



## Partnership working in small rural primary schools: the best of both worlds

### Research report

Robert Hill, with Kelly Kettlewell  
and Jane Salt



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## Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to:

### **Robert Hill**

Robert Hill is a former special adviser to Prime Minister Tony Blair and to Charles Clarke, when he was Secretary of State for Education. Robert now researches, writes, advises and speaks on school policy issues. He has led a number of studies that have examined and evaluated how a range of different models of school-to-school partnership can impact on school improvement. Robert is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow of the Department of Education and Professional Studies at Kings College, London.

### **NFER – Kelly Kettlewell, Fiona Walker, Clare O’Beirne, Helen Everett and Jennie Harland**

NFER is an independent charity committed to providing evidence which improves the lives of learners. NFER has a team of over 100 professional researchers, statisticians and assessment experts who offer extensive experience in a wide range of research methodologies, together with deep subject knowledge. In 2013, over 50 per cent of schools in England took part in research conducted by NFER. Kelly Kettlewell and Fiona Walker work in the Centre for Evidence and Consultancy which leads NFER’s large-scale and longitudinal research projects while providing rapid, innovative and flexible responses for smaller projects and specialist consultancy. Kelly and Fiona would like to extend their thanks to their NFER colleagues Clare O’Beirne, Helen Everett and Jennie Harland who provided support throughout this project.

### **Jane Salt at CfBT Education Services, Lincolnshire**

Jane Salt works for CfBT in Lincolnshire as an education adviser. A key element of her work is leading the development of collaboration and partnership working between schools. She has previous leadership experience as a headteacher, most recently in a large primary school. She now works with primary schools in a range of contexts. Her role includes supporting governing bodies in the recruitment of headteachers.

### **The small rural primary schools that took part**

Over 30 primary schools were involved in the focus groups and case studies that formed a key part of this research project. Our thanks go to all of these schools that gave up their staff time to participate in the research. Our particular thanks go to those schools that also hosted these sessions and to Halton Holegate Church of England Primary School, the Denton and Harlaxton Church of England Primary School Federation, Gipsy Bridge Academy and St Margaret’s Church of England Primary School for their extensive involvement.



## Background to the research

In the spring of 2013 CfBT Education Trust commissioned Robert Hill and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to investigate partnership working in small rural schools.

The aim of the research was to investigate the most effective ways for small rural primary schools to work together in order to improve provision and raise standards. The project sought to examine the circumstances and context of small rural schools in Lincolnshire and evaluate their different leadership models (such as collaborations, federations, partnerships or academy chains) to:

- identify successful approaches to collaboration likely to have a positive impact on pupil achievement
- identify barriers to successful collaborative models
- understand the role of the local authority in enabling effective partnership
- place the Lincolnshire approach in the context of approaches being adopted in other areas in England and best practice in partnership as identified in research literature
- identify issues and recommendations for policymakers to consider.

Robert Hill, supported by NFER researchers, staff at Lincolnshire local authority and the CfBT in-house research team, conducted a detailed analysis of data about the participating schools, four case studies and seven focus group interviews.

Two reports have been produced as a result of this research. This report is the main output and draws together the analysis of the data sources mentioned above. It is supported by a secondary report entitled *Partnership working in small rural primary schools: the best of both worlds – supporting report and evidence*. The supporting report contains further details about the methods of the study, Lincolnshire schools' context, detailed reports from the case study visits and a short report on nine other counties that cater for small rural schools.

Both reports are available online as free downloads from the research pages of the CfBT website: [www.cfbt.com/research](http://www.cfbt.com/research)



## Executive summary

### School improvement in small schools matters because...

- there are 4,000 schools in England with fewer than 150 pupils and 1,400 with fewer than 75
- small schools bring a range of benefits but they also face significant challenges
- the challenges are particularly acute for small rural primary schools
- the challenges are likely to increase as the government raises the bar for school standards, expects schools to take more responsibility for their own improvement and relies increasingly on a school-centred approach to bring about school improvement
- academisation and the establishment of teaching schools will not by themselves address these problems.

### However, partnership working has the potential to provide the right framework for addressing these challenges.

- Previous studies have highlighted the potential value of partnership working in helping small schools with leadership, recruitment, improvements in teaching and learning, business management and succession planning.
- However, partnership working covers a wide spectrum of activity, from informal collaboration to federations and multi-academy trusts.
- Governors and headteachers often find it hard to get started and/or develop effective partnerships.
- It is also challenging to develop an effective partnership across the whole of a local education system.

### Lincolnshire provides a test-bed for how far it is possible to foster partnership working, address previous obstacles and build a school-to-school improvement model for small rural schools.

- Lincolnshire built on its earlier work which developed federations and executive headships, to promote a more strategic approach to partnership working among small schools in 2012.
- All small schools were grouped in clusters, with each school receiving pump-priming funding of £20,000 when the cluster had agreed its priorities for action and confirmed in a written agreement how it was going to work together and govern itself.
- Most of the cluster partnerships were informal but some were more structured, with the schools in federations or primary academy trusts.
- Partnership activity included sharing data and information on performance, continuing and joint professional development, developing middle leaders, joint programmes and events for pupils, school business management and governor development.



- Federations and academy trusts were more likely to employ executive headteachers, deploy staff across schools, have joint leadership teams and use common systems in areas such as data tracking, classroom observations and procurement.
- The performance of small rural schools in Lincolnshire has improved significantly over the past two years as measured by their performance in Key Stage 2 tests and the outcome of Ofsted inspections.
- A number of factors contributed to the improvement, including the schools' own efforts and the actions of CfBT on behalf of the local authority.
- Ofsted reports and feedback from headteachers and governors indicate that partnership working was also a contributory factor.

### **Ten lessons for schools**

1. Build on existing partnerships and relationships – partnership grows out of partnership.
2. Keep partnerships geographically focused – distance inhibits the frequency and intensity of schools' joint work.
3. Develop strong headteacher relationships, shared values and commitment by meeting regularly, visiting one another's schools, phoning and emailing frequently and welcoming new headteachers to a partnership school.
4. Be clear about governance arrangements, funding and accountability, and involve governors in school-to-school development and training.
5. Ensure that the leadership of partnerships reaches down to involve middle leaders and coordinators.
6. Use action plans to prioritise and clarify what partnerships will do together.
7. Focus partnership activity on improving teaching and learning through teacher-to-teacher and pupil-to-pupil engagement and learning – including the use of digital contact between staff and pupils.
8. Focus any dedicated resources on providing dedicated leadership or project management time to organise activity and/or cover transport costs.
9. Be prepared to engage in multi-partnership activity and for the form and membership of partnerships to evolve over time.
10. Monitor and evaluate the impact of partnership activity.



### Ten lessons for local authorities

Lincolnshire is far from being the only shire county or local authority to promote partnership programmes. Learning from Lincolnshire and other authorities suggests that effective strategies cover the following ten areas.

1. Provide a clear vision of the future in terms of school-to-school working.
2. Be flexible about the structural arrangements for partnerships but encourage a direction of travel that moves to more structured arrangements – and formalise the arrangement, whatever form it takes.
3. Expand the use of executive headship, using soft influence and hard levers (for example, intervening when schools are failing or struggling to recruit a new headteacher) to reinforce the growth of local clusters and the recruitment and retention of high quality school leaders.
4. Insist on schools agreeing on measures of progress and success – which they track and monitor.
5. Focus any allocation of ring-fenced resources on providing some dedicated leadership or (start-up) project management time to coordinate partnership activity and/or cover transport costs.
6. Reinforce a partnership strategy by the way that other policies on areas such as children's services and place planning are framed and implemented.
7. Use simple practical initiatives to help foster partnership depth – such as time at headteachers' briefings for cluster heads to work together, appointing the same professional link adviser to all the schools in a partnership and enabling partnerships to jointly procure CPD.
8. Identify headteachers to champion the strategy, build ownership among their peers and provide a guiding coalition for change.
9. Support networking and communication between schools and partnerships through newsletters, micro-websites and conferences.
10. Stick with the initiative – recognising that elements of the programme will evolve and that the full benefit will take time to come through.





### Ten lessons for policymakers

1. Set a clear, consistent vision and strategy for primary schools – and small primary schools in particular – to work together in small clusters but without being prescriptive on the form it should take.
2. Recognise in the way that policies are developed that schools are likely to engage in partnership with other schools on a number of different levels.
3. Affirm the role of local authorities in steering and enabling clusters to develop and grow.
4. Work with faith bodies to encourage and facilitate cross-church/community school partnerships.
5. Aim to develop 3,000–4,000 executive leaders of primary schools and provide a career path and training and development to match this ambition.
6. Encourage governors to work and train together across clusters, and encourage moves towards exercising governance at cluster level through federations, trusts and multi-academy trusts.
7. Reinforce the strategy of cluster working by enabling school forums to allocate lump sums to clusters as well as to individual schools.
8. Communicate the value of partnership working to parents and the wider world in order to provide more support for the efforts of small schools in developing partnerships.
9. Ensure that the accountability regime balances the competitive pressures among schools to recruit pupils with measures that value partnership working.
10. Evaluate the impact of partnership working at national level and provide tools to help schools assess the impact of partnership initiatives.



## 1. Partnership working between small rural schools

*'We've got the best of both worlds now... because I'm still my own person, my own school, but we're part of a partnership and it has the elements of a large school.'* (Primary school headteacher, Lincolnshire)

### 1.1 School improvement in small schools matters

In January 2013 there were 16,784 primary schools in England. On average they had around 250 pupils: a primary school with one form of pupil entry from the reception year through to Year 6 would have around 210 pupils (Department for Education, 2013a). However, a considerable number of primary schools are much smaller than this. In 2009 over 4,200 primary schools had fewer than 150 pupils and 1,400 had fewer than 75 pupils on their rolls (Greany, 2009).<sup>1</sup> These schools are mainly to be found in the villages and small rural towns of England's shire counties – though some are located on the rural fringes of metropolitan areas.

Given that small schools account for around a quarter of all primary schools, the issue of how they perform and the school improvement model that is most appropriate for them should be of great concern to ministers, policymakers and school leaders. However, there is a relative dearth of performance information about these schools. The Department for Education (DfE) does not publish key stage attainment test results in a form that enables ready comparisons to be made between schools of different sizes. Part of the problem is that the number of pupils taking the tests in many small schools is so low that drawing statistical conclusions and identifying meaningful yearly trends is far from straightforward.

Ofsted last specifically reported on the issue through reports published in 1999 and 2000. At that time it found that performance was, on average, just as strong in small schools as in other schools. The first of two reports (Ofsted, 1999; 2000) examined test results from schools with fewer than 100 pupils and compared them with other schools. The outcomes for the small schools were in headline terms markedly better but, after allowing for socio-economic factors, the differences were marginal. The second report a year later had a similar message, concluding that:

*'In terms of the overall quality of education, inspections show that pupils in small schools are not disadvantaged in comparison with those in larger schools because of school size. Small schools are equally capable of providing an effective education and many are amongst the most effective in the country.'*

A richer body of evidence from more general education research points to small schools bringing both real benefits as well as facing a range of challenges. Figure 1, below, summarises the respective opportunities and challenges of running small schools.

<sup>1</sup> These numbers are unlikely to have changed significantly during the past five years.



**Figure 1:** Opportunities and challenges of running a small school

Characteristics	Opportunities	Challenges
<b>Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is more possible for leaders to set and carry through a vision to move a school forward.</li> <li>• Leaders are more ‘hands-on’ and really know what is happening in the school.</li> <li>• Leaders are more accessible.</li> <li>• There are more opportunities to take on school-wide leadership roles and leaders can gain more experience of a range of issues.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headteachers have to spend more time teaching than their peers in larger schools – leaving less time for strategic leadership (school development) and leading learning – and their teaching may often be interrupted.</li> <li>• Leaders may experience task overload, as there are just as many jobs to do as there are in larger schools but fewer people to do them.</li> <li>• If key leaders leave they can be difficult to replace – and those appointed may be promoted too soon.</li> <li>• Building a team of high-calibre governors is often a challenge.</li> </ul>
<b>Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders have to look for creative solutions to develop resources and to recruit and retain staff.</li> <li>• Communication is easier and chains of command are shorter in the event of having to deal with a crisis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Budget pressures (if pupil numbers vary or funding is cut) are harder for small schools to manage.</li> <li>• Some appointments may be too expensive to make or if staff are paid less they may come to the school with less experience.</li> <li>• The scale of small schools’ budgets may limit the employment of support staff, loading bureaucratic and managerial activity onto headteachers and other staff.</li> <li>• It is more difficult to manage one-off unexpected events.</li> </ul>



<p><b>Teaching and learning</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is easier to establish committed and cohesive teams and to plan the curriculum jointly.</li> <li>• Small schools are in general better at equipping pupils to gain and use conceptual and meta-cognitive knowledge.</li> <li>• Younger and less able pupils can gain from working in mixed-age classes with older pupils.</li> <li>• Leaders and staff know each pupil well and are able to engage regularly with parents about each child's personal development.</li> <li>• Communication can be personal and there is less need for paperwork.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The curriculum may be restricted and teachers may have to teach outside their areas of expertise.*</li> <li>• It may be harder for staff and pupils to change existing ways of acting.</li> <li>• One or two weak teachers have a disproportionate effect in a three- or four-teacher school.</li> <li>• It can be challenging to teach mixed-age classes and to provide both differentiated and broader learning opportunities for all pupils.</li> <li>• Monitoring and tracking systems may be less formal.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Professional development</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders really know what is happening and it is easier and quicker to identify and resolve problems and 'pop in' to help sort things out.</li> <li>• It is easier for staff to support one another.</li> <li>• There is an incentive for leaders to develop a wider knowledge of educational issues to support their staff.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are fewer opportunities for phase/subject leaders or teachers to observe each other, to be coached and to engage in professional development both inside and particularly outside the school, because of the practicality and cost of arranging and paying for cover.</li> <li>• There is greater risk of professional isolation.</li> <li>• There are fewer role models for emerging leaders.</li> </ul>

\*Less applicable to primary schools

**Sources:** The content above has been adapted from a table contained in Dunford et al. (2013) that in turn summarised findings in Kimber (2003). Additional material has been added based on Mohr (2000), Carter (2003), Copland and Boatright (2004) and Hill (2010).



## 1.2 New challenges facing small schools

The challenges facing all schools, and small schools in particular, are increasing. The minimum floor standards<sup>2</sup> that the government expects primary schools to achieve have already been raised and are being raised again from 60 to 65 per cent with effect from the key stage tests that primary pupils will sit in summer 2014. From September 2014 a new national curriculum for most subjects will come into force in maintained primary schools. A year later a revised curriculum for pupils in Years 2 and 4 in English, science and mathematics will come on stream, accompanied by revised assessment arrangements at Key Stages 1 and 2 from summer 2016. The government is also abolishing the arrangements for assessing pupil progress through national curriculum levels. It will be up to schools to decide how to track and monitor the attainment and progress of their pupils, although there will be new statistics that will show how many pupils are 'secondary ready'.

The money allocated through the pupil premium is increasing and will reach £1,300 per pupil in 2014. However, alongside this rise there is increased pressure to make faster progress to close gaps in attainment, with schools that fail to close the gap required to draw up pupil premium action plans. The Ofsted inspection regime continues to be ever more demanding. More is being expected of governors in terms of challenge and oversight. Funding pressures are increasing, despite the schools' budget being spared the level of cuts that other services have had to manage. This is a big change agenda for any school to manage on its own – let alone those that rely on the resource of a headteacher who may have to teach for half his or her working week.

At the same time as all these developments are taking place ministers are deliberately moving schools towards relying on their own capacity and resources. As local authority services and support are reduced, schools are being expected to take more responsibility for their own performance, improvement and strategy. The government's vision is for improvement to be led by schools for schools, through networks such as teaching school alliances and academy chains. However, while teaching school alliances are developing fast, many of them are still in their relative infancy and they are not as yet evenly distributed across the country or phases of education. Most alliances are still working towards offering the breadth of professional and leadership development and the menu of school improvement support that schools need or are looking for.

Academy chains also have their limitations in terms of their relevance to small schools. The economics of running a large academy chain mean that the income generated by the 'top slice' of a small school's budget to pay for the cost of centrally-provided services is often insufficient for a chain to deliver the model of support or the level of services that it generally makes available to other schools in the chain. Some leaders of academy chains take the view that it is, therefore, not viable for them to take on significant numbers of single or even clusters of small primary schools. However, multi-academy trusts of three, four or five primary schools are springing up and these tend to be built around one or two highly effective and/or entrepreneurial primary school leaders. These trusts tend to operate more along the lines of, and in some cases have grown out of, primary school federations. This looks to be a more appropriate model for providing school-to-school support for primary schools and a number of these new multi-academy trusts do include very small schools within them.

<sup>2</sup> From 2011 the government's 'minimum floor standard' was raised to require at least 60 per cent of primary pupils in each school to have achieved level 4 or above in both English and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2. However, a school would only be considered to be below the floor standard (and therefore be targeted for intervention) if rates of expected progress were below the national average as well. From 2013 a school is deemed to be below the primary school floor standard if it meets all of the following conditions: (i) fewer than 60 per cent of pupils achieve level 4 or above in all of reading, writing and mathematics, (ii) fewer than the median percentage make expected progress in reading, (iii) fewer than the median percentage make expected progress in writing, and (iv) fewer than the median percentage make expected progress in mathematics.



But across the country only nine per cent of primary schools had converted to academy status as at September 2013, and even including free schools and academy applications in the pipeline, the proportion was only 13 per cent. So academisation is not a quick fix for providing school-to-school support for small primary schools.

There is, therefore, also a case for looking at other partnership vehicles alongside teaching schools and multi-academy trusts, given that it will be increasingly demanding for small schools on their own to manage the scale of the change agenda that is rushing down the track to meet them.

### **1.3 Partnership working can help address these challenges**

Previous studies have highlighted the value of partnership working between schools. Key benefits that have been documented include:<sup>3</sup>

- the introduction of sustainable models of headship
- broader opportunities for vulnerable learners and an enriched curriculum
- improved lesson planning and peer-to-peer challenge and support
- the sharing of data and the benchmarking of practice
- access to a better range of professional development including classroom coaching and expert practitioners
- the development of leadership talent
- more effective business management.

Sceptics sometimes concede that collaboration does deliver these gains but question whether collaboration actually delivers when it comes to schools' bottom line: namely faster rates of improvement in attainment. However, even here the evidence is stronger than is often supposed. For example, school-to-school support was at the heart of the Excellence in Cities, London Challenge and City Challenge programmes. All three of these programmes were subject to rigorous academically-led evaluations that were able to demonstrate that pupils made greater progress than similar pupils in other schools (Hutchings et al., 2012; NFER, 2007; Ofsted, 2005; and Ofsted, 2010). Similarly a study of federations and collaborations found that pupils in primary school federations/ collaboratives started to outperform similar pupils in non-federation schools after approximately two to four years of partnership working (Chapman et al., 2011). These improvements were not uniform across all types of partnerships but taken as a whole demonstrated a strong empirical base for schools working together.

However, partnership working covers a wide spectrum of activity, from informal collaboration between schools to schools coming together under a single governing body as a federation or multi-academy trust. Figure 2 illustrates this spectrum. Most local authority areas in England contain examples of these different types of partnerships.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of these issues see Ainscow et al., 2006; Arnold, 2006; Hill, 2008; Hill and Matthews, 2010; Jones, 2008; Lindsay et al., 2007; Matthews et al., 2011; the National College, 2010; Ofsted, 2011; and Todman et al., 2009.



**Figure 2:** Spectrum of leadership and governance models for partnerships



However, governors sometimes need convincing to get involved in partnerships with other schools. Headteachers often find it hard to get meaningful collaborative activity under way. Even where schools have overcome the initial hurdles they often struggle to develop really deep and effective collaboration that amounts to more than just doing some useful things together, to being at the heart of their improvement strategy and raising standards for pupils. Developing a high quality network of effective partnerships across the whole of a local education system is even more of a challenge.

It was against this background that CfBT Education Trust, which has a long-standing partnership with Lincolnshire County Council to deliver a range of educational services, decided to design and implement a strategic approach towards partnership working among schools across the county.



## 2. Partnership working among small schools in Lincolnshire – the approach<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1 How the partnership approach evolved

Lincolnshire is a large, predominantly rural county with 276 primary schools – around a third of them having fewer than 100 pupils. The number of faith schools (103) matches nearly exactly the number of community schools (102). Over a fifth of primary schools (59) in the county are academies – that is more than double the percentage nationally.

CfBT, on behalf of the local authority, had for some time been promoting federations, and the appointment and deployment of executive headteachers, as well as more general partnership activity. However, knowing that the county council was committed to retaining a network of rural schools, CfBT decided in early 2012 to develop a more strategic approach to school improvement among Lincolnshire's small rural primary schools. The main reasons for doing this were threefold:

- an understanding of the scale of the change agenda that small schools were facing (as described above)
- difficulties in recruiting headteachers; in 2012/13 schools with fewer than 100 pupils generated over 40 per cent of the headteacher vacancies. Nearly 20 per cent of the smallest schools had a vacancy during the 2012/13 school year – considerably higher than the 13 per cent vacancy level for schools with over 100 pupils. Overall the smallest schools had fewer applications per vacancy. In addition, some schools had had four or five different headteachers within a two-year period. CfBT officers also identified problems with filling middle leadership positions such as curriculum or assessment leads, subject coordinators and key stage leaders.
- problems with performance; in early 2012, primary schools in Lincolnshire with fewer than 210 pupils accounted for a disproportionate number of the schools that had been graded as 'satisfactory' for two inspections in a row. In addition, two-thirds of the 46 primary schools with Key Stage 2 results below the government's floor target had fewer than 180 pupils.

A programme designed to involve all small primary schools in local but formal partnership clusters was seen as the means to increase the capability of schools to manage themselves effectively, recruit and build leadership capacity and provide a stronger platform for securing school improvement.

The initial plan conceived by CfBT involved local school clusters that worked under the auspices of Lead Strategic Groups, comprising the headteachers and chairs of governors and chaired by an experienced coordinator. The coordinator was to be responsible for the line management and deployment of shared staff including a joint business manager and special needs coordinator. However, Lincolnshire headteachers and governors felt that the approach was too rigid. Moreover, changes in the regulations for school funding that were being introduced around the same time limited the authority's flexibility to provide dedicated funding for partnership initiatives on an ongoing basis. So after discussion with schools, CfBT amended the plan, and the programme described in Figure 3, below, was adopted.

<sup>4</sup> For a full description of the background, activity and outcomes of the partnership programme for Lincolnshire's small rural primary schools, see the supporting report, available at: [www.cfbt.com/research/research-library/2014/r-partnership-working-2014](http://www.cfbt.com/research/research-library/2014/r-partnership-working-2014)





**Figure 3:** Key features of the CfBT small schools partnership programme

- Schools were placed in local clusters, though in some cases schools negotiated to be involved in a different cluster from the one originally identified.
- Each cluster was required to submit a business plan setting out the joint work they would undertake together and identifying how they would spend their allocation of funding.
- CfBT officers assessed the draft business plans – and sent some back for further work before they were approved.
- Each cluster partnership would be underpinned by the schools' agreement on a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on how they would work together.
- Once a business plan had been approved and a MoU was in place, CfBT would release £20,000 per school – on a one-off rather than on a per-annum basis.
- Funding originally earmarked for partnership working would be incorporated into the lump sum element of the funding formula allocations made to all primary schools.

CfBT worked with some 'early adopter' schools to trial the scheme. Most of the partnerships were up and running by September 2012 – or very soon thereafter. For the purposes of this report we focused on studying the partnerships involving the 99 schools with pupils that had 110 or fewer pupils on roll as at September 2013 – though some of these schools were in partnership with schools that had more pupils than this. CfBT was able to categorise the way that the 99 schools were working together according to which was a school's main or home partnership. The results in Figure 4, below, show that most schools were involved in informal partnerships.



**Figure 4:** Main form of partnership working of the 99 smaller schools in Lincolnshire

Type of partnership	Number of schools	Partnership scope and governance
<b>Category 1:</b> Not involved in any collaborative activity	7 (0)	
<b>Category 2:</b> Informal local collaboration	58 (49)	Mostly local partnerships with activity covering joint continuing professional development (CPD) sessions, joint learning walks, designating subject leads, holding joint development activity for governors and peer reviews of self-evaluation forms.
<b>Category 3:</b> More formal collaboration	9 (9)	This might include soft federations, being part of a teaching school alliance and/or schools agreeing to share a business manager, SEN provision, a specialist teacher or CPD sessions.
<b>Category 4:</b> Structured collaboration	5 (5)	The schools are part of a company, trust or other legal entity <i>but governance and accountability rests with each individual school</i> (this definition includes schools in umbrella trusts). Includes one joint venture company and one school that is part of an academy trust outside Lincolnshire but formally supporting another school inside Lincolnshire.
<b>Category 5:</b> Hard partnership	20 (14)	Schools are part of a trust or federation <i>that is responsible for the governance and performance of all the schools that form the trust/federation</i> . These partnerships mostly took the form of hard federations but two were academy trusts.

**Source:** CfBT (Numbers in brackets indicate the number of schools that had signed a MoU)

The 99 schools worked through 47 partnerships – though some partnerships also included schools with more than 110 pupils. As of June 2013, 27 of the 99 schools had an executive headteacher responsible for two or more schools (though in some cases the executive headteacher’s responsibilities also included schools with more than 110 pupils). The 99 schools also included four examples of headteachers from one school supporting a headteacher in another school.

Only eight of the 47 partnerships made provision for some form of dedicated leadership support. This took the form of an executive, deputy or assistant headteacher released for one, two or three days a week, or a part-time or full-time project manager/director.



## 2.2 Partnership working among small schools in Lincolnshire – the range of partnership activity

Through case study visits to four schools and focus group discussions with 31 headteachers, deputy headteachers, teachers and governors it was possible to gain a good understanding of the activity being undertaken by the partnerships. The range of collaborative effort covered seven main areas – which are described in the left-hand column of Figure 5. These areas of activity were in varying degrees to be found across all the different forms of partnership. It was evident from a number of the discussions that partnership activity had become more mature during the course of the 2012/13 school year. Schools were more closely matching their collaborative initiatives to the priorities in their school development plans and, in some cases, moving to share subject coordinators across schools.

As well as common areas of activity there were also some differences between the different types of partnership. The right-hand column of Figure 5 describes the distinct characteristics of structured and hard partnerships.

**Figure 5:** Common and distinguishing features of partnership working among small Lincolnshire schools

Typical areas of partnership activity	Particular attributes of structured and hard partnerships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Sharing data and information on performance</b>, including RAISEonline reports, schools’ self-evaluation forms (SEFs), school development plans, monitoring and appraisal systems and Ofsted reports.</li> <li>• <b>Continuing and joint professional development</b>, including running shared INSET, undertaking monitoring and moderating marking across schools, jointly planning units of work or undertaking lesson study and teachers pairing together for joint professional development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Executive headship</b> – this form of headship was not limited to federations and multi-academy trusts. However, having two or three schools as part of a single governing structure provides a natural vehicle for being able to have a headteacher who is able to dedicate all his or her time to leadership of learning and school oversight, without also having to juggle the role of classroom teacher for part of the week.</li> <li>• <b>Shared appointments and single staff team</b> – schools within a federation or academy trust may retain their own identity and character but see the staff as being part of a single team. They tend to approach teaching and learning on a common basis. Subject leaders and SENCOs will often have cross-federation responsibilities. Leaders and some teaching staff and teaching assistants may split their working week and spend time in more than one school. Joint staff meetings are common as are cross-school teams for subjects and phases.</li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Developing middle leaders</b> through initiatives such as training sessions on data analysis and setting up a ten-week middle leadership development programme involving one middle leader from each school in the partnership. There were also examples of subject leaders and coordinators jointly planning schemes of work and sharing information on schools' and teachers' respective areas of expertise so that they knew where to go for support on specific issues.</li><li>• <b>Shared programmes for pupils</b>, including pupils blogging and Skyping each other on curriculum projects, visiting each other's schools and holding joint school councils.</li><li>• <b>Special events</b> or 'wow' days for pupils to share cultural or scientific experiences they would not normally be able to access; joint sports days; and joint sessions for all the staff in a partnership.</li><li>• <b>School business management</b> – several schools were in separate business management partnerships but schools also described how as a result of the partnership programme they were now collaborating on purchasing goods and services, such as school meals.</li><li>• <b>Governor development</b>, including joint training sessions and chairs of governors from all the schools in a partnership meeting with CfBT advisers to look at how ready their schools were for an Ofsted inspection; and using experienced chairs of governors to support other governing bodies.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Staff retention and development</b> – the framework for deploying assistant headteachers, middle leaders and subject coordinators across schools in federations and multi-academy trusts helps to retain staff and develop new leaders. By building in leadership assignments or postings to other schools as part of their everyday way of working, federations and trusts are growing leadership capacity – and helping to recruit and retain staff.</li><li>• <b>Common systems</b> – federations and academy trusts are more likely to use common approaches towards setting targets, tracking data, conducting classroom observations and managing staff performance.</li><li>• <b>Greater economies of scale</b> – federations and multi-academy trusts offer a stronger platform for realising over time the economies of scale that partnership working between schools can potentially bring through employing a single business manager, joint procurement, management of IT licences and systems, and transport.</li></ul>
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The differences between informal and hard partnerships were also evident in how partnerships were led and governed. The activity in informal partnerships was usually led by headteachers collectively. They would meet together once or twice a term (often using the dedicated time set aside for cluster discussions at headteachers' briefing sessions) to agree priorities and plan joint work programmes. In between meetings they talked to and emailed each other intensively. Delivery of specific streams of joint work might be allocated to a specific headteacher and/or in some cases partnerships shared responsibility for different initiatives among nominated members of staff from each school.

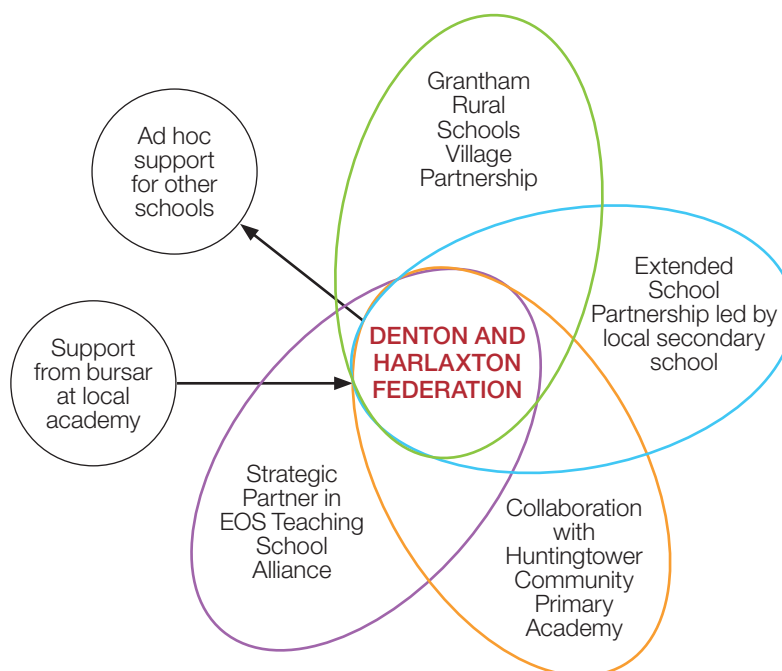


Governance arrangements often involved governors visiting and getting to know each other's schools and participating in partnership activities. In some cases partnerships had established a strategic governance group, comprising the headteachers and chairs of each school in the partnership, to oversee its strategic direction.

In structured and particularly in hard partnerships the roles and responsibilities of leaders and governors were more formalised because they knew they were directly accountable for two, three or more schools. So the work of the partnership was much more likely to be organised through the senior leadership team of a federation or multi-academy trust. Governors generally had clear arrangements for monitoring the budgets and performance of each school for which they were responsible, using regular progress visits and well-established tracking systems.

The other significant feature of the partnership landscape is its complexity. Small schools, particularly if they are part of a structured or hard partnership, are likely to be involved in not just one, but several spheres of collaborative activity. As well being part of a hard partnership a school might, as Figure 6 shows, work with its local cluster, support another local school, be part of a teaching school alliance, collaborate with a local secondary school or share or buy business services from another school. This scale of partnership activity may appear to be onerous and draining of leadership time and energy. However, discussions with school leaders suggested that as long as the purpose and scope of each of the partnership links is clear and reflects a school's development priorities, then they can all add value. This pattern represented in Figure 6 may well reflect the future in terms of how a school-led improvement system will work.

**Figure 6:** The Denton and Harlaxton Federation partnership networks



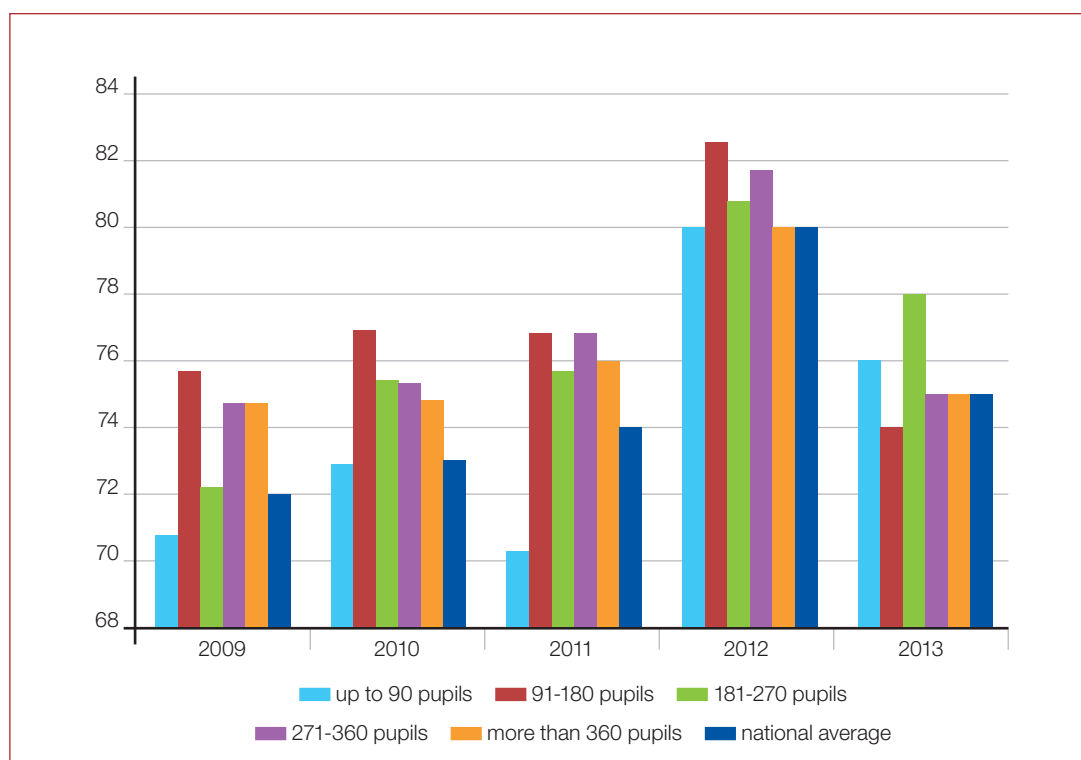


### 2.3 Partnership working among small schools in Lincolnshire – the impact

Identifying the impact of Lincolnshire’s partnership programme is both difficult and easy. It is relatively easy to establish whether there has been progress and improvement but much more difficult to be sure about the causes for that improvement. There are three useful sources of evidence that deal with the first issue – whether there has been improvement.

First, Figure 7 shows the attainment of primary school pupils in Lincolnshire since 2009, as measured by the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or above in English and mathematics (and, for 2013, in reading, writing and mathematics). The form of the Key Stage 2 assessments has changed repeatedly during these five years and so the results from one year are not directly comparable with those from previous years. However, it is reasonable to make within-year comparisons. Figure 7 shows that in 2009 the performance of pupils in small schools was significantly below that of their peers in larger schools and was lagging behind the national performance. In 2012 pupils in the smallest schools were matching the national benchmark and also the achievement of the largest schools in Lincolnshire. In 2013 results indicate that small schools were just above both the national performance level and the average for other groups of Lincolnshire schools – apart from those with 181 to 270 pupils.

**Figure 7:** Proportion of pupils in Lincolnshire and nationally achieving level 4 or higher in both English and mathematics in Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests, by size of school



**Source:** CfBT and DfE statistical first releases (2010), (2011), (2012) and (2013b)

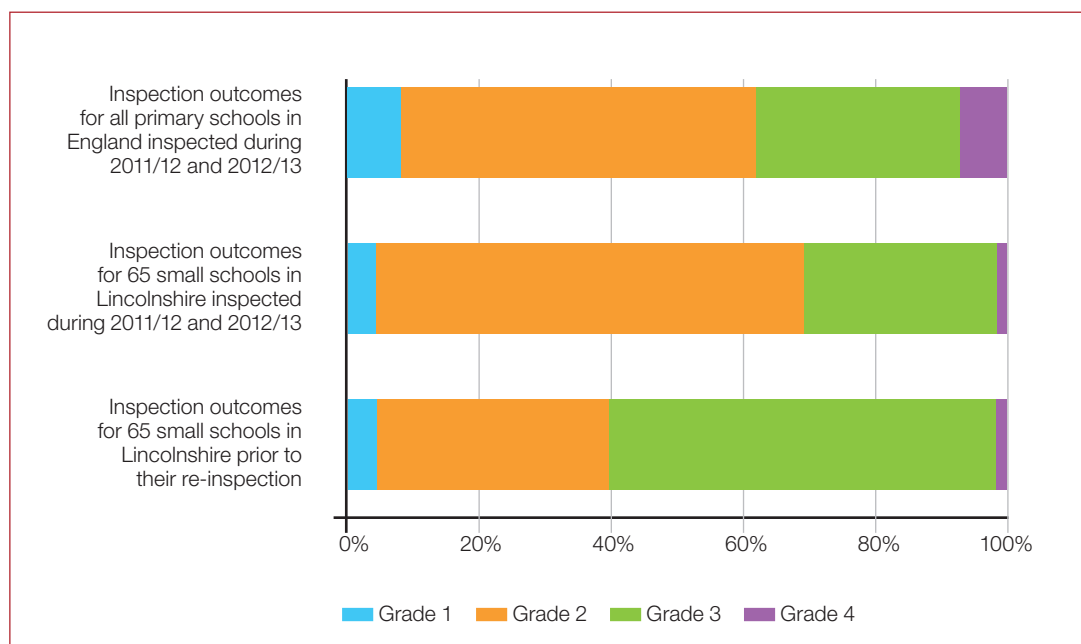
**Note:** For 2009 to 2012 inclusive, the figures relate to results for English and mathematics and for 2013, to results for reading and mathematics and to teacher assessment for writing.



Second, the number of small primary schools with fewer than 90 pupils falling below the government's floor target for primary schools fell from over 20 to single figures in 2012 and to just one in 2013. This is despite the threshold for the floor target having been raised twice during this period.

Third, the Ofsted inspection outcomes of the smallest primary schools inspected during the school years 2011/12 and 2012/13 show significant improvement. The top bar in Figure 8 shows the national picture in terms of inspection outcomes by Ofsted grade for the 10,483 primary schools in England that were inspected during the 2011/12 and 2012/13 school years. This bar provides the benchmark by which to assess developments in Lincolnshire. In total 65 of the 99 small rural primary schools that are the subject of this study were inspected during the same two-year period. The middle bar in Figure 8 shows the outcomes for these schools that were inspected during this time. The bottom bar provides a baseline by which to judge the performance and progress of the 65 schools, relative to the grades they received in their previous inspection.

**Figure 8:** Distribution of Ofsted inspection grades for small schools in Lincolnshire inspected during 2011/12 and 2012/13, compared with all primary schools



**Sources:** Ofsted (2012), Ofsted (2013a) and Ofsted inspection reports for Lincolnshire schools

The main message to emerge from this chart is that the number of 'outstanding' and 'inadequate' (respectively Grade 1 and Grade 4) small rural schools in Lincolnshire has remained the same but there has been a sizeable reduction in the number of 'satisfactory'/'requiring improvement' (Grade 3) schools and a corresponding increase in the proportion of 'good' (Grade 2) schools. The 65 Lincolnshire schools, taken as a group, have moved from having inspection outcomes that are much poorer than other primary schools in England to having, on average, better inspection outcomes.



The attainment and inspection data taken together would seem to indicate that there has been a real improvement in the performance of the smallest schools in Lincolnshire. However, that does not necessarily equate to partnership being the cause of that improvement – not least because partnership working has been taking place alongside a range of other factors and interventions. However, an analysis of the content and findings of the Ofsted inspection reports provides useful evidence of those factors that inspectors consider to have been particularly significant in the improvement of schools. Three key themes emerge from examining the Ofsted reports for the 65 schools:

- Schools' own efforts to raise standards, improve the quality of teaching and learning, provide a safe and stimulating environment for their pupils and address issues of concern raised in previous inspections.
- The part played by CfBT in its role as the local authority. The contribution of the authority to school improvement for those schools that are satisfactory or require improvement is referenced in many of the inspection reports – and often links the direct support provided by CfBT to resources coming from partnership schools and executive headteachers.
- Partnership working is singled out as a factor contributing to school improvement for schools in informal partnerships and particularly for schools in federations and hard partnership arrangements. Inspectors cite partnership working, and/or the role of executive headteachers and federations as being instrumental in school improvement in 45 of the 65 inspection reports.

The findings receive endorsement from headteachers and governors. Although a number of the partnerships that attended the focus group meetings said that it was too early to say whether collaborative working was helping to raise achievement, they could nonetheless identify a range of positive benefits from collaborative working. Areas that they identified included a stronger platform for recruiting good headteachers and teachers, staff retention and development, support for new headteachers, improved teaching and learning, less professional isolation, better and broader pupil development and a more powerful voice in the school system.

Those partnerships that were using executive headteachers were particularly positive about this role. Not only was it providing a good solution to a pressing problem (by an executive headteacher taking on responsibility for a school where there had been either a chronic turnover of headteachers or a long-standing vacancy) but it was also providing a means of keeping able young school leaders working within a small schools context. Hard partnerships provide the scope for these aspiring leaders to realise their ambitions within a federation or academy trust: there was less need for them to move on to a bigger school – which has all too often been the past pattern. Executive headship was helping governors of small schools break out of the destabilising cycle of find-a-head, try-to-keep-a-head, lose-a-head, have-to-find-a-head-again. As the chair of one school, that was both part of an academy trust and supporting another school in Lincolnshire, put it:





*'Broadening the scope of the school has meant that we have been able to continue to challenge, develop and retain a dynamic ambitious head who without such opportunities would probably have moved on to a more demanding role before now.'*

The improvement in school performance among schools in Lincolnshire cannot, therefore, be put down to any one single factor, but from the evidence of the Ofsted reports and the testimony of headteachers, partnership has been a significant part of the improvement cocktail. It is also clear that there are continuing challenges to sustain the collaborative momentum as the dedicated partnership funding provided by the local authority is exhausted. There is also a challenge to move partnership working for all the local clusters from being a collection of ad hoc initiatives to being at the core of how schools deliver their school development plans.

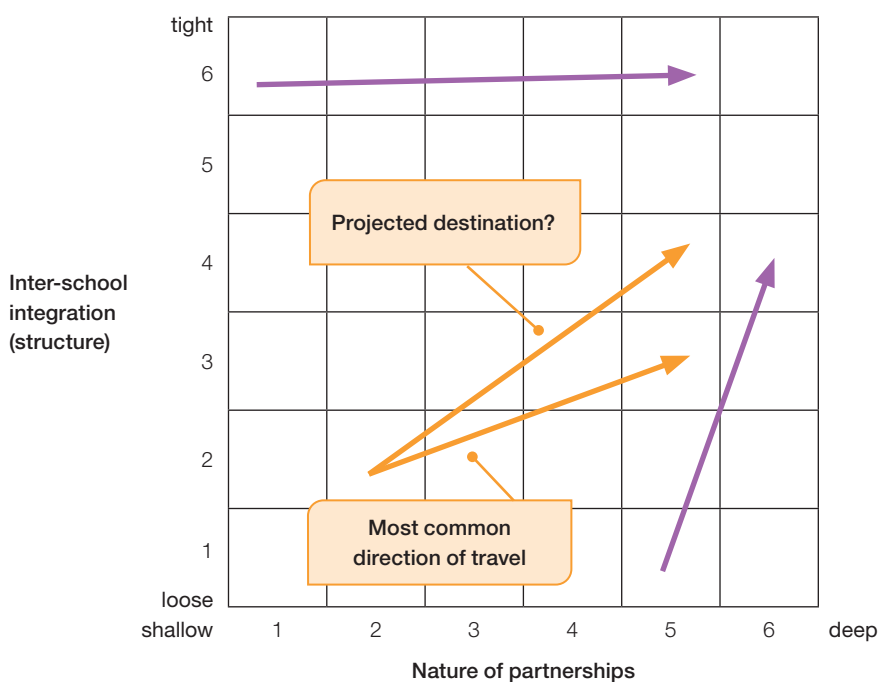


### 3. Ten lessons for schools on building effective partnerships

The experience of the small schools in Lincolnshire reinforces many of the lessons that other schools that have engaged in collaborative activity have also found. Key learning points include:

- 1. Build on existing partnerships and relationships.** Partnership grows out of partnership. In his work on teaching school alliances, Professor David Hargreaves has described how most school-to-school collaboration starts in quite an informal and superficial way – in the bottom four cells of the grid that forms Figure 9. That is natural and reflects the way we form relationships more generally. The challenge, as the arrows in Figure 9 illustrate, is for schools to develop and deepen the partnership – and as they do they are likely to find that they become linked together more structurally.

**Figure 9:** Inter-school partnership grid



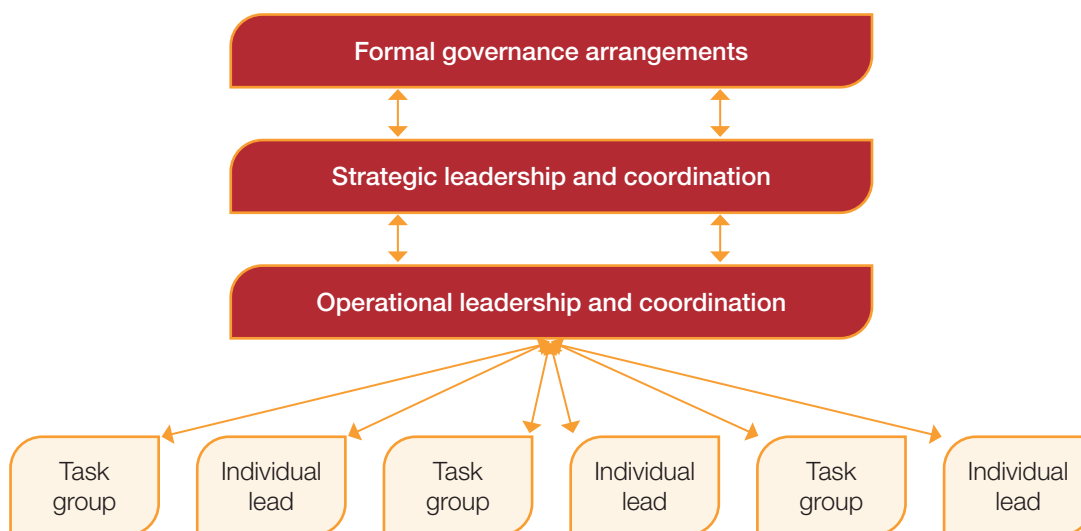
**Source:** Hargreaves (2012)

- 2. Keep local partnerships geographically focused.** A few headteachers in Lincolnshire were finding that the travelling distance between schools in the partnership was proving time-consuming and acting as a brake on partnership development. It was requiring more of an effort for staff and leaders to get together. Distance inhibits the frequency and intensity of schools' joint work. Forty-five minutes is reckoned to be the maximum travelling time that schools should allow when deciding whether to partner (see Hill et al., 2012) – and that is at the outside of what is sensible.



- 3. Ensure that headteachers leading a collaboration develop strong relationships, shared values and commitment to each other.** Partnerships will achieve little unless the headteacher of each of the schools involved backs it whole-heartedly. Schools in Lincolnshire provided examples of how just one headteacher having reservations or not being fully committed acted as a drag anchor on the rest of the partnership. Shared commitment comes by meeting regularly, agreeing a common vision, visiting each other's schools, sharing data and plans, doing joint learning walks, modelling collaboration and, particularly, embracing new headteachers when appointed to lead a school within a partnership.
- 4. Be clear about governance, funding and accountability.** There is no single model for the governance and leadership of partnerships, but it is crucial to be clear about the different levels of accountability. Figure 10 highlights how the formal governance of a partnership – whether that is a joint committee, a trust, a federation or other arrangement – needs to fit with strategic and operational leadership responsibilities. The Lincolnshire experience shows that where schools are not part of a formal trust or federation a memorandum of understanding (MoU) provides a good way for schools to formalise their commitments to each other – including arrangements for funding. Several partnerships in Lincolnshire accompanied the formal structures with opportunities for governors to visit each other's schools and participate in joint initiatives. Strategic leadership of partnerships is normally exercised through headteachers meeting together to agree priorities and partnership work programmes.

**Figure 10:** Levels of governance and leadership in school partnerships



**Source:** Rea and Hill (2011)

- 5. Involve middle leaders in the leadership of partnerships.** Figure 10 also brings out the importance of avoiding the trap of partnership leadership getting 'stuck' at headteacher level. It makes sense in terms of both sharing the workload and generating broader cross-school links and relationships for phase leaders and subject and special needs coordinators to be allocated responsibility for developing and delivering projects and tasks. Adopting this strategy will help to build social capital within collaboratives and aid communication between schools.



**6. Use business plans and action plans to prioritise what partnerships will do together.**

The partnerships in Lincolnshire that were developing strongly had formulated a partnership development plan and/or were using their school development plans to identify common priorities. They were also setting timetables for action, setting budgets and establishing success measures by which they would judge the impact of their work together.

**7. Focus partnership activity on improving teaching and learning through teacher-to-teacher and pupil-to-pupil engagement.**

One of the reasons that some schools in Lincolnshire expressed reservations about the original CfBT partnership proposals was that they thought that there was insufficient focus on teaching and learning. School partnerships prove their worth and contribute most to raising standards when they act as a vehicle for teachers to collaborate across schools to develop schemes of work, plan lessons, observe each other's practice, share data, coach each other and carry out lesson study. Lincolnshire schools also showed how pupils, with only a handful of other children of the same age in their class, could benefit enormously from peer-reviewing each other's work through both online contact and visiting each other's schools.

**8. Find ways to allocate resources to pay for some dedicated leadership or project management time.**

Previous research on partnerships published by CfBT in 2008 found that headteachers felt that too much was expected of them in terms of management action and that there was insufficient time for leadership (Jones, 2008). That finding was repeated in this study. Federations and multi-academy trusts are often able to draw on the resources of a non-teaching executive headteacher to lead and coordinate activity. But broader and more informal partnerships are likely to be limited in how extensively and deeply they can work together all the time they rely on headteachers to lead the partnership in addition to the day job of running their school. Sharing leadership tasks between headteachers and using middle leaders, as described above, will of course help, but there will come a point when partnerships will stall because there is not sufficient coordinating input. This does not mean necessarily having to appoint someone full time. Using an aspiring leader and releasing them for, say, two days a week, may be both more affordable and sufficient to maintain the pace of partnership activity.

**9. Be prepared to be engaged in multi-partnership activity and for the form and membership of partnerships to evolve over time.**

As the Denton and Harlaxton Federation showed (see Figure 6 above), partnership activity takes place at a number of levels. It is not a question of either being part of a local cluster or being a member of a teaching school alliance – it can be both. Being part of a multi-academy trust is compatible with working with the local cluster of schools. Schools should also expect their partnership to evolve. The implications of the Hargreaves grid (Figure 9) is that as work between schools deepens, so their governance is likely to become more structured and formal. In addition, as happened with one or two of the Lincolnshire partnerships, schools may fall by the wayside. They may leave or be 'dropped' by a partnership because they do not want to develop at the pace of others.

**10. Monitor and evaluate the impact of partnership activity.**

Just as schools track and monitor pupil performance so they need to evaluate the impact of their joint work. The clearer they are about the objectives for collaborative activity the easier it will be to assess the added value partnership is bringing. The fact that some initiatives may not be effective should not be taken as a sign of failure but used as learning to either adjust the initiative or redirect energy and resources into new or proven areas of joint working.



## 4. Ten lessons for local authorities

Lincolnshire has not been the only local authority during this period to initiate programmes and strategies to foster partnership working among its primary schools – particularly small rural primary schools. As part of this study NFER conducted a literature review of the approaches and policies undertaken by other shire counties that are comparable with Lincolnshire. Details of the review can be found in the supporting report.<sup>5</sup> The experience of Lincolnshire and these other counties provides a number of key lessons for local authorities more generally.

- 1. Provide a clear vision of the future in terms of school-to-school working.** The starting point has to be for local authorities to communicate effectively and consistently the purpose of partnership working to headteachers, governors and parents. They need to spell out and provide examples of the educational, economic and leadership benefits through conferences, newsletters, websites, media strategies and personal contact. The vision needs to include and reflect discussions with school leaders and governors and take account of the existing and potential role of federations, multi-academy trusts and teaching schools within the county.
- 2. Be flexible about the range of governance structures for partnerships but encourage a direction of travel that moves to harder and more structured arrangements – and formalise the arrangement, whatever form it takes.** A number of local authorities have found that it can be counter-productive to propose or insist on one particular form of partnership model. So setting out a menu of options is helpful and can enable schools to feel a greater sense of ownership of the decisions they are taking. However, whatever the form of the collaboration, the governance arrangements need to be formalised through MoUs or other means so that it is clear where the accountability for funding and performance of partnership programmes lies. It also makes sense over time to steer partnerships towards closer and harder forms of partnership because, as described above, this is likely to provide a more sustainable basis for realising the full leadership, educational and economic benefits.
- 3. Expand the use of executive headship.** Local authorities can, of course, use their influence with governors at any time to explain how executive headship works and seek to persuade them to consider it as an option as part of their succession planning. But authorities also have harder levers at their disposal. For example, when schools are failing or schools are struggling to recruit a new headteacher, authorities are in a stronger position to steer governors towards or, in some cases, insist on the appointment of an executive headteacher. Every primary school headship vacancy is an opportunity to consolidate executive headship, reinforce the development of local clusters and provide a more sustainable model for recruiting and retaining high quality school leaders.
- 4. Insist on schools adopting measures of progress and success – which they track and monitor.** Partnership is a means, not an end. So it is important to assess the value it is adding. By setting clear objectives at the outset, in the form of pupil attainment, teacher performance, leadership recruitment and retention or quality of governance, authorities can help provide a clear framework for schools to measure partnership impact. Authorities can also help with providing data to track progress and, by involving university education departments, can also assist school clusters to develop and use research and evaluation tools.

<sup>5</sup> [www.cfbt.com/research/research-library/2014/r-partnership-working-2014](http://www.cfbt.com/research/research-library/2014/r-partnership-working-2014)



- 5. Focus any allocation of ring-fenced resources on providing some dedicated leadership or (start-up) project management time.** Some authorities pump-prime partnership programmes while others 'bend' other policies to support partnership development among primary schools. Where dedicated partnership funding is allocated then focusing this on creating leadership capacity to coordinate collaborative effort provides a good return on investment. As explained above, this does not need to be a full-time appointment. To start with, schools may create capacity by freeing up headteachers or assistant headteachers to take on partnership leadership tasks. As a partnership expands and matures, a project coordinator may be required to sustain the momentum. The other priority that rural schools and partnerships find hard to fund from their own resources is transport costs. Online contact and rethinking the use of CPD budgets provide part of the answer but some dedicated funding will be a bonus.
- 6. Reinforce a partnership strategy by the way that other policies are framed and implemented.** Some authorities have made local school clusters the basis for providing extended children's and family services or delivering their early years strategies. The way that authorities deal with surplus places and the provision of new classes will also have an impact on partnership dynamics – if authorities get this wrong it can erode trust between schools very quickly. Similarly, strategies on school building and school transport should include a filter that considers how they might support partnership development.
- 7. Use practical initiatives to help foster partnership depth.** Lincolnshire found that a simple step such as making time at briefings for headteachers to meet and work together in their clusters was hugely valued. The county has also facilitated schools in the same cluster to have the same professional link adviser and this has helped to provide challenge and support to schools both individually and as a cluster that is informed and consistent. CfBT has also enabled schools to use the units allocated to them as part of a professional development agreement, collectively – so that clusters can shape the professional development programmes to meet the priorities that cluster schools have jointly identified.
- 8. Identify headteachers to champion the strategy, build ownership among their peers and provide a guiding coalition for change.** In Lincolnshire, CfBT has established a group of school leaders to oversee the further development of continuing collaborative work. This group meets regularly and includes a CfBT adviser and teaching and learning consultant, a representative from the diocese of Lincoln, five headteachers, a governor and the headteacher of a teaching school in Lincoln.
- 9. Support networking and communication between schools and partnerships through newsletters, micro-websites and conferences.** Lincolnshire is producing regular partnership newsletters and holds an annual partnership conference to share case studies and learning between school clusters. Essex County Council has involved all leaders and governors of primary schools in a series of conferences and followed this up with a dedicated website explaining different partnership models and options, and facilitating visits to schools.
- 10. Stick with the partnership initiative – recognising that elements of the programme will evolve and that the full benefit will take time to come through.** The research evidence is clear: federations, multi-academy trusts and broader partnership initiatives all take time to yield their full potential. Promoters of partnerships need to maintain their investment and support for several years to see the accelerated school improvement that then comes through.



## 5. Ten lessons for policymakers

The early part of this report described how changes to the national curriculum, assessment system and inspection framework were shaping the context within which primary schools were operating. It explained how the government was seeking to develop a school-led improvement network through the growth of teaching schools and academy chains to help build the capacity of schools to manage these changes effectively. The argument was made that too few of the policy interventions were being designed in a way that fitted the needs of small primary schools. There is more that ministers and policymakers could do to use the resources and expertise within these schools to raise standards and improve outcomes.

**1. Set a clear consistent vision and strategy for primary schools – and small primary schools in particular – to work together in small clusters but without being prescriptive in relation to the form it should take.** Successive governments have promoted partnership working between primary schools. The previous (Labour) government developed and encouraged federations. The current (coalition) government has incentivised primary schools to become part of academy chains. Figure 11 describes the grants that were available in late 2013 and early 2014 for primary schools to become part of an academy chain – including extra sums for the smallest schools.

**Figure 11:** Primary chains grant

This £50,000 grant is available until 31 March 2014 for groups of three or more schools applying to form a multi-academy trust (MAT), where the majority of the schools are primary. To qualify for this, at least one school in the chain must be performing well.

Where small schools (with under 210 pupils) are joining the MAT, an additional small schools supplement is available. Schools with under 100 pupils will receive an additional £5,000 and those with between 100 and 210 pupils will receive £2,000.

**Source:** DfE (2013c)

**Note:** In February 2014 the DfE announced new and more generous incentives for primary schools to form multi-academy trusts.

However, not only is the existence of these grants not very well known but they are very restrictive in the form of the partnerships they are incentivising. As this report has shown, academy status may not be practical or viable for all groups of local primary schools. Teaching schools are adding value but currently leave many primary schools untouched. There is a need for a broader vision to encourage all primary schools to be working together in clusters – including through academy trusts – and to be moving down the path of partnership working. As the House of Commons Education Select Committee reported in November 2013:

*'We believe that the government should provide funding to help schools meet the costs associated with taking part in collaboration. We are concerned that the existing funding incentives are concentrated too narrowly on the academy sponsorship route. The government should widen this funding to help meet the costs associated with formalising other partnerships. In particular, we recommend that the government widen eligibility for the Primary Chains Grant to help schools cover the cost of forming federations, since many would benefit from working in partnership without leaving local authority control.'* (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013)

**2. Recognise that schools are likely to engage in partnership with other schools on a number of different levels.** The experience of Lincolnshire and other areas shows that collaboration is likely to be multi-dimensional as schools engage with local clusters, federations or chains, business partnerships, teaching school alliances and other one-off school-to-school initiatives. The self-improving school landscape is still developing and policymakers need to track it and understand how it is working so that future policies reflect the complexity of the relationships that schools in many areas are forming.

**3. Affirm the role of local authorities in steering and enabling clusters to develop and grow.**

The role of local authorities has been changing dramatically over the past 25 years. They no longer run or provide many services directly. Funding is mostly delegated directly to schools. School improvement is primarily the responsibility of school governors and leaders – although local authorities still have an important role in knowing how well schools in their area are performing and intervening where standards fall below acceptable standards. As the analysis of the selected shire counties shows (presented in the supporting report), many local authorities also see their role as embracing the strategic development of partnerships among schools. The government has been reluctant to recognise the potential value of this enabling function, but without it there is a real risk that primary school collaboration will be piecemeal and patchy. As the Education Select Committee argued:

*'Local authorities still have a critical role to play in a school-led improvement system, in particular through creating an "enabling environment" within which collaboration can flourish... The role of local authorities is still evolving and some clarification of what is expected of them is needed. We recommend that the government set out clearly the role of local authorities in helping to broker school-to-school partnerships...'* (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013)

**4. Work with faith bodies to encourage and facilitate cross-church/community school partnerships.** In most parts of the country community schools and academies co-exist alongside faith schools – predominantly Anglican and Catholic voluntary aided or voluntary controlled primary schools. Many local school clusters rightly cut across these boundaries because this aids social cohesion, understanding of different perspectives and facilitates school-to-school and teacher-to-teacher working in convenient geographically based partnerships. However, there is often a limit to the extent and depth to which schools can take these partnerships: it is possible but practically difficult for faith and non-faith schools to be part of the same trust or academy trust. Federations provide a more flexible partnership structure: voluntary controlled, voluntary aided and community schools can all be part of the same federation. The government's discussions with diocesan representatives have been focused on the development of academy trusts – those discussions should be broadened to encompass other forms of school partnerships.

**5. Aim to develop 3,000–4,000 executive leaders of primary schools.** This report and the accompanying more detailed study on small rural primary schools in Lincolnshire add to the growing body of evidence that demonstrates the value of executive headship. The problems of recruiting primary headteachers are not limited to small rural schools or shire counties. In May 2013 the *TES* (*TES*, 2013) reported that, of the 261 primary schools advertising for a new headteacher the previous January, 26 per cent were forced to re-advertise within two months. This was up significantly from 15 per cent for the same period in 2012, and a higher proportion than in any year since 2000. Moreover, as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools has commented:



*'As the baby-boom generation retires, younger, less-experienced colleagues will have to take their place – and this is at a time that we are asking so much more of our schools.'* (TES, 2013)<sup>6</sup>

The Chief Inspector's answer to this challenge was to call for more training and development for school leaders but within a context where a younger school leadership force has 'the support of clusters and federations'. It seems sensible, therefore, for the government to be explicit about aiming for 3,000–4,000 executive headteachers within the primary school sector. The National College for Teaching and Leadership should be given a remit to put in place a career path, training and development to match this ambition.

- 6. Encourage governors to work and train together across clusters and encourage moves towards exercising governance at cluster level.** Inspectors consistently judge the quality of school leadership and management more favourably than governance (Ofsted, 2013b). It makes sense for policymakers to encourage shared governor development across small schools, drawing on the strengths of those schools with the most effective governance. It should develop the National Leader of Governance model so that more governing bodies can learn from and be supported by their peers. It would also help local authorities and school leaders in their discussions with governors if there was a clear signal that encouraged clusters to move, over time, down the path towards harder governance through federations, trusts, multi-academy trusts or other structures.
- 7. Reinforce the strategy of cluster working by enabling school forums to allocate lump sums to clusters as well as to individual schools.** The government's desire to standardise levels of per-pupil funding for schools across the country is understandable. But it needs to be accompanied by flexibility, particularly if it is school leaders that are advising or determining how that flexibility is used. There is a strong case for school forums<sup>7</sup> as part of the annual budget cycle being able to recommend allocations of lump sum payments to partnerships, following consultation with schools in the authority.
- 8. Communicate the value of partnership working to parents and the wider world.** Many commentators and parents may be sceptical or may not appreciate the value of federations and school partnerships. They may be concerned about losing the identity of their local school or worry that there will no named headteacher on the site. Ministers and policymakers have the public platform to help answer these concerns and so provide a more supportive environment for small schools to develop partnerships, federations and academy trusts locally.
- 9. Ensure that the accountability regime balances the competitive pressures among schools to recruit pupils with measures that value partnership working.** Schools engaged in partnerships frequently refer to having to balance working collaboratively with ensuring that their individual school remains competitive in terms of results and attracting pupils. There is no escaping this tension but action could be taken to ease it. The DfE now collects and publishes a wealth of data on schools – much of which it publishes. However, some of the data it analyses it holds back. For example, the performance of academy trusts is analysed in great detail but not posted online. The Department could remedy that and develop a tool for groups of schools to assess their collective progress and performance compared with school groups that have a similar profile of pupils. This would be useful in its own right and could also inform Ofsted's work when it is making inspection judgements about the impact of partnership working.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Michael Wilshaw speaking to the Hackney Learning Trust, as reported in *The Guardian online* on 7 November 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2013/nov/07/wilshaw-way-ofsted-chief-headteacher-shortage>

<sup>7</sup> School forums have a consultative role in relation to the local distribution of school funding.

- 10. Evaluate the impact of partnership working at national level and provide tools to help schools assess the impact of partnership initiatives.** Any evaluation should include, but not be limited to, the impact on attainment but also incorporate an assessment of the contribution to effective leadership, teacher development and improvement, and efficient business management. The results should be summarised and shared with school leaders.



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