by Southery.

Model 2 Executive headships - Hilgay / Ten Mile Bank / Southery

A successful executive headship would also be likely to centre around Hilgay, Southery and Ten Mile Bank schools (for a variety of geographical, historical and contextual reasons, Denver Primary would be less likely to be receptive than the other three schools in the study). Executive headship is seen within Norfolk as a highly effective model for securing a school's long-term viability, and might become a real option if heads moved on in the near future, as some were expected to do. As with federation, possible combinations include Hilgay and Ten Mile Bank (the two smallest schools) or Southery and either Hilgay or Ten Mile Bank. Also worthy of consideration is the more ambitious plan of executive headship between all three schools. The possible imminent vacancy of one or more of these three headships gives added point to this model.

Under the Norfolk scheme of support for such management partnerships, there would be a significant financial incentive. The schools would save the cost of one of the heads (or two, in a three-way partnership) but there would, however, be additional staffing costs including the need to appoint a teacher or teachers to cover the heads' current class teaching time (either three or four days a week). If there is no other senior leader in the school, one would need to be appointed.

Financial implications

Detailed calculations of the financial implications of executive headship models can be found in Appendix 10. The following table is a summary of these findings.

Financial advantages of executive headships in Norfolk

Executive headship	Savings	Additional costs	Available for school improvement
Executive headship (two schools)	One head's salary £53,200	Salary rise (head) ²⁰ £5,505 Class teacher £28,000 Assistant head £3,800	£15,800 + £20,000 <i>additional LA formula funding</i>
Executive headship (three schools)	Two heads' salaries £106,400	Salary rise (head) £12,461 Class teacher £28,000 Two assistant heads £7,600	£58,330 + £20,000 <i>additional LA formula funding</i>

Headteacher management support

The recruitment of a joint school business manager for the three (or all four) schools would both lighten the burden on their headteachers and provide valuable management expertise. It would also enable the schools to 'grow together' and facilitate the sharing of good practice as well as enabling joint procurement. The new postholder, holding a Certificate in School Business Management (CSBM) or Diploma in School Business Management, would, among other duties, be responsible for writing bids to secure new funding streams. This might be a new appointment or an enhancement of the current administrative postholder in one of the schools.

Financial implications

Training for a business manager through NCSL is free for small schools but schools fund any supply and travel costs. There are also potential improvements to the efficiency of financial and site management. Potentially, an SBM could raise significant additional funds and enable schools to make economies in spending on resources. Additionally, there would be significant savings of headteacher time, freeing them to do what they do best - lead learning and teaching. However, there would be the additional salary costs of employing a shared school business manager. This could range from an increase in salary for an existing member of staff (possibly between £5,000-8,000 per annum) to the full costs of a new appointment. A term time only appointment to be shared by two or three schools would cost in the region of £25,000 - £30,000 depending on experience. This figure would be lower if other administrative support is reduced.

²⁰ The School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document 2009 includes interim pay arrangements for headteachers who are accountable for more than one school on a temporary or permanent basis. Since the present study predates this national directive, precise figures were not available. However, the combined size of these two schools remains within the Group 1 range, so the increase of the headteacher's pay assumed here in recognition of the additional responsibility remains broadly in keeping with the new guidance. See www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/payandperformance/pay/

Teacher development and building leadership capacity

The schools acknowledged that there was much to be gained by a wider sharing of skills and expertise held within individual schools (for example, in ICT, art and design and French). There were clearly barriers to be overcome here, but the potential benefits were great. A way forward would be for the schools to develop a strategic plan for distributed leadership across the group of schools. This would give current members of their teaching staffs the opportunity to develop their expertise and to exercise responsibility beyond their own school, thus aiding teacher retention and providing an incentive for recruiting skilled staff when vacancies occurred. This strategy would build on the work already done in the cluster, particularly in the areas of mathematics and science. The schools would, over time, be likely to create a middle leadership tier which could contribute to the next generation of small school headteachers. A start could be made by enrolling teachers on the Leading from the Middle programme. If the schools were in an executive headship arrangement or were federated, even further benefits could be expected. The formal structure would make it clearer that middle leaders had an overarching responsibility for the whole partnership, with clearer lines of accountability and the likelihood of more decisive strategic direction.

Financial implications

The sharing of skills between schools is often difficult for small schools to achieve given the limitations of staff numbers and time. However, the increased flexibility that an executive headship provides is a significant enabling factor in sharing and developing expertise, including middle leadership across the schools. Whilst there are unlikely to be financial savings, there are considerable staff development benefits through the greater capacity that the headteacher's non-teaching role and the employment of additional staff, for example a business manager and HLTA, provide to the school.

Joint appointment of staff

Three of the schools considered that there was scope to appoint a joint member of staff to co-ordinate a key aspect of work. This might, for example, be an HLTA with responsibility for supporting pupils with special educational needs, or those who are gifted and talented, or both. The same (or different) appointment could provide in-house cover for sickness and training. There were clearly financial and logistical issues to be addressed, but this would be a symbolic as well as a practical solution to a pressing problem. The schools might meet together (with support from their finance officer) in order to audit current needs and draw up a role specification. In time, the group of schools might support several such posts. Again, this model would be likely to be significantly more successful if the schools were in an executive headship or were federated, as the postholder could more easily promote commonalities of approach between the schools.

Financial implications

The estimated annual costs of an HLTA on point 24 are £22,000 including oncosts, which, taking into account the need for an additional class teacher (to cover the previous class teaching commitments of the two headteachers), is broadly equivalent to the saving to be made from having one headteacher. Furthermore, there are cost savings that would come from the ability to cover essential functions from within the schools' staffing complement, rather than, for example, having to pay for supply teachers.

The educational outcomes that would be expected include significantly improved practice in special educational needs and provision for gifted and talented pupils.

Curriculum Development

The schools in the sample acknowledged the considerable value of joint activity with other schools through the local authority cluster organisation, particularly in the area of curriculum development. At the same time, they felt that this group of schools was too large and too disparate to focus precisely on their needs. Consideration could therefore be given to the formation of a more formal, tightly-knit 'inner group' which could draw up a joint strategic plan for implementing new initiatives and policies. Working together in this way would save much time and effort, as well as drawing on a wider range of skills and expertise. It would also promote the pooling of resources, better use of facilities, shared pupil activities such as cultural events and better opportunities for peer observation. The current informal interchange between the schools would form a good basis for such a step. There would be an important role for the use of ICT in this development, for example the creation of a joint virtual learning environment.

This model might act as a staging-post in developing an executive headship or federation, or both. There would be further savings, in terms of time spent at senior leadership level, if this were so. Alternatively, the group of schools could consider setting up a shared trust, as a way of securing their commitment to joint curriculum development. This could also be a way of involving on a more permanent basis some of the external partners which had helped promote innovative teaching in the schools.

Financial implications

The formation of an 'inner group' and the drawing up of a strategic plan will require more time from the schools in the early stages. However the potential benefits are significant, as described above. They include economies of time and effort through the sharing of responsibilities, information, initiatives and policies between schools.

The schools could also make savings through the joint organization of cultural events and professional development activities, and the pooling of resources rather than their replication in each school.

Examples of this include:

- a) Pupil activities / events - e.g. educational visits; theatre groups; dance groups; musical events; typically these cost £500 -1,000 for an individual school. These costs can be cut to half or less when small schools join together, and also provides pupils with the opportunity to mix with a larger group of children than in their own school.
- b) Shared professional development - in addition to promoting and sharing good practice across the group of schools, there are some significant savings to be made from joint training, for example
 - the average cost of sending a teacher on a one-day course is approximately £325 (£150 in fees and £175 in supply cover).

- typical costs of a shared training day are £600 (£500 in consultant's fees and £100 in refreshments and materials)
- for 30 staff (teachers, HLTAs, TAs) coming together from four schools this equates to around £20 per person.
If four such days were arranged annually, each school would pay approximately £600 rather than around £1,300 which is the estimated cost of buying places on four one-day courses over the year.

Extended services

The area children's centre was sited in the nearby town of Downham Market; none of the four sample schools had an attached children's centre. All of the sample schools lacked the resources, both human and material, to offer many extended services, and the village communities they served were too small to make them viable.

The development of a cluster website to signpost extended services provided a useful model for disseminating essential information. However, it was not without inherent problems, for example the assumptions it made about ICT skills and internet access. The schools might therefore seek to investigate other ways of extending their joint capacity to offer more local services, complementing those offered in Downham Market. Formal collaboration would enable the schools to rationalise their existing extended service provision, and possibly to provide some economy of scale to expand the range. A shared trust involving a larger group of schools could help to support all children and young people in the area, through better co-ordination of services.

5.2 Cornwall

Summary of main findings:

- The study schools had engaged in extensive informal collaborations for a number of years. The heads valued them primarily for their personal and professional support, in order to avoid isolation. Among the wider benefits reported were wider learning opportunities for pupils and a larger pool of staff expertise to draw on.
- The local authority's support strategy for small schools has created small self-selected 'clusters' of schools, often with a high degree of interdependence. It was recognised, both by the local authority and by the schools themselves, that these clusters provided a strong infrastructure on which formal collaborations such as executive headships, federations, or both, could be built.
- There was a valuable support network, funded by the local authority, for the development of extended services, which encouraged schools to find collaborative solutions to problems. However, the network served a large geographical area and its role in promoting formal collaborations was, by headteachers, considered less effective than more local groupings.
- The local authority had encouraged headteachers and governors to consider the future pattern of education in their geographical area. This initiative had alerted school stakeholders to the difficulties faced by small schools, and presented them with the opportunity to consider new models of school organisation and leadership.

- The local authority advocated executive headship as a key strategy; this was largely influenced by the difficulties experienced in recruiting headteachers for small schools, though it was also aware of other benefits which were likely to ensue. Executive headships were set up for a three-year trial period in order to test their viability and sustainability. Schools were encouraged to consider federations but there was no strong impetus towards their formation.
- Where executive headships existed, the initiative for their formation had generally come from the schools and often from the heads themselves. Heads considered the key benefit of executive headship to be the additional time created for reflection, analysis and school improvement activity, as well as ensuring a better work-life balance. They also identified as an important consequence the opportunities for developing leadership capacity. However, not all headteachers in the study had a personal interest in becoming an executive head.
- Recent events, in which one of the study schools temporarily lost the confidence of its community following the establishment of an executive headship arrangement, have shown how vulnerable small schools can be. Consequently schools and the local authority have become more aware that intended executive headships must be on a secure footing, that teaching arrangements in the schools must not be adversely affected, and that communities must be kept fully informed.
- There was potential for creating and extending a number of models of formal collaboration in the Cornwall sample of schools. Two of the four schools in the study had recently embarked on an executive headship arrangement which might be further strengthened by federation. There was also scope for the development of formal collaboration between schools through federation, executive headship or shared trust status. The financial savings made by such arrangements (see Appendix 9) could be reinvested in the establishment of a strong leadership team to work across the schools.
- Further development of the wider Lizard cluster, through the development of a collaborative virtual learning environment (VLE), would enable staff, pupils and governors from different schools to work together more closely. 'Virtual collaboration' might help foster a united approach and draw communities together, preparing the ground for a formal collaborative arrangement.

The local authority view

Main points:

- Small rural schools in Cornwall were experiencing three significant challenges: the recruitment of headteachers; surplus places; and poor accommodation. These were key drivers in the local authority's support for alternative models of headship.
- The local authority's strategy was to involve the schools themselves in determining solutions to the above problems, potentially moving communities beyond a parochial view and enabling them to consider what forms of school organisation may be best for the wider area.
- There was a well-established system of 'clusters' between small, self-selected groups of small schools that provided the infrastructure for collaboration of various kinds and degrees. These were valued highly by the small school heads. Local authority organised networks, on the other hand, were often regarded as too big, with non-teaching heads having a stronger voice than representatives from the smaller schools.

- The initiative for forming executive headships in Cornwall had generally come from the schools themselves rather than from the local authority. However, the local authority provided advice and support for governors and a structure for implementation, including a review after three years. Federation was not proposed as an option during this period, though schools might choose it thereafter.
- Executive headships introduced some savings at schools level but might also have additional costs; the net balance did not represent an overall cost reduction to the local authority, as the schools retained separate budgets. The local authority view was that the rationale for executive headship should not be to reduce costs but to make the best use of leadership expertise.
- The local authority recognised the importance of consulting all stakeholders, including parents. Parents' views were generally taken into account through discussion with parent governors. Parents sometimes perceived that executive headship created time for leadership at the expense of the quality of teaching. They often needed to be convinced of its benefits.

Small schools in Cornwall

At the time of the study, Cornwall defined a small school as one with 150 pupils or fewer; a very small school had fifty pupils or fewer. Using this definition, virtually all Cornish primary schools were small. Cornwall also had many schools with surplus places and inadequate school buildings. Fifty per cent of headteachers in Cornwall were over fifty and twenty-five percent were over fifty-five. Many small schools had found it difficult to recruit headteachers, especially latterly.

Local authority support for collaboration

Small schools were encouraged to join together in small 'clusters' and local authority grants were given in response to action plans which they submitted²¹. Clusters varied in size from two upwards and nearly all small schools belonged to one. These arrangements had been in place for about twenty years; the groupings were very flexible, and schools occasionally chose to move from one cluster to another. The LA view was that decisions about groupings were best taken locally, and the system had served Cornwall well. Cluster activities varied greatly, but generally involved joint pupil activities and common professional development. Some clusters had very advanced collaborative arrangements, for example, sharing subject leaders or administrative staff. Clusters were able to purchase LA adviser support collectively, for example on-site training, and this was common.

The LA also had a 'network' organisation: networks were groups of schools based on area primary schools and the high schools they feed. They were larger groupings and more cumbersome. They had been less instrumental in bringing about change than clusters. However, networks were used to promote some collaborative arrangements, for example the teaching of modern foreign languages or the provision of extended services.

²¹ In February 2009 the research team was informed that, from April 2009, grants to support small school clusters would be withdrawn.

Succession planning and leadership development

The local authority sought to identify potential school leaders early in their careers and to encourage and inform them about a range of alternative forms of leadership.

For example, a large conference was held in the summer term 2008 for aspirant leaders and governors. This included a workshop on alternative forms of leadership run by an executive headteacher. This was to be followed by a training session on school leadership for governors to be held termly in each area.

In response to the challenges identified, the local authority had consulted with headteachers and governors in local network groups to create its Primary Strategy for Change. Each network produced hypothetical plans for their local area during a visioning day in May 2008. The plans for the Lizard area (where the sample schools were sited) included the federation of existing small schools or the closure of all ten schools and the building of a new three to sixteen school on a vacant central site.

Formal collaborations and management partnerships

Initiatives for executive headship, where two schools were led by one headteacher, had generally come from the schools themselves. The local authority supported the idea where it emerged; a designated officer met with the governing bodies to explore the idea with them and advise on the process. The local authority also advised on possible partners for executive headship if one was sought. Parents were involved, normally through the parent governors. It was unusual for governors to see executive headship as a first option; most liked to advertise for a head as their first strategy for filling a vacancy.

Executive headships were for a three year period initially; the local authority considered they needed to be allowed a trial period in order to test their resilience. During this time schools had separate governing bodies and could decide to revert to separate headteachers. If the executive headship was successful they could work towards federation or amalgamation. If they federated they would continue to have two separate school budgets but governance would be by a single governing body. If they amalgamated, the two schools would become one, with a single budget. However, in the one recent example which had opted for this solution, the amalgamated school would remain on two sites and communities would retain their local provision. Executive headships have been formed between schools of varying sizes and between Church of England and community schools. The local authority also encouraged federation between schools of different phases.

It was the local authority's view that executive headships did not reduce surplus places or create opportunities for reducing funding; the aim was that they were able to provide a higher quality of leadership. They also offered new career opportunities for other members of staff to develop their leadership, since a member of staff in each school was identified to deal with the day-to-day management when the headteacher was elsewhere.

There were many benefits to executive headship arrangements. The most obvious was that they provided a way of filling headship vacancies and therefore of keeping small schools open. That was vitally important to rural communities which had small schools at their heart. The local authority vision was that small schools should remain open because communities needed them. But the schools had to be effective; there was no support for ineffective schools. Also, if a school declined significantly in size, closure became an option.

There were a number of obstacles to be overcome.

- Governors and parents needed to be persuaded; the professionals could see the logic, but members of the community saw things from another perspective. The local authority had learned the importance of taking account of parents' views; the officer noted that "it is very hard to repair the loss of faith in a school". The local authority tended to see shared headship as a leadership and management solution; for parents, however, it was mainly a teaching and learning issue - that is, they were primarily concerned with the quality of teaching which their children were receiving. Some headteachers also saw it that way, and had turned down the opportunity for shared headship because they valued their personal teaching role.
- There was no additional financial incentive beyond a transitional grant of £5000, which released headteachers to plan for the new executive headship arrangement. In one instance, the local authority funded the redundancy of a headteacher to enable an executive headship to be established. However, the recent phasing out of small school adjustment within the funding formula had reduced small school budgets and made executive headship financially attractive. However, the opportunity to save money by sharing a head was not, from the local authority point of view, the main motive; in any case, the savings were partly offset by additional costs, for example increased staff salaries and travel costs between sites.
- The church status of many primary schools was also a potential barrier. The diocesan policy was that executive headship should only occur between a church school and a community school if 'Christian leadership' was maintained. Given the high proportion of church schools, there was a danger that this might limit choice and diversity.

Sources of information:

- *Interview with a Local Authority Officer with responsibility for leadership and management including succession planning, 21st November 2008.*
- *Interview with Local Authority Adviser with responsibility for small schools, 25th November 2008.*
- *Documentation provided by the local authority.*

The view of the Anglican Diocese of Truro

Summary of main points:

- The diocese recognised that it has a role in long-term strategic planning, in partnership with the local authority, for possible formal collaborations between schools; this needed to be done before the relevant headships become vacant.
- The diocese had no problem with formal collaboration between church and non-church schools as long as Christian leadership was maintained. It was recognised that this stance might have equal opportunities implications for future headship appointments if these were to be limited only to those who are practising Christians.
- There was a role for the diocese in educating both foundation governors and the wider community about alternative forms of school leadership.
- Locally, vicars often had experience of linking disparate communities within their parish and were able to be key supporters of executive headteachers who were linking two or more schools.

The diocese of Truro was enthusiastic about collaboration between small schools and, on the Isles of Scilly, had direct experience of a federation of five schools led by one headteacher.

The director considered it to be essential to plan strategically for the development of federated schools (with a single governing body) rather than just executive headships. Working closely with the local authority, she wished to assess where collaborations might naturally take place before headships became vacant. She said that there is a need for “doing it differently, otherwise events will overtake us”.

There were many small church schools in the county; federation between church and community schools would be acceptable to the diocese as long as Christian leadership was ensured. For example, a large church primary (400+ pupils) was collaborating with a small rural school even though there was little financial advantage for the school to do so. Governor anxiety about this executive headship had been based around the question “how will we be sure we’ll get our fair share of time?” It had been important to promote the idea of a multi-base head rather than an outreach head.

The diocese had a role in working with foundation governors, parishes, priests and parochial church councils (PCCs) to educate them about alternative school leadership models. They needed, she said, to “sow the seed” with new governors and then be “really brave” in promoting change. In order to convince people, it would be important to have successful case studies within the county as exemplars. Local vicars who were accustomed to pulling various communities together could be key players here.

The diocesan director of education felt that consultation had its place but communities lost heart if findings were not acted upon swiftly. There was a fine balance between consultation and decisive action. For example, a church school had closed recently, but fears about the ‘death of the community’ had been unfounded. The director felt that “it might be painful at the time, but people move on quickly”. Already, many families travelled to schools other than their local school in order to access extended services.

Source of information:

- *Interview with the Director of Education, Diocese of Truro, 25th November 2008.*

School Case Studies

Garras Primary and St Martin-in-Meneage Primary Schools

Main points:

- There were many benefits in executive headship arrangements: wider learning opportunities for children, access to a larger ‘talent pool’ of staff, improved professional development, and a clearer focus on strategic leadership.
- The drive for formal collaboration could often come from the headteachers themselves.
- Parents’ perceptions of collaboration (even if inaccurate) had to be taken into account. No school, particularly a small rural school, could afford to lose the confidence of its parents. Any dilution of the quality of teaching following executive headship was likely to undermine the credibility of the collaboration.

- Formal collaboration produced efficiency savings in terms of more effective use of resources, both human and material, and more secure financial planning. This did not imply that there were savings to be made in the schools' overall budgets.

Population and context

Garras and St Martin-in-Meneage schools worked in close partnership and have had an executive headteacher since September 2008.

Garras Primary School currently had twelve pupils, of whom ten were boys. This represented a recent decline in numbers during the recent temporary shared headship arrangement with Manaccan Primary School (see 'Executive headship' section below); previously the number on roll was forty-one. On entry, children's attainment was broadly average in that they arrived at school with a range of language, mathematical and social skills. The school was situated in an area of outstanding natural beauty close to the Lizard Peninsula where many visit and purchase second homes, though the local population had a high level of deprivation. The distinctive dispersed settlement pattern on the Lizard reflected the special economic history of farming, fishing, mining and quarrying. Families lived in a mixture of privately owned and rented houses and farms. House prices were high and this deterred many local people with young families from buying in the area.

St Martin-in-Meneage Primary School currently had forty-two pupils; there were more boys than girls, though the imbalance was less pronounced than at Garras. On entry, children's attainment was broadly average, with year cohorts varying in terms of developmental level, the proportion of summer born children and gender. The school served a close-knit rural community in an area of outstanding natural beauty close to the Helford River. About a third of the children came from farming families and several generations of these families had been educated at the school.

Standards and quality of provision

The schools were well staffed, had been recently endorsed by Ofsted and had a positive vision. The educational outcomes for children were good. At Garras, an analysis of recent performance data demonstrated that children did better than the national average in reading, writing and mathematics by the time children left the school and that, allowing for variations within small cohort sizes, overall progress was good. The picture was similar at St Martin school. The average point scores over the past few years showed the school consistently achieving above the national average in all core subjects. Progress using contextual value added measures was generally good, though variable from year to year because of small cohorts. Both schools had been successful before linking, and remained so, but children's learning opportunities had been widened. Each school, the head commented, preserved what small schools did best – the quality of individual care and the ethos of belonging - but they were now more outward-looking.

Leadership and management

The headteacher was experienced and had been head at Garras for a number of years. The executive partnership with St Martin followed the retirement of the St Martin headteacher, though the link had been planned for some time. Currently the executive head divided her time equally between the two schools and did not have a class teaching commitment. The executive headship arrangement had afforded the teaching staff of both schools new opportunities for leadership which had not been open to them when the schools were led separately.

Buildings, resources and staffing

The building and facilities at Garras were generally fit for purpose, though the youngest children had no covered area for outside activities in poor weather. At St Martin, facilities were also reasonably spacious for the size of school, though classes were housed in elderly temporary classrooms. The old building had a small hall where assemblies, drama, dance, music and gymnastics were taught. This was also the dining room and there was another mobile classroom which was used for music tuition, meetings and by the under-fives group. Both schools were adequately resourced for their size and the executive partnership, though still at an early stage, was allowing some value for money rationalisation. This included, for example, some joint procurement and holding resources in common. At Garras, staffing was currently generous due to the recent decline in the school roll. In addition to the executive head, there was one full-time and two part-time teachers, together with a part-time HLTA.

At St Martin the teaching staff had a range of specialist interests. Additional specialist teachers or instructors were employed for certain subjects, giving pupils experience of both male and female teachers. Teachers were well supported by a small team of teaching assistants. The part-time school secretary worked in both schools, as did the school bursar, thus reducing the overall administrative workload.

Extended Services

A range of additional extra-curricular opportunities was provided, some with the support of the sports partnership. Community use of the school at Garras had diminished recently as clubs had run out of funding. One member of staff had the parent support qualification. Services not provided were signposted through the SKILL (South Kerrier Initiative for Linking Learning) extended schools network (see Appendix 8). Membership of the SKILL initiative had, the head said, been a positive experience. It provided very effective support for heads: opportunities to collaborate, to share good practice and to visit one another's schools. The regular briefing sheets, she felt, offered a useful source of important information. Pupils benefited from many additional opportunities including outdoor pursuits and gifted and talented classes. There was no provision, beyond the clubs, for after-school care, and little demand for it - the answer to extended services, the head commented, tended to be extended families.

The local pre-school was based on the Garras site and five children would be moving through to the school in September 2009. This would improve the school's roll and make a contribution to its recovery.

Future priorities

The two schools would continue to work as one, the head said, in order to further improve provision for the children in the area. This would involve closer collaboration between the governing bodies and new opportunities for pupils, for example improving learning through a webcam link between the schools.

The maintenance of secure rolls within the year groups was seen to be vital at Garras, and the establishment of pre-school provision from last September was one strategy to attract new parents to the school. Children from the two schools would be offered more opportunities for working and playing together. One key priority was to encourage even more children to learn an instrument, bringing the music provision at Garras up to the same high standard as at St Martin. A key priority at St Martin was to raise the profile of multi-cultural education by giving pupils a broader range of experiences which would equip them to live in an ethnically diverse society.

Executive headship

The headteacher has been in post at Garras school for eleven years. During that time she had established a personal and professional friendship with the head of St Martin school. Over a long period of time they had informal discussions about the possibility of formalising the close collaboration which they had built up. This was largely in response to their perception that the job of a small school headteacher was “becoming completely unsustainable” as a result of the increasing workload. “When you are teaching three or even four days a week, it means that office work has to be done at the end of the school day”, the head commented; “you just reach a point where you can’t do it any more”.

The plans for formalising the collaboration were laid carefully, informed both by professional literature and by visiting schools in another local authority. The headteachers’ thinking was openly shared with the governing bodies of the two schools, and appeared regularly on the agendas of their meetings. The local authority was involved, approved the idea and offered support for its implementation. So when the headteacher of St Martin School retired in the summer of 2008 there was strong all-round support from both governing bodies, and from the local authority, for the scheme whereby the head of Garras would become executive head of both schools for a three year trial period. It was felt from the beginning, the head reported, to be “definitely the best option” with both schools, especially St Martin, having much to gain.

In the meantime, an unplanned eventuality intervened. The headteacher of another nearby primary school (Manaccan) fell ill and was expected to be absent for a lengthy period. The head of Garras was asked, at short notice, to take on this school for the autumn term 2007 in addition to her own. The governors agreed, but the situation swiftly deteriorated shortly after the new arrangements began. The key point at issue was the cover provided for the Garras headteacher’s class. Because this was organised at short notice, it was only possible to engage a number of supply teachers, at least in the short term. Although their teaching was at least satisfactory, continuity was interrupted and parents’ confidence in the school was undermined. This was particularly so when the chair of governors resigned, and removed her children from the school. Her action was followed by other parents, and the school roll fell from 41 to 12 (where it still stands). It was clear, in retrospect, that the community felt that it had been misled about the impact of the plans for collaboration, though at the time “no-one could have predicted the level of dissent”. This experience knocked the planned executive headship between Garras and St Martin off-balance, but it did not prevent it.

School perceptions of benefits and barriers to collaboration

The key benefit of executive headship was the time it created for school development. Headship was “not just about sustaining what you’ve got, it’s about moving the school on”, the head commented. Significant time was needed to provide leadership in a school, whatever its size; the executive headship enabled the headteacher to prioritise this as part of her work. The current arrangement created space for proper planning, rather than simply responding to outside pressures.

There were also clear efficiency gains. Although the executive headship between Garras and St Martin was relatively new, the advantages were already being felt and the head noted that “we are starting to function as one unit”. For example, she noted, “when we take the children swimming, we need one bus not two; teaching can be done by one swimming instructor not two”. The schools had joint trips, for example to an archaeological dig, and a joint Christmas production, to be performed in both village churches. Key Stage 1 physical education lessons were held weekly for children of both schools together. Specific teaching and learning needs could be addressed together, for example with regard to gender issues (there are very few girls, particularly at Garras) or Year 6 transition to secondary school.

The schools were “growing together” and providing new opportunities for professional development. The head believed that teachers in small schools “really value collaboration” and “tend to be very collegiate people”. Each school had an assistant head, who “has to make decisions when you’re not there”. She noted that this “changes their whole mindset” and provided them with real opportunities to exercise leadership. “You can see a real difference in confidence”, she pointed out. It had also put them on the leadership spine for the first time, “giving them a career path and a purpose”.

The link had also provided other opportunities for distributed leadership - for example, the HLTAs at one site have inspired the TAs at the other site to seek the higher level qualification. Joint INSET meetings held in each school had, the head says, “improved the cross-fertilisation of ideas” and enabled better sharing of specialist skills. One part-time secretary worked on both sites, and the schools shared the same school improvement partner, the same bursar, the same local financial support technician and the same clerk. The newly qualified teacher at one school was mentored by a teacher (the assistant head) at the other.

All in all, to the benefit of both schools, the head believed that “it has produced a much flatter management system”, and utilised the skills of a much larger group of professionals than is available to a single school.

School perceptions of attitudes of parents and the community

Some hard lessons had been learned from the Garras experience and, the head admitted, “mistakes were made”. It was a reminder, she added, that “we have to keep our parents sweet”, as success in a small school depended wholly on ensuring that parents are on your side. Because, in her words, “people are very protective of their local communities”, there was a need to keep parents informed every step of the way. This meant taking plans for change to parents for formal consultation. Many parents were suspicious of change and assessed it in relation to the immediate impact on their children. This needed to be recognised in every action (for example, being very careful about the nuances of the language used, avoiding the unguarded use of terms like “my school” or “my children”). There was also much to learn about “joining communities” from the experience of the Church of England, she commented, which had faced similar issues when uniting the ministries of neighbouring parishes.

Sources of information:

:

- *Interview with the executive headteacher, Garras Primary and St Martin-in-Meneage Primary Schools, Garras chair of governors and St Martin chair of governors, 25th November 2008.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and researched online.*

Further areas of potential collaboration that emerged from the study of Garras and St Martin-in Meneage Primary Schools

The following models were discussed during a second interview with the executive headteacher. (See Appendix 5)

Main points:

- Executive headship of three schools would be possible but would raise some challenging practical issues.

- Although governors had not looked beyond the pilot, they did not anticipate federation of the two schools as a long term outcome.
- It was important that those who took on executive headship had a clear vision of what they expected to achieve in the medium to long term, and that they shared this plan with governors, parents and the wider community.
- Executive heads could also be prone to isolation, so membership of wider support networks remained important.
- Formal collaboration had an impact on school improvement through, for example, the pooling of resources and staff expertise and through broadening training opportunities.

Executive headship in more than two schools

The headteacher had experience of two executive headship arrangements, firstly between Garras, her original school, and Manaccan (as an interim measure) and subsequently between Garras and St Martin as a three year pilot. Given these experiences, she felt that a shared headship of three schools could work, given the right circumstances and staffing. There would, however, be some significant practical difficulties to overcome, for example, how to split the headteacher's time equitably between the three schools and how to minimise the time lost in travelling between sites. The main challenge would be to gain the confidence of the three communities, together with their governors, staff and parents.

Sustaining the executive headship in the longer term

The headteacher believed that the three-year executive headship pilot had 'saved' both schools for the time being, but that governors had given little thought to how the arrangement might continue beyond the trial period. Current indications were that neither set of governors would consider the development of a 'hard' federation, as they had little information about what advantages this might bestow.

Although no formal plan had been drawn up, the headteacher had a clear vision of what she wanted to achieve by the end of the three year period. She intended that the partnership of the two schools would be firmly established and that the benefits of the executive headship would be apparent to all, and particularly to parents and governors in both communities. Resources, expertise and training would be shared between the schools. The budgets would be rationalised to take account of the loss of the small school grant so that the schools would be financially secure. The assistant headteacher would receive training in order to ensure that leadership was effective. Other staff including support staff would have leadership responsibilities.

School improvement and the impact of the executive headship

The headteacher believed that executive headship was having a noticeable effect on school improvement. Above all it provided the time for leadership and reflection that were denied to the head of a single small school. Collaborative activities were easier to arrange: consequently, there were wider opportunities for pupils' learning and for staff professional development. Good practice could be more easily spread from one school to the other and new initiatives tried with more staff than would be possible in one school. In short, the headteacher believed that the benefits of executive headship were substantial, for the school, its pupils and staff. It provided her with greater professional satisfaction and a significantly better work-life balance.

Landewednack Community Primary School

Main points:

- Landewednack was a successful school that was financially secure, at least in the short-to-medium term. It was able to support three classes and a headteacher with a relatively light teaching commitment.
- Informal collaboration served the school and its pupils and staff well, through the close links with Grade Ruan Primary School, the Lizard cluster and the SKILL network.
- The school provided the core offer for extended services.
- Against this background, there was currently no motivation for considering formal collaboration, although the headteacher acknowledged that this might be necessary in the future in order to ensure the school's survival.

Population and context

The school provided for children from four to eleven years old in the main school, and for children aged two to four in attached childcare provision. The school had seventy-five pupils on roll, organised into three classes. The proportion of pupils taking free school meals was broadly average as was the overall percentage of pupils with special educational needs, although the number of children with statements was well above average.

Pupils came from Lizard village and other surrounding small villages. The catchment was reported as being the twenty-fifth most deprived parish in Cornwall. There was a large amount of seasonal employment and many families existed within a low wage economy. Although the school was not a denominational school, it had strong links with the local church and chapel.

Standards and quality of provision

Landewednack was reported by Ofsted (November 2008) to be a good school. Small cohorts (usually fewer than twelve) provided wide variations in attainment from year to year depending on the composition of each year group, but generally standards at the end of Year 6 were above the national average and pupils made good progress. Recent school data indicated that standards in writing were lower than in reading and mathematics.

Leadership and management

The headteacher has been at the school for a number of years, as teacher, acting head on two occasions and as substantive headteacher for the last eight years. The school had a large budgetary surplus (nearly twenty per cent was carried forward in March 2008) due to an underspend on the money allocated for the new school library. This had enabled the reduction of the headteacher's teaching commitment from two-and-a-half to one-and-a-half days and would provide additional funding for further improvements to the school site, for example a fitness trail.

The headteacher considered that her biggest challenge was the lack of time to fulfil her responsibilities and the consequent poor work-life balance that she experienced. She felt three main pressures on her time: her class teaching commitment, the considerable number of additional opportunities the school provided for its pupils and the management of the Children's Centre as well as the school. A further significant factor was the small number of staff to whom she was able to delegate responsibilities. She was also frustrated by the bureaucracy she encountered in dealing with simple matters, for example the repair of a broken window.

Buildings, resources and staffing

The school had three adequately sized classrooms, a new school library, a large community sports hall and a purpose built Children's Centre. It also had a school playing field and a small playground around the main buildings. The school was well resourced and did not need to borrow from other schools.

The school had 3.7 full time equivalent (FTE) teachers including the headteacher; only the head and one other member of staff were full-time. The school had no deputy or teaching and learning responsibility (TLR) post although several teachers were very experienced. Teachers had designated responsibilities for the core subjects and for ICT, PE and music.

The teaching staff complement was stable; no teacher had left or joined the school in the last two years. Teachers worked hard and contributed much to the school but none had expressed any intention to seek promotion. This made it difficult for the headteacher to allocate additional roles to them and significantly increased her workload. For example, she was the school's coordinator for both special educational needs and gifted and talented pupils.

With the exception of French, which had not been provided until recently, teachers were able to cover all areas of the curriculum competently. There were particular strengths in ICT that the headteacher felt could be of benefit to other schools. Staff had ready access to professional development opportunities, but the necessity to attend compulsory training meant that there was rarely any time for anything more.

The school had good levels of administrative support from the bought-in bursar, the office manager (21 hours), IT support (5 hours) and administration of the Little Lizard Children's Centre (2.5 hours). There were also 2.9 FTE teaching assistants. The Children's Centre was staffed by 1.5 FTE nursery assistants.

Extended Services

During her time at the school, the headteacher had been very influential in the development of its facilities, including the community sports hall and the childcare facility.

The school provided the full extended services core offer through its on-site Children's Centre, with childcare available from eight to six o'clock for fifty weeks of the year. Other services were 'signposted' through the extended schools co-ordinator who was based at Helston Secondary School. The community sports hall was used by local clubs and community groups.

These developments had been initiated by the headteacher and funded through a series of grants she had obtained from different sources. No financial support had been received from the local authority or SKILL network. The headteacher had also arranged for the Lizard Outreach Trust minibus to be based at the school; she also handled its bookings, which gave Landewednack ready access to the minibus.

The school had established many partnerships within the local community and with other organisations including the National Trust, the Maja Tham Trust and the Cornwall Children's Fund. The head noted that pupils had benefited from these links through a wide range of additional learning opportunities both in and out of school.

Future priorities

The school aimed to continue to raise standards in the core subjects through such strategies as the development of APP (Assessing Pupil Progress) and the improved use of targeted intervention programmes. It also intended to develop further the Children's Centre services. Other priorities included the improvement of the external environment and the review of provision for pupils with special educational needs.

The school was also strengthening its links with the SKILL network in order to take better advantage of the opportunities it offers.

Current collaboration

The headteacher was a strong advocate of informal collaboration because of the benefits for pupils, for example, the way in which collaborative projects had enriched the curriculum. They were, she commented, opportunities that the school could not have afforded if working alone, and had enabled pupils from different schools to mix before transferring to secondary school. She also placed a high value on the mutual support that arose from informal links at headship level, particularly in the absence of senior management teams, which enabled heads to discuss issues they felt unable to raise with the local authority, staff or governors. Much of this activity had been developed in partnership with the neighbouring school at Grade Ruan, largely through the close and mutually supportive personal relationship that has been developed between the two headteachers.

The school has participated in other collaborative ventures that have been organised through the SKILL initiative into which the school pays £500 per annum. These have included training on such topics as assessment for learning, courses for governors and activities for pupils including gifted and talented master classes. Recently, Landewednack and Grade Ruan secured SKILL funding of £5000 for a highly successful multicultural arts week (art, music and story telling) that has led to the formation of an after school samba club for parents and pupils in the two schools.

The headteacher is a member of the SKILL extended services management committee which she has found useful in being able to meet with professionals from housing, police and health services.

Prior to the inception of SKILL, the local Lizard headteachers had their own cluster support network. This group was now re-forming and had met recently to write some policy documents for individual schools to amend and adopt. Pupils at Landewednack also benefited from the many activities and events that the Sports Partnership provided to local schools.

School perceptions of benefits and barriers to collaboration

Whilst the headteacher was enthusiastic about the benefits of collaborative activities for staff and pupils, she was concerned over the time taken to organise them and over the prohibitive transport costs. She hoped that the SKILL coordinator would take on more of the responsibility and organisation to lighten the load on individual headteachers.

Looking to the future, the head doubted whether an executive headship would be appropriate for Landewednack, particularly given the negative experience of a neighbouring school (Garras). She and governors believed that Landewednack met the extended schools agenda well, worked effectively within the SKILL network to the benefit of its pupils and staff and was large enough to survive as a single school. Nor was there any financial imperative to consider other models of leadership at this time. The budget was healthy and should be able to maintain the present structure, despite the loss of the local small schools grant.

The headteacher believed that executive headship raised many issues that needed careful handling. For example, she said, the communities served by Landewednack and Grade Ruan schools had significant differences. Popular perception was that Landewednack was the 'poor relation' of the two. Furthermore, it might be that neither of the incumbent headteachers would be the right person to become executive headteacher. Personally, she felt she did not have the capacity to take on such a role.

School perceptions of attitudes of parents and the community

The headteacher reported that the governing body was very committed to the current forms of informal collaboration because they could see beneficial outcomes for pupils. She believed that governors were enthusiastic about belonging to the SKILL network because they felt that the training courses it provided for governors enabled them to understand the wider educational picture. In turn, this would help to ensure that they were able to secure the long term independence of Landewednack Primary School.

Governors had been part of the local area consultation with the LA that focused on how the Primary Strategy for Change could be implemented in the local region. The proposal to close all schools in the Lizard area and build a new all-through school instead was firmly rejected by governors, who were adamant that Landewednack must retain its own school as the focus of educational and community services. They viewed formal collaboration as weakening this position and a prelude to amalgamation or closure. Their vision for the school was to develop further as a community centre for families and pupils with professionals from health and social services appointed specifically to the Lizard area.

Sources of information:

- *Interview with the headteacher, Landewednack Community Primary School, 4th December 2008.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and researched online.*

Grade Ruan CoE Primary School

Main points:

- The school was currently self-sufficient with three classes, a good reputation and a headteacher who currently taught for one-and-a-half days a week. However, this equilibrium could be lost if the school roll declined (for example, if the local emergency housing situation changed).
- Collaboration has been used effectively to enrich the curriculum for pupils in and out of school hours but there was no impetus to seek more formal arrangements with other schools.
- The denominational character of the school (voluntary controlled Church of England) would need to be taken into consideration when undertaking federation with a community school.
- The school was meeting its obligations for extended services through the 'signposting' of opportunities that are available at Landewednack.

Population and context

The school had seventy-five children aged four to eleven on roll, organised into three classes. The proportion of pupils taking free school meals was broadly average but has increased rapidly over recent years. A higher than average proportion of pupils had special educational needs and pupil mobility was also above the national average. Approximately a quarter of pupils were living in temporary accommodation.

Pupils came mainly from the village, and most had attended the local pre-school before entering Grade Ruan School. Parents were engaged in a variety of work including farm work, manual labour, small businesses and the professions. There was some unemployment. A number of families were migrant workers from different parts of Europe. This was not evident from school-level data on pupil ethnicity, probably due to the transitory nature of the families. The school had strong links with the church as a voluntary controlled Church of England school.

Standards and quality of provision

The Ofsted inspection of 2006 found Grade Ruan a confident and successful school, highly regarded by its community, where pupils achieved well and made good progress. Pupils' attainment on entry was broadly in line with the national age-related expectations for children of this age, although the small size of cohorts meant that performance data varied widely from year to year. By the time pupils left the school at the end of Year 6, standards were consistently above average in the core subjects.

Leadership and management

The headteacher was in her fifth year at the school with a current teaching commitment of one-and-a-half days a week. Her leadership and the team work with governors and staff were highlighted as strengths of the school by Ofsted in 2006.

The school had a tight budget with a carry forward for 2008-09 of 1.6 per cent. This would be exacerbated by the withdrawal of the local small schools grant over the next three years. The headteacher was confident that she could manage this diminishing budget through the retirement of staff, the loss of the TLR allowance and the additional funding that the school would receive when a teacher became an advanced skills teacher (AST). She believed that the school would continue to be financially viable within its current structure and that there were no financial incentives, therefore, for more formal collaboration. However, she was aware that her own workload could increase substantially when the TLR teacher left and if the reduced budget required her to take on a higher class teaching commitment.

The headteacher considered that her major challenge as leader of a small school was the lack of time and energy to fulfil the different responsibilities to the extent that she would like. Factors such as balancing the teaching commitment with leadership responsibilities, and the lack of senior staff with whom she could share her thinking, contributed significantly to this situation.

The range of out-of-school and enrichment activities made further demands on her time. Additional tasks included writing bids, organising the events themselves and encouraging families to participate (for example by providing transport after clubs). Additional energy, motivation and drive were required in order to sustain collaborative activities once they have been set up.

Buildings, resources and staffing

The school had adequate accommodation although some parts needed refurbishment. The original nineteenth century building housed the ICT suite, the junior library and one classroom. Other classes were taught in a separate block with its own toilets and cloakrooms. A modern extension provided a staff room and office accommodation. The school had a large hall that was opened in 2005 following local fund raising. There was a hard area outside with markings for various activities and an activity playhouse for younger children. The school used the village recreation field across the adjacent lane and a local meadow for environmental and outdoor education. The school felt that it is well resourced with the exception of ICT which needed upgrading. There was no recent sharing of staff or resources with other schools.

The school had 4.0 FTE teachers including the headteacher but no deputy or senior teacher, although the early years teacher was shortly to become an advanced skills teacher (AST). The school also had 2.6 FTE teaching assistants, and adequate levels of administrative support including an efficient bought-in bursar.

The small number of teachers and the large number of responsibilities that needed to be taken on added considerably to the headteacher's workload. It was for this reason that she had decided that the school would not appoint another newly qualified teacher when the next vacancy occurs. She also found that developing high quality subject leadership was very difficult in a small school. For example, she felt that ICT had suffered because there was no member of staff with appropriate expertise.

In the head's view, the reduction of classes to three several years ago - resulting in a wider age range in teaching groups and fewer staff to take on responsibilities - had contributed to a fall in standards.

Extended Services

Other than a wide range of after-school clubs, the school was unable to provide the core offer for extended services, having found little demand from parents. Instead governors had taken the decision to signpost parents to the year-round childcare facilities that were available at Landewednack Primary School five miles away.

Future priorities

Priorities for the school this year included the development of subject leadership, the induction of the NQT and a thorough overhaul of ICT following the appointment of an experienced technician. Ongoing priorities included raising standards in writing, particularly for boys, and further maintenance and refurbishment of the buildings.

Current collaborations

The school has established strong partnerships with many external organizations and agencies. These included the local secondary school at Mullion, the SKILL network, the local South Lizard cluster, Penryn Sports College, local churches, School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT), Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), local colleges, Duchy Ballet, Family Learning and the Cornwall Children's Fund. Many of these provided additional learning experiences for pupils while others provided staff training opportunities.

The school is part of the SKILL (South Kerrier Initiative for Linking Learning) Extended Schools and Community Change Project. The headteacher welcomed the fact that the newly appointed co-ordinator was recently a small school head but would like it clarified who has

the authority to decide what monies are spent. She was concerned about the dominance of large school headteachers on the network group; she also felt that the briefing papers were over-elaborate and added to her workload rather than reduced it.

There was a good deal of informal collaboration with the neighbouring school of Landewednack that had stemmed from the close and supportive relationship between the two headteachers. The main focus has been to provide joint events and opportunities to enrich the curriculum and widen pupils' experience. These have included the Purcell Outreach Project which subsidised instrumental tuition in each school and provided visiting musicians, and a grant of £5000 from the SKILL network for a multicultural arts week. The two schools have also shared some documents, for example their travel plans.

School perceptions of benefits and barriers to collaboration

Despite the many pressures, the headteacher believed that Grade Ruan is large enough to remain independent of a formal collaborative arrangement at this time, but argued strongly that it was essential for her wellbeing and effective functioning to belong to a good support network. To this end, she has been a prime mover in re-establishing the Lizard cluster of local primary schools which had ceased with the development of the SKILL network. The group planned to hold termly meetings and organise inter-school visits.

However, a major problem for collaborative initiatives was that of transporting children to activities. A collaborative bid with two other schools for a project for the Polish children was obtained in 2006, but did not go ahead as it was not possible to secure the necessary taxi and minibus transport to bring children from other schools to Grade Ruan.

Collaboration between Landewednack and Grade Ruan has benefited the curriculum and provided mutual support for the two headteachers, but the head believed that the current success of each school and the prevalent attitudes of governors and parents were barriers to closer collaboration. Partnership with external agencies was deemed outstanding by Ofsted (2006) because of the way in which it enhanced and enriched the curriculum. Against this background, the headteacher felt there was little incentive for significant change, although she recognised that a sizeable fall in numbers, for example, if the temporary housing facility closed, could seriously threaten the school's sustainability.

Although she did not believe that executive headship was appropriate for the school at present, the headteacher felt that this model could provide an effective means to help resolve the major challenge for small schools, that of ensuring that headteachers were able to fulfil all their roles. She felt that executive headship was ultimately inevitable, but that there were too many barriers for it to happen in the next two to three years. These included her own wish not to take on the position. She also felt that the strong and distinct identities of two communities, and adverse staff, parent and governor attitudes towards formal links would act as potential barriers. Grade Ruan had gained children from Garras because of parental reaction to the former executive headship arrangement there (that is, with Manaccan). It was clear, she noted, that the Garras pilot had had repercussions across the Lizard.

School perceptions of attitudes of parents and the community

The headteacher reported that community feeling, including that of the governors, was very strongly in favour of retaining one headteacher in each school. Governors had attended network meetings at which various proposals for the future organisation of schools was discussed but had remained committed to the school being self-sufficient.

The headteacher also believed that the experience at Garras was widely known amongst parents and the wider community and that it had influenced people's views against such a model locally.

Sources of information:

- *Interview with the headteacher of Grade Ruan CoE Primary School, 5th December 2008.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and researched online.*

Further areas of potential collaboration that emerged from the study of Landewednack and Grade Ruan Primary Schools

Landewednack and Grade Ruan had a long history of collaboration that had provided mutual support for the two headteachers and curriculum enhancement for both schools. Both headteachers were keen to develop "sustainable ways of working" which would improve their wellbeing and effectiveness. The following models were developed through a joint second meeting between the researcher and both headteachers. (See Appendix 5 for structure).

Commonalities between Landewednack and Grade Ruan Primary Schools

Each school was of similar size and organisation, including the head's teaching commitment. Each had a similar philosophy with a strong belief in its role at 'the heart of the local community' and in the benefits of collaboration at informal level. Each served a community in which there is an unusual amount of seasonal, low paid employment and in which pupil mobility is above average. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs was also above average. Each school offered a significantly enriched curriculum through partnerships with other agencies. Current priorities in each school included writing, subject leadership and aspects of assessment.

Differences

There were differences in the schools' status: Grade Ruan was CoE voluntary controlled, Landewednack a community school. Landewednack provided the core extended services on site, while Grade Ruan provided only after-school clubs. Another significant difference was in the current financial situation of the schools: Grade Ruan had a higher wage bill, due to current staff being very experienced and its viability might also be further threatened if the local temporary housing were to close. ICT provision was a strength in Landewednack but a priority for development in Grade Ruan following the departure of the ICT subject leader.

Shared concerns

The challenges faced by each school were largely the same, relating mainly to the workload of the headteachers, the small number of staff and the absence of other senior leaders. Both valued external support networks highly. Developing effective subject leadership was also an area of concern to both schools, as was their individual capacity to initiate and sustain collaborative activities. The pressure to maintain a broad range of extra-curricular activities further added to the considerable strain on the two headteachers.

The continued development of informal models of collaboration

The two schools had a long and productive history of working together, at headship level in particular. Although there was no perceived impetus for more formal collaboration between the schools at this time, the two headteachers were keen to extend the ways in which they collaborated in order to reduce workloads and make more efficient use of time. They had therefore decided to ask the SKILL Coordinator and other heads to widen the scope of SKILL's work and improve its support to them, for example, by making grant applications on their behalf.

The need for a good support network prompted their decision to reinstate the Lizard cluster. They anticipated that this support network could also provide opportunities to share and learn from a wider group of schools. They also agreed to strengthen informal collaboration in a number of ways. For example, in future the two headteachers intended to look for opportunities for each of their schools to lead on a different initiative and then share the learning with the other school. When appropriate, specific staff expertise would be made available to the other school. Initially, this would involve ICT which was well established in Landewednack but not at Grade Ruan. The two schools would also collaborate on aspects of assessment. Both were introducing the Assessment of Pupil Performance initiative and believed that it would be helpful to share materials and review progress together. They had agreed to share aspects of school self-evaluation with each other, for example, their self-evaluation evidence files. They also intended to exchange other policies and documents that were in development.

A priority for both schools was to improve standards of writing. The heads felt that this would be a good opportunity to work together, perhaps arranging joint training sessions and drawing up a common action plan. A further priority for each school was developing provision for gifted and talented learners - the heads were attending the same course. They therefore intended to work together by writing a common policy and action plan, and meeting regularly to review progress.

Moving towards executive headship and/or federation

The heads remained cautious about moving towards formal collaboration because of the experience of a neighbouring head at Garras. Both had been approached by the local authority to take on a second (more distant) school but had refused because of current workloads and worries stemming from the Garras experience. Besides, neither school had anyone to take on the assistant headteacher role when the head is working in the other school.

Neither headteacher wished to take on two schools as executive headteacher but such an arrangement was seen as inevitable for their two schools within the next five to ten years if each village is to retain its school. They felt that financial pressures, the difficulties of recruiting heads and the substantial workload were barriers to the continuation of the current system. Also relevant was the difficulty of recruiting teachers who were able to teach mixed-age classes effectively and who were willing to give the additional commitment that was required by successful small schools.

The heads felt that neighbouring schools were not always in the best position to collaborate formally because of local sensitivities; a link with a school some distance away, however, could work well. They also believed that other models should be considered, for example, the use of a consultant headteacher who might provide support to an inexperienced or part-time headteacher in another school for a day a week. They did not anticipate any cost benefits to executive headship because of the need to free the headteacher from a class teaching commitment, as well as the costs of upgrading the salary of the assistant headteacher in each school.

Another executive head's perspective

St Keverne and Coverack Primary Schools

St Keverne and Coverack were two schools in the Lizard cluster which, like Garras and St Martin, were linked (from September 2008) by an executive headship. The transition from separate to joint headship had been achieved successfully.

Summary of main points:

- Executive headships were felt by the headteacher to be a way of preserving small local schools and could be a useful transition to federation.
- The move to executive headship had improved the work-life balance and leadership of the headteacher, despite having two schools and related governing bodies to service. The lack of class teaching responsibility could, the head felt, make executive headship a more attractive career choice than small school teaching headships.
- The success of the St Keverne/Coverack executive headship had, in the head's view, relied upon high quality administrative support (CSBM) in both schools and "credible leadership" when the headteacher was not present.
- Opportunities had been created for leadership development of staff in both schools.
- The head and the local vicar, as a governor of both schools, hoped that more interaction and co-operation between the schools would help to pull together two different communities within one parish.
- St Keverne had the space to accommodate further extended services for the local area.

Coverack school had forty-eight pupils on roll with just one surplus place. St Keverne had declined in recent years from 120 to fifty-eight pupils. Coverack was perceived as an affluent village, the head related, and St Keverne as more disadvantaged. The schools were four miles apart.

The headteacher had been at Coverack Primary School for fifteen years. In 2007 the headteacher at the neighbouring St Keverne Primary had moved to the local authority school improvement team. A senior teacher had been asked to cover the headship, initially for two terms. The governing body had requested local authority support in arranging an executive headship and the current head had been approached. He and his governing body had agreed that it was the best way to secure the future of both schools, especially since their own headteacher expected to retire in three years time. There had been a history of collaboration between the two schools for joint governor training, staff training and pupil projects.

The executive headship of the two schools started in September 2008. The head worked in each school for two-and-a-half days each week but now only taught when he covered for absent staff. This had reduced his workload even though, with two governing bodies, he now had twice as many meetings to attend. The governing bodies had a clear intention to keep the two schools open. The vicar of St Keverne was a member of both governing bodies and his parish included both communities.

He and the headteacher hoped that more co-operation between the schools would also bring the communities closer together.

So far, the collaboration was felt to be working well because of the strength of the teaching and administrative teams in both schools and because all the governors were involved. Three experienced senior teachers led the schools when the headteacher was elsewhere and both of the secretaries had completed the CSBM training.

Although economies of scale might be possible (for example in grounds maintenance), financial savings had been minimal because of the need to replace the headteacher's teaching time and to fund teaching and learning responsibility allowances. Restricted budgets had forced the headteacher to reduce staff already at St Keverne and he feared that he could be forced back into taking on a teaching role in the future. However, he hoped that in three years time he would lead two good schools and that when he retired the executive headship would be seen as a desirable promotion and a more attractive proposition than a single headship.

As a school which is under capacity, St Keverne had space for the expansion of extended services. There was a playgroup on site but it could only afford to run in the mornings. Library services and adult education classes were also held at the school. It would, he believed, be ideally suited to development as a children's centre or 'one stop shop'. Pre-school care was provided at St Keverne and after-school care at Coverack but it was difficult for these to be self-sustaining without adequate continuation funding. With the LA in transition (a new unitary authority from April 2009) and additional small schools funding already removed, future levels of support were unclear.

Source of information:

- *Interview with the executive headteacher of St Keverne and Coverack schools, 24th November 2008.*

The way forward - strategies and hypothetical models

This section sketches hypothetical models for improving school viability and effectiveness through more formal collaboration between all or some of the four schools in the sample. The models (and the strategies for moving towards them) are informed by the following:

- The current working contexts of the schools.
- Their own analysis of their effectiveness and their development needs.
- Ideas generated during the course of interviews and discussions.
- Support which might be offered by the local authority, diocese or other agency.
- Knowledge of relevant developments, initiatives or projects, both local and national.

All figures used in these models are mid-range for the school size and do not represent actual salaries of staff in the study schools

Potential executive headships, federations or shared trusts

The Cornwall Primary Strategy for Change identified a number of potential executive headships and / or federations, based on the geographical distribution of the nine primary schools of the Lizard cluster. Among these are:

Garras and St Martin-in-Meneage;

Grade Ruan and Landewednack.

Garras and St Martin-in-Meneage

Current situation

The two schools were in the early stages of an executive headship. Staff were beginning to work across the two schools and the (separate) governing bodies were continuing to evolve ways of working together.

Model 1 - Federation between Garras and St Martin

A further development of the current executive headship arrangement would be an agreement for the governing bodies to seek federation. The key benefit would be to underline the schools' long-term commitment to working together. Shared governance would also lead to additional improvements in efficiency, with consequent reductions in workload for both governors and head.

Grade Ruan and Landewednack

There were strong existing links between the two schools. The headteachers worked together on a number of issues and supported one another. They were keen to extend this to the sharing of staff skills. The local vicar was a governor at both schools.

Model 2 - Federation: Landewednack / Grade Ruan

The two schools would retain separate heads but have a single governing body, which would facilitate increased sharing of staff (for instance, HLTA and curriculum co-ordination for ICT).

The sharing of an ICT curriculum co-ordinator and technical support would help Grade Ruan to address a key development priority. Both schools would benefit from sharing an HLTA to support provision for pupils who are gifted and talented or who have special education needs. The latter could also provide reliable class cover for both headteachers.

Model 3 - Executive Headship: Landewednack / Grade Ruan

Although there was no immediate intention to form an executive headship between Grade Ruan and Landewednack, the schools worked closely together and were paving the way for such an arrangement in the future if priorities changed. This might be triggered by a fall in the numbers on roll and consequent reductions in funding. Transition to an executive headship would be simplified if the schools were already federated.

An executive headship could provide a number of benefits, including increasing the likelihood of recruiting and sustaining high calibre leadership and improving career opportunities for other staff. It should also result in a better work-life balance because of the increased capacity for sharing responsibilities within a larger staff pool. There would also be potential gains for pupils, in terms of wider curriculum opportunities and membership of a larger social group.

Although Grade Ruan is a church school and Landewednack a community school, they both have a similar ethos and a common chair of governors in the local vicar. Preparation for their formal collaboration would need to include shared training and other development activities; diocesan involvement would be an important component. This would lead to a collective vision based on an analysis of overall strategic priorities. Time would be needed for school leaders to plan, implement and monitor this preparatory work.

Financial implications

Detailed calculations of the financial implications of the executive headship model for Cornwall can be found in Appendix 10. The following table is a summary of these findings.

Financial advantage of executive headship in Cornwall

Executive headship	Savings	Additional costs	Available for school improvement
Executive headship Landewednack/Grade Ruan	One head’s salary £53,200	Salary rise (head) £5,505 Class teacher £14,000 Assistant head £3,800	£29,650

Model 4 - Shared trust

Landewednack, Garras and St Martin would be well placed to acquire trust status. Landewednack already has a large number of external partners including the National Trust and the local Primary Care Trust (especially in relation to the Children’s Centre). All three schools have links with the local sports trust.

The Trust and Foundation Schools Partnership (TFSP) outlines the following as key benefits of a trust:

- it strengthens existing relationships by placing them on a more formal footing, helping to clarify roles and responsibilities and demonstrating long-term commitment.
- it ensures that the good practice and positive links with partners continues after the involvement of those who initiated them have ended.
- it gives the school the autonomy to decide its own admissions policy, employ staff and manage its own assets.

To acquire trust status, Landewednack would follow the process outlined in Appendix 11. This takes a minimum of fifteen weeks during which time the school would both become a foundation school and acquire trust status. This legal consultative process would be led by the governing body and headteacher and result in new instruments of government. They would apply to the TFSP, receiving £10,000 funding from the DCSF to support the legal costs and any other support required to progress the application. The TFSP would also provide two days consultant support and would act as a broker in finding suitable local partners for the trust.

Initially, Grade Ruan (as a church school) could become an associate member of the trust and, later, other schools of all phases in the Lizard area might choose to become part of a larger shared trust. A shared trust involving all Lizard schools could greatly strengthen the capacity to co-ordinate extended services throughout the peninsular. The children's centre situated at Landewednack could be a hub for the whole Lizard area, co-ordinating extended services, sharing its expertise and offering the use of its social centre and sports hall. The local Primary Care Trust could be a key partner.

Distributed leadership

Reducing the workload of the headteachers would enable them to become more effective leaders and teachers, and improve their work-life balance. The heavy workload of small school headteachers has been recognised by the local authority and diocese as a major barrier to recruitment. The development of distributed leadership to include all members of staff would help to overcome this.

The joint appointment of a HLTA for Grade Ruan and Landewednack schools would work under the direction of the headteachers in their role as special educational needs and gifted and talented co-ordinators. The appointee could, for example, organise intervention groups and provide class cover in both schools.

The appointment of a joint school business manager with CSBM training could reduce significantly the headteachers' workload in areas such as bid writing, site management and finance, and reduce the cost of buying in local authority financial support.

The SKILL co-ordinator could write bids on behalf of the Lizard schools after discussing a strategic plan with all heads.

Financial implications

Estimated annual costs (point 24) of an HLTA are £22,000 including on costs. This would be offset by savings which could be made in the supply teaching budgets of the two schools.

CSBM training - no course costs but supply and travel are paid by the school. However, a higher salary level would then need to be paid to the business manager. This could be as much as an additional £5,000 to 8,000 per annum).

Overall benefits from these two measures would include considerable improvements to the efficiency of financial and site management, together with significantly improved practices in SEN and G&T, and savings to the supply cover budget.

Staff development and building leadership capacity

Limited staff experience and expertise in some curriculum areas were reported by a number of schools. In some cases this was compounded by a lack of professional ambition or aspiration. Equally, however, there were others, including support staff, who had eagerly grasped development opportunities that were presented through collaborative arrangements. Neither Landewednack nor Grade Ruan had a deputy head or senior teacher (TLR) to share the leadership of the school.

The heads felt that it was essential that they and their staff develop an 'outward facing' view of education locally, and that they learned and benefited from one another's experience. This could be enhanced through a planned programme of inter-school visits involving staff at all levels, with follow-up debriefing within individual schools and within the cluster. The next step might be to create opportunities for staff to take on responsibilities across more than one school, providing career development and enabling two or more schools to consider their staffing needs in the context of a wider staff pool.

Groups of subject leaders across the SKILL network could attend NCSL Leading from the Middle or Leadership Pathways training. Additional leadership opportunities would be provided for the mentors that each programme requires. Middle leader training would also provide a pool of staff who might seek NPQH training in the future. Administrative staff in all schools could attend CSBM training.

The above proposals would need to be set within an agreed cluster plan for leadership development.

Financial implications

With limited budgets, time and staffing, many small schools might find the recommendations made in this section difficult to achieve. In an executive headship, however, the savings made from the headteacher's salary should enable both schools to fund the additional staff and training. There are no costs to small schools (below 100 pupils) for the NCSL programmes listed.

Benefits should be substantial in respect to improvements in staff expertise and motivation, career and professional development opportunities and recruitment and retention. Evidence from other shared headships and federations suggests that the quality of leadership, teaching and learning improves and that ultimately, standards of achievement rise.

Curriculum development

Currently, the development of the curriculum, through a range of specific projects, was an area of collaboration which was particularly strong. There was considerable scope for more systematic curriculum development to be undertaken with the other four schools from the smaller local area, or from all the schools in the Lizard cluster. This could involve shared professional training days, the development of resources, and joint working on common priorities from their school development plans (for example, writing, subject leadership).

Cluster or local working parties might be set up to enable subject leaders to work together in developing common schemes of work and policies, and, in the longer term, developing the model of one leader per subject working across two or more schools. Video conferencing would enable meetings to take place without extensive costs in time and travelling. This would help to provide a wider range of expertise, experience and resources than a single small school could command.

A virtual learning environment could be established to enable schools to share what they do best and to facilitate learning between the small year cohorts in each school. This would need LA support and a joint bid through SKILL for funding, but could be sustained using the existing ICT expertise in each area (present, for example, in Coverack, Landewednack and St Martin schools). When an experienced member of staff retired at Grade Ruan school, governors might seek to appoint a less experienced teacher with good ICT skills to work in partnership with the ICT leader at Landewednack.

Financial implications

Initially, additional time would be needed to set up some of the recommendations in this section but there are considerable efficiencies of time to be made in the longer term through the production of common documents, plans and schemes, and because these and other responsibilities are shared between a larger group of professionals than available to one school alone.

Extended services

The SKILL network has the potential to offer further support to schools, both through the wider network and the local Lizard cluster. It would be vital that a strategic, network-wide plan was agreed in order that all schools could provide the core offer and that a reasonable balance between breadth and viability was achieved.

Landewednack had the only children's centre in the study. This was well positioned to serve Landewednack and Grade Ruan. St Keverne had the space to develop satellite care provision, if funding were available; this could provide core extended services for St Keverne, Coverack, St Martin, Garras and Manaccan. Landewednack could advise the headteacher of St Keverne in setting this up. Social services and health personnel serving the whole Lizard cluster might be based at Landewednack, providing outreach to the centre at St Keverne. Garras/St Martin and St Keverne/Coverack could consider putting together joint bids through the SKILL network for combined enrichment events such as multicultural or performing arts days (similar to those organised by Landewednack and Grade Ruan). St Keverne has the capacity to host such events.

5.3 Northumberland

Summary of main findings:

- The study schools were very small and served rural areas whose population was highly dispersed. Headteachers spent a substantial amount of time teaching their classes; there were very few other members of staff and most were part-time. The heads reported that they were finding it increasingly difficult to respond to demands while maintaining a reasonable work-life balance.
- The medium for the most effective informal collaboration in rural Northumberland schools was felt by the schools to be the self-organised 'cluster', generally consisting of a small group of neighbouring schools. These were often well-established and contributed to curriculum innovation and professional development, as well as providing a network of personal support for the headteachers.
- These clusters provided a strong basis for the potential formation of future formal collaborations such as executive headships or federations. They were more valued by the schools than the large and geographically spread 'partnerships' based on high schools and their first and middle feeder schools.
- Many heads of small schools recognised that their current position was unlikely to be viable in the long term. They (and their governing bodies) were open to consideration of new models of leadership and in some cases preliminary thinking and preparation had been done. There was recognition that formal collaborations were likely to be the best way that very small schools could meet present and future expectations.

- The local authority provided information about alternative models of leadership and its officers gave personal support to schools wishing to consider them. However, some heads felt uncertain about the future of their schools following the primary school reorganisation which was being undertaken. The schools had limited knowledge of the range of formal collaborative options and they reported that there were no local authority incentives which might encourage their investigation.
- The schools reported that a major burden was the necessity to adapt requirements to a small school context or to the sparsely populated communities which they serve. In relation to extended services, for example, they felt it was beyond their resources, even acting together, to overcome the obstacles of long distances, poor transport and low demand.
- These very small schools enjoyed close relationships with parents and were greatly valued by them. However, they reported that parents and other members of rural communities often had little understanding of the difficulties of running a small school, or of the benefits which alternative forms of leadership and organisation might bring. Local opposition to change was a potential obstacle to future development.
- There was potential for creating a number of models of formal collaborations in the Northumberland sample of schools, for example:
 - Two were about to embark upon an executive headship which might further develop into a federation.
 - There would be scope for the federation of a larger number of schools, some as executive headships and some with their own headteacher.

The local authority view

Main points:

- The local authority encouraged collaboration; it provided schools with information about different leadership models, including federation, but did not initiate such arrangements, or support them financially. The prime movers were the schools themselves, led by their governing bodies.
- Groups of schools adopted different models of collaboration that suited their own local circumstances. Most involving small schools had arisen from a local difficulty (generally recruitment) rather than from strategic planning.
- Governing bodies of schools with an executive head did not necessarily see the arrangement as permanent; it was reviewed and sometimes ended following the departure of the executive headteacher.
- Geographical factors - including isolation, transport difficulties and low numbers on roll - limited the ability of small rural schools to offer extended services, although in some aspects there were examples of good practice.

Small schools in Northumberland

At the time of the study, Northumberland had 136 first schools (four to nine years) of which sixty-three had fewer than one hundred pupils, thirty had fewer than fifty pupils and fifteen had fewer than thirty pupils. Over a third (37%) were denominational schools; of these, ten were voluntary aided Roman Catholic schools, thirty were voluntary aided Church of England

schools and eleven were voluntary controlled Church of England schools. Approximately 35% of all first school headteachers were fifty-five years of age or older.

Northumberland is a large county and is the most sparsely populated in England, though there are some areas of dense population. More than half of the population live in less than five per cent of its total area, concentrated in the south-east. Small villages characterise the majority of the county; in the large tracts of moorland and upland areas, isolated hamlets are the only settlements found. Northumberland therefore regarded small rural primary schools as an essential part of the authority's educational provision despite their high running costs (it estimated that unit costs rose significantly once the number fell below ninety pupils). It also believed that the scattered nature of the population meant that even if models of leadership changed, the number of school units would need to remain largely the same. Some of the highest levels of surplus capacity were in some of the more remote areas where access to alternative provision was not practical for very young children. Small rural primary schools were felt to be very much part of the landscape in Northumberland.

Over the last four years, Northumberland has been implementing its 'Putting the Learner First' programme, which had been designed to improve standards at Key Stages 2 and 4, reduce surplus places (expected to rise to twenty-one per cent of places in first schools by 2011) and improve the condition of school accommodation. The programme included plans to move from a three-tier to a two-tier system, to be implemented over an extended time frame. There was no plan to close small schools, although two had closed during the past year at the request of their governing bodies.

Ofsted reports indicated that most small schools performed well in Northumberland, and better than the larger schools in the county (although this reflected a socio-economic factors as well as differences in size). The local authority attributed the high standards achieved by most small schools to the additional individual attention that their pupils received.

Small school leadership

The local authority was aware that its schools were less well funded than those in many authorities. Consequently, the headteachers of its small rural primary schools taught more extensively than in comparable schools elsewhere. A recent workforce analysis, carried out internally by the local authority, indicated that over half of Northumberland's first school headteachers had a teaching commitment of at least fifty per cent and that some taught for at least eighty per cent of the week. This commitment reduced the headteacher's capacity to provide effective leadership - including, for example, making creative use of HLTAs or school business managers, or indeed considering the possibility of becoming an executive head. The LA was concerned over the work-life balance of many small school headteachers, and the sustainability of some of the school's provision - for example after school clubs, which were dependent on the willingness of a small number of people to work well beyond the school day.

Recruitment to all primary schools continued to be problematic. In the last year, only half of the first school headship vacancies had been filled with a permanent appointment. This was particularly acute in the smaller primary schools where workload issues tended to reduce the number of applications. A further problem was the small differential between the salaries of small school headteachers and those of senior teachers in other schools.

Local authority support for collaboration

Northumberland actively promoted alternative forms of school leadership, through the work of its advisers on governors' selection panels, through its 'Leading in Northumberland' newsletters, and through conferences and other training opportunities for governors and headteachers. Its policy was underpinned by the principle that it is the governors of the schools and not the local authority who proposed alternative models such as federation and who led the consultation on their proposal. The local authority's role was to assist and facilitate this process.

The local authority had recently established a succession planning team and a strategy had been developed. A particular focus was on the critical role of governors. The strategy also aimed to identify future school leaders; to support schools in the recruitment, induction and retention of headteachers; and to assist the development of new models of school leadership. Initiatives had included an audit of headteachers willing to work beyond their own school; however, lack of funding had limited what could be achieved. Additional support for headteachers in small schools had been provided through the designation of an adviser with specific responsibility for small schools and through a revised induction programme for new headteachers. A key element of the programme was the opportunity to network with other heads and to undertake activities such as shared monitoring activities in one another's schools.

Northumberland believed that governors must be well informed if they are to consider different models of leadership and had produced a clear and instructive chart entitled 'The Federations Continuum' which set out the different characteristics of each level of collaboration. It had promoted the benefits of different approaches through the annual governors' conferences, through its newsletters and through the termly briefings for chairs of governors and headteachers. Governors had been asked to consider such questions as: what were they doing to ensure they could sustain quality leadership in the school? how willing were they to consider alternative models of leadership? and how would they like the local authority to support them?

Models of collaboration in small schools

Schools in Northumberland worked within one of fifteen regional 'partnerships', consisting of a high school and its feeder middle and first schools. A considerable degree of autonomy was distributed to these groups and they were encouraged to share practice and identify local solutions to local issues.

There was a high level of informal collaboration between small schools but more formal models were also developing, including one 'soft' federation and one shared headship. The LA recognised, however, that there was no sense of permanence in the 'soft' federations involving small primary schools. Each school retained its own governing body and budget and normal custom was that the collaborative arrangement was reviewed when the executive headteacher moved on. This might result in a move back to each school appointing its own headteacher, or to a suggested federation with another school, rather than a continuation of the current arrangement. LA advisers believed that the next step in supporting these groups would be to encourage long term succession planning within the partnerships.

Extended services in small rural primary schools

The local authority acknowledged that it was difficult for many of its small rural primary schools to offer the full range of extended services, although it felt that Northumberland had a good record of supporting its small schools in this respect. This was due mainly to the willingness of schools to work together within the regional partnerships for the benefit of all; for example, the Alnwick partnership had been able to subsidise activities in a small school using income generated by larger schools.

Rural isolation, small numbers and the cost and difficulty of obtaining local transport were major inhibiting factors affecting the provision of pre- and post- school care, after school clubs, and the use of schools by community groups. The workload of small school headteachers was another factor which could affect the development of extended services. The signposting of services was not wholly satisfactory, given the long distances to be travelled and the reluctance of some parents for their young children to be transported from one school location to another. Poorer families and vulnerable children in particular were missing out.

Recent initiatives had led to an improvement in developing the core offer in rural areas. For example: each partnership now had an extended schools co-ordinator to help develop local activities and resources; Parent Support Advisers provided a rolling programme of parenting classes in different locations in the partnership to which they are attached; sports partnerships had had a beneficial impact on the quality of PE in small schools and had improved the range of after-school clubs.

Sources of information:

- *Discussions with the School Workforce Adviser and the Extended Services Co-ordinator, 8th January 2009.*
- *Documentation provided by the local authority.*

The view of the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle

Main points:

- The diocese was fully committed to promoting and supporting collaborative leadership.
- The recruitment crisis in small rural schools and the unsustainable workloads of their headteachers made it essential to explore alternative models of school leadership.
- There was encouragement for governors to give serious consideration to executive headship as a possible leadership model, when working with them on headship appointments.
- The unique circumstances of each school required a pragmatic and flexible approach to collaboration, seizing opportunities when they arose.
- There was no objection to federations between church and community schools.

Working in close partnership with the local authority, the diocese felt that it had been in the forefront of the development of shared headships in Northumberland, driven by its concerns over the welfare and recruitment of headteachers to small rural primary schools. In response to these concerns, the diocese ensured that governors were aware of their duty of care to the individual when appointing a new headteacher, and consequently, that there were alternative models of leadership for them to consider, including federation. Despite this, most governing bodies wished to appoint their own headteacher.

The diocese had significant anxieties about the well-being of heads of small schools: expectations were regarded as “immoral”. Demands on heads were reported to have grown substantially over recent years and took no account of the need for work-life balance.

Although most heads were effective, this was often at great personal cost. Increasingly, the role could only be fulfilled by the exceptional head. A fact finding visit to Norfolk several years ago, together with the experience gained from early federations in Northumberland, had convinced the diocese that a pragmatic and flexible approach to collaboration was needed. It was underpinned by the principle that the needs of the learner overrode any other concerns. With forty-one church schools in Northumberland, the diocese had been involved in many different models of collaboration, for example, a shared headship stemming from maternity leave, federation between a community middle school and a church first school, and a long standing federation around Holy Island that had more recently included a third school. However, in some situations governors did not always appreciate the potential benefit of collaborative arrangements and some had come to an end.

A notable example of successful collaboration was the West Tyne cluster of five schools that had been working closely together for several years. They pooled resources, including a teacher for RE; arranged joint theme days and weeks; provided cluster professional development training; and produced common documentation.

Two schools within the group had entered into a formal collaboration when one of the headteachers retired, while two other headteachers in the group shared the executive headship of a third school in the cluster. The diocese was currently working towards the formation of a three-to-nineteen academy co-sponsored with the Duke of Northumberland, which would replace ten schools, including two church schools.

The diocese felt that executive headship brought many benefits. It removed the class teaching commitment from the headteacher and enabled a larger team of staff to share resources, expertise and responsibilities across the schools. Where it was working well, the two governing bodies held their meetings on the same evening, with a joint session covering items of common concern, thus reducing the number of meetings that the headteacher needed to attend.

The diocese had a positive and enabling attitude to joint headship of church and community schools and had no objections to the executive headteacher coming from the community school. It invited these headteachers to become part of the church heads group; it also ensured that they were well briefed by diocesan advisers so that they understood both what it means to be the headteacher of a Church of England school and their responsibility for maintaining its Christian ethos.

Source of information:

- *Interview with the Director of Education, diocese of Newcastle, 7th January 2009.*

The Middle School Perspective

Three of the four first schools in the study fed into the Dr Thomlinson CoE Middle School; the middle school and its six feeder first schools belonged to the Morpeth partnership. Collaboration within the partnership worked well at middle and high school level, for example with joint professional development training. The regular partnership meetings for headteachers were supplemented by meetings of smaller networks, including the middle school and its feeder schools. Some very small schools within the partnership also met as a discrete group to consider such issues as finance and the sharing of secretarial staff. Schools in the Rothbury area met termly, usually at headteacher level but additional meetings with a curriculum focus also took place. There were no formal meetings for governors of the group of schools now that the consultation over the move to a two tier structure had been completed, although a good proportion of middle school governors were also governors at one of the first schools and this helped to strengthen links between the local schools.

The high school and the other two middle schools in the partnership are in the process of becoming a 'hard' federation (proposed for September 2009) with one governing body (but separate headteachers and budgets). Dr Thomlinson Middle School was invited to join this arrangement, although first schools were not, but chose to remain independent because it is a church school and is some distance from the other schools.

The head felt that there were many possibilities to extend collaboration between the middle school and its feeder schools, for example by an extension of the successful sports partnership model to other subject areas - for example ICT, where the middle school had significantly greater resources. This would also have the benefit of bringing together the very small numbers of children from each age group in each school.

The head also advocated a more creative approach to solving a range of problems which might, for example, include the joint funding of posts such as a school business manager. There was also potential for shared headship, with one head overseeing two or more schools - perhaps the middle school and one or more feeder schools. Previously, local governing bodies had been resistant to this proposal but he felt the climate might be changing now that there were concerns over falling rolls, recruitment difficulties and restricted career opportunities in very small first schools.

All partnerships had their own extended services co-ordinator. However, despite schools' efforts to provide pre- and post- school care in the local area using a commercial company, the demand had been insufficient and the small numbers interested were widely scattered between the local schools. This had led to the decision that the local schools would 'signpost' rather than provide a childcare service themselves. The middle school had a home/school link worker based on site but this service did not extend to the first schools. A range of clubs and other activities was offered to its pupils but most of these were held during lunchtimes to overcome after-school transport difficulties.

Source of information:

- *Interview with the headteacher of Dr Thomlinson CoE Middle School, Rothbury, 9th January 2009.*

The four schools: individual case studies

The four study schools were from two geographical 'partnerships'. The schools were located to the west and north-west of Alnwick. Three (Harbottle, Netherton Northside and Thropton) fed into Dr Thomlinson Middle School in Rothbury and then into Morpeth High School. Branton fed into Glendale Middle School and then Alnwick High School.

Harbottle CoE First School

Main points:

- The school was very small and served an isolated though close-knit community. The headteacher had a large teaching commitment and was the only full-time member of staff. It was a popular and successful school, but the responsibilities of leadership were reported to be an increasing burden.
- Informal collaboration was extensive and had been a significant feature of the school for a long time. Relationships with two similar nearby schools were particularly strong, and this cluster had formed the basis of much of the development work undertaken in recent years.

- The headteacher had agreed to lead one of these neighbouring schools under an executive headship arrangement with effect from April 2009. The proposal had the support of staff, governors, parents and community.

Population and context

The school currently had twenty-three pupils on roll (plus four part-time in the nursery) and numbers were slowly rising. If the school were to become a primary school following local authority proposals for reorganisation, numbers were likely to be around forty. The school population was widely scattered; four small villages and many isolated, outlying settlements were served, with some children travelling ten miles to school. Not all came from farming families. Some were craftspeople; others were professionals who had made a lifestyle choice to relocate to the area. A few were unemployed. The disparate nature of the catchment made it difficult to predict trends.

A quarter of the houses in the area were holiday homes. Children entered the school with a range of abilities, though generally they were average or above, except in language and communication, where they were often lower.

Standards and quality of provision

Given their starting points, pupils achieved high standards, with results comparing favourably with national and local averages. Despite its very small size, the school prided itself on the richness of its curriculum. The school was a guardian for the nearby National Trust property at Cragside and used it for a variety of purposes. There were also links with National Parks, Forestry Commission and Young Enterprise as well as involvement in local issues. The school, the head said, “has a tradition of being aware of opportunities and taking advantage of them”. Examples included links with the Campaign for Learning and ‘learning to learn’ skills programmes with Durham and Newcastle Universities. “We just listen out for things to get involved in,” the head commented. Extensive use was made of outside expertise; she noted that “we are very lucky with the number of members of the community who come in and help”. This included professionals (artist, poet, composer, musician, author), as well as artisans (woodworker, gardener, shepherd) - “you can value all sorts”, she pointed out.

Buildings, resources and staffing

The school was housed in an early Victorian building which was in good condition. Together with the extra accommodation provided by a recent extension, it was adequate for present needs and included a well-equipped hall. The building was sited high above the road, but the recent addition of a slope and handrail had made access possible for pupils with disabilities. The school presented itself as a lively and busy learning environment and was well-resourced. The ICT suite was a particular asset, offering a generous ratio of computers to pupils. The head taught for three-and-a-half days a week. There were two other part-time teachers, and a small team of other part-time staff including two teaching assistants and a secretary; the head noted that “people all do far more than it says on their job description”.

Leadership and management

The headteacher had very limited time away from the children and felt the pressure of the management role with its increasing bureaucratic demands. She had a collaborative approach to decision-making and all staff had good opportunities for exercising responsibility and pursuing professional development. However, most of the burden of leadership and management devolved upon her. “There’s no-one to delegate to” she commented; “I’m the only full-time member of staff”. However, contact with the children was her reason for doing the job and she would be very reluctant to see that go. Responding to new initiatives was

one of the greatest challenges. The head said that she “is realistic about what is possible”. “We’ll sometimes say” she added, “we can’t do that but we can do something different and maybe better”.

The school’s isolated position disadvantaged it in a number of ways. For example, training was difficult to access, as it was often held too far away. Likewise, after-school meetings often could not be reached in time. Essential professional support such as psychological assessments or speech therapy was sometimes slow to respond. However, the head felt very well supported by the governing body, and by the chair in particular.

Extended services

Developing out-of-school activities had been a key improvement priority for the school this year. Following a parental survey, the range of lunchtime and after-school activities, mostly run by volunteers from the community, had been expanded. Further activities available in Rothbury were signposted, and some coaching sessions were run by the sports partnership. A week’s holiday club, supported by the district council, had been put on last summer; it was well attended and it was hoped that it could be repeated. There was a very well-established mother and toddler group which met in the school; the school also offered sufficient nursery places for the community. A childminder who lived very close to the school was able to offer childcare to all parents who required it. Parents and governors considered this to be an impressive range for such a small school. Nevertheless, problems remained; for example, access to services in Rothbury were difficult for some families, and some children were unable to attend after-school sessions as three-quarters lived beyond reasonable walking distance.

Future priorities

In addition to the above, the school development plan identified the intention to make further improvements in the quality of teaching through a range of creative and imaginative strategies. However, the current proposals for the headteacher to become executive head of the neighbouring Netherton school had subsumed these issues into one key priority: to make the new leadership arrangements effective so that they clearly benefited the pupils from both school communities.

Current collaboration

The school was involved in an intricate and overlapping web of informal collaborative arrangements. The oldest of these, and still the most significant, was the ‘three valleys cluster’ (with Netherton and Branton first schools). The three schools had developed a very close understanding because they had worked together for so long, but this had taken time to achieve. The benefits were enormous, the head believed: reducing isolation, sharing expertise, giving moral support, offering short-cuts and so on. But the headteacher was clear that compatibility - a shared vision - was an essential prerequisite for successful collaboration.

On a practical level, pupils from the three schools worked together on a joint project at least once a term - a recent example was a visit to Newcastle to see different places of worship. This did not just offer financial savings. It widened the peer group for children to socialise in, increased their access to expertise and provided them with additional challenge. Their joint ceilidh band symbolised their working together - it was a local fixture, performing in the villages and at regional festivals, and regularly raising money for charity.

There was also a range of other collaborative groupings, with different though related concerns and focuses. These included an augmented three valleys group - five schools which focused on common training needs and which had formed a Creative Partnership. The middle school (situated in Rothbury) and its feeder first schools formed the Coquet valley partnership, which sought to secure savings in access to services and resources as well as working to secure a smooth transition from first to middle school. Lastly, the school belonged to the Morpeth partnership which was made up of all schools which fed into the high school in Morpeth. This last group, the headteacher felt, had its value but was too unwieldy to be fully effective. It comprised too broad a range of interests, and its meetings were often inaccessible because of their distance and timing.

Informal collaboration had been well supported by the local authority in the past - for example, small school advisers had been funded to offer hands-on support for groups of small schools (the headteacher had formerly been one herself). Now, however, although officers and advisers were sympathetic and offered encouragement, there was significantly less active help.

School perceptions of benefits of and barriers to further collaboration

The school was very aware of the multiple advantages to be gained from collaboration. Working together - especially within the three valleys cluster - was on an informal basis but was not an add-on. It was woven into the culture of the school; it was how they met their obligations and developed their ideas.

However, there were inevitable barriers which needed to be overcome every time a new collaborative venture was embarked on. Some were due to circumstances, others to personalities. The list of inhibitors, the head commented, was predictable and familiar: time for leadership, management and innovation; and funding to support staff release, transport, training and resources. Seed funding was only partially effective - "we need more than a blast of money", the headteacher said, "because we're talking about people who are already working flat out".

Even when these obstacles were overcome, effective collaboration didn't necessarily follow. Schools had to be comfortable with their neighbours and partners, the head commented, and the deeper the collaboration, the more dependant they were on trust. It was easy to sign up to the principle, but for some it was only lip-service because the reality could be too threatening. She believed that "people get antagonistic if forced - they have to make their own mind up".

Plans for shared headship with the neighbouring first school in Netherton were well advanced; in many ways this had seemed a natural development from the three valleys collaboration. There was, however, a degree of caution: a four-term trial period had been agreed, after which the position would be reviewed by governors of both schools.

School perceptions of attitudes of governors, parents and the community

Governors played an active role in the life of the school and were both knowledgeable and supportive. The chair described the head as "a great plate-spinner" but governors were concerned about the demands on her and on her colleagues. Many parents were also prominent in offering the school practical, hands-on support. The community was an intimate one - most parents had known each other since they originally met at the mother and toddler group. Relationships between school and parents were very open - communication was very strong and "there are no secrets". The headteacher lived in the community and so was known on a personal level. Parents would be kept informed about the shared headship proposal; no objections were expected or difficulties envisaged.

Sources of information:

- *Interview with the headteacher and chair of governors, Harbottle CoE First School, 15th January 2009.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and documents researched online.*

Netherton Northside First School

Main points:

- The school, serving a remote rural community, was very small and becoming smaller. It was, however, a successful school with some outstanding features. The headteacher had a substantial teaching commitment; it was increasingly difficult to sustain both this and her leadership and management responsibilities.
- The school was firmly committed to collaboration and participated in a number of network groups. The most effective of these was the close-knit local cluster of three schools which had, over the years, become a major force for support and innovation.
- The head was to move on in April and it had been agreed that the headteacher of another of the cluster schools would take over as executive head. It was felt that this offered the best chance for the school to remain viable in the future. The school's stakeholders had been consulted and were prepared for the change.

Population and context

The school was slightly smaller than it used to be, and it was likely to decline further in the following year. It was not known whether this was a long-term trend as just one or two families moving into the area could make a significant difference. Currently there were sixteen pupils on roll (with two additional children in the nursery, one of whom had severe special educational needs). There was a foster carer in the community, so the school often had pupils who were looked after. Under the proposal for the school to be a primary school, there were likely to be around thirty pupils.

Many children lived in widely scattered and remote farmsteads; the houses in the village itself were often occupied by older people. Parents mainly worked in agricultural or building trades; a few were semi-professional. Their isolation could make it more difficult for children to socialise successfully, the headteacher said, so that they needed additional support in school. Children might lack experiences which those in more populous areas took for granted; for example, there were few opportunities to shop, so children might be unfamiliar with selecting items and handling money.

Standards and quality of provision

Children entered the school with a broad range of abilities; it was difficult to generalise, the head pointed out, because of the very small numbers. The high quality of teaching and the school's nurturing ethos ensured that all children made good progress. By the time they left at the end of Year 4, their attainment was above average, particularly in mathematics. Very effective use was made of a variety of community links, for example National Parks and the Creative Partnership, to enrich and broaden the curriculum. When last inspected by Ofsted (February 2006) the school was praised for its good all-round provision; its nurturing family ethos was particularly noted. It succeeded in being the "happy, bright and stimulating" school it aspired to be in its vision statement.

Buildings, resources and staffing

The building was in very good condition and had recently been remodelled and extended. It was generous for the current number of pupils, having been planned with the intended reorganisation of the school in mind. It was also well resourced for a very small school; there had been recent investment in ICT and children now had access to a wide range of up-to-date equipment to support their learning. All staff other than the head worked part-time. There were two part-time teachers (working a total of four days), three teaching assistants (one an HLTA), secretary, cook and caretaker.

Leadership and management

The headteacher had been in post for four years, having moved from another school in the three valleys cluster. She taught four days a week; the remaining one day, she said, is “woefully inadequate” for what needed to be done. This might include such things as sorting out a leaking roof, an electrical fault or the failure of ICT equipment. There was no-one else to do such essential maintenance, even though it diverted attention from pressing strategic matters. In the head’s view “that’s what’s stopping the recruitment to small schools”. However, “everybody mucks in”, she added, and there was a palpable team spirit shown in staff conversation which flowed from strategy to organisation to children’s progress and back again.

Extended services

The school was keen to meet its obligations with regard to offering extended services, though there were real difficulties in an isolated rural area. A range of after-school clubs was offered; recently, plans for after-school childcare had been made but proved to be unviable because of the very small numbers needing it. Available services were signposted by providing information through the school and neighbouring schools. The mother and toddler group performed a vital service, providing the school’s first contact with the families of future pupils; the school also offered sufficient nursery places for the area. Many families did not have access to a car during the day, and there was no public transport. Accessing services further afield (for example in Rothbury) was a genuine problem for some.

Future priorities

The current school development plan identified the need to widen consultation within the school community. This was being done through more regular school council meetings and the establishment of eco-, travel plan and food committees. Opportunities were also being sought for parents to make a contribution to deciding on school priorities. Another key area was the revision of curriculum planning in the Early Years Foundation Stage to reflect changing circumstances within the school.

A third priority was to continue the work of developing the school grounds for school and community use.

Current collaboration

The most extensive - and most effective - collaboration with other schools was within the three valleys cluster, a self-help group of three neighbouring small schools in the area. This was already well established when the headteacher arrived, and she had knowledge of its workings from her previous school. The head felt that the size of the group was an important factor in its success: “it’s just the right number - we all get on”, she commented. Also significant was the way the three schools had grown together slowly over time, so that new

heads were easily inducted into the ways of the cluster. “Things have evolved naturally, an incremental and needs-based evolution”, she noted, so that now “it works like clockwork”. The three heads talked frequently and met regularly, to share strategies, develop common approaches and to mull over new ideas. It was, she said, both a personal support network and a framework for professional development.

However, the head was very aware that some neighbouring schools were not part of this arrangement. This was the origin of the Coquet valley cluster - the three valleys cluster plus two. This group was the basis of a Creative Partnership but it did not have such an extensive developmental role. Rippling outwards, the school was also a member of the partnership groups which were formed around the middle and high schools. These provided a forum for sharing friendship and communicating information, but not much beyond that. They were not, in the head’s view, where the main work was done.

The greatest benefit of the three valleys cluster was the widening of learning opportunities for the children. Everyone looked forward to the joint curriculum days which happened about three times a year; “they all get on” the head said, and “they all learn from each other”. There were exciting activities on offer, plus the chance to make new friends and to meet up with old ones. It extended their intellectual curiosity at the same time as enhancing their self-esteem and co-operative skills.

The head was a strong advocate of schools working together closely. Collaboration, she said, provided the structure which underpinned “the potential of small schools to excel”. However, it could not be delivered to order: she believed that “collaboration is vital to success but it must be needs-driven”. She added that some ventures failed because “the schools want to close their doors to sharing”. Also, schools had to find their own resources to work together; “financial support is nil”, the head pointed out, and so additional costs such as supply cover fell disproportionately on small schools.

School perceptions of benefits of and barriers to further collaboration

The school naturally was strongly committed to the principles of collaboration, having had such a positive experience of sharing within the three valleys cluster. There had recently been a realisation, though, that things couldn’t simply carry on as before. The educational context - new expectations, new demands - was continuing to change fast, and the schools had to change in response to it. So the head had chosen to move on to make way for a shared headship with nearby Harbottle school, commenting that “I knew I’d got to be the one to move in order for collaboration to happen”. She was shortly to take up a post in a slightly larger school and was looking forward to the fresh challenge.

Meanwhile, planning for the new structure was going on apace. There was a determination to get it right, to build carefully on the firm foundations laid over the years. There were obstacles to be overcome - to do with communication, organisation and logistics - but there was optimism and confidence as the school moved into the next phase of its development. The local authority had welcomed the initiative, but took the view that it was for schools themselves to sort out any collaborative arrangements they wished.

School perceptions of attitudes of governors, parents and the community

Governors were highly committed to the school and had an active presence within it. The chair, the parent of a former pupil, had a very good understanding of current issues and of the difficulties of running a small school. “More and more work is outsourced to schools and you’re not getting the back-up”, she commented. The governing body had taken a strategic view of the school’s future and actively sought the executive headship arrangement. The chair reported that “the conversation has been going on for years but it

was never addressed". Executive headship had not happened as a result of local authority intervention: "the local authority is very hands-off", she said; "it has had to come from us". Governors did not regard this as an undue risk; a much riskier course of action would have been to do nothing. The community was very close-knit so, the chair said, the school "gave out information as soon as we had it" rather than "firefighting rumours". Parents (some of whom are themselves governors) were generally supportive of the decision, despite "historical worries" based around a failed shared headship some years ago. They knew about falling rolls and agreed, the chair concluded, that "it's the way it's got to go or we're doomed".

Sources of information:

- *Interview with the headteacher, and chair of governors, Netherton Northside First School, 16th January 2009.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and documents researched online.*

Harbottle CoE First School and Netherton Northside First School: developing models for formal collaboration

On a return visit to the schools (27th January 2009) a discussion was held with the headteachers of Harbottle First School and Netherton Northside First Schools. The governors at Netherton had indicated that they were concerned about the future viability of their school, following the impending fall in the roll and the moving on of the headteacher. Two days before the visit, the governors of Harbottle school had formally given their approval of shared headship of the two schools for a four-term trial period. The focus of the present meeting was to explore strategies for ensuring that the forthcoming formal collaboration was effective, securing value for money savings which could lead to improvements in provision. A framework document, based around twelve key points, was used to guide discussion (See Appendix 6) and a number of key questions were addressed:

- What are the overall aims of the new collaborative arrangement?
- What models of working together could be adopted to secure improvements in provision for pupils of both schools?
- At what pace should changes be implemented, and how should they be agreed and communicated?
- How might the success of the formal collaboration be measured at the end of the trial period?

The following is a summary of the discussion:

- **Communications.** Both headteachers were conscious of the need to ensure that all members of the school community were kept in touch with developments. "The groundwork needs to be done", they felt, to ensure that a recent local example of a shared headship which "failed miserably" was not repeated. Communications within the communities were good - "there is a sense of community across parishes" - and this was greatly helped by a newsletter which they all received.
- **Time for leadership.** The headteacher, who currently taught for three-and-a-half days a week, would be able to reduce her teaching commitment to two afternoons per week (specialising in music and RE). This would enable her to devote significantly more time to strategic leadership, rather than just being, in her words, "the most expensive teacher". Considerable benefits would flow from this, not least "not being as frazzled" by trying to do so many things at once.

- **Staff roles and responsibilities.** Everybody's roles and responsibilities would be affected by the shared headship, not just the head herself. Additional teaching staff would be recruited and total teaching time augmented and rearranged, though the details of the plan were still being agreed. There were no plans to offer responsibility allowances. The new situation was seen as not being substantially different from the existing one; for example, the school was already accustomed to the frequent absence of the head to attend meetings, and current arrangements for looking after the school were felt to work well.
- **Mechanisms for joint working.** The headteacher's vision was that, in time, staff would have the opportunity to work across the two schools in order to share their expertise more effectively. There would be shared curriculum planning, shared staff meetings and shared opportunities for professional development. This would, she said, be mirrored by "lots more work together with children" - not always in person, as transport costs were prohibitive, but through ICT. There were plans, for example, to purchase webcams for conferencing; opportunities for this would be easy to arrange as the two schools would be following the same curriculum.
- **Governance.** There would clearly be a need for the two governing bodies to work more closely together. The first step would be to create a joint staffing committee but other joint groups would follow. It would, however, be for governors to decide how they wished to work together and to determine the pace of change. It was likely to be on an evolutionary and incremental basis. There was, at the moment, no expectation that the two schools would continue to work together after the four-term trial period; there were, therefore, no current plans for the governing bodies to federate.
- **Parents' perceptions.** Parents were being kept informed of the plans and given the opportunity to share their worries (a meeting with the Harbottle parents was due to happen on the evening of the discussion). Parents were already familiar with the concept of working together through the termly joint curriculum days and through joint fundraising efforts. Opposition to the proposals was not anticipated, though it was acknowledged that parents of children at Harbottle would need to see that their school would also benefit from the arrangement.
- **Alignment of support.** There would be value for money savings to be made in a number of areas, for example, in service level agreements, a common resource pool and shared transport. Local authority support - for example, finance and school improvement support - was already aligned in both schools. Nationally, however, there were requirements and expectations, the heads commented, which did not recognise the reality of shared headship. These included the assumption that the schools would complete individual returns, keep separate self-evaluation forms and so on. Also, under current arrangements, the schools would be inspected by Ofsted separately (this would be equally true if the schools were federated). The head was obviously keen to avoid having to do everything twice - a new burden, she pointed out, in exchange for the old.

The above discussion formed the basis of a preliminary analysis of the possible ways forward for these two schools. The models proposed were based on their own preliminary planning, but were hypothetical (proposed models involving all four schools in the group, including more detailed costings, are to be found below).

- **Teaching costs.** Shared headship between the two schools would save the cost of one of the heads - approximately £40,000 (including add-on costs). The new executive head would continue to teach for two afternoons per week (that is, 0.2 FTE). In order to cover the two heads' present teaching commitment (four days a week in one school

and three-and-a-half in the other) a total of 1.3 FTE additional teaching time would be needed. This would cost (with add-ons) around £33,000, based on the current average cost of a teacher. The new teaching time could be made up in a number of ways: a new part-time teacher in each school; a full-time teacher and a part-time teacher working across both schools; a new full-time teacher, together with augmentation of present part-time teaching contracts; and so on. It would be affordable to increase the total teaching complement, possibly by up to two days (0.4 FTE).

- **Leadership team.** The above figures took no account of rewarding the headteacher, or other members of the teaching staff, for additional responsibilities. The headteacher might be paid an additional two points on the leadership spine (about £2,500); to do so may require the schools to review their indicative salary range. The schools might wish to consider the need for a senior teacher or teacher-in-charge in each school (or, possibly, an assistant head across both schools). This would create a leadership team and reduce the burden on the head as the sole paid leader. The creation of a middle leadership tier would provide a career progression route for ambitious teachers and would aid both recruitment and retention. The overall cost for this might be between £3,000 and £7,000, depending on the solution found. As such, it would probably be an alternative to the augmentation of teaching time outlined above.
- **Responsibilities.** In time, a culture shift was likely to result from having staff, other than the headteacher, who worked across both schools. All members of staff would see themselves as having a responsibility towards the partnership as a whole, even if they themselves only worked in one of the schools. This shift could be accelerated by giving staff (including, perhaps, teaching assistants) specific responsibilities for both schools, maybe a core subject or special educational needs. This would have immense time benefits - the two schools would not need to double up on key roles. There were, however, cost implications - time to carry out the role on both sites, time and expense of travel, and so on. This might amount to around one day per week (0.2 fte), possibly shared on a rota basis between key responsibility holders - amounting to about £4,000.
- **Sharing expertise.** Working together would widen the pool of expertise available to the two schools. The present teaching staff had specific curriculum skills which would be of direct benefit to the school other than the one in which they are currently teaching. Sharing of teaching expertise had no quantifiable financial saving; it did have considerable benefits in terms of reducing the heavy workload borne by teachers in small schools, as well as potentially increasing job satisfaction. However, for some activities, the time and cost of travelling between sites would need to be taken into account.
- **Business management.** The two administrative staff (one in each school) worked part-time and had complementary strengths. There was scope for rationalising the administrative support, though this might be offset by the increased 'front-of-house' duties in the part-time absence of the head. The best solution would be to ensure that the headteacher had secretarial and administrative support for the whole week rather than just part of it - although this might be at the other site. This would entail increasing the hours for administrative support but would bring efficiency savings as less of the headteacher's time would be spent on routine administration. The responsibilities of the administrators (or of one of them) could be augmented to include business management, and training and accreditation sought for this. The cost of improving administrative and financial support in this way would be reasonably small. Training would be free, and an increase of, say, three hours of administrative support per week might be estimated at around £1,500 per annum, including a salary enhancement to reflect greater responsibilities.

- **Professional development.** The two schools had a long tradition of working together on professional training and development, both with each other and with other local schools. These arrangements could, of course, continue. In addition, the wider skill pool meant that the two schools would be better placed than before to meet some of their own professional development needs. For teaching staff, more flexible arrangements might mean that there would be a greater opportunity to engage in training, without the disadvantage of children losing continuity in their learning. For administrative staff, the opportunity to work as a team was likely to bring an enhancement in the skills of both.
- **Federation.** The shared headship had been agreed for a trial period lasting four terms. When it was reviewed, governors at both schools might wish to consider federation as an option. This would have no major cost implications. However, the headteacher would only need to work with one governing body, not two; this would potentially save considerable time in terms of reporting and consultation, and would ensure that the schools were able to work even more closely together than solely under an executive arrangement. It would streamline further the decision-making process in the two schools and result in small additional efficiency savings. It might be that the two schools would be in a position to seek further partners to form a bigger alliance of schools. Their long-term relationship with Branton school suggested one possibility (though this school fed into a different middle school/high school group).

Branton Community First School

Main points:

- With a roll of sixteen, the school felt itself to be on the edge of viability. Despite this, the headteacher was leading the school positively and improvements had been made which would benefit the pupils and local community.
- In the head's view, closure would be a positive option if a new primary school could be built locally to amalgamate three small schools and provide a hub for improved extended services for the whole area.
- Positive responses had been made in the past to local authority initiatives to partner small schools and move towards a two tier system but these had foundered due to lack of local authority resources.
- The school reported that it had gained a great deal from collaboration (especially within the three valleys cluster and Creative Partnership) which had enhanced the learning of pupils and supported the staff professionally and personally.
- More extensive collaboration with other local first schools and the local middle school, the head felt, would further enhance provision.

Population and context

Branton Community First School had sixteen pupils, four girls and twelve boys. Parents were largely employed in farming and tourism. The school served an area of recognised rural disadvantage though the eligibility of current pupils for free school meals was low. The number of pupils with special educational needs was above the national average because the school was chosen for a number of vulnerable pupils who had not coped in larger settings. None of the pupils lived in Branton village and several travelled long distances to school. Since many children lived in isolated farms, the head noted, the school served a vital social function as it was the only time they had contact with their peers.

After Branton, pupils transferred to Glendale Middle School in Wooler and then on to Alnwick High School.

Standards and quality of provision

Branton was recently deemed by Ofsted to be “a good school with outstanding features in provision, support and pastoral care of pupils”. In partnership with two other small local schools (in the three valleys cluster) the school had developed an innovative curriculum which was rooted in the pupils’ experience and the place in which they lived. Further enrichment came from specialist teaching and coaching, and from visits, some of them residential. Pupils made good progress and standards at the end of Year 2 were above the national average.

Buildings, resources and staffing

The 1925 building, consisting of two small classrooms and an entrance hall, was well maintained but required some improvement. In summer 2009, the toilet facilities and staff spaces would be updated and a new learning space (designed as a multiple use area and hall) added. These modernisations would be funded from the school’s capital budget; the school had recruited its own architect and builder, and the headteacher would spend the summer as foreman.

The headteacher taught the whole school for two days, and Class 2 (the older pupils) for three mornings, a total of eighty per cent of her time. There was one other teacher who worked for three-and-a-half days. In addition, a teacher of Spanish was employed for one hour and a specialist PE teacher for two hours each week. A full-time teaching assistant supported a pupil with a statement of special educational needs, but had also been able to contribute substantially to the music curriculum by teaching recorders and musical notation. This resource might be lost when the pupil transferred to middle school at the end of the year.

A secretary was employed for eighteen hours per week to give both administrative and financial support. Technical and ICT support were bought from the local authority. The local high school had Specialist Technology status but the promised support visits, the head noted, had not taken place. However, Glendale Middle School was offering to provide ICT support.

The school worked closely with its parents and community to provide a range of enrichment activities related to the local environment. A heritage afternoon each week was supported by volunteers to give pupils experience of lambing, calving and shearing through farm visits and related crafts such as weaving, knitting, proggy mat making, dry stone walling and woodwork. The whole community supported the school in providing this valuable resource.

The school relied heavily on fundraising to finance itself; the head noted that “if we managed on the school budget we wouldn’t be viable”. The head personally subsidised resources and paid for visitor lunches. As a result, the school had been able to carry forward £3,000 the previous year.

Leadership and Management

The headteacher had worked at Branton for twenty years, first as a teacher and then as head. She was aware of the vulnerability of such a small school, feeling she was constantly “walking a fine line”. “All the time in small schools”, she added, “you are relying on the goodwill of others: staff, parents and governors.” But she noted that she is expected to be the main driver of all school improvement. For example, when a fund-raising committee for the

new extension was needed, nobody came forward initially. "They expect the school to be here", she said, "but they don't know what a struggle it is - we're always under threat." However, at a governors' meeting following the fieldwork visit, two volunteers came forward and a community newsletter was produced.

In the last few years the school has responded positively to local authority proposals that small schools should federate and move to a two-tier structure. The headteacher would welcome a new purpose built primary school at Powburn, to replace several small schools in the area. But though plans had been drawn up and energy invested, no progress had been made, she said.

Staff were encouraged to attend training and to visit and liaise with other schools for professional development. The PE teacher worked in other local small schools and also liaised with the middle school as part of the North Northumberland Sports Partnership; she not only led PE but also developed specialist geographical skills through orienteering. The part-time teacher led the music and art curriculum, which included organising the ceilidh band. The secretary liaised with other administrative staff at local authority update meetings, which she found valuable.

The headteacher was aware that her heavy teaching commitment limited the amount of time she was able to spend on essential leadership tasks in school time, including monitoring the impact of new initiatives. She regularly worked on management tasks at the weekend.

Extended Services

Extended childcare services were provided by the headteacher personally. Because she was in the school, she was happy to look after children if parents needed to drop off a child early or pick them up late. However, formal after school activities were difficult to arrange, she pointed out; most pupils were collected by school transport, so additional activities relied upon parents being able to collect their children afterwards (for example, the ceilidh band, which rehearsed at Netherton). A recent scheme for sixth formers to provide after school activities had also foundered because of transport difficulties. There was no local pre-school provision; the local playgroup had closed recently. The school no longer provided education for three-year-olds following local authority advice that it was unsuitable for them to be included in a class with pupils from Key Stage 1; now, the head commented, these children had no pre-school experience. The area was deprived of services; families had to go to Alnwick or Wooler to access job centres and healthcare, post offices had closed and mobile library services were to be reduced. The extended schools co-ordinator and after hours school co-ordinator were also based in Alnwick.

The headteacher felt that a new primary school at Powburn could provide an easily accessible local centre for these facilities.

Future Priorities

Many of the school's improvement priorities related to the proposed new building (including the need to raise funds). One key aim was to provide a resource centre for the community including - in the long term - enhanced nursery provision which might improve the recruitment of pupils to the school. It was also intended to create an outside learning area for the youngest pupils. Other priorities included: working with other creative partnership schools (including evaluating the impact of the project); developing links with an urban school which might use the school as a resource for outdoor learning; and introducing Spanish into the curriculum.

Current collaborations

The collaboration between Harbottle, Netherton and Branton schools (the three valleys cluster) was well established; it was based upon personal friendships between the headteachers and the similarities in the size and educational vision of their schools. They had shared both professional and curriculum development and pupil learning activities (such as the ceidlih band), holding termly cluster days and twice-yearly Saturday workshops. Originally this cluster was supported by a local authority cluster teacher and a resource centre but both of these had gone.

Three years ago, Branton worked with Netherton to create a topic-based, creative curriculum. They invited Harbottle, Thropton, Milfield, Acklington and Amble first schools to join them in refining it. All seven schools were now using this curriculum plan, so it offered many opportunities for collaborative learning, using e-mail. This group of schools formed the basis of a Creative Partnership, through which they had acquired funding for visiting artists for learning enrichment opportunities.

The headteacher attended monthly meetings with lower, middle and high schools which form the Alnwick pyramid. It is through this collaboration that high quality sports coaching and facilities had been available for even the smallest schools through the North Northumberland Sports Partnership. For example, all children went swimming in Alnwick all year and the school PTA paid for transport. It would not be possible to share the cost of transport because distances between schools were too great.

School's perception of benefit and barriers to further collaboration

The Three Valleys cluster, the head noted, provided considerable personal support for the headteachers in a forum based on trust, openness and support. The schools aimed to share the talents of their combined staffs and equipment. This had been of great benefit when the headteacher of Branton was absent in the summer: the Netherton headteacher oversaw the school until she returned. There were great benefits to the pupils of shared learning such as residential and other visits, for example the recent 'multi-cultural' visits to Newcastle. The only thing which inhibited collaboration in the cluster was the distance between schools - it took thirty five minutes to travel from Branton to Harbottle.

The headteacher would be open to any future proposals for collaboration which might benefit the pupils' learning. For example, the middle school at Glendale had achieved Technology Specialist Status and would welcome more feeder school involvement. However, she felt that communities could be a barrier to federation between schools; isolation could lead to very local loyalties. At one time the possibility of federation between Branton and Whittingham schools had been explored; it even went as far as joint governing body meetings and social events. However, the head commented, the proposal involved Branton becoming affiliated to the Church of England because the larger school was a church school. One parent objected to this and, the head says, "the locals didn't want it".

The Powburn new school model, which would include satellite health and community facilities and the closure of several lower schools, appeared to be more popular within the community. A local landowner was prepared to give the land; it was the local authority which was delaying progress because the funding was not available. The move to two tier schooling was being rolled out from the south of the county and it was unclear when it would reach the Branton area.

Attitudes of governors, parents and the community

Governors and parents, according to the headteacher, could see great benefits to pupils in the shared activities within the three valleys cluster. For example, the ceilidh band enabled parents and children from the three schools to “get together and have a chance to mix.” Joint ventures open to parents were well attended despite travel difficulties, which suggested parents valued and supported the benefits which collaboration brought. They were summarised by the head as: staff supporting one another, opportunities for shared training and curriculum development; enhancing the schools’ capacity to embark on bigger projects; and increasing children’s confidence through the widening of their experience. During the headteacher’s absence through sickness, the head from Netherton had, the head said, provided “invaluable support”. “The collaboration between the schools meant that her knowledge of Branton school and its ethos maintained continuity through what could otherwise have been a very difficult patch”, she added.

Being part of the local pyramid ensured that small schools were not working in isolation or limited by small budgets. Collaboration could also raise the profile of the school in the wider community and promote its identity. The head reported that parents would welcome further links with the middle school, which could offer technology support.

Governors reported that, although both parents and governors could appreciate the financial efficiencies which would follow federation between two small schools, they had other concerns. (“I would wonder if they were getting one person to work twice as hard” one commented; “there are still a lot of ‘what ifs’”). The potential benefits of the Powburn single school were clear to them but, a parent governor commented, “I think we would lose quite a lot as well - gain a lot but lose out on the special”. For these governors, the prospect of losing the small school ethos and identity in a larger institution was a major concern.

Parents could see the possibilities of providing some extended services to the community as well as to the families of pupils once the improvements to the building had been completed, a governor noted. For example, a partnership with the Wildlife trust might see the school becoming a venue for a local club.

Sources of information:

- *Discussions with the headteacher, secretary, chair of governors and a parent governor of Branton First School, 16th January 2009.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and documents researched online.*

Further areas of potential collaboration between Branton and other schools

The following models were developed from a second conversation with the headteacher of Branton First School.

Community and school collaborations following the new extension

Current plans for extending the school would improve foundation stage facilities and increase the school’s capacity to offer a community venue. There was no village hall in Branton so the additional space could provide a meeting room for local clubs and groups. This would also provide income for the school.

There were also plans to develop the school garden, including the creation of a wildlife area (with webcams in nestboxes). Once the new extension was completed, the school could be used as a wildlife study centre for urban schools. Such potential collaborations would share the advantages of living in an area of outstanding natural beauty, the head believed, and would give pupils an opportunity to widen their horizons by mixing with children from a different area.

The Three Valleys cluster and the Creative Partnership

Currently, the headteachers of the three schools in the original three valleys cluster met once a term and shared the workload of policy development and attendance at meetings (one attends and shares the information). Soon the three schools would be led by two headteachers but there would still be a need to continue this successful collaboration as it gave vital peer support. The next step would be to share staff skills. For example, the joint appointment of an HLTA between the three schools would provide much of the additional support for gifted and talented pupils and those with special educational needs. A skilled colleague could support the headteacher in her role as SENCo and provide supply cover for classes. The overall cost would be about £18,000 divided between the three schools. Branton might be able to afford its share if anticipated staffing adjustments took place. It would be valuable for the headteacher to be able to work with colleagues in other schools. This would be feasible when the part-time teacher was in school - for example, using the one teacher with the whole school for some activities, an HLTA covering the headteacher's class, or the head taking a group of pupils with her when she visited other schools. This would enhance, for example, the ability of the headteachers in all schools to carry out monitoring and evaluation of learning with colleagues.

A larger pool of staff skills would be available if sharing was organised within the Creative Partnership group. Between them, the seven schools would be a rich source of expertise for Branton's current priority to develop the early years curriculum and community provision in the school's new learning space.

Links with the middle school

The development of closer links and sharing of facilities and expertise with Glendale Middle School would benefit both schools. The headteachers of both schools were keen for this to happen. Branton had expertise in music, especially the ceilidh band; Glendale had achieved technology status and was well equipped for design technology. For example, Key Stage 2 pupils from Branton could pursue a project over half a term using Glendale's facilities on a weekly basis. Transport would have to be funded, but as parents were in favour of such collaboration this was not envisaged as a problem.

If the local authority decided to proceed to a two tier structure in the area, first and middle school links would enable staff to share curriculum expertise and extend their skills and experience with other key stages, for example, through shared professional training days.

Closure and amalgamation of three first schools and the building of a new primary school

The headteacher had a well developed vision for a new primary school at Powburn which, in her view, would serve the families and communities of the area more successfully as it is the local hub for services which all families visited. (The study was unable to collect the views of the other two schools, Whittingham and Eglington, which were included in the proposal.) A local landowner had offered to donate the necessary land, which would substantially reduce the overall cost. The three schools at Eglington, Whittingham and Branton currently had a total of sixty-five pupils on roll. If this were to become a primary school (including a nursery) it would have eighty to ninety pupils. This would form a small primary school which would be viable for the foreseeable future.

Thropton Village First School

Main Findings

- The school felt uncertain about the local authority strategy for reorganisation and this hindered it from engaging in long term local planning.
- The school anticipated that closer collaboration and the development of flexible ways of working would prepare participating schools for a range of future possibilities.
- The school reported that the local cluster provided very effective support; they could develop a common ethos and a joint approach to meeting current challenges. It was noted that the larger pyramid group had a less direct and less positive impact on the life of a small school.
- Federation between the middle school and its feeder first schools - each with its own head but with one governing body - was a possible model for consideration.

Population and context

Thropton First School had forty-four pupils (including the nursery) from three to nine years of age. The roll had fallen from fifty-five in 2007 but was not predicted to decline further in the near future. Most pupils transferred at the end of Year 4 to the middle school in Rothbury, and then on to high school in Morpeth.

This small rural school served a wide catchment area in part of upper Coquetdale, a locality where socio-economic characteristics were broadly average. A number of pupils also came from nearby Rothbury. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals was well below average. There were now a few professional parents but the majority were in lower paid or seasonal employment, with often only one parent working. Currently, an average number of pupils had learning difficulties with few statements of special educational need. The school had foundation status.

Standards and quality of provision

The Ofsted inspection of September 2007 reported “an outstandingly inclusive school” which was “well led and managed”. The quality of the curriculum, pupils’ personal development, and the quality of care and support, were also judged to be good. Standards were good in the foundation stage, though there was a need to improve the progress of the older pupils. The school was found to have “excellent partnerships” with other schools.

Buildings, resources and staffing

The original 1867 Victorian building had been extensively extended to provide two spacious classrooms, a purpose built nursery, a computer suite, hall and community room. The whole building was well maintained. The extensive outdoor space provided a wide area for play and plenty of room for further extension to the building if it became necessary in the future.

Resources were excellent and the school development plan showed they were well managed, with annual allocations to subject areas and half-yearly reviews. Additional resources were borrowed from the middle school and their facilities were also used for swimming lessons.

The headteacher was in her fourth year at the school and taught the foundation stage class every morning - that is, sixty per cent of her time. There were three other teachers, two of them part-time; two were newly qualified. Older pupils had access to specialist PE teaching and peripatetic instrumental teachers were bought in from the local authority (and continue to teach the pupils in the middle school). There were four part-time teaching assistants, of whom one was an HLTA. Administration hours had recently been increased to twenty-five hours. The recently appointed assistant had previously worked in a bank and had financial expertise.

Supply teachers were shared with other local schools and there was mutual support for temporary absence; for example administrative staff from the middle school provided cover pending the recent new appointment.

Leadership and Management

One of the biggest challenges for the headteacher, she said, was “having the opportunity to go forward with the school’s aims whilst having class responsibility”. Under these circumstances, she pointed out, innovation was difficult. Invariably, it was the headteacher who had to take the lead. Her staff were mainly inexperienced, particularly in leadership roles. Keeping in touch with government initiatives was limited by time, she said, and attendance at local authority meetings by the availability of supply cover.

Each teacher had a core subject and at least one foundation subject to co-ordinate. The headteacher was the special educational needs co-ordinator. An incentive allowance was used to reward extra responsibility required by current developments; for example, there was an assessment co-ordinator for one year. The school had an excellent system for the performance management and continuing professional development of all staff. The headteacher believed “in developing people so they are active in managing something”.

Extended Services

The school offered a range of after school activities for pupils as well as very effective parent support. The toddler group and playgroup provided opportunities for parents and their children to meet socially - an essential service for those living in remote places.

The school had made great efforts to satisfy the need of a small number of families for childcare. It was not viable to establish care within the school but they signposted provision in the area, even offering to arrange transport for children. However, parents wanted childcare in the village and therefore used local childminders. The extended services co-ordinator was based in Morpeth, and the head reported that little advice or support had been received other than a poorly attended family learning day. She added that support from the school nurse had been severely cut; she now had to work in three areas rather than one. However, a new family centre was to be established in Rothbury. The headteacher felt that links with this service would complement the school’s strength in supporting families. The school had sufficient space to become a satellite for local courses for parents and other services.

Current Priorities

Staff had recently received training for implementing an innovative and enquiry-based curriculum, linked to the school’s participation in a Creative Partnership. The school also intended to develop leadership in the school by using an incentive reward for senior responsibility which was linked to performance management. Other priorities included developing the assessment for learning initiative and raising standards in writing for boys.

Current collaborations

The school belonged to a number of collaborative groups. Two local clusters - the three valleys and Coquet clusters - were the most significant; there was a strong sense of mutual support in both. The three valleys cluster was a long established cluster of three very small schools with like-minded headteachers (Harbottle, Netherton and Branton.) This cluster had provided much personal and professional support to the headteacher - for example, sharing of documents to reduce each school's workload. As the headteacher said, "none of the schools has a deputy headteacher so it is nice to talk about management issues with other managers". The augmented Coquet cluster (and its associated Creative Partnership) had been the medium for developing a more innovative curriculum and had provided enrichment through working with visiting artists, for example. Involvement in both clusters dated from the time of the present headteacher's appointment; before, she noted, the school had been more isolated.

The Rothbury group of schools linked Harbottle, Netherton and Thropton with the larger Rothbury First School and Dr Thomlinson Middle School. The headteacher attended termly liaison meetings at the middle school. The governing bodies shared a clerk who organised common training prior to each round of meetings.

As part of the Sports Partnership, a school sports co-ordinator, based at the middle school, met with PE co-ordinators to plan a programme of in- and out-of-school activities. The annual amount which it cost the school also paid for transport. This had enabled the school to achieve the Active Mark. The ICT facilities at the middle school were "fantastic" and had been offered for lower school use.

The school was also part of the Morpeth partnership pyramid which included all first and middle schools which fed into the high school at Morpeth. This was the area group through which the local authority communicated with schools through termly meetings. There was, the head noted, no help from the local authority in providing supply costs to enable heads of small schools to attend these distant meetings.

Recently, the school successfully collaborated with the parish council to bid for £100,000 to improve play facilities for the village. Children were involved in designing the playground.

School perceptions of benefits of/barriers to further collaboration

The headteacher could see many benefits from federation, particularly in providing a headteacher with the time to lead and in creating more efficient school governance. The head felt that, were she to be free of teaching commitments, she would be able to get more done. Not everyone recognises, she added, how much work had to be taken home for completion in the evenings and at weekends. As each school had to submit similar paperwork, it could be more efficiently done in federation. "If one governing body could oversee this in two, three or four schools including budget control it would be better," she pointed out.

The school was at the centre of its community and was well supported by parents. However, the head was conscious of the high expectations which parents had of a head's commitment, and felt that this is a potential barrier. She hoped that as parents from different communities got together at the new Rothbury Family Centre, prejudices would be eroded and they would perceive themselves to be part of a wider community.

Sources of information:

- *Interview with the headteacher and chair of governors (joining after the first hour) of Thropton Village First School, 15th January 2009.*
- *Documentation supplied by the school and documents researched online.*

Further areas of potential collaboration with other schools

The following models were developed from a second conversation with the headteacher of Thropton Village First School.

Trading expertise within the Creative Partnership

This would involve headteacher and staff being released to share what Thropton does best and, in turn, to gain from the expertise of others. Potential gains to Thropton would have to be clearly articulated to parents in order to ensure their support. Associated costs would include supply cover (at about £180 per day) plus the 'hidden cost' of the possible loss of continuity in learning when teachers are away from their classes.

The school had particular strengths in working with families and in the early years of schooling, which could be exchanged with other Creative Partnership schools. A possible swap might be with Branton, which had expertise in music and in boys writing, both of which would be valuable. The HLTA at Thropton could be shared to provide some special educational needs intervention support for Branton if they were unable to afford a teaching assistant at the end of this year. Thropton also had skills in developing staff through performance management and in promoting staff development, which others could call upon.

Links with the middle school

Both schools would benefit from extending the existing successful links with the middle school. Thropton could use the middle school ICT facilities to enhance aspects such as animation in their creative curriculum. If such use could be timetabled to follow the regular swimming sessions, there would be no additional travel costs. The development of a Coquet valley virtual learning environment (VLE), through the newly established county ICT platform, Nortal (managed by the middle school) would allow pupils and staff to share learning with other schools.

Staff from all the Coquet cluster schools could build upon their current collaborations to undertake joint professional development activities. For example, as the schools worked towards becoming all-through primaries, teachers would need to develop Key Stage 1 expertise in the middle school and Key Stage 2 expertise in the first school. Administrative staff could also attend training, such as school business management, together.

In order to develop middle management in all the schools, the Coquet cluster or Morpeth partnership might be a suitable sized group for a cluster application to NCSL for Leading from the Middle training. If so (currently it requires eighteen applicants), it would have the advantage of locally arranged training and significantly less travelling.

Links with the Rothbury Family Centre

The headteacher was keen to make early links with the new Rothbury Family Centre. The community room at the school would make an ideal satellite for health services (such as health visitor and baby clinics) which could link with existing toddler and playgroups. Parent learning sessions, with crèche facilities, could also be provided. Health care (such as nurse surgeries and chiropody services) could be provided for the wider community, many of whom were disadvantaged by a lack of transport.

Development towards a Thropton primary school

The headteacher had a clear vision for the future of the school as a three to eleven primary school. She could envisage how this increase in size would enable her to monitor teaching and learning more effectively by spreading her teaching commitment across four classes. She would no longer need to be the main teacher for any class; the benefits to the headteacher's leadership would be considerable. The school had the space to expand so that it could accommodate sixty to seventy pupils, and could actively pursue this option. However, the headteacher was unsure of the mechanism for doing so, feeling that the school needed to wait for the local authority to make decisions about the roll-out of the two tier system in the Rothbury area.

To prepare for primary status, it would be important for the headteacher to convince the governing body and all stakeholders of the advantages to the staff and pupils; minutes of meetings before her appointment showed that at that time parents favoured the three tier system. Parents saw the advantages of pupils using the middle school facilities for science, technology and sport so continuation of this would have to be assured.

The governing body would need to make an active approach to the local authority to ascertain timescales, so that capital funding could be saved towards the necessary extension of the building. The building would only need one additional classroom; the relatively low cost of this could provide a persuasive argument.

Meetings held with parents

A cautionary note

Two meetings were held to gauge the views of parents; both were poorly attended - a total of four parents, of whom three were also governors. Only two of the four schools were represented. The following commentary should therefore be treated with caution, and the sentiments expressed not taken as necessarily typical of parents' views generally. However, they have been included here because they are consistent with parents' concerns reported by headteachers and governors in the majority of the individual schools studied, both in Northumberland and in the other two local authorities.

Points arising from the meetings

Parents were generally unaware of existing collaborations because their own children had mostly started school very recently. In principle, they were in agreement with sharing staff and expertise with other schools or buying in specialist support where there was little staff expertise, for example for music. They also felt that subject co-ordination across schools could work well.

However, those attending the meetings were opposed to any arrangement which would involve their headteacher overseeing another small school. They could see a financial advantage, but this was strongly counterbalanced by the concern that their headteacher would be (partly) lost to them. The views in opposition to the idea were forcefully expressed. "Sharing a head is no good at all", one parent commented, "she is part of this community. How many communities can she be part of?" Another added, "the headteacher *is* the school." A specific worry was that access to the head would be restricted. One parent commented that "it would not give you the opportunity to see the headteacher enough." Another concern was that the quality of leadership would be compromised. "The headteacher would only get a generalised overview", one parent commented; "they wouldn't have their finger on the pulse." Another felt that "there would be times with no senior management in school." An overarching fear which was expressed was that "one school would become the annexe of another."

The parents were, however, aware that some schools had difficulty recruiting headteachers. as succession planning had been a major feature of the local authority governors' conference the previous year.

Sources of information:

- *Focus group meeting attended by three parents of pupils at Thropton Village First School, two of whom were governors, 15th January 2009.*
- *Focus group meeting attended by one parent of a pupil at Branton First School, also a governor, 16th January 2009.*

The way forward: strategies and hypothetical models

The summarised models (and the strategies for moving towards them) are informed by the following:

- The current situation that the schools find themselves in.
- Their own analysis of their strengths and immediate development priorities.
- Proposals and ideas which arose from the interviews and discussions.
- The support which might be offered by the local authority or other agency.
- Knowledge of relevant developments, initiatives or projects, both local and national.

All figures used in these models are mid-range for the school size and do not represent actual salaries of staff in the study schools

Model 1 Federation - Harbottle / Netherton

There would clearly be potential for the executive headship between Harbottle and Netherton to develop into a federation with shared governance. During the period of executive headship, governors as well as staff could trial joint committees with delegated responsibilities. The nature of the type of future federation will be dependent on the views of parents and community of Netherton.

Model 2 Shared trust - Branton / Thropton / Netherton

A shared trust would be an alternative way to put in place long-term sustainable structures for improvement between the schools. Sharing a trust can create a solid base for collaboration which will not be affected by the departure of key individuals, and will not be dependent on them for its long term continuation. Trust schools can also manage their own assets, employ their own staff, and set their own admissions arrangements. The Trust and Foundation Schools Partnership can provide schools with consultancy support and a small amount of funding if they are accepted onto the Trust Schools Programme.

Thropton, Harbottle, Netherton and Branton had strong existing links not just with each other but with various local organisations such as The National Trust. They also wished to establish a link with the newly formed Rothbury Family Centre. With these as external

partners, there was thus the potential to establish a shared trust. As a foundation school, Thropton would be well placed to acquire trust status (see Appendix 11 for the process) since it is a foundation school already; Branton and Netherton Northside could also acquire the same trust, with Harbottle, as a church school, becoming an associate member. The main benefit to this group of schools would be formalise existing good practice, particularly in the area of the development of a creative, locally appropriate curriculum. A trust would also help to ensure that the partners remained committed to each other when key staff moved on.

Model 3 Soft Federation - Harbottle / Netherton / Thropton /Dr Thomlinson

Harbottle, Netherton Northside, Thropton and Dr Thomlinson Middle School could become a soft federation with an underpinning agreed set of aims. The schools would have separate governing bodies but would delegate powers to joint committees; the schools might have their own headteacher, or share an executive headteacher. There would need to be representation from all school communities on the joint governor committees with delegated powers.

A soft federation would be a more viable model because two of the schools are Church of England schools, and Thropton is a foundation school. Forming a single governing body would require a compromise as it would not be possible for both the foundation school and the church schools to retain a majority.

The potential advantages are extensive and would include: greater efficiency in finance, resources and administration; more flexible staffing, shared across the schools (including, for example a school business manager and ICT technician); better learning opportunities for pupils in all schools; improved leadership and professional development opportunities for staff. The model would have the advantage of all the schools being located geographically close to one another.

In the longer term, all these schools - both first schools and middle school - may become primary schools. As a soft federation, they would support one another in developing the skills to teach a wider age range. This would be a particular benefit to the current middle school staff who must adapt to the foundation stage to Year 4 age range which they have not been accustomed to teaching. Conversely, the first schools would have to extend their range by two years (Years 5 and 6). Subject expertise from current middle school staff could support first schools such as Thropton to raise the achievement of Key Stage 2 pupils. Pupils at the small first schools would additionally benefit from using the enhanced facilities of the middle school for sport, science and ICT.

Efficiency savings could be created by sharing key support staff and specialist teachers. The existence of an overarching federation would also enable the schools to respond better to changing circumstances, such as a future fall in school rolls, or the need to establish further executive headships.

If further executive headships were to be established in the future, the financial benefits would be as follows:

Financial implications

Detailed calculations of the financial implications of executive headship models can be found in Appendix 10. The following table is a summary of these findings.

Financial advantages of executive headships in Northumberland

	Savings	Additional costs	Available for school improvement
Executive headship (two first schools such as Harbottle and Netherton)	One head's salary £53,200	Salary rise (head) £5,505 Class teacher £24,500 Assistant head £3,800	£19,395
Executive headship (three first schools)	Two heads' salaries £106,400	Salary rise (head) £12,461 Class teacher £28,000 Two Assistant heads £7,600	£58,339
Executive headship (one middle and one first school)	One head's salary £53,200	Salary rise (head) £9,310 Class teacher £14,000 Assistant head £3,800	£26,000

In the three school model, the overall savings on headteachers' salaries could be used to support the appointment of additional staff including one or more HLTAs, as suggested in paragraph 6.1 above, a shared business manager and/or ICT technician.

Training for a business manager through NCSL is free for small schools but supply and travel are paid by the school(s). There would be additional salary costs of employing a shared school business manager that could range from an increase in salary for a member of staff currently employed in the school to the full costs of a new appointment. A term time only appointment to be shared by three or more schools could cost in the region of £25,000 - £30,000 depending on experience.

An ICT technician would probably be in the range (depending on experience and the level at which the post is appointed) at approximately £20,000 - £25,000.

Sharing skills and staff

Increased sharing of skills and staff between all four schools would be a benefit, enlarging the pool of professional expertise available to each school and achieving affordable support for headteachers by employing staff such as HLTAs across several schools.

Time efficiencies could be achieved by sharing subject leaders and policies. This would reduce the workload for all staff. Headteachers could share procedures and systems, supporting one another in carrying out the monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum and the effectiveness of new initiatives. The use of ICT links would enable much of this sharing to take place without lengthy travelling.

Financial implications

- a) **Sharing HLTAs** - an additional post at point 24 would cost approximately £22,000 including oncosts. Therefore, one HLTA post shared between the four schools would cost each of them around £5,500 a year for 1.25 days per week of additional staff time. Some costs could be offset by savings to the supply budgets of the schools involved, although the management of only 1.25 days per week per school each would need close co-operation. A more practical model would be the sharing of an additional HTLA between two schools at an estimated cost of £11,000 each.
- b) **Sharing subject leaders** - this development would not be likely to prove a cost saving measure but offered opportunities for reducing workloads and extending professional development.
- c) **Sharing leadership tasks at headteacher level** - initially this would require more of the headteachers' time for setting up and agreeing a plan of action but additional HLTA support would enable this time to be found. The benefit in the longer term is one of greater efficiency in the use of headteacher's time as tasks, expertise and developments were shared, and an improvement in the overall strategic leadership across the schools involved.

Further develop the links between first and middle schools

There was much to be gained for all the schools in further strengthening their collaboration with local middle schools (Glendale for Branton and Dr Thomlinson for Thropton, Harbottle and Netherton Northside). Benefits would be in improving pupils' learning opportunities through use of the enhanced middle school resources for subjects such as ICT, DT, science and PE. Pupils would gain familiarity with a larger school environment and gain confidence in transition. Travel costs could be minimised by linking sessions in other subjects with existing swimming sessions.

Staff would benefit, particularly if all the schools became primaries. Sharing professional development would enable schools to pool staff expertise to cover the whole three to eleven age range. They could support one another through the organisational transition.

Financial implications

- a) **Strengthening collaboration with middle schools** - the use of middle school expertise and facilities would be unlikely to reduce expenditure although the only additional costs would be those of transport which could be minimised by careful timetabling as suggested above.
- b) **Shared CPD** - this has significant potential for overall savings to be made.
- the typical costs of a one day course for a teacher are around £325
 - average costs of a training day with an external consultant bought in are £600 (£500 in consultant's fees; £100 for refreshments and materials)
 - this brings the cost per person (if TAs, HLTAs and teachers are all included) to around £20 per head if 30 staff can be brought together from 4 or 5 schools.
 - it has the added advantage of providing common development across the cluster by including all staff in the training, rather than relying on one teacher to attend a course and 'cascade' messages back

If four such days were arranged annually, each school would pay approximately £600 rather than around £1,300 which is the estimated cost of buying places on four one-day courses over the year.

6. Overall conclusions

In all three local authorities, the small schools studied were engaged in a rich variety of informal collaborations with other schools. Some of these were based upon local authority networks, which linked schools of all phases with their receiving secondary or high school. The links felt by schools to be most effective, however, were locally determined groupings, often small in size, which provided interdependent support between schools with a similar ethos. These 'clusters' of schools organised joint activities, which were directly focused on improving the learning experiences of pupils. Their collaborations contributed much towards reducing the isolation of the individual schools, providing in particular a self-help network of support for the headteachers. These strong local groupings created a firm foundation on which the establishment of more formal collaborations could be built.

There was, in all three areas, potential for existing informal collaborations to develop further, for example through sharing staff and responsibilities. The appointment of a shared school business manager in a group of schools would support the headteachers in financial management and encourage economies of scale through collaborative ventures and bid-writing. HLTAs appointed across schools could support the headteachers in their role as SENCo and provide cover for classes. Joint staff training could provide the opportunity for a wider range of views to be discussed and for a common curriculum to be developed. Subject leadership could be shared across a number of schools, reducing the workload of all the teachers.

The three local authorities in the study, and the two Church of England dioceses consulted, all encouraged formal collaborations between schools, including executive headships and federated governing bodies. This was largely in response to the increasing difficulty of recruiting suitable headteachers, though in all cases there was a wider awareness of the potential of formal collaboration to improve educational provision. Collaborations were generally seen by the local authorities as choices to be initiated by school governing bodies. Governors, however, were often poorly informed about the advantages such arrangements would bring, beyond easing the difficulties in appointing a headteacher. There is scope, therefore, for local authorities and dioceses to increase their support to governors, both in helping them make decisions about leadership arrangements and in helping them appoint suitable candidates to new leadership roles. If effective, this would in time lead to an overall improvement in the quality of small school leadership which would have a direct impact on pupil learning.

In all three areas, there was an awareness that parents and communities might need to be persuaded about the benefits of formal collaborative models. Linking with other schools could be perceived, in the community, as the loss of the school's independence or character, or even as the precursor to amalgamation or closure.

In fact, executive headship or other formal arrangement would be likely to strengthen small rural schools, making them more viable and preventing their loss. Parents' primary concern about changes in leadership arrangements was related to the perceived impact on their child's learning; they worried first and foremost about the loss of the headteacher in the classroom. Ironically, it is precisely here that partnered schools have most to gain: an executive head, for example, would have more time to focus on the improvement of teaching and learning.

In the study schools, the headteachers (and many governors) generally appreciated the benefits which shared headship arrangements would be likely to bring to headteacher, staff and pupils alike. The multiplicity of roles which a headteacher in a single small school had to undertake, in addition to their management and administrative duties - often as class teacher, SENCo, child protection officer, curriculum co-ordinator, core subject leader and

others - meant that they had little time for strategic planning. Executive headship, they saw, would give the opportunity to reduce their teaching loads and enable them to focus on school improvement; it would create time for monitoring the quality of learning and taking action to improve standards. Executive headship also had the potential to be a more attractive career option than a single small school headship and might encourage more - and higher quality - applicants to seek vacant posts. A wider staff group would allow the headteacher greater opportunities to delegate responsibilities. Executive headships would also create opportunities for new leadership roles, for example assistant headships or TLR posts in each school to deputise for the heads in their absence.

It was the expectation of these gains which had motivated the two executive headship arrangements in the study - one in the early stages of operation, the other in the late stages of planning. Both had followed precisely the route described in many of the above hypothetical models - formal collaborations which had developed from existing informal links.

Though the advantages of executive headship were generally clear to schools, the benefits of federation were less apparent. Though it was appreciated that, for schools with an executive head, there would be considerable advantages in only having one governing body to work with, it was also generally seen as a radical step which needed a trial period as preparation. In the three examples of executive headship in the study, therefore (including that in the two additional schools investigated in Cornwall) governing bodies were linked in a non-statutory soft federation; this was perceived as giving schools and communities time to grow together, and was to be reviewed by governors after a trial period. In all three, it was not anticipated by governors that federation would necessarily follow.

There is no reason, however, that federation should follow executive headship rather than precede it. Federation could be conceived as a first stage of long-term collaborative succession planning: two or more schools could make an initial commitment to federation in order to signal their intention to arrange an executive headship when the opportunity arose to appoint a single headteacher.

The study schools had little knowledge of the anticipated benefits of shared trusts and envisaged few potential external partners in their rural locations. However, many of the small schools in these remote areas had forged partnerships with a range of external organisations; most were sharing the ensuing benefits with other schools with which they were informally linked. Establishing a shared trust could, in these circumstances, strengthen existing partnerships by putting them on a statutory basis. Moreover, the setting up of a shared trust could fulfil precisely the same function as federation - signaling the intention, by undertaking a statutory collaboration, to take further steps towards interdependence between the schools sharing the trust.

Over the next five years many headteachers of small schools will retire. This is a window of opportunity which should not be missed - by schools, by local authorities and by central government. Strategic succession planning, carried out at local level and involving headteachers, governors, local authorities and dioceses, would enable schools to plan positively for the establishment of alternative structures. It is a course of action that would both strengthen small rural schools and improve their future viability.

7. Recommendations

- Small primary schools should have access to better information and guidance on the potential benefits of different statutory models of collaboration; this guidance should be specific to rural contexts and evidence-based.
- Local authorities, working with dioceses and small schools themselves, should seek to develop a strategic plan for the promotion of formal collaborations, including how they might be brokered and supported.
- Local authorities and Church of England dioceses should extend their co-operation in order to help schools to negotiate potential barriers to the partnering of church and non-church schools.
- Local authorities should pay particular attention to how formal school partnership models can be effectively advocated to governing bodies and local communities.

8. Further reading

Barnes, I: *Primary executive heads: A study of heads who are leading more than one primary school* (NCSL 2006).

Collins, A et al: *Federations: Does every school need a headteacher? Key implications from a study of federations in the Netherlands* (NCSL 2005).

Ford, G and McCue, E: *Can federation help stars to come out?* (NCSL 2008),

Grimwade, K: *How can a local authority best raise awareness and support exploration of the opportunities for alternative models of leadership and organisation with school leaders and governors?* (Cambridgeshire/NCSL 2008).

Jones, J: *The development of leadership capacity through collaboration in small primary schools* (CfBT 2008)

Lindsay, J et al: *School federations pilot study 2003-2007* (DCSF 2008)
How hard federation can help your school (DCSF 2009)

9. Glossary

Executive headship: A formal collaborative arrangement of two or more schools with a single headteacher. The schools may or may not be federated.

Federation: A statutory arrangement whereby schools have shared governance. This may be a single governing body (a **hard federation**) or an executive committee with delegated powers (a **soft governance federation**).

Formal collaboration: two or more schools working together for a common purpose or purposes, contractually agreed. The range of possibilities is very wide, for example, a shared business manager for a group of schools, a specialist teacher employed by several schools, contractual arrangements for delivering extended services.

Informal collaboration: any arrangement by which two or more schools work together towards common ends, but which has no written (that is, contractual) basis. A very wide range of activities is covered by this term, for example, shared professional development, joint pupil activities. Sometimes known as a loose collaboration.

Management partnership: term used in some local authorities to denote two or more schools linked together by a single headteacher. The schools may or may not be federated. In essence, the arrangement is the same as an executive headship (qv).

Shared headship: the same as executive headship (qv).

Shared trust: A group of schools which, having acquired foundation status, adopt the same trust with the aim of using the experience, energy and expertise of one another and any other outside partners (see www.trustandfoundationschools.org.uk).

10. Appendices

1. Overview of On Line Research Data Types Collated & Data Sources Used
2. Questions for schools
3. Questions for LAs
4. Questions for joint meeting between Norfolk schools
5. Questions for joint meeting Landewednack / Grade Ruan Schools
6. Framework for discussion between Harbottle / Netherton Northside Schools
7. Final visit questions used in individual Norfolk and Northumberland schools
8. SKILL network interview evidence
9. Detailed financial calculations of benefits of executive headship for hypothetical models
10. Process of acquiring foundation status prior to trust

Appendix 1

CORNWALL SCHOOLS

Overview of on line research data types collated and data sources used

	Data	Data Type	Data Reference	Data Source	Comments
1	School Performance	Achievement & Attainment Tables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1A - Garras Community Primary School • 1B - St Martin in Meneage Community Primary School • 1C - Grade Ruan CE School • 1D - Landewednack Community Primary School 	DCSF Website (www.dcsf.gov.uk)	
		Cornwall Primary School League Tables - KS2 National Curriculum Tests May 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1E 	BBC Website (homepage)	Garras Community Primary School and St Martin in Meneage results not included because they are classed as 'small schools'
2	Financial	Schools Formula Funding - Section 52 statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2A 	LA website (www.cornwall.gov.uk)	
		FMSIS (Financial Management Standards in Schools) - DCSF commissioned report (Hedra August 2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2B 	DCSF FMSIS website (www.fmsis.info)	This is a DCSF commissioned report aimed to give schools a flavour of the issues faced when going through the process.
		Individual School progress with FMSIS	Telephone conversation	Andy Winn, Finance Team, LA	Confirmed that all four schools have not completed FMSIS, however stated that Cornwall are working to a FMSIS completion deadline of March 2010 (DCSF deadline is March 2009)

3	Ofsted Data	School summaries and reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3A - Garras Community Primary School • 3B - St Martin in Meneage Community Primary School • 3C - Grade Ruan CE School • 3D - Landewednack Community Primary School 	Ofsted website (www.ofsted.gov.uk)	
4	Service Level Agreements for bought in services by school	No Data provided	Telephone conversations	D Rowe, LA J Caudle, Cornwall Learning	LA confirmed that the schools would have to release this information. Schools may buy in services via Cornwall Learning (J Caudle). Cornwall CC buys in services and time from Cornwall Learning, which acts as an independent business unit.
		Cornwall Learning Brochure	• 4A	On line google search	Background information on Cornwall learning Business Unit
5	Detailed School Contextual Information	Ofsted/DCSF online RAISE reports (context, absence, measures and targets)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5A - Garras Community Primary School • 5B - St Martin in Meneage Community Primary School • 5C - Grade Ruan CE School • 5D - Landewednack 	Provided at the discretion of DCSF commissioners of the research project	
		School written profile and contextual information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5E - Garras Community Primary School • 5F - St Martin in Meneage Community Primary School • 5G - Grade Ruan CE School • 5H - Landewednack 	School website and/or on line google search <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No school website for Garras Community • (www.st-martin-in-meneage.cornwall.sch.uk) • (www.grade-ruan.cornwall.sch.uk) • (www.landewednack.cornwall.sch.uk) 	

6	School Improvement Plan	No data provided			Nothing available as published data
7	Evidence of existing school collaborations				
	SKILL (South Kerrier Initiative for Linking Learning) – Extended Schools Project and Community Change Team	SKILL Project Status Report dated 20/6/06	• 7A	On line google search	Background information on SKILL
	Lizard Small Schools Cluster	Context of cluster	• 7B	Grade Ruan school website	
	Helston & The Lizard	Context and background case study data	• 7C	On line google search	
	Little Lizard Children's Centre			Reference on Landewednack website but cannot access page information	Follow up at school visit for more information

Appendix 2

DCSF Small Rural Schools Research Project

Questions for Schools

Below is our list of questions; the four headings are based on the key questions outlined by the DCSF in their research specification.

As far as possible, we intend to ask the same questions of each of the twelve schools involved in the project. However, we recognise that not all the questions will be relevant to your particular circumstances. Likewise, there may be areas covered in our discussions which touch on issues not directly addressed by a question.

The headteacher and the chair of governors will obviously be key people in giving answers to the questions. However, others in the school may well be in a better position to answer some of them - for example, other teachers, administrative staff, other governors, parents etc. We would be grateful for the opportunity to meet any key enablers of collaboration, if that is possible to arrange.

A. How different types of collaboration might support the viability of small schools.

1. What challenges face you as the head of a small school in this context?
What is your vision for the future of the school? What are your priorities for development?
2. In what ways are you collaborating with other schools e.g. sharing staff, resources, pupil activities?
3. What is the impact of collaboration on standards in the school?
4. Can you describe how any collaborative arrangements came about? Who was the prime mover? How did they evolve? Who has responsibility / accountability for shared resources?
5. What financial, or other, incentives are there for greater collaboration? What are the management benefits?
6. Do you receive any external support to enable you to initiate or sustain collaborations?
7. What are the barriers to forming federations and shared trusts?

B. The specific benefits that collaboration between small schools might bring. The enablers who are involved in setting up and maintaining collaborations. The challenges involved in collaborating.

1. Are you a member of a local 'cluster' or 'pyramid' of schools? If so, what practical support does this provide in terms of school development?
2. Are you a member of any other network or collaborative arrangement with other small schools? If so, what is the specific focus?
3. Can you outline the key benefits of working in collaboration with other schools?
Are there any inhibitors or barriers to collaboration and, if so, what are they?

4. Where has the initiative for collaboration come from?
5. What are the issues in sustaining, as opposed to initiating, collaboration?
6. What involvement has the governing body had in initiating or sustaining collaborations?
7. How do pupils directly experience the benefits of collaboration?
8. How is collaboration with other schools perceived in the community - for example, by parents?
9. Do you have any plans for any further collaborative ventures?

C. The possibilities for improving sustainability and overall effectiveness through sharing staff and / or resources.

1. How do you ensure that the many roles and responsibilities within the school are successfully met? Are there any gaps?
2. What opportunities do your staff have for professional and leadership development?
3. Are any of your staff shared with other schools? If so, what are the benefits of this arrangement? What, if any, are the difficulties?
4. Do you share resources with other schools? If so, how do these arrangements work and how successful are they?
5. Do pupils share activities with those in other schools? If so, how does this work?

D. The potential for co-location of extended services. The benefits and challenges of doing so.

1. How is the school meeting the expectations of the extended services agenda? What have been the difficulties, and what solutions have you found?
2. What external support, if any, have you had in helping to deliver the extended services core offer?
3. Are there any other services e.g. health or social services which could be located within your school?

Appendix 3

Questions for Local Authorities

Below is our list of questions. As far as possible, we intend to ask the same questions of each of the three Local Authorities involved in the project. However, we recognise that some questions may not be relevant to your particular circumstances. Likewise, there may be other areas covered in our discussions which touch on issues not directly addressed by a question.

The officer with responsibility for small schools will obviously be a key person in giving answers to the questions. However, others in the Local Authority may well be in a better position to answer some of them - for example, officers with financial or administrative responsibilities, or officers with responsibility for overall strategic direction. It would be very helpful if the officer being interviewed could find out in advance the answer to questions outside her/his area of operation or responsibility. We would, of course, be willing to meet with more than one person if that could be arranged; we would be particularly grateful for the opportunity to meet any key enablers of collaborations in the LA.

A. How different types of collaboration might support the viability of small schools.

1. Does the LA have a policy on encouraging collaboration between small rural schools? If so, what are the key elements of the policy? How is the policy promoted, and how is it manifested?
2. What types of existing collaboration are there in the LA? How effective do you judge the different types to be?
3. Are there any financial incentives or other form of support for setting up or maintaining small school collaborations, of whatever type?
4. What determines the type of collaboration in which small schools engage (for example, local initiative, LA promotion / intervention)?
5. What individual support, if any, is given to small schools which, in the LA's view, would benefit from collaboration but where there is little or none currently in evidence?

B. The specific benefits that collaboration between small schools might bring. The enablers who are involved in setting up and maintaining collaborations. The challenges involved in collaborating.

1. What do you see as the benefits of small school collaborations / federations / trusts?
2. What obstacles or challenges inhibit small schools from engaging in more extensive collaboration?
3. Who are the key instigators and enablers of small school collaborations?
4. Are there local 'cluster' or 'pyramid' organisations which small schools are part of? If so, how effective are they at providing specific support for small schools? Where they are most effective, who are the key players?
5. Are there mechanisms for enabling or supporting small schools to network with other small schools beyond their immediate 'cluster'?

6. What are the barriers that prevent you from offering more support to schools that want to collaborate?

C. The possibilities for improving sustainability and overall effectiveness through sharing staff and/or resources.

1. What are the issues relating to the recruitment and retention of staff, particularly headteachers, in small schools? What action (for example, in relation to succession planning) is the LA taking to address these?
2. Are there any general skills gaps/areas of weakness in small schools in your LA?
3. How do you deal with professional development of the staff?
4. How are small schools helped to respond to national policies, initiatives and directives? Is there differentiated support and, if so, what form does it take?
5. Are there any LA schemes for providing specific services (for example bursar services, IT technician support) to a group of small schools?
6. Do small schools have different arrangements for buying in LA services?
7. Is there a role for the LA in encouraging greater sharing of resources and staff? If so, how might this be carried out?

D. The potential for co-location of extended services. The benefits and challenges of doing so.

1. How successful are small schools in meeting the extended services agenda? What problems have there been for small schools in rural areas? What solutions have been found?
2. What models of successful practice are there in the delivery of extended services in rural areas? How can these models be shared and how can they be developed further?
3. Is there any unmet demand for health and social services? Do you think that the demand for these services might justify a part-time provision of the service in the community?
4. Are there any services that have been withdrawn or are under threat?
5. Is there existing capacity on the school site for co-location (perhaps due to surplus places)?
6. What scope is there for the development of shared trust collaborations as a way of delivering extended services in rural areas? What would need to happen to achieve this?
7. What issues has the LA identified in ensuring the sustainability of small rural schools? What plans are in place to address them?

Appendix 4

Meeting of headteacher and governors of Denver, Hilgay Village, Southery and Ten Mile Bank Primary Schools, Thursday 20th November 2008

Prompts for Discussion

1. Context

Commonalities

- Below average socio-economic communities, characterised by low-paid, often part-time employment and modest expectations and aspirations.
- High level of pupil turbulence which hinders continuity of education and care.
- Similar visions, as expressed in published aims and mission statements.
- Strong emphasis on the 'whole child' with continuity of care as a significant attribute.

Differences

- Distinctive ethos and school individuality (including church status) which schools are keen to preserve.
- School size (two schools significantly larger than other two).
- Adequacy of school building and facilities.
- Community perceptions of school effectiveness, based on historical as well as current viewpoints.

Shared concerns

- Short-term vulnerability caused by staff absence, illness or ineffectiveness.
- Recruitment and retention of high quality staff.
- Range of staff expertise and skills, and time available for exercising leadership, especially for the headteacher.
- Capacity to implement new initiatives and requirements swiftly and effectively.

DCSF concerns about small schools

"Small rural primary schools face increasing difficulties from falling numbers of pupils, headteacher shortages and few opportunities for staff development. These schools may struggle to provide extended services, specialist teaching, and new facilities and equipment..."

2. Ideas for further investigation

A very wide range of suggestions and proposals was made during the course of the initial visits, though schools were clear about the obstacles as well as the potential benefits. The following areas for further fruitful collaboration arise from an analysis of school documentation (particularly the Self Evaluation Form and the School Development Plan) or were suggested in discussion by more than one school (and occasionally by three or all four):

- Sharing specialist teaching and/or management of key roles, for example music, MFL, SENCo, G & T.
- More systematic procedures for sharing events and experiences, for example, staff development, school visits, and curriculum enrichment activities.
- Widening leadership opportunities for highly skilled staff.
- Mechanisms for 'trading' staff expertise between schools.
- Sharing administrative staff, or making available administrative expertise.
- Joint production of policy documents, communications, booklets, curriculum planning.
- Further joint development of extended services provision, beyond the 'signposting' of the new website.
- Early succession planning in readiness for headteacher retirement or moving to another post.

3. Questions and starting points

While not overlooking the obstacles to greater collaboration (including whether the desire is there), it is intended that the discussion should be solution focused. The following questions will hopefully provide a framework for working up a hypothetical model for formal collaboration which might suit the circumstances of some, or all, of the schools.

What would be your ideal collaborative model for small rural schools - the one that, in your view, would best serve your communities in the present and in the future?

What, collectively, could you do to reduce both the short-and long-term vulnerability of your schools?

What would need to happen in order to take the crucial step from extensive, informal collaboration to structural, formal collaboration?

What brokering, or leveraging, might be needed to overcome the obstacles to formal collaboration?

How could you 'start the ball rolling' to achieve greater collaboration? Who would be the key players and what support would they need? What role might there be for the high school, the local authority, the diocese, or other agencies?

What 'first steps' would you like to see as an outcome of this meeting?

Appendix 5

DCSF Rural Small Schools Research Project

Meeting of headteachers of Landewednack and Grade Ruan Primary Schools.
Tuesday 9th December 2008

Prompts for Discussion

Context

Commonalities

- School size and organisation including the headteacher's teaching commitment.
- Below average socio-economic communities with much seasonal, low paid employment.
- Above average levels of mobility.
- Above average (particularly Grade Ruan) proportion of pupils with SEN.
- Similar visions, as expressed in published aims and mission statements.
- Strong emphasis on the 'whole child' and the 'school family' with pupils' wellbeing and personal development according high status.
- Strong belief in their role at 'the heart of the local community'.
- Strong school leaders who are innovative, creative and outward facing in their approaches.
- Current beliefs that the schools are self-sufficient.
- Governor and parental views about preserving the independence of their school
- The strong commitment of headteachers and governors to informal collaboration with other schools
- A significantly enriched curriculum through active partnerships with many agencies.
- Priorities that include writing, subject leadership and aspects of assessment

Differences

- Status of the school -Grade Ruan is a VC C of E while Landewednack is a Community School
- The provision of extended school services on site
- Current budgetary situation
- Community perceptions of school effectiveness, based on historical viewpoints

- Perceptions of the effectiveness of some aspects of the SKILL network
- The proportion of pupils in emergency housing and its possible impact if withdrawn
- The quality of ICT provision

Shared concerns

- Time available to fulfil the headteacher's leadership role and the consequent lack of work-life balance
- Small number of staff to whom responsibilities can be delegated and its impact on the headteacher's role
- The 'loneliness' of the leadership role and the need for personal support networks outside of school
- The difficulty of ensuring effective subject leadership across the curriculum
- Recent blips in pupils' achievement
- The capacity to initiate own collaborative ventures
- The additional pressure created by the considerable number of additional opportunities the school provides to its pupils
- The difficulties of sustaining collaboration because of the additional energy, motivation and drive that it requires from the head

Ideas for further investigation

Landwednack and Grade Ruan have a long history of collaboration that has benefited the curriculum and provided mutual support for the two headteachers. Both headteachers are keen to develop 'sustainable ways of working' which will improve their wellbeing and effectiveness.

The following areas that may provide additional opportunities for productive collaboration arise from an analysis of school documentation (particularly the Self Evaluation Form and the School Development Plan) or have arisen from the discussion with one or both schools:

- Sharing expertise to support the development of teaching and learning practices, for example, ICT, EYFS (which is a school priority at Landwednack while Grade Ruan has an AST for EYFS)
- Sharing the management of key roles across two schools, for example subject/middle leadership for ICT, foundation subjects, G&T, SENCO. (the schools have 3.7 and 4.0 FTE staff)
- Sharing resources e.g. the self-evaluation files being developed by subject leaders at Landwednack
- Developing joint approaches to areas of common concern e.g. pupil tracking and APP

- Writing a joint development plan to improve writing, particularly that of boys; providing joint inset, joint files, tracking etc
- Joint production of policy documents, communications, booklets, curriculum planning.
- Further work to resolve transport difficulties for collaborative projects
- Early succession planning with governors in readiness for headteacher retirement or moving to another post.

Questions and starting points

Currently, there is no perceived impetus for more formal collaboration between the schools. However, the following questions will hopefully provide a framework for working up a hypothetical model for formal collaboration.

1. What would be your ideal collaborative model for small rural schools - the one that, in your view, would best serve your communities in the present and in the future?
2. What, collectively, could you do to reduce the pressure on individual headteachers and ensure the job is more manageable?
3. What, collectively, could you do to reduce the long-term vulnerability of your schools?
4. What would need to happen in order to take the crucial step from extensive, informal collaboration to structural, formal collaboration?
5. What brokering, or leveraging, might be needed to overcome the obstacles to formal collaboration?
6. How could you 'start the ball rolling' to achieve greater collaboration? Who would be the key players and what support would they need? What role might there be for the secondary school, SKILL, the local authority, the diocese, or other agencies?
7. What 'first steps' would you like to see as an outcome of this meeting?

Appendix 6

Harbottle CE First School and Netherton Northside First School

Second visit of the DCSF small school collaboration research team Tuesday 27th
January 2009

The way forward: areas for discussion

The purpose of the discussion is to explore ways of pursuing the planned formal collaboration between the two schools. The agenda is an open one, but the following list might help to serve as a focus:

1. Maximising the benefits of shared headship: opportunities and potential difficulties.
2. Fair shares: managing parental perceptions.
3. Maintaining the quality of teaching and learning.
4. Ethos: independence and autonomy or shared identity?
5. Administrative arrangements and support: future needs.
6. Governance: expectations, mechanisms and structures.
7. Efficiency and value for money improvements.
8. Staff roles and responsibilities, within and between the schools.
9. Opportunities for staff development and leadership.
10. The opportunities for e-communication and the use of ICT.
11. The role of the local authority and of the diocese: information and support.
12. The future of the three valleys cluster.

In addition, it would be useful to spend some time on how you will measure the success of the enterprise, for example by summarising goals and thinking about how to assess the impact.

Appendix 7

Questions for the final visit

The purpose of the final visit is to give you an opportunity to comment on the process so far, and to consider how far the school might wish to act on the ideas which have been generated. The following questions are designed to act as prompts for reflection and discussion.

1. Has participation in this research changed the way you see working together with other schools? If so, in what ways?
2. What have you learned about the benefits of formal collaboration that might influence the way the school develops in the future?
3. How would you like to see collaboration develop between your school and other schools in the cluster? How do you envisage that you might get there?
4. Under what circumstances would you promote a formal partnership between your school and another school?
5. If you see formal partnership as a future possibility, how would you prepare the school and the community for the change?
6. What do you see specifically as the next steps for you and your school?

Appendix 8

The SKILL network (South Kerrier Initiative for Linking Learning)

Summary of main points:

- The SKILL network is delivering significant benefits to the local schools through the three strands of its work.
- Some small primary school headteachers in the Lizard area find that SKILL is too large and large-school orientated to meet their individual support needs, and have therefore re-established their own primary school cluster group.
- The appointment of one person to the three coordination roles provides an integrated presence that schools welcome because of the time savings.
- The co-ordinator provides an enthusiastic and evolving service to schools largely in response to their demands; a clear strategic direction for these services does not appear to be well developed as yet.
- The SKILL initiative and its three strands have no responsibility to promote formal collaboration although they do enable and encourage informal collaboration.

The South Kerrier Initiative for Linking Learning comprises the two secondary schools and twenty feeder primary schools in the South Kerrier area of Cornwall. Its vision has been agreed by the schools and includes the publicly stated objective of maintaining a school in each village, while also allowing for the possibility of federations within the Lizard cluster.

The SKILL network comprises a termly meeting for all headteachers and a number of committees that address specific topics such as: extended services; multi-agency discussion improvements to child care and protection; consultation on the Primary Strategy for Change and pupil data tracking. SKILL provides an in-service training day for the staff and governors of all schools every two years.

The three strands to the initiative are managed by a single coordinator who was previously a small school headteacher:

a. SKILL Headteacher Support (employed by the local authority for 0.3 fte, funded through a service level agreement with schools).

This role is intended to provide support to the headteachers of all schools in the area and to promote informal collaboration between schools through joint activities. There is no brief for encouraging more formal models of collaboration. The co-ordinator's role is principally one of facilitation, and his work is shaped largely by the demands from schools and by self-initiated activities.

The co-ordinator is keen to ensure good communication with schools in the network as part of his support for headteachers, and he regularly emails information to them. He also produces a monthly newsletter listing local opportunities for pupils and staff and a digest of essential information for headteachers. This has received a mixed reaction from headteachers. Some welcome the level of detail but others (including some smaller school heads) feel that its length and density are too great, given how little time they have available.

Through his efforts, SKILL provides local training on such topics as Assessment for Learning and First Aid, courses for governors and activities for pupils including master classes. The co-ordinator also conducts research into specific issues at the request of schools and provides sample policies and other documents. He liaises closely with local authority advisers and occasionally secures funding from their budgets to set up local initiatives such as the embryonic gifted and talented network within SKILL.

b. SKILL Extended Schools Co-ordinator (employed for 0.2 fte; funded by the local authority).

This role is to support the development of extended services in schools throughout the SKILL network. The work is overseen by a Steering Group of five headteachers and other representatives from extended services in the area. The co-ordinator is also responsible for writing the extended schools development plan which is based on an audit of need completed with each school. He is also leading the PACT (Parents and Children Together) programme.

The co-ordinator has considerable flexibility and delegated responsibility. For example, he makes the decision about which bids should be funded. This funding is subject to two conditions, that the bid links into the core extended schools offer and that it will have a self-sustaining outcome. There is no requirement for these bids to be collaborative projects. Bids in the last year have ranged from £350 to £5000.

Many extra-curricular activities, particularly in the performing arts and sport, take place at Mullion Comprehensive, which is the partner secondary school for the nine Lizard primary schools. Primary schools can access these clubs and also submit their own bid to SKILL if they wish to set up extended services on their own sites. The co-ordinator is aware that the bid system is not popular with some headteachers of small schools because of their workloads. He has attempted to simplify the proforma, offers schools £50 for each bid in order to help offset the time taken to complete it and offers to complete the form jointly with a headteacher.

He is aware of the major transport difficulties that exist in the area which limit access to extended provision and SKILL has therefore funded a minibus.

c. Sports Partnership Co-ordinator (employed for 0.5 fte by the Sports Partnership)

In this role, the co-ordinator organises a range of sporting events linked to the Sports Partnership Development Plan. He finds that this is a very helpful role in that schools are keen to participate in the range of activities and it enables him to get into every school on a termly basis, and thus develop a better understanding of each school and its overall needs. He tries to familiarise schools with all the regional opportunities available to them.

For example, he publicises three summer holiday events (Kerrier Outreach, Cornwall Outdoors, Bishop's Farm) and offers subsidised places at some. He also arranges local events such as archery and climbing at the main secondary school.

Sources of information:

- *Interview with the SKILL network co-ordinator*
- *Interview with the Headteacher of Mullion Comprehensive School*

Appendix 9

Detailed financial calculations of benefits of executive headships in hypothetical models for

1. Norfolk

The calculations which follow provide only the broadest of estimates because of the complexities of headteachers' and teachers' pay.

a) A shared headship between two of the schools

Such a partnership would generate an additional £20,000 or so from the local authority funding formula.

There would be a saving of one headteacher's salary between the schools. This sum would be reduced by the need to increase the executive headteacher's salary to reflect the increased responsibility. All these schools are Group 1 (L6-18 £40,494 - £54,441) but some combinations could take the joint numbers on roll into Group 2 for salary purposes. However, much would depend on the previous salary of the executive headteacher and on governors' discretionary powers regarding salary levels.

- Possible gross saving of one headteacher's salary: £53,200 (assume Leadership Spine Point 9 £43,607 + 22% oncosts)
- Salary rise to reflect increased responsibility: estimate 4 additional points to Leadership Spine Point 13 £58,705 (£48,119 + 22% oncosts)
- Net saving of £47,695 (£53,200 less difference between existing salary and new one of £5,505)

This saving of approximately £47,500 would be offset by the need to appoint a senior teacher in each school, and by the need to appoint a teacher to cover the head's current teaching commitment of 4 days per week.

- Upgrading of two teachers from an average of UPS1 to deputy headteacher on the Leadership Spine at Point 1 (from £32,660 to £35,794) = $2 \times £3,134$ + oncosts = £7,646. This sum would be considerably greater if the teachers concerned were lower than UPS 1 and were appointed higher on the Leadership Spine.
- A teacher on Main Scale 5 for 4 days per week would cost approximately £28,000 including oncosts.

This could leave total savings on the headteacher's salary at approximately £11,800.

This surplus might be used to increase the teaching complement (to improve the schools' capacity for professional development, for example) and/or used to support the employment of a shared HLTA for SEN (see paragraph 5.4) or business manager (see paragraph 5.2).

b) A shared headship between three of the schools

- Possible gross saving of two headteachers' salaries: £106,400 (assume Leadership Spine Point 9 £43,607 + 22% oncosts)
- Salary rise to reflect increased responsibility: estimate 8 additional points to Leadership Spine Point 17 £64,761 (£53,083 + 22% oncosts)
- Net saving of £93,939 (£106,400 less difference between existing salary and new one of £12,461)

This saving of approximately £94,000 would be reduced by the necessary appointment of a senior teacher in each school and additional teaching to cover the head's current commitment (4 days).

- Upgrading of three teachers from an average of UPS1 to deputy headteacher on the Leadership Spine at Point 1 (from £32,660 to £35,794) = 3 x £3,134 + oncosts = £11,470.
- A teacher on Main Scale 5 for four days per week would cost approximately £28,000 including oncosts.

This could leave total savings on the headteacher's salary at approximately £54,530. This could be used to support the appointment of additional staff including an HLTA and business manager as suggested in paragraphs 5.2 and 5.4, and/or the development of distributed leadership across the schools as in paragraph 5.3 below.

2. Cornwall

Financial implications

Because of the complexities of headteachers' and teachers' pay the following figures are broad estimates and probable represent the best case scenario in terms of savings. In reality, these could vary considerably.

There is no financial incentive to support leadership partnerships in Cornwall although each school in an executive headship would continue to receive its existing budget.

In considering the implications for Landewednack and Grade Ruan, savings would be made through the sharing of one headteacher's salary. However, some of this would be lost by the need to raise the executive headteacher's salary to reflect the increased responsibility. Both schools are Group 1 (L6-18 £40,494 - £54,441) but combining the current numbers on roll would move the headship into Group 2. (L8-21 £42,544 - £58,563)

- Possible saving: £43,607 (Leadership Spine Point 9) + 22% oncosts = £53,200
- Salary rise to reflect Group 2/increased responsibility: say 4 points £48,119 (LS Point 13) + 22% oncosts = £58,705
- Saving of £47,695 (£53,200 less difference between existing salary and new one of £5,505)

This saving of approximately £47,500 would be offset by the need to appoint a senior teacher in each school, and by the need to appoint a teacher to cover the head's current teaching commitment.

- Upgrading of two teachers from an average of UPS1 to deputy headteacher on the Leadership Spine at Point 1 (from £32,660 to £35,794) = 2 x £3134 + oncosts = £7646. Clearly this would be considerable more if the teachers concerned were lower than UPS 1 and were appointed higher on the Leadership Spine.
- A teacher on Main Scale 5 for two days per week would cost approximately £14000 including oncosts.

This could leave total savings on the headteacher's salary at approximately £25,850. This could be used to support the development of the federated schools in numerous and innovative ways, including for example, these staffing, leadership and curriculum strategies proposed in the following paragraphs.

3. Northumberland

Financial implications

The complexities of headteachers' and teachers' pay are such that calculations below can only be broad estimates. They represent the best case scenario in terms of savings but these could vary considerably.

Northumberland provides no financial incentive to support executive headships although each school would continue to receive its existing budget.

An executive headship of Harbottle and Netherton would provide savings through the sharing of one headteacher's salary between the schools. This sum would be reduced by the need to raise the executive headteacher's salary to reflect the increased responsibility. Both schools are Group 1 (L6-18 £40,494 - £54,441) and the numbers on roll are so small (41 in total) that an executive headship would still fall within Group 1 for salary purposes. However, much would depend on the previous salary of the executive headteacher and on governors' discretionary powers regarding salary levels.

- Possible gross saving of one headteacher's salary: £53,200 (assume Leadership Spine Point 9 £43,607 + 22% oncosts)
- Salary rise to reflect increased responsibility: estimate 4 additional points to Leadership Spine Point 13 £58,705 (£48,119 + 22% oncosts)
- Net saving of £47,695 (£53,200 less difference between existing salary and new one of £5,505)

This saving of approximately £47,500 would be offset by the need to appoint a senior teacher in each school, and by the need to appoint a teacher to cover the head's current teaching commitment of 3.5 days per week.

- Upgrading of two teachers from an average of UPS1 to deputy headteacher on the Leadership Spine at Point 1 (from £32,660 to £35,794) = 2 x £3,134 + oncosts = £7,646. This sum would be considerable greater if the teachers concerned were lower than UPS 1 and were appointed higher on the Leadership Spine.

- A teacher on Main Scale 5 for 3.5 days per week would cost approximately £24,500 including oncosts.

This could leave total savings on the headteacher's salary at approximately £15,300. This could be used to support the development of the federation in different ways, for example, the employment of a part-time additional HTLA as suggested in paragraph 6.1 above.

Rothbury Federation

Executive headships - this proposal provides the opportunity for a number of executive headship models within the suggested federation e.g.

a) three executive headteachers for the six lower schools; the costings of this model would mirror those described in paragraph 6.3 above

b) an executive headship of three lower schools; estimated costs would be:

- Possible gross saving of two headteachers' salaries: £106,400 (assume Leadership Spine Point 9 £43,607 + 22% oncosts)
- Salary rise to reflect increased responsibility: estimate 8 additional points to Leadership Spine Point 17 £64,761 (£53,083 + 22% oncosts)
- Net saving of £93,939 (£106,400 less difference between existing salary and new one of £12,461)

This saving of approximately £94,000 would be offset by the need to appoint a senior teacher in each school, and by the need to appoint a teacher to cover the head's current teaching commitment (between 3.5 and 4 days).

- Upgrading of three teachers from an average of UPS1 to deputy headteacher on the Leadership Spine at Point 1 (from £32,660 to £35,794) = 3 x £3,134 + oncosts = £11,470.
- A teacher on Main Scale 5 for four days per week would cost approximately £28,000 including oncosts.

This could leave total savings on the headteacher's salary at approximately £54,530. This could be used to support the appointment of additional staff including one or more HLTAs as suggested in paragraph 6.1 above, a shared business manager and / or ICT technician. Training for a business manager through NCSL is free for small schools but supply and travel are paid by the school(s). There would be additional salary costs of employing a shared business manager that could range from an increase in salary for a member of staff currently employed in the school to the full costs of a new appointment. A term time only appointment to be shared by three or more schools could cost in the region of £25,000 - £30,000 depending on experience.

An ICT technician would probably be in the range (depending on experience and the level at which the post is appointed) at approximately £20,000 - £25,000.

In this model, the overall savings on headteachers' salaries have the potential to enable the three schools to employ an additional HLTA, ICT technician and business manager between them.

c) an executive headship between the middle school and one first school

- Possible gross saving of one lower school headteacher's salary: £53,200 (assume Leadership Spine Point 9 £43,607 + 22% oncosts)
- Salary rise to reflect increased responsibility for middle school headteacher: estimated top of Group 2 currently (Point 21) - add 5 additional points to Leadership Spine Point 26 £80,756 (£66,194 + 22% oncosts)
- Net saving of £43,890 (£53,200 less difference between existing salary and new one of £9,310)

This saving of approximately £44,000 would be offset by the need to upgrade the deputy head in the middle school and upgrade a senior teacher in the lower school, and by the need to appoint a teacher to cover the deputy head's current teaching commitment in lieu of his / her additional leadership time - estimated at 2 days per week.

- Upgrading of deputy head by 4 leadership points - approximately £5,163 including oncosts
- Upgrading of one teacher from an average of UPS1 to deputy headteacher on the Leadership Spine at Point 1 (from £32,660 to £35,794) = 1 x £3,134 + oncosts = £3,823.
- A teacher on Main Scale 5 for 2 days per week would cost approximately £14,000 including oncosts.

Net savings would be approximately £21,000.

Appendix 10

The process of acquiring Trust status

To acquire trust status a school must first change to a Foundation school

Changing status - Going Foundation

The minimum time for completing the process is 14 weeks

WEEK 1

- Information gathering

Agree a draft proposal to put to the governing body

WEEK 2

- Governing body meeting to agree to consult

Inform the LA by letter of the date and time of this meeting

If you are a VC school inform the Diocese of Trustees by letter of the date and time of this meeting

WEEKS 3 - 7

- Issue consultation document and allow four weeks for responses

WEEKS 8 - 9

- Governing body considers responses to consultation and decides whether or not to proceed

WEEKS 10 - 13

- Publish statutory notice - start of statutory 4 week 'representation period'

WEEK 14

- Governing body meeting to consider responses and make decision about whether to proceed with changing status

WEEKS 14 - 15

- Apply for a new Instrument of Government
- Inform parents and other consultees of your final decision

11. References

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