



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

Supporting report and evidence

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, 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 research team, led by Robert Hill and supported by NFER researchers, staff at Lincolnshire County Council 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 supports the main report entitled *Small rural schools: the best of both worlds – research report* and contains further details about the Lincolnshire school context, detailed reports from the case study visits and a short report on other counties which have a large number of small rural schools.

Both reports are available online as free downloads from the CfBT website: www.cfbt.com/research. The main report is also available in hard copy on request.

Purpose

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.

Methods

The initial intention was to focus on small rural schools with 100 or fewer pupils. In the event, and following discussion with Lincolnshire County Council, 99 small rural schools with a maximum of 110 pupils were included in the study. The performance and operation of these schools, along with their pattern of partnership working, were analysed using a mix of desk-based and field-based research activities:

1. Categorisation by Lincolnshire County Council of the type of the main means of partnership working adopted by the 99 schools
2. Analysis of secondary data from CfBT Education Services in partnership with Lincolnshire County Council School Improvement Service on attainment and inspection outcomes and placing this in the context of national performance standards



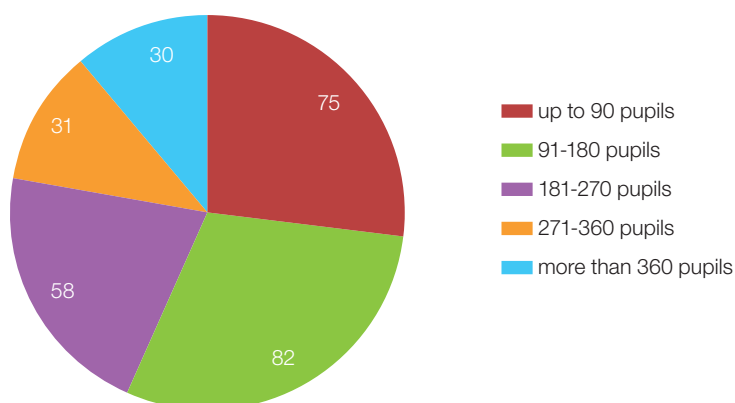
3. Seven focus group discussions with 31 headteachers, deputy heads, teachers and governors drawn from a cross-section of the 99 small rural schools across the county
4. Four visits and case studies to four schools that had developed or were involved in innovative and/or relatively mature partnership arrangements
5. Analysis of background papers and survey data supplied by Lincolnshire County Council
6. An online search to identify approaches towards school improvement among small rural schools in other large rural counties in England
7. A short review of the literature on school improvement in small schools.



1. The Lincolnshire schools context

Lincolnshire County Council is, in geographical terms, the fourth largest local education authority in England. The county is largely rural in nature. It has 276 primary schools and, as Figure 1 shows, over half have fewer than 180 pupils and more than a quarter have fewer than 90 pupils.

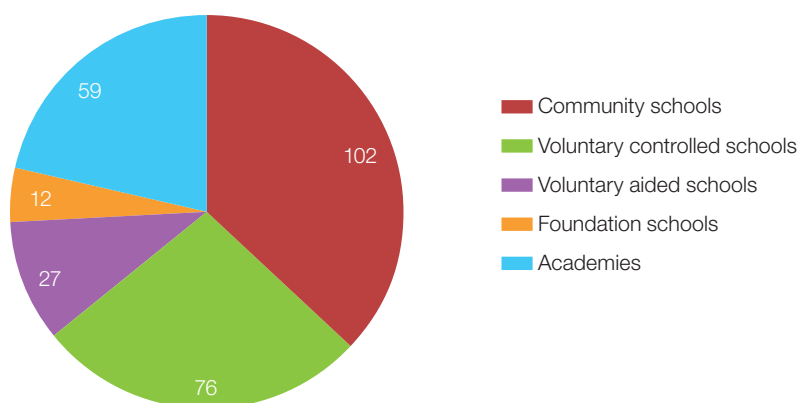
Figure 1: Lincolnshire primary schools, by size of school



Source: CfBT, December 2013

The number of faith schools – either voluntary controlled or voluntary aided – matches nearly exactly the number of community schools. Over a fifth of primary schools (60) in the county are academies – that is around double the percentage nationally. Figure 2 provides a breakdown of schools by category.

Figure 2: Lincolnshire primary schools, by type of school



Source: CfBT, December 2013



In terms of performance, 81 per cent of children in Lincolnshire primary schools achieved level 4 or higher in English and mathematics in 2012, higher than the national average of 79 per cent. However, at the end of August 2012, only two thirds of children in the county were attending primary schools that were 'good' or 'outstanding' as judged by inspectors – which placed Lincolnshire in the fourth quintile when ranked alongside other local authorities.

Education services in Lincolnshire are provided by CfBT Education Trust. In September 2002, CfBT began a ten-year partnership with Lincolnshire County Council. As part of its remit CfBT offers a wide range of monitoring and support to early years settings, schools and colleges with a view to improving the experiences and achievements of children and young people in Lincolnshire. The contract has now been extended to 2017.

The county council, through its work with CfBT, has a well-established history of fostering and developing a range of partnerships between schools in all areas of the county. However, prior to 2012 many of the partnerships had been created on an opportunistic basis – for example, bringing schools together when a headteacher vacancy could not be filled – and this had resulted in a pattern of ad hoc collaborative arrangements between schools.

1.1 The rationale for Lincolnshire's partnership programme for small rural schools

In January 2012 CfBT proposed to county councillors that the county should adopt a much more strategic approach to school partnerships.¹ As well as the background of piecemeal partnership working there were a number of other factors that influenced the thinking of the CfBT officers who were responsible for delivering school improvement on behalf of the county council.

They knew that elected members were committed to maintaining a network of rural schools. However, Lincolnshire had 69 primary schools that had been graded as 'satisfactory' for the last two inspections and, of these, 50 were small schools with fewer than 210 pupils on roll. In addition, of the 46 primary schools that in 2010 were below the government's new floor target,² 30 had fewer than 180 pupils. The smallest schools were also the worst performers in terms of the average performance of schools as measured by the percentage achieving level 4 or higher in English and mathematics combined at Key Stage 2.

Besides the challenge on standards and attainment, the paper prepared by CfBT officers identified a range of other issues facing small schools in Lincolnshire:

- recruiting high quality staff – particularly headteachers. Figure 3, below, shows that in 2012/13 schools with fewer than 100 pupils generated over 40 per cent of the headteacher vacancies. Nearly a fifth 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 school also had fewer applications per vacancy. In addition 20 schools – eight small and 12 larger schools – had acting headteachers (including executive heads, staff acting up and consultant heads) to plug headship gaps.³ Moreover, the recruitment challenge is likely to increase as 49 primary headteachers are due to retire between now and 2018 (assuming a retirement age of 60).

¹ The section that follows draws on the paper submitted by CfBT officers to county councillors.

² 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.

³ Not all the headship gaps were caused by vacancies: they also included schools that were without a headteacher due to sickness or maternity leave.



- developing middle leaders – small schools were experiencing problems with recruiting high quality staff (posts are often ‘unfilled for considerable periods of time’), succession planning for key positions and addressing the variable levels of expertise among their current middle leaders
- ensuring the high quality of teaching and learning, given the challenge in small schools of teaching mixed age groups effectively and knowing that ‘weaknesses in teaching undoubtedly have a far greater impact within a three- or four-teacher school than they do in larger schools’
- improving school administration and securing better value services as budgets were squeezed in real terms, through schools sharing business managers and procurement
- meeting the needs of vulnerable pupils – particularly as ‘vulnerable children do not always receive the highest quality of support within the smaller school environment because the resource and expertise is not always available to deal with pupils with very specific needs’
- managing the implementation of the new national curriculum and tougher inspections for schools and local authorities
- strengthening the calibre and quality of school governance
- recognising that pyramid partnerships (i.e. linking feeder schools and secondaries) were not in many cases a viable or appropriate option for primary schools.

Figure 3: Vacancies and recruitment at primary schools in Lincolnshire during 2012/13

	All primary schools			Primary schools with 100 or fewer pupils		
	Voluntary aided	Voluntary controlled	Non-church	Voluntary aided	Voluntary controlled	Non-church
Number of headteacher posts vacant and/or being re-advertised during the 2012/13 school year	3	18	19	2	8	7
Average number of applicants per vacancy	2.3	4.0	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0

Source: CfBT

Note 1: There were 277 primary schools overall in Lincolnshire in 2012/13, of which 88 had 100 pupils or fewer.

Note 2: Of the 40 vacancies, 28 were filled and 12 had not been filled as at the beginning of September 2013, with two of these being at schools with 100 pupils or fewer.

1.2 The original programme for developing partnership among smaller schools

The original scheme proposed by CfBT was aimed at creating partnerships of schools with a minimum of 210 and a maximum of 650 pupils – with an optimum size of 350 pupils. The plan was to cap the number of schools in partnerships to seven and aim for five as a norm. The scheme would be limited to schools with around 200 pupils. The key features of each partnership would be:

- schools would enter into a legal partnership arrangement for a minimum of five years
- the employment of a shared business manager and special needs coordinator (SENCO) across the collaboration
- potential shared provision covering a site management team and joint curriculum support staff
- an option to appoint joint staff, either to provide specialist teaching or supply cover, across the collaboration
- strategic leadership of the collaboration provided through a Lead Strategic Group comprising the headteachers and chairs of governors, and chaired by an experienced coordinator – with the coordinator responsible for the line management and deployment of shared staff
- a protocol established with governing bodies covering headteacher appointments in order to encourage consideration of executive headship options, if and when appropriate.

The scheme would be incentivised and underwritten by providing a partnership premium of £100,000 per partnership per annum. In addition start-up funding of £20,000 per school would be made available to employ a single partnership business manager and a single SENCO across the partnership, while restructuring took place.

1.3 The revised programme for developing partnership working among smaller schools

The plan developed by CfBT was soundly based – it reflected the evidence on factors that helped to build and promote effective partnership working between schools. However, although schools were not resistant to the overall thrust of the proposals they were unhappy about some of the details – in particular being ‘forced’ to have joint SENCOs and business managers. They argued that they wanted any funding to be focused on improving teaching and learning rather than on joint appointments.

In addition there were complications with the funding proposals. The Department for Education (DfE) was introducing new rules designed to ensure that there was greater consistency between local authorities on how they allocated funding to schools. This had the effect of reducing the degree of flexibility available to individual authorities and made it problematic to sustain partnership premium payments of £100,000 – either within or outside the funding formula arrangements.

CfBT officials continued to talk with headteachers and during the spring and summer of 2012 it was agreed to implement a revised set of proposals:

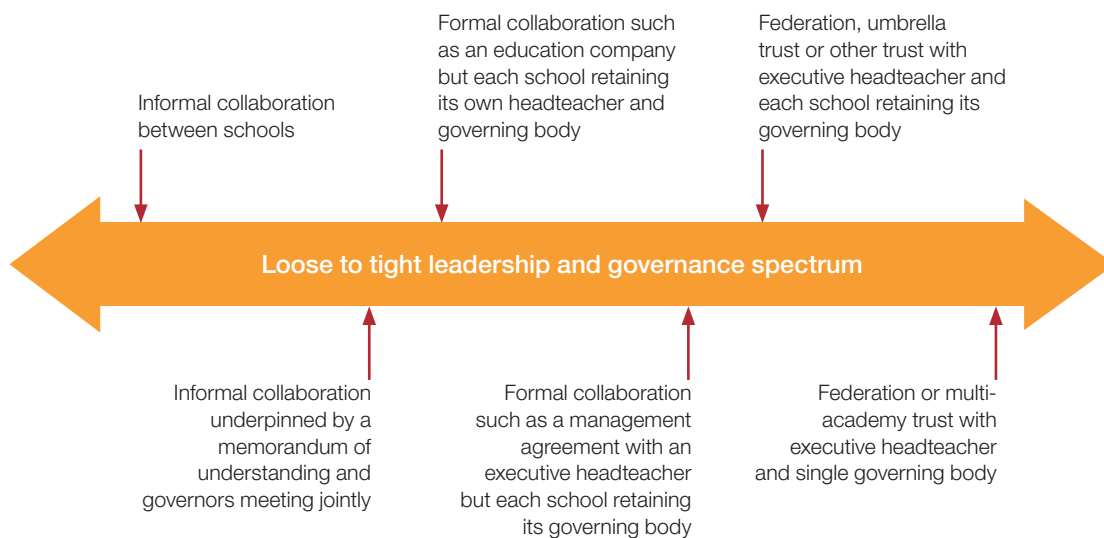


- the pattern of partnerships originally envisaged by CfBT was broadly adopted, with schools placed in a local cluster, although in some cases schools negotiated to be involved in a different cluster from the one originally identified
- each cluster was required to submit a business plan setting out the joint work they would undertake and identifying how they would spend their allocation of funding
- each cluster partnership would be underpinned by the schools agreeing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on how they would work together
- once a business plan had been approved and a MoU was in place then CfBT would release £20,000 per school – but as a one-off rather than on a per annum basis
- in future years the 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. They were also robust with reviewing and assessing the draft business plans submitted by school partnerships – and sent some back for further work before they were approved. Most of the partnerships were up and running by September 2012 – or very soon thereafter. In this report we focus on the partnerships of the 99 schools with pupils that had 110 or fewer pupils on roll as at September 2013 – though some of these schools are in partnership with schools that have more pupils than this.

In the revised model CfBT did not try and force all schools into the same form of governance for their cluster. It was recognised that a variety of governance models would be appropriate, given schools’ differing starting points in terms of their experience of collaborative activity. The range of governance models and relationships available to groups of schools wanting to work together are illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Spectrum of leadership and governance models for partnerships





Schools may well be involved in several partnerships at the same time, as is described below, but 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 5, below, show that most schools were involved in informal partnerships.

Figure 5: Main form of partnership working of the 99 smaller schools in Lincolnshire

Type of partnership	Number of schools	Partnership scope and governance
Category 1: Not involved in any collaborative activity	7 (0)	
Category 2: 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 governors development activity, peer reviews of SEFs etc.
Category 3: 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.
Category 4: 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.
Category 5: 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

Note: Numbers in brackets indicate the number of schools in each category that had signed a Heads of Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding formalising their partnership arrangements.

The 99 schools were working through 47 partnerships – though these partnerships in some cases also included schools with more than 110 pupils. As of June 2013, 27 of the 99 schools had an executive head responsible for two or more schools (though in some cases the executive head'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 head released for one, two or three days a week, or a part-time or full-time project manager/director.

1.4 Initial progress of partnerships

At the beginning of January 2013 – which was one term into the new pattern of partnership working – CfBT sent a survey to 123 schools.⁴ Nearly half of the schools (47 per cent) representing 62 per cent of local partnerships responded. The key points to emerge were:

- partnerships ranged in size from three to six schools and some partnerships included significantly larger schools
- 96 per cent of schools had reported seeing some improvement as a result of partnership working
- 86 per cent of schools identified improving teaching and learning as the main priority
- 86 per cent of schools had delivered shared CPD
- 84 per cent of schools had been involved in collaborative planning of activities
- 59 per cent of schools had been involved in joint moderation activities
- 51 per cent of schools had engaged in learning walks in partner schools.

There were mixed responses on the financial benefits of partnership working; nine out of ten schools reported seeing financial benefits, particularly via joint CPD; 44 per cent said that sharing resources was having a positive financial impact; and 78 per cent said finance was the main challenge for sustaining partnerships.

⁴ The 123 schools included the 99 that form the focus of this report but also included some other slightly larger schools.



2. Activity in informal partnerships in autumn 2013

By the autumn term of 2013 the partnership work among the small schools had progressed significantly. The four case studies and seven focus group discussions with headteachers and governors from across the county revealed that the range of partnership activity among the partnerships categorised as ‘informal’ was extensive. Analysis of the discussions independently facilitated either by Robert Hill or NFER researchers showed that partnership activity was covering six main areas, as follows.

2.1 Sharing data and information on performance

Many headteachers reported that they knew and were familiar with the data and performance of their partner schools. Headteachers would share RAISEonline reports, schools’ self-evaluation forms (SEFs), school development plans, monitoring and appraisal systems and Ofsted reports. In the more mature partnerships a shared understanding of the issues and challenges facing schools in a partnership formed the backdrop to a partnership’s development plan and the joint activity it decided to undertake – as Figure 6 describes. In some cases the link between school and partnership priorities was being carried a stage further, with the main delivery strands of partnership working being written into individual school development plans.

Figure 6: Examples of using shared data and information to plan joint projects in informal and more formal partnerships

In one partnership the headteachers looked at their respective development priorities to identify those that were common to each school. They decided that the development of middle leaders was one issue, writing was another and that it made sense to work jointly on provision for pupils at level 6.

In another partnership the schools found developing more opportunities for outdoor learning was a feature of their school development plans. This led to teachers from all the schools having a training day together on outdoor learning at an eco-centre. Each teacher was then paired with a teacher from a different school to work on developing their practice and implementing the ideas discussed at the training day.

Similarly, the headteachers in a third partnership sat down with their school development plans to identify common areas. One issue that came through was the need to broaden understanding of other cultures and so the schools made arrangements for half a dozen children from each school to visit places of worship of different religions.

In a fourth partnership the literacy coordinators worked together to analyse data and then used this intelligence to jointly plan and deliver a unit of work on writing over two weeks.

The sharing of information was not just limited to plans but also involved sharing practice, through joint learning walks, ‘drop-ins’ and lesson observations in one another’s schools. In one example two headteachers visited a partner school and carried out a learning walk with the headteacher of that school. The visiting headteachers then provided feedback that was included in the school self-evaluation form.



2.2 Continuing and joint professional development

Most commonly this area of partnership activity included schools within a partnership scheduling and running shared INSETs, undertaking monitoring and moderating marking across schools, jointly planning units of work or undertaking lesson study, and teachers pairing together for joint professional development. Figure 7 provides two examples of this area of activity.

Figure 7: Examples of shared professional development among teachers in informal and more formal partnerships

A partnership of five schools dedicated a training day to holding a series of 'twilight' sessions. Every teacher in every school led an hour-long session on a different issue, such as phonics intervention, PE, peer mentoring and coaching etc. Teachers then signed up to attend different sessions. A 'passport' system enabled them to exchange details, keep in contact and keep track of the sessions they attended. Each teacher was able to attend up to four sessions and they were also given an hour to prepare their own session and an hour to deliver it.

Another partnership held a week where any member of staff (teaching or non-teaching) could ask to go on a learning walk in another school. The partnership CPD coordinator took all the requests and drew up a timetable to facilitate the logistics of the initiative.

Other examples of shared professional development included:

- a joint programme delivered by a CfBT consultant designed for a group of teachers within the partnership to help them move their classroom practice from 'good' to 'outstanding'
- using the professional development agreement (PDA) units allocated to Lincolnshire schools by CfBT to organise training for five or six staff from schools in the partnership. Schools found this more cost effective and more productive (because it involved less travelling), and it enabled them to personalise the training
- SENCOs undertaking joint training and coordinating their work
- sharing resources across schools in areas such as science and ICT, and facilitating this by using them at different times in different schools.

2.3 Developing middle leaders

The importance of developing middle leaders related both to shared formal development of middle leaders and to informal joint activity. In relation to the former, one partnership had held a series of training sessions on data analysis. Another had set up a ten-week middle leadership development programme involving one middle leader from each school in the partnership.

More informal work between middle leaders has included subject leaders across a partnership exchanging contact details and then emailing each other on issues such as curriculum plans and providing feedback. Coordinators were also sharing information on schools' and teachers' respective areas of expertise so that they knew where to go for support on specific issues. Figure 8 provides another example of partnership working between middle leaders.



Figure 8: Example of joint working between middle leaders in informal and more formal partnerships

The curriculum leads from a partnership of six schools met up with the headteachers and were given a brief to develop a curriculum project. The lead teachers designed, organised and undertook the work jointly and then presented it back to the headteachers. Partnership funding enabled them to have a number of days to complete the work and they used part of the time to visit other schools (external to the partnership) that had outstanding practice in this area – an initiative a small school would not easily have been able to do on its own.

One of the most interesting developments is that some partnerships are beginning to go down the road of having a team approach to subject leadership. This involves appointing coordinators who have responsibility for a subject or area of work across all the schools in the partnership – with the coordinator reporting to the headteachers jointly. The case study on Halton Holegate Church of England (CoE) Primary School (see page 39) describes how one partnership is moving down this path. The advantage of this approach is that teachers do not have to try to cover so many subject areas for curriculum planning and schemes of work. In a small school this can be onerous as well as stretching expertise and resources very thinly.

2.4 Shared programmes for pupils

Children in small primary schools have the opportunity to build close relationships across years with other children but inevitably have few opportunities to interact with their peers. Many of the partnerships have realised that collaborative working can help address this. The case study of St Margaret's CoE Primary School (see page 51) describes how the schools in that partnership are using blogs, Skype and visits to enable pupils to peer review each other's writing projects. The partnership also arranges for pupil councils to go to other schools and to hold joint school council meetings.

Other examples include going on joint visits (as in the case of visits to places of worship described above), a collaborative music programme across all the schools in a partnership culminating in a public performance, an enterprise education project, joint challenge workshops on thinking skills and a joint club (supported by Lincoln University) for gifted and talented pupils.

2.5 Special events

Providing opportunities for pupils to meet and mix is also a key feature of the special events that partnerships are organising. One partnership referred to them as joint 'Wow' days, or celebration events. For example, one partnership organised a culture day costing £12,000. The children had the opportunity to try out six different activities, an experience they otherwise would not have had. As one headteacher commented:

'There's no way as a small school any of us could have done it [on our own].'

Another example of a special event was the partnership holding a joint competitive sports day.

Not all the special events had a pupil focus. In some cases the aim was to bring the different schools closer together. So one partnership held a launch event where governors and teachers could meet and get to know each other in an informal setting. The partnership found that this proved invaluable in terms of building relationships and providing the basis for joint working and emailing.



2.6 School business management

The partnerships that had been formed to drive improved teaching and learning in the classroom did not always coincide with cluster working for business management. In other words, schools might be part of a partnership to develop CPD and improve teaching and learning but also belong to a wider cluster that focused on school business management.

However, the focus group and case study visits did also come across examples of school business managers collaborating to purchase goods and services in bulk. In one case the schools that formed the partnership were sharing the same provider for hot meals to try to save money. In another instance schools decided to respond to a requirement to draw up development business continuity plans by working together rather than each of them doing it separately.

2.7 Leadership in informal and more formal partnerships

School leaders emphasised the importance of commitment from headteachers of all the schools participating in a partnership. Typical comments at the focus group meetings included:

'It starts with the heads and them wanting to have shared goals.'

'Unless you have the commitment at senior management level, forget it. You have got to commit the time and stick to it and have a clear focused plan.'

'It's the headteachers that are key and you've got to have them enthusiastic and on board.'

The headteachers were also of one mind in recognising the need to build relationships with one another. The structures for informal and formal partnerships would not work effectively unless headteachers had taken the time to get to know and trust each other. As one headteacher put it:

'Relationships behind it are what will be the cement and sustain it [i.e. the partnership].'

This in turn requires school leaders taking the trouble to understand the context, culture and challenges of one another's schools – and then being willing to respond accordingly:

'There has to be a willingness to be open, not territorial; and being prepared to share is important.'

Another key building block for making partnerships work effectively was distributing leadership. This operated at two levels. First, headteachers were sharing out tasks among themselves. For example, in one partnership one headteacher was responsible for joint CPD activity, one for vulnerable groups of pupils and one was taking responsibility for their joint work on feedback. Second, headteachers were distributing responsibilities to staff across their schools. One partnership described the reasoning behind its approach in the following terms:

'We think it is important to empower the staff within the partnership, so each group of people will have leadership responsibility at some point. So if it's literacy leaders, we look at the strengths of our literacy team across the schools and we may name a person who is more experienced in a certain way to lead it.'

In another partnership one teacher had been assigned responsibility for organising a multicultural day, one a maths trail and another for organising an art exhibition. There was also a clear pattern



in terms of how headteachers were organising the leadership of partnerships. In general they were having regular meetings supplemented by frequent email and phone calls, as these examples illustrate:

'Last year we met at least four or five times. It depends on need and what they are focusing on but they will call each other and email frequently.'

'We meet each month and speak each week. Staff on middle leadership probably meet every four weeks.'

Partnership leaders found it a good discipline to plan ahead to avoid partnership activity being squeezed out by other pressures. Some also described how they formally structured and recorded their partnership sessions,

'We sat down and put the diary dates in for the year and they are set in stone.'

'Our formal termly planning meetings are minuted. That is when we spend time looking back at what we've done and what we plan to achieve.'

Despite these strategies to share and organise leadership effort, schools were still struggling to generate sufficient leadership capacity to maximise the potential of the partnerships. As one headteacher put it:

'Everything is undertaken by school leaders in addition to their day jobs.'

This finding is not altogether surprising given that, as explained earlier, only eight of the 47 partnerships are making any dedicated time available for an executive head, a headteacher or a deputy head to coordinate partnership work. Another key leadership concern was how to manage a change of headship within a partnership. This was seen as potentially disruptive to partnership activity and momentum. One headteacher commented that:

'In the past a change of head has been the death of some partnerships when commitment has been lost.'

Another pointed out that an influx of new staff at the start of a school year can mean having to start again in forging relationships and ways of working. However, headteachers also thought being proactive could help to minimise or offset risks of a change of headship within a partnership. Key actions included:

- making collaboration part of the job specification, interview process and expectation of a successful candidate for a headship in a partnership
- including a headteacher from one of the other partnership schools on the interview panel
- welcoming new headteachers into the partnership from the first day of their appointment. The case study from Halton Holegate describes how a new headteacher received an early morning call from the head of one of his partner schools welcoming him to the school and offering him any advice or support he might need. That was followed by emails during the day containing similar messages from the headteachers of the other two schools in the partnership.



3. Activity in federations and multi-academy trusts in autumn 2013

Federations and multi-academy trusts are instigating the same types of collaborative activity as more informal partnerships but there are also distinctive features about how schools in these harder forms of partnership are organised and work together. The case studies for the Denton and Harlaxton Federation and Gipse Bridge Academy (see pages 42 and 47) illustrate this. The level of joint activity between schools is more intense and they are more likely to share the following features.

3.1 Executive leadership

Having two or three schools as part of a single governing structure provides the means to have a headteacher who is able to dedicate all of his or her time to headship, without also having to juggle the role of classroom teacher for part of the week. The Denton/Harlaxton and Gipse Bridge case studies explain the value of headteachers who can focus on the strategic leadership and development of the schools full time. Furthermore, the federation or academy trust has a leader who is able to coach and develop the senior leadership team and middle leaders and ensure that there is proper assessment and career development in place for all staff.

Executive headship also helps to provide greater leadership stability and support succession planning. Headteachers of small schools sometimes stay as leaders of a school for a very long time. In one of the focus groups one headteacher had taken over from a colleague who had led the school for over 30 years and in another case the previous headteacher had been in post for 23 years. However, an increasing trend is for headship of a small school to be seen as a stepping-stone to leading a larger school. That might work in terms of providing young headteachers with experience but results in small schools being involved in a cycle of find a head, appoint a head, lose a head, find a head again – and so on. One of the focus group schools had gone through four headteachers in five years – it was through federation that the school eventually found stability. Executive headship provides a means to retain able headteachers of small schools: they are able to realise their ambition through leading several schools under one umbrella. As the chair of governors of Gipse Bridge Academy explained:

'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 understanding of the value of executive headship among governors is growing but sometimes the decision to accept the new role is preceded by a lot of debate and soul-searching. The chair of governors of the Denton and Harlaxton Federation explained:

'It was the confidence of the headteacher that swung it. She convinced us that she and her colleagues were capable of running the two schools effectively. We also knew that if we didn't do it, it would be harder to retain the head.'

3.2 Shared appointments and single staff team

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 approach teaching and learning on a common basis. In the Denton and Harlaxton Federation, for example, subject leaders and SENCOs have cross-



federation responsibilities. Leaders and some teaching staff and teaching assistants may split their working week and spend time in both schools. All staff are part of a cross-school phase team that is the basis for joint planning. Staff meetings are held on a joint basis between the two schools and there is intensive joint working between senior leaders and staff. A similar pattern was repeated in another federation of two schools; they hold joint staff meetings and the deputy heads (working to an executive head) meet together fortnightly.

In the most mature federations and academy trusts the relationship between the schools is one of mutual learning between the schools, even if one of the schools is performing more strongly than another at a particular point in time. The executive head of one school, which had a formal partnership agreement with another school because it could not recruit a headteacher, described how the process of the two schools working together had helped his school move away from a 'it's just the way we do it here' mentality – which had been a limiting factor in its development.

3.3 Staff retention and development

The framework for deploying assistant heads, middle leaders and subject coordinators across schools in federations and multi-academy trusts brings another benefit: helping 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. The vice chair of governors at Gipsey Bridge Academy described how the combination of the school being part of an academy trust and working with another school was providing superb personal career and leadership development experience for staff working in a small school:

'This has been a huge bonus for us and we envisage will continue to be so by attracting a higher calibre of staff who will hopefully stay with us for longer.'

Federations and multi-academy trusts can in effect be a production line for new leaders. Leadership is developed as a partnership resource rather than as an asset belonging to an individual school. This means that when an executive leader decides to move on, leadership is more likely to have been systematically shared and distributed – making continued progress more likely and sustainable. One headteacher at a focus group provided a good description of how federations promoted leadership development:

'In a small school, there are few opportunities for a promotion. Having a federation is enabling teachers to move up the ladder, which is key to their professional development. It does open up a lot more opportunities.'

The process is also likely to yield good candidates with the skills and the grounding to take on the senior roles.

3.4 Common systems

Federations and academy trusts are more likely to use common approaches towards setting targets, tracking data, conducting classroom observations and managing staff performance. That does not mean their approaches are necessarily better than those of schools working together more informally. However, the fact that their partnership is more formal provides a more structured and sustainable framework for developing, applying and reviewing the quality of schools' core business of teaching and learning. Most federations have joint policies and practices covering areas



such as curriculum planning, assessment and monitoring – and will take steps to see that they are implemented across all schools in the federation. In one federation, for example, the executive head and a lead governor visit each of the three schools in the federation on a regular basis to review pupil progress data with the staff in the respective schools. The federation provides a clear framework within which schools not only support one another but also hold one another to account.

3.5 Greater economies of scale

Federations and multi-academy trusts also offer a stronger platform for realising over time the economies of scale that partnership working between schools can bring. The two schools in the Denton and Harlaxton Federation have started to make some progress on this agenda. Both schools, for example, now have the same provider for school meals. Coach travel for pupils is negotiated jointly. The IT support contract has been moved to a local firm and this has enabled emails to be accessed and iPads to be used at either school. The administrative support staff at Denton work part-time so the executive head is able to call on the team at the larger Harlaxton school when Denton staff are not available.

It is perfectly possible for more informal partnerships to commission activity along these lines, but the hard forms of partnership tend to result in budgets being managed more strategically across schools. Federations and multi-academy trusts are also more likely to employ and use bursars or business managers as a corporate resource. This in turn tends to drive a more cross-school approach to extracting the greatest value from the total budget.

4. Areas of overlap between different types of partnership

Formal and informal partnerships have their own distinctive characteristics but there are also areas of overlap. This section describes how some issues affect both types of partnership even though responses to them may vary, and also identifies key enablers and key challenges to partnership working – which for the most part also cut across partnership typology.

4.1 Governance of partnerships

Initially governors may need to be persuaded to support partnership work. Quite often governors are wary of what being involved in partnership working means. They are concerned that it could be a distraction or involve ‘their’ best teachers being shared and not being in ‘their’ school all the time. So quite often there needs to be intense discussion with governors to secure their support – particularly if a hard federation or executive head arrangement with another school is involved. The report from one focus group explained:

‘With federations, gaining governor consent may well be harder: one group of schools going from soft federation to hard federation had countless governors’ meetings, discussing the pros and cons.’

There was a distinct difference between the governance arrangements of those partnerships that were informal or where schools retained their own governing body, and those where schools shared the same governing body – as in a hard federation or multi-academy trust. In the former, joint governance typically covers:

- governors getting together, visiting and monitoring across each other’s schools
- designating a lead governor for partnership issues from each school, with the lead governors holding two meetings a year where headteachers report back to them and with the lead governors in turn reporting back to their respective governing bodies
- setting up a strategic group, comprising the headteachers and chairs of each school in the partnership, overseeing the strategic direction of the partnership
- governors sitting in on meetings of governing bodies in other schools
- involving governors in partnership events and inviting them to pop into staff training and development sessions.

Many of the schools were also using their partnerships as the basis for organising and delivering government training and development. Examples included:

- joint training sessions open to all governors in a partnership
- chairs of governors meeting together and working with CfBT advisers to look at how ready their schools were for an Ofsted inspection and to undertake a governor ‘health check’
- using experienced chairs of governors to support other governing bodies.



In structured and particularly in hard partnerships the roles and responsibilities of governors have to be more formalised because they are directly responsible for two, three or more schools. In one federation governors have clear arrangements for monitoring the separate budgets of each of the three schools and have also put in place pupil progress meetings and governor learning days at each school. Another federation has adopted what it refers to as ‘the orange, pink and green system’ for monitoring and evaluation. The colour coding helps to clarify the respective responsibilities of teachers, school leaders and governors for tracking pupil progress over the course of each term.

When a federation is first formed there may be a sense of ‘their’ or ‘our’ governors as governors from two or more schools come together to form a new governing body. The Denton and Harlaxton Federation found that governor open days at each school provided opportunities for governors to observe learning and become familiar with each school. They also made a point of alternating the location of their meetings between the two schools.

The disciplines required of operating as a governor of a federation or multi-academy trust may also lead to governance being sharper. As well as working with and supporting other schools in Lincolnshire, Gipse Bridge Academy is also part of a wider multi-academy trust involving schools outside the county. The chair of governors at Gipse Bridge Academy described the impact that this has had on her role:

‘The head reports to the governing body, the governing body report to the trust... If I am required to present reports to my colleagues on the multi-academy trust board regarding standards and use of resources, I in turn use this as an opportunity to reflect upon and evaluate these points. Are we happy with the level of progress? Is the appointment of a learning mentor the best use of resources?’

An Ofsted inspection in May 2013 found that governance at Denton CoE Primary School was ‘strong’ – and commended the role of governors in establishing the federation:

‘Governors have successfully overseen the establishment of the partnership with the federated school and made sure that there is a single vision and unified policies and procedures. They know how the school’s results compare with those of other schools and hold leaders to account for its performance. Governors know the strengths of teaching and how it is being improved, and make sure that pay and promotion are justified by the impact of teaching on pupils’ progress and achievement.’ (Ofsted inspection report [412374] for Denton CoE School, May 2013)

4.2 The complexity of partnership working

A key finding that emerged from both the case study visits and the focus group sessions was that partnership working was multi-layered. That is to say schools were very often involved in several different types of partnership at the same time. They might be part of a local cluster but also be a member of a wider business management partnership or involved in a partnership programme with the local secondary school on transition issues. Significantly several local clusters were forming links with teaching school alliances and were using them to access professional development programmes and participate in School Direct by being allocated a teacher trainee.

The pattern of partnership working was probably most complex for those schools that were involved in a federation or multi-academy trust. As well being part of a hard partnership they might, as Figures 9 and 10 show, also be involved with their local cluster, supporting another local school, linked to a



teaching school alliance, collaborating with a local secondary school, or working with other schools on business services or other issues of mutual interest. Some may see this scale of partnership activity as onerous and draining of leadership time and energy. However, discussions with the leaders of the schools concerned suggest 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 to the work of a school. The patterns in Figures 9 and 10 probably reflect the future in terms of what a school-led improvement system looks like.

Figure 9: Gipsey Bridge Academy's partnership networks

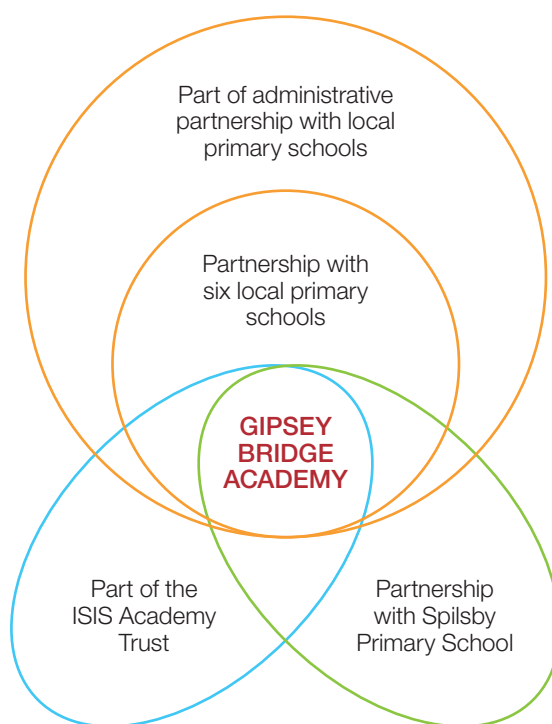
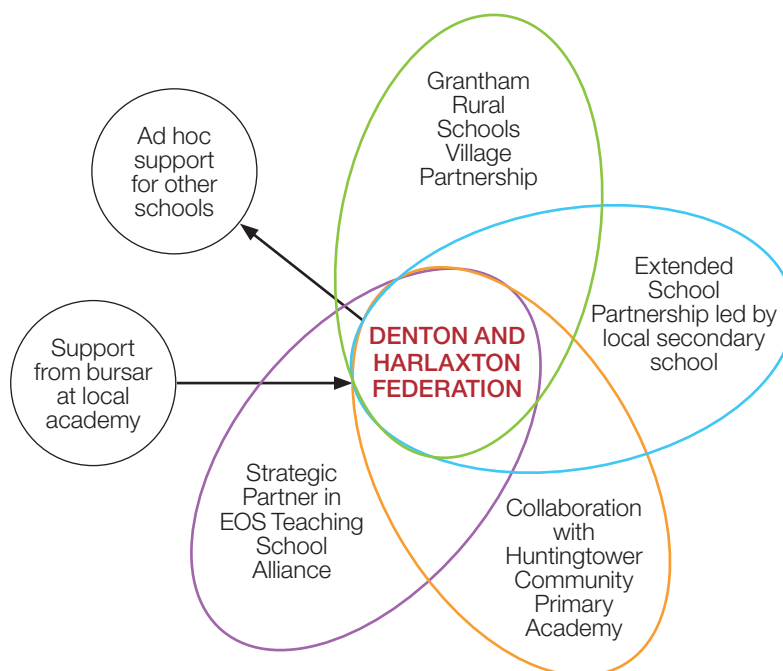




Figure 10: The Denton and Harlaxton Federation partnership networks



4.3 Enablers of partnership development

From the conversations with headteachers, deputy heads and school governors, we were able to identify a series of actions that had helped to promote the growth and depth of partnerships. Figure 11 identifies these 'enablers' of partnership activity under two headings: 'Getting started' and 'Managing and developing partnerships'.



Figure 11: Enablers of partnership development

Getting started

Holding shared values (such as all schools in a partnership being faith schools) or defining a common mission (such as 'helping to raise standards for all children across the partnership') provided a unifying focus for defining initial partnership activity.

Building on pre-existing relationships and networks provided the foundation of trust that assisted partnerships to get off the ground and move into more effective ways of working together.

The local authority promoting and steering partnerships helped to ensure that the vast majority of small schools were included within a partnership.

The local authority brokering federations, by linking schools with the capacity to lead to schools that needed support or had a headship vacancy, facilitated the emergence of a series of hard partnerships.

Kickstart funding coupled with the requirement to produce a business plan and develop a MoU provided partnership impetus: *'If we hadn't had the start-up funding, it would never have happened.'* The funding removed the ad hoc nature of the partnerships – it gave them a drive and made headteachers sit down and decide on priorities whereas previously *'it was just bits and pieces.'*

Headteachers agreeing an action plan of what they will do together provided direction: *'You need a core agreement so that you know what the partnership is about.'*

Bringing staff together from all the schools in the partnership can help to generate momentum and a sense of shared purpose: *'We had a great training day at the beginning of September and got all the staff together from the three schools. It was the first time that everyone, right down to the teaching assistants, were there.'*

Holding a launch event, where governors and teachers could meet and get to know each other informally proved invaluable for some partnerships in terms of building relationships and providing the basis for joint working and follow-up contact.

Basing school partnerships on clusters that were geographically close to each other made it easier for leaders and staff to meet and work together.

Managing and developing partnerships

Organising some partnership activity on a very local sub-cluster basis, particularly where teacher-to-teacher contact is planned, may make it easier for more staff to meet and visit each other's schools, as opposed to attempting this across a whole partnership.

Developing digital contact between schools helps to foster pupil contact and reduces costs: *'Two of the schools in the partnership recently had a residential visit together and beforehand we had a Skype and blogging session between the two groups that were going so that the children could get to know each other without the travel costs.'*

The St Margaret's CoE Primary School case study (page 51) also provides an example of the value of digital contact between schools.

Allowing for flexibility within the partnership allows for schools differing requirements: *'Not everybody gets involved with everything at the same time, depending on other priorities and needs.'*

Enabling schools to retain their own individual personality enables partnerships to benefit from diversity: *'You don't lose your identity as a school, you don't lose the personalities of your staff. You don't end up this bland morphed grey sludgy thing.'*

Providing dedicated time for cluster working at the headteachers' briefing sessions (that are run by the local authority and facilitated by CfBT) has provided a practical and easy way for headteachers to meet together.

Partnership newsletters and conferences have helped to spread information on what other partnerships are doing. The partnership conference organised by CfBT in July 2013 *'provided support, energy and lots of practical ideas.'*

Allocating the same professional adviser to schools in a partnership provides someone who can provide challenge and support for the partnership as well as for individual schools.

Being able to use collectively the units bought by schools from CfBT as part of the professional development agreement has enabled partnerships to commission bespoke development sessions for their teachers.



4.4 Key challenges

The focus groups and case study visits also revealed that partnerships were facing a range of challenges – as Figure 12 explains. But the conversations also showed that in many cases headteachers were working on solutions to the problems they identified. For example, on the challenge of competition undermining collaboration one headteacher argued that the answer was for partnerships to develop a shared vision and commitment *‘to think about the children within Lincolnshire as a whole rather than within a particular school’*.

The challenge of geography was being dealt with in one partnership by seeking to recruit more schools into the partnership so that an enlarged group of schools could then work in two smaller and more local sub-groups for part of the time. And the issue of lack of space was dealt with in one partnership by using a venue in the city of Lincoln for a partnership-wide event that helped to create a special atmosphere for the children.

On funding, some schools pointed out that they were developing and thriving despite not having accessed any of the partnership funding made available by CfBT. Other partnerships recognised that their work together was now so vital that they were funding activity from mainstream budgets. They had seen the value from both an economic and educational perspective of organising and paying for professional development jointly:

‘Because we all think it is so important, we have all agreed to put in money from our own budgets... but there is only a finite amount we can do.’

Some schools thought that using parents to take children from one school to another might be part of the answer to the cost of transport. Other schools thought that the answer to funding issues might lie in applying for grants.

However, the fact that schools and partnerships are seeing some challenges as opportunities does not mean that the challenges should be glossed over. CfBT will need to work with school leaders and governors to identify particular issues that are holding back collaborative progress and agree strategies for tackling them.

Figure 12: Challenges to partnership development

Organisational challenges

In some cases the original partnership membership has not worked out and some schools have changed partnership. For example, one school was placed in a collaboration of six schools – but the partnership did not work and four have split off to form a new group. Another school was ‘separated’ from the schools it had been working with and placed in a different collaborative cluster. However, there was not sufficient common purpose within the new group and so the school rejoined the cluster with which it originally had links.

Some schools in a partnership may be more committed than others: *‘There are three schools that are demonstrating a high level of commitments towards one another and another two that are on the periphery.’* Or as another school leader observed: *‘If there’s one person dragging their heels it can stop it happening for everyone else.’*



The schools in some partnerships are too distant from each other: *'It takes 40 minutes for schools to get together if they want a joint staff meeting after school.'*

There can be too many schools in a partnership. *'The more schools you have in a partnership, the more time it takes to coordinate it and the longer the gap between meetings, because you have to wait for a convenient date for all.'* A big cluster of 10 or 11 schools is 'unmanageable' because it is too difficult to bring headteachers together.

The nature of the buildings that most small rural schools have may mean that there is a lack of spaces big enough for partnerships to host each other's staff, pupils and parents.

Competitive pressures can cut across collaborative activity. For example, schools want to take on the maximum number of pupils in order to maximise their funding but that can mean succeeding at the expense of other local schools in the cluster: *'You want to be appealing as a school and then you're working collaboratively with schools near to you who are also wanting children in their school. You're essentially trying to work with another school as well as improve yourself, improve them but then you're improving the competition... You have to think about the children within Lincolnshire as a whole rather than within a particular school.'*

Expanding schools because of rising pupil numbers can cause tensions. One partnership had to cope with the fallout from proposals to expand pupil numbers – which had originally been focused on just one of the schools in the cluster. In the end the plans were modified and the partnership came through the strains and stresses intact.

Gaining parental and community support for partnership is not always straightforward. Even though a federation may be the only means of keeping a village school open, villages feel that it is their village school, and all of a sudden, they feel 'short-changed' when, as they perceive it, they have to share their headteacher and school.

Funding challenges

The one-off nature of the funding allocation from CfBT has been problematic for several of the partnerships. Headteachers appreciated being able to use the one-off funding over more than one school year. However, one headteacher described how she was making the partnership money last and stretch but when it comes to an end, the partnership will struggle and will not be able to do the things they want to do: *'If you don't have the funding, you're limited and therefore some things have to fall by the wayside.'*

The areas that schools see as being most financially demanding include:

- backfilling teaching roles while staff are working/training with other staff *'because to release a member of staff from the classroom to do really good work, it costs'*
- the cost of transporting pupils around the partnership – an issue highlighted in the case study of St Margaret's CoE Primary School
- the cost of fuel for teachers travelling between the different schools.



5. The impact of partnership working

Assessing the impact of partnership working among small schools in Lincolnshire is not straightforward. The initiative described in this report has only been in operation since summer 2012 in some schools and September 2012 for most schools. We know that partnership impact takes time to come through. However, set against that is the fact that CfBT's 2012 partnership programme built on earlier measures to promote collaborative practice and develop federations. Then there is the issue of whether any improvement that has taken place can be linked to partnership activity – very often a range of interventions or steps are being taken in a school that are contributing to improved performance. So anything that is said about the impact of partnership activity has at this stage to be provisional and subject to caveats.

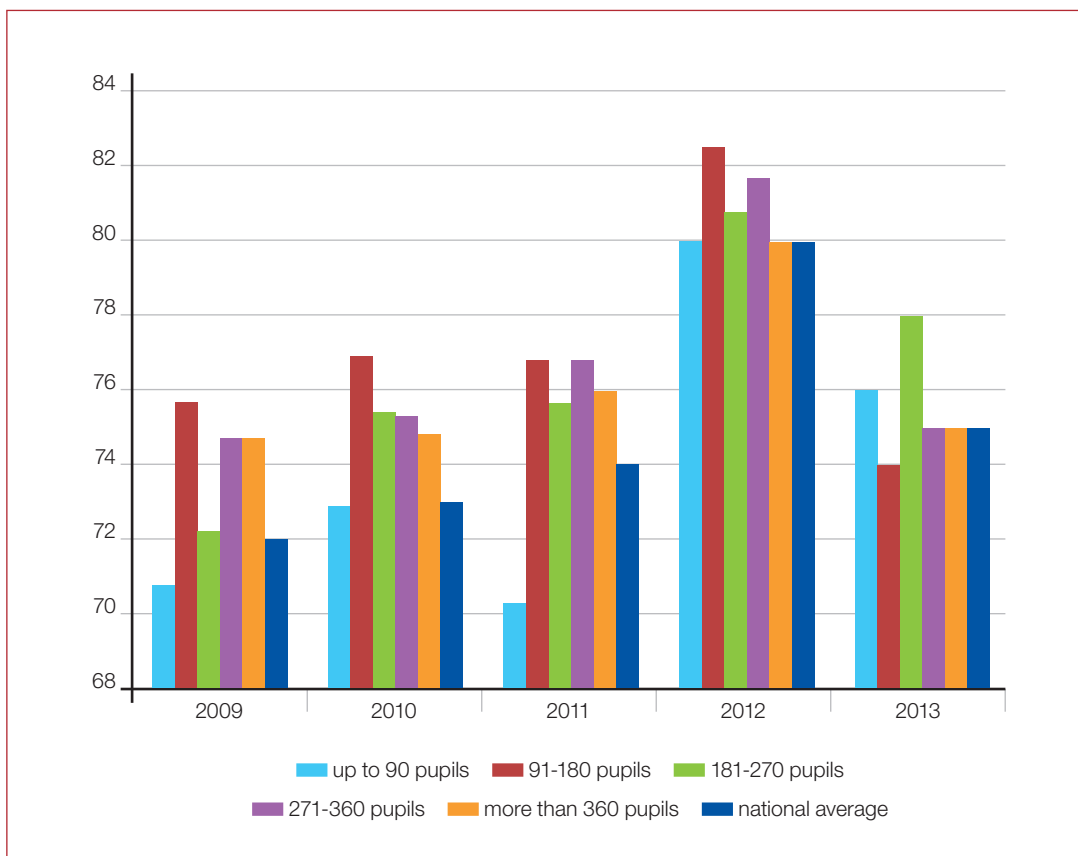
In this section we describe what is happening in terms of trends in pupil attainment in Lincolnshire and set that within the context of national performance trends. We also look at the outcome of Ofsted inspection results for small rural schools in Lincolnshire over the past two years. We then put that information alongside headteachers' own assessments of the partnership impact and try to assess the extent to which there is a basis for identifying what might be termed a 'partnership premium'.

5.1 Pupil attainment in Lincolnshire schools

Figure 13, below, 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 National Curriculum tests assessments has changed during the past 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. The chart in Figure 13 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 again matched the national performance level but also outperformed all other groups of Lincolnshire schools – apart from those with 181 to 270 pupils.



Figure 13: 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



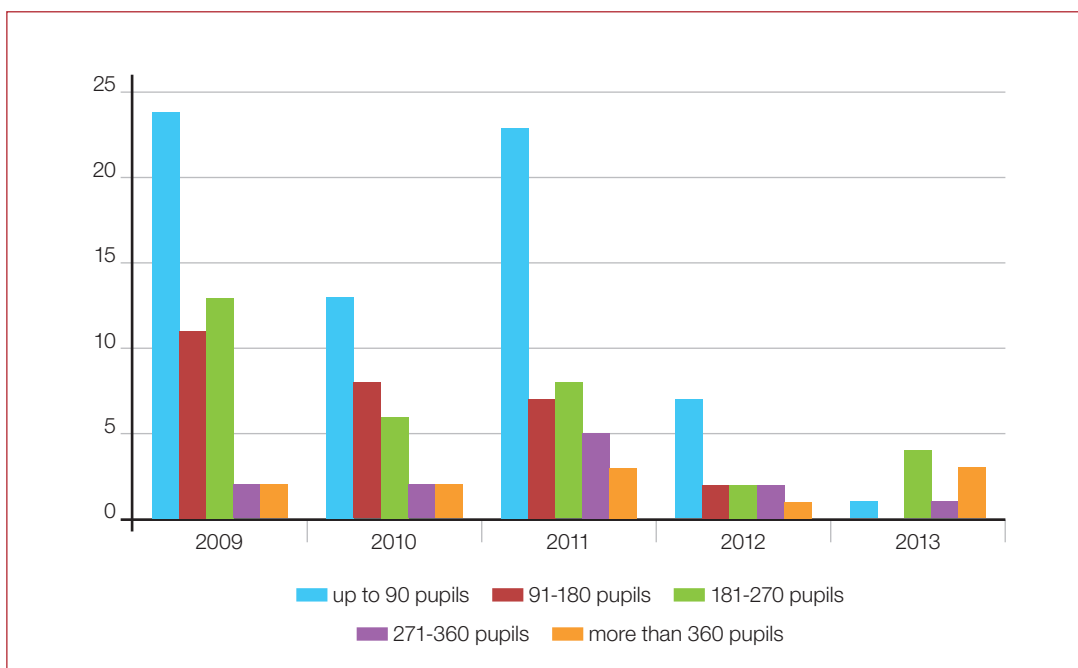
Source: CfBT and DfE statistical first releases (2010), (2011), (2012) and (2013)

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

A further measure by which to assess the progress of the smallest schools is to track the number falling below the government's floor target for primary school outcomes. This again is not straightforward, given both the changing nature of National Curriculum tests assessments and, as described earlier, amendments to how the floor target is calculated. Nevertheless the government does track progress on this measure from year to year. Figure 14 shows that over the past two years the number has fallen from over 20 to single figures and then, in 2013, to just one.



Figure 14: Number of Lincolnshire schools below the government's Key Stage 2 floor target, by size of school



Source: CfBT

5.2 Evidence from Ofsted inspections

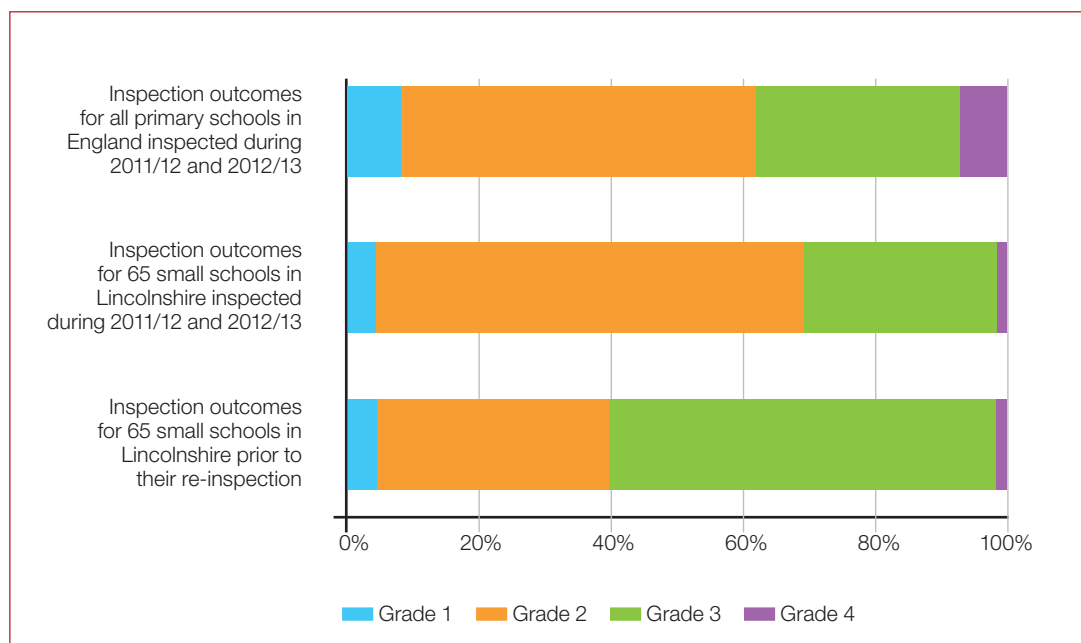
The improvement in performance of the smallest primary schools in Lincolnshire between 2011 and 2013 receives further confirmation when one looks at the outcomes of Ofsted inspections. The top bar in Figure 15, below, shows the national picture in terms of inspection outcomes by Ofsted grade for the 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.

A total of 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 15 shows the inspection outcomes for these 65 schools. The bottom bar provides a baseline by which to judge their performance and progress, relative to the grades they received in their previous inspection.

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' or 'requiring improvement' (Grade 3) schools and a corresponding increase in the proportion of 'good' (Grade 2) schools. The 65 Lincolnshire schools have moved from having, on average, poorer inspection outcomes than other primary schools in England to having, on average, better inspection outcomes.



Figure 15: Distribution of Ofsted inspection outcomes for small primary schools in Lincolnshire, compared with all primary schools



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

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 Ofsted reports for those schools that have improved contain frequent references to the way in which school leaders have taken steps to improve staff development, address specific weaknesses in, for example, the use of phonics and/or the teaching of mathematics and enhance the quality of feedback to pupils
- 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. Even more significantly Ofsted inspectors frequently refer to the direct support provided by CfBT alongside resources from partnership schools also being deployed and executive heads being appointed. The authority's use of school partnership as a strategic school improvement tool is very evident – as Figure 16 illustrates.

Figure 16: Extracts from Ofsted inspection reports on the role of the local authority in school improvement during 2012/13 and 2013/14

'Appropriate partnerships with other schools and with local authority consultants are helping staff to strengthen aspects of their teaching, and thus the achievement of all groups of pupils.'

Ofsted inspection report (120417) for Moulton Chapel Primary School in May 2012

'The local authority provided effective support following the drop in standards in 2012. It brokered the partnership with a good school and the appointment of an executive headteacher.'

Ofsted inspection report (401932) for Holbeach Bank Primary School in July 2013

'The local authority has had a "light-touch" approach with this good school. It has supported self-evaluation and governors in the recruitment process for a new headteacher. It provides a consultant headteacher to support the acting headteacher in her new role.'

Ofsted inspection report (403440) for the Potterhanworth Church of England Primary School in October 2012

'The local authority has increased its support for the school following the appointment of the new headteacher. The local authority officer provides good advice on specific issues identified by the headteacher and governors. Previously, it has provided training for governors and funding to support school improvement through a collaborative partnership with other local schools.'

Ofsted inspection report (401952) for the Cowbit St Mary's (Endowed) CoE Primary School in May 2013

'The current interim headteacher was commissioned by the local authority before Easter and took up post officially at the beginning of the summer term. She is the executive headteacher of three other local federated schools... Work through the local collaborative partnership has brought enrichment to the curriculum. Access to the expertise and resources from the three federated schools has had an immediate and positive impact on school improvement.'

Ofsted monitoring inspection visit to Sutton St James Community Primary School, 22 May 2013

- Thirdly, partnership working is also 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 heads and federations as being instrumental in school improvement in 45 of the 65 inspection reports. Figure 17, below, provides examples of how inspectors see partnerships and federations promoting improvement.



Figure 17: Extracts from Ofsted inspection reports identifying collaborative activity between schools as contributing to school improvement

Examples of the value of informal partnership working

'The effective governing body has successfully challenged the school and supported improvements, including through wider links with other local schools. This liaison has brought opportunity for teachers to work with others, learn from each other and broaden experiences for pupils.'

Ofsted inspection report (395736) for Leadenham Church of England Primary School, whose overall effectiveness moved from 'satisfactory' to 'good' when it was inspected in July 2012.

'The school makes good use of local schools to provide cost-effective training and opportunities to learn from each other's best practice.'

Ofsted inspection report (401941) for Toynton All Saints Primary School, whose overall effectiveness moved from 'satisfactory' to 'good' when it was inspected in October 2012.

'The headteacher has established very productive partnerships with a group of local schools who use funding from the local authority well to provide joint, cost-effective training based upon common needs. This has benefited this school particularly in the use of computers for learning.'

Ofsted inspection report (401943) for Hemswell Cliff Primary School, whose overall effectiveness moved from 'satisfactory' to 'good' when it was inspected in February 2013.

'Partnerships with a local cluster of schools broaden pupils' learning opportunities. The headteacher and the governing body benefit from the school's partnership with a local cluster of schools, which meets regularly to share practices, exchange information and discuss educational issues.'

Inspection report (380069) for Scamblesby Church of England Primary School, which sustained its overall effectiveness as 'good' when it was inspected in February 2012.

Examples of the value of federation and executive headship

'This school is much smaller than the average primary school. It "federated" with New York Primary School, six miles away, in 2010. A new joint governing body was formed and an executive headteacher appointed, after a period of instability. The school is also in a "collaboration" of several other primary schools in the area...'

'... The executive headteacher provides strong leadership and shares his vision clearly with governors and staff. As a consequence, all aspects of the school have improved since the previous inspection. Partnerships are very strong. The federation brings many benefits for staff and pupils alike. Staff at Frithville have gained expertise from shared managers, such as those responsible for coordinating provision for special educational needs.'

Ofsted inspection report (405926) for Frithville Primary School, whose overall effectiveness moved from 'satisfactory' to 'good' when it was inspected in May 2013.

'The school is now in a hard federation with its partner school; the senior leadership team has been restructured and a single governing body now covers both schools. The formalised links with its partner school under the outstanding joint leadership of the executive headteacher and headteacher have resulted in good improvements since the last inspection...'

Outstanding partnerships with the partner school, other schools and within the community have a very positive impact on learning and progress.'

Ofsted inspection report (380013) for Gosberton Community Primary School,⁵ whose overall effectiveness moved from 'satisfactory' to 'good' when it was inspected in September 2011.

'The executive headteacher has provided strong leadership. She has rebuilt the teaching team and ensured that all staff across the federation have leadership roles... The forming of the federation has already yielded numerous benefits. These include shared expertise in the classroom, a better distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities, access to a wider range of resources and facilities, economies of scale in organising events for pupils and joint training initiatives. All of these add to the school's capacity to sustain improvement in the future.'

Ofsted inspection report (403743) for Utterby Primary School, which sustained its overall effectiveness as 'good' when it was inspected in November 2012.

'Led by a determined executive headteacher, the school has made good progress on the areas identified by the previous inspection... The executive headteacher is empowering leaders to develop their skills and, as a result, the school has a good capacity to secure further improvement... The executive headteacher and, increasingly, subject leaders watch teachers teach and discuss how their skills could be improved. They are set precise goals so that they know how they can improve their effectiveness, and they are provided with professional training opportunities. The federation arrangements allow staff across the two schools to share more widely the most effective practice.'

Ofsted inspection report (400377) for North Thoresby Primary School, whose overall effectiveness moved from 'satisfactory' to 'good' when it was inspected in November 2012.

⁵ Now Gosberton Academy and part of the Phoenix Academy Trust



5.3 Evidence from headteachers

The findings from Ofsted inspection reports receive endorsement from headteachers. 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 raising achievement, they could nonetheless identify a range of positive benefits from collaborative working. Figure 18 lists the key benefits as described by headteachers, deputy heads and governors at the focus group sessions.

Figure 18: Benefits of collaborative working, as reported in focus group discussions by headteachers, deputy heads and governors

Improved teaching and learning

'There was a measurable improvement, from 65 per cent to 85 per cent, in the proportion of classroom observations judged good or better.'

Picking up ideas to support special educational needs and learning new intervention strategies *'has definitely had an impact'*.

'The staff are different and the classrooms more exciting and open: they are doing it for the children.'

Partnership with a teaching school alliance is *'driving curriculum change forward'* and opening minds to appreciate *'what's out there in terms of pedagogy, research and the new direction of education'*.

Less professional isolation

'Staff value the opportunities to get together in each other's classrooms.'

'There are more spontaneous links between staff – teachers are now thinking, "I could just ring that school".'

'Working in a small group is far more productive than working within just one school because you're sharing ideas.'

'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 that provides the elements of a large school.'

'We couldn't do the things we do if we didn't do it as a partnership – for example, inviting in outside speakers to give us another perspective. It stops us feeling insular.'

'It was part of the recruitment process that applicants came in, met a few of our partnership heads and were able to see that even though it's a small school, the development they were going to get was going to be good so it would be worth taking the post – if offered – despite the travelling time.'

Support for new headteachers

One headteacher described the support she received as 'unbelievable'. She experienced some difficulties and so rang another head in the partnership. *'I probably wouldn't have had that as a new head if the school had been on its own. It was knowing that I could just phone somebody and that they knew my school well which made a big difference.'*

'It was invaluable to have an experienced head in my first year of headship looking at my SEF and classroom observation practice. Without the partnership it would have been an impossible year for me as a head.'

A more powerful voice in the school system

'You've got the power of being more than just a lone voice but one of six saying "Come and see what we're doing. We're doing some really good things down here." As a small head on your own, it's not a very powerful voice.'

'We're big enough to make stuff happen in a way that as a small school you're rattling around... you can draw on their joint evidence across the partnership.'

Pupil development

An opportunity to meet a wider group of children of their own age: *'It's opened up the vision for our children of working with other children. It's not "us and them", they are making new friends.'*

'It helps develop pupils' confidence and self-esteem [and this] helps with the transition to secondary school.'

5.4 Conclusion

The CfBT partnership programme of support for small rural schools has been a bold and worthwhile initiative.⁶ In total some £2.8 million⁷ has been invested in incentivising and funding schools to move partnership working on to a new level. Although it is too early to evaluate the full impact of the programme, there are already signs of the investment providing a good return. First, the initiative has the support of most schools. Second, through the development and deployment of executive heads it is helping to address leadership recruitment issues. Third, it is encouraging and facilitating schools to adopt practices and ways of working that the research evidence indicates promote school improvement. Fourth, based on inspection assessments, it is contributing to improved school performance – even if a causal link and the exact scope of the impact cannot be definitely demonstrated at this point.

However, the partnership programme is still very much work in progress – for both CfBT and schools. CfBT has established a group of school leaders to oversee the further development of continuing collaborative work. This group regularly includes a CfBT adviser and teaching and

⁶ The companion publication to this report, *Partnership working in small rural schools: the best of both worlds – research report* will place the work in Lincolnshire in the context of the approaches adopted by other local authorities towards supporting small rural schools.

⁷ This sum includes allocations made to some schools in the 47 partnerships that had over 100 pupils.



learning consultant, a representative from the diocese of Lincoln, five headteachers, a governor and the headteacher of a teaching school in Lincoln. Others may attend by invitation, depending on the agenda.

Among the strategic challenges the group will need to address are:

- maintaining the momentum and progress as the dedicated funding allocated to schools is exhausted, as well as channelling and mainstreaming other programmes and initiatives through partnerships – as CfBT is already doing by facilitating the collective use of the units allocated under the professional development agreement. For example, it will make sense to see the provision of any county-wide professional development initiatives, efforts to support the implementation of the new national curriculum and key stage assessments and all governor development support going through the partnerships
- extending and deepening links between partnerships and teaching school alliances both within Lincolnshire and beyond, even if this means schools buying in fewer support services directly from CfBT
- moving partnership working from being a series of ad hoc initiatives to being at the core of how schools deliver their school development plan. As one headteacher put it, this will involve taking partnership to the point where it becomes ‘a self-improving model’, with groups of schools developing a shared curriculum approach and being involved in one another’s performance management. The Ofsted inspection reports that were examined identified a number of areas for further improvement that were common across schools. The quality of marking and monitoring of pupils’ progress and embedding key literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum were two such areas. It makes sense for schools to work on these issues jointly in their clusters rather than individually
- developing sufficient leadership capacity within school clusters. Depth of joint working is unlikely to be achieved all the time that a partnership relies solely on leaders having to develop and coordinate activity alongside their day job. One answer may be for partnerships to be bolder in how they work together – sharing posts and procurement – in order to free up the funding to employ dedicated partnership project management or leadership capacity. CfBT may be able to assist with developing some business models and pilot projects to show how this is possible
- encouraging the growth of federations and multi-academy trusts. The combination of the leadership recruitment challenge and the examination of the Ofsted inspection reports emphasises the value of hard clusters. Many of the more informal partnerships may grow towards federation as they work ever more closely together. In other cases, where school performance fails to improve or where recruitment problems are persistent and protracted, an external stimulus may be need to trigger the formation of a federation or trust. However, given the mix of faith and non-faith schools in Lincolnshire it is also important that other forms of partnerships continue to operate as it is often problematic for church and non-church schools to share the same governance structure

- continuing to work on exploiting the potential of digital connections between schools as a means of maximising contact between staff and pupils while minimising the need for travel. Already CfBT has in hand an initiative that is encouraging the use of iPads to facilitate pupil learning both within and across schools.

If the local authority and small schools in Lincolnshire are able to address these challenges and sustain and deepen the level of their collaborative effort, they will not only continue to bring benefits to staff and pupils but point the way for local authorities and small schools in other parts of the country to follow. What is at stake is the opportunity to chart a new way forward for primary schooling in England.

6. Case studies

Halton Hologate Church of England Primary School

Halton Hologate is a voluntary controlled school of 72 pupils in a village near the market town of Spilsby in east Lincolnshire. The school has three classes: one for reception and Years 1 and 2 pupils; one for Year 3 and most of Year 4; and one comprising the brightest of the pupils from Year 4 with pupils from Years 5 and 6. The school has three teachers – two are full time and one teaches for 0.6 of the week, with the headteacher, Damian Sunter, teaching for the balance of the week. This is Damian's first headship. There are three teaching assistants (TAs) and two staff who support autistic pupils on a one-to-one basis. There is one other member of staff who is responsible for pupil premium interventions and leads small group work in the afternoons.

In June 2010 inspectors judged the school to be 'good'. The results from this year's Key Stage 2 tests were, in headline terms, poor. Damian came to the school in April 2013 and has identified the areas where the school needs to improve its practice – particularly in relation to assessment and tracking. In addition there were only eight pupils in the cohort and some of them had particular learning difficulties, though all of the Key Stage 2 pupils made at least two levels of progress in reading, writing and mathematics.

Joining an existing partnership

There was no mention of partnership working in the advertisement for the headship post at Halton Hologate. However, when Damian came to look round the school the existing headteacher mentioned the existence of a partnership with three other local church schools – in Toynton, Willoughby and Great Steeping. St Helena's in Willoughby is, at seven miles, the furthest away. In the interview for the job Damian was asked about his experience of collaborative working between schools and there was a clear implication that the governors were supportive of it.

Early on his first morning as headteacher at Halton Hologate, Damian received a call from the head of St Helena's welcoming him to the school and offering him any advice or support he might need. That was followed by emails with similar messages from the heads of the other two schools in the partnership. This set the tone for the headteachers embracing a new colleague into the partnership.

The partnership is relatively new and only really started its work in September 2012 – though the fact that two of the headteachers had previously worked with each other helped to provide the initial trust and momentum to get the partnership going.

Partnership activity

Halton Hologate received around £25,000 as part of its share of the partnership funding allocated by CfBT and some of that had been spent by the time Damian arrived. The partnership's early activities included:

- bringing staff from the four schools together to undertake moderation of writing
- running Easter holiday booster sessions for Year 6 pupils across the partnership
- working with a music specialist in the summer term of 2013 and putting on a production for parents and the public

- hosting the Year 6 pupils from the four schools at Halton Hologate for a session on drug awareness
- arranging for 10 children from each school to be part of a 48-hour gifted and talented artist retreat.

For this school year the headteachers have coordinated and agreed common training days. After the autumn 2013 half-term, for example, staff are coming together to share and be challenged on how they undertake progress assessments, looking at the evidence they use and the judgements they make. There is also a training day set aside to plan a unit of work that will be delivered across the four schools. The project will mainly focus on geography and science but will also develop reading, writing and mathematics skills. It will provide an opportunity for staff to analyse the requirements of the new national curriculum and it is planned to involve children emailing and peer-assessing one another, and meeting up to carry out weather experiments.

The headteachers have shared across the partnership details of their members of staff, the year groups they teach and any particular specialism they have. This has resulted in a newly qualified teacher (NQT) from one of the other schools coming to observe the senior teacher at Halton Hologate who has a mathematics specialism. Similarly, the teacher at Halton Hologate with responsibility for Reception and Years 1 and 2 pupils has been able to draw on the expertise of other staff in the federation who have experience of teaching mixed-age classes and ensuring that older children in such groupings are appropriately stretched.

Leadership and governance of the partnership

The four headteachers meet and spend the whole day together at the termly headteacher briefing sessions convened by CfBT. They use the slots allocated in the afternoon for cluster business to plan their joint activity. They are also in constant touch by email.

The headteachers exchange their school development plans, monitoring and appraisal arrangements and self-evaluation forms. When something new comes along – such as having to draw up a business continuity policy – they help each other address the issue.

‘The four heads are very secure and comfortable with each other and feel able to offer advice or ask for support.’ (Headteacher, Halton Hologate CoE Primary School)

The strength of their joint working is indicated by the fact that they were asked by CfBT to make a presentation to a conference on school partnership in July 2013 on what it was like to walk into an existing partnership. The administrators from each school are also in touch with each other if they need advice or guidance.

Governors from the four schools have met with each other to discuss the activity and progress of the partnership. The four chairs of governors carried out a joint governance ‘health check’ organised by CfBT. Each headteacher is welcome to attend meetings of the governing body in partner schools.

Partnership impact

Governors are keen to know what impact the partnership is having on the children. However, it is too early to answer that question. But Damian does now see the partnership as providing the main source of professional development for his staff. He has also seen the positive impact on the quality



of teaching, as evidenced in classroom observations, as a result of being involved with staff in other schools.

More experienced staff are able to share and use their expertise with a greater number of colleagues and are also gaining access to development through being able to observe, work with and learn from four headteachers rather than just one.

The partnership is also having an impact by helping to keep teaching and learning fresh – for both teachers and pupils. This can be a challenge when teachers have the same pupils for three years running.

‘The partnership provides a bigger pool of ideas. If you only ever do the same thing you get the same results.’ (Headteacher, Halton Hologate CoE Primary School)

Challenges and future development

Damian sees his first priority as being to the children at Halton Hologate. While he is very positive about the work of the partnership he also thinks it is important to be realistic:

‘We have brilliant ideas but we have to stay grounded and avoid biting off more than we can chew.’ (Headteacher, Halton Hologate CoE Primary School)

For example, the partnership has started to form a relationship with the Kyra teaching school alliance led by Mount Pleasant Academy in Lincoln. In particular the partnership is interested in the alliance’s work on talent management. However, Damian’s feeling is that being involved in this activity is a step too far at this stage and that the partnership will potentially be more ready for this commitment in a year’s time. Since all the headteachers have a teaching commitment they have a limited amount of time and resource to dedicate to the development of the partnership.

A more immediate priority for the partnership is to designate staff to act as subject leads across the partnership – Damian himself will be acting as the literacy lead. This will be a big step in how the four schools work together. A measure of success will be whether the partnership can develop a real handle on its collective performance in key areas such as writing. Damian’s ambition is for the partnership to be organising fewer one-off training days and develop more strategic projects that are collectively planned and delivered – particularly in relation to implementing the new national curriculum.

The partnership has got past the issue of the dedicated partnership money having all gone. His view is that if all four schools commit to something – particularly as the partnership’s agenda focuses on core school improvement issues – then working together has the potential to do things better at a lower cost. And some issues – such as Damian acting as the literacy lead – do not in any event impose an additional cost.

One area that might benefit from this approach is governor training which could be organised jointly.

The Denton and Harlaxton Church of England Primary School Federation

Denton and Harlaxton Church of England Primary Schools form a hard federation with a single governing body. The two schools, both voluntary controlled, are situated about a mile apart on the western edge of Grantham and are both within the same CoE parish.

Denton has 69 pupils on roll. They are taught in three classes – one class for Reception and Years 1 and 2; one for Years 3 and 4; and one for Years 5 and 6. Harlaxton is a bigger school with 186 pupils and one form for every year of entry.

The executive headteacher for both schools is Sheri Edwards. Sheri came to Denton in 2007 at the request of CfBT when the school was placed in special measures by Ofsted. Initially the appointment was on an acting basis but Sheri then took over permanently – it was her first headship. By June 2008 the school had been graded by inspectors as ‘good’ and in 2010 it was judged ‘outstanding’. The school was inspected again in April 2013 and found to be ‘outstanding’ across the board.

The link with Harlaxton came about in February 2011. The school had just been assessed as ‘satisfactory’ and Sheri was again asked by CfBT to lead the school on a ‘caretaker’ basis. The governors had a lot of discussion about whether to make the link with Harlaxton a permanent one. There were concerns about what this would mean for Denton pupils and staff but, as the chair of governors put it:

‘It was the confidence of the headteacher that swung it. She convinced us that she and her colleagues were capable of running the two schools effectively. We also knew that if we didn’t do it, it would be harder to retain the head.’

Harlaxton was re-inspected in January 2013 and was judged ‘good’ and the leadership and management ‘outstanding’. The inspector reported:

‘The executive headteacher has been highly successful in helping to transform the school, and in establishing and sharing a clear vision of improvement. School leaders work together with a great sense of passion and commitment, and their high expectations are reflected throughout the school.’

‘Leadership roles have evolved and strengthened and several of the school’s leaders have moved across from the outstanding partner school. The powerful working partnership between the two schools has played a key role in accelerating the improvements seen.’

(Ofsted inspection report for Harlaxton Church of England Primary School, 30 and 31 January 2013)

The proportion of pupils in both schools achieving level 4 or above in reading, writing and mathematics at Key Stage 2 is well above the national average. In 2013 all pupils at Denton made at least at least two levels of progress and at Harlaxton over nine out of ten pupils did so.

Leadership and governance

The senior leadership of the federation comprises the executive headteacher and two assistant heads – one for each school. When Sheri first came to Denton she taught for half the week but since taking over as executive head does not have a teaching workload. The assistant head at Denton combines her leadership responsibilities with being a part-time class teacher, acting as the special



needs co-ordinator, overseeing the TAs and providing planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) cover at Harlaxton. The assistant head at Harlaxton is also the Year 6 teacher.

When the federation was formed the governing body was reconstituted. It comprises 15 governors who meet as a full governing body once a term. Most of those wanting to continue as governors were able to do so – although there were elections for parent governors at Harlaxton as there were four candidates for two places. During the first few months of federation there was a sense of ‘their’ or ‘our’ governors, but all that has gone. Governor open days at each school provide opportunities for governors to observe learning and get to know each school well. They alternate the location of their meetings between the two schools. The quality and calibre of the governance was commended in the inspection reports on both Denton and Harlaxton.

Operation of the federation

The executive head has created a framework and culture that sees the two schools operating as one unit rather than two separate institutions. Many staff roles extend over both schools – for example, a teacher might have a lead responsibility for mathematics or literacy across the federation. Some teachers will be deployed from one school to another – both to boost learning for pupils but also to model good practice and coach other colleagues.

Some teaching assistants work in both schools. There are joint staff meetings every week and joint policies and practices covering areas such as curriculum planning, assessment and monitoring. As part of the federation’s performance management policy, all teachers are required to engage in lesson study with other colleagues. This involves jointly planning, reviewing and observing lessons. All staff are also part of a team covering a distinct phase of education (for example Key Stage 1) with at least three teachers in each team.

‘These teams will decide on a theme for a term, identify a trip or visit to kick-start the theme, agree which subjects should be planned into the theme and which should be taught discretely. Each teacher then develops their medium-term plans which they send round to colleagues. Within the themes teachers may emphasise different issues. If the theme were, for example, the Victorians, one teacher might lead on the development of industry, another might focus on social conditions and another on the development of voting rights. So lessons will not be identical or formulaic and staff will draw on each other’s material and pool artefacts and resources.’

(Executive headteacher, Denton and Harlaxton Federation)

The schools have also started to take advantage of the greater economy of scale that federation brings. Both schools, for example, now have the same provider for school meals. Coach travel for pupils is negotiated jointly. The IT support contract has been moved to a local firm and this has enabled emails to be accessed and iPads to be used at either school. The administrative support staff at Denton work part-time so Sheri is able to call on the team at Harlaxton when Denton staff are not available.

Partnership with other local schools

Denton and Harlaxton work closely with two other small schools in Great Ponton and Ropsley, that are respectively five and ten miles away. The schools form the Grantham Rural Schools Village Partnership. Denton already had a close relationship with Ropsley when the CfBT initiative to foster partnership working (see section 1.3) came along. The schools developed and secured approval for a business plan from CfBT and each school was allocated around £20,000.



The funding was used to 'backfill' teachers so that they could spend time with other colleagues and undertake peer coaching and lesson study style activities. NQTs had the opportunity to broaden their experience by learning from colleagues in other schools and SENCOs were able to meet and support each other.

The partnership also provided some joint training days and part of the resource at Harlaxton was used to create a conference room for training and lesson study. The facility is available for all the schools in the partnership to use.

The funding has now all been spent but the schools in the partnership are committed to sustaining a network of learning professionals. So they are continuing to collaborate on training, enabling TAs to work with and learn from each other and supporting NQTs in their teaching of phonics. The SENCOs are collaborating on preparing a training day round dyscalculia.

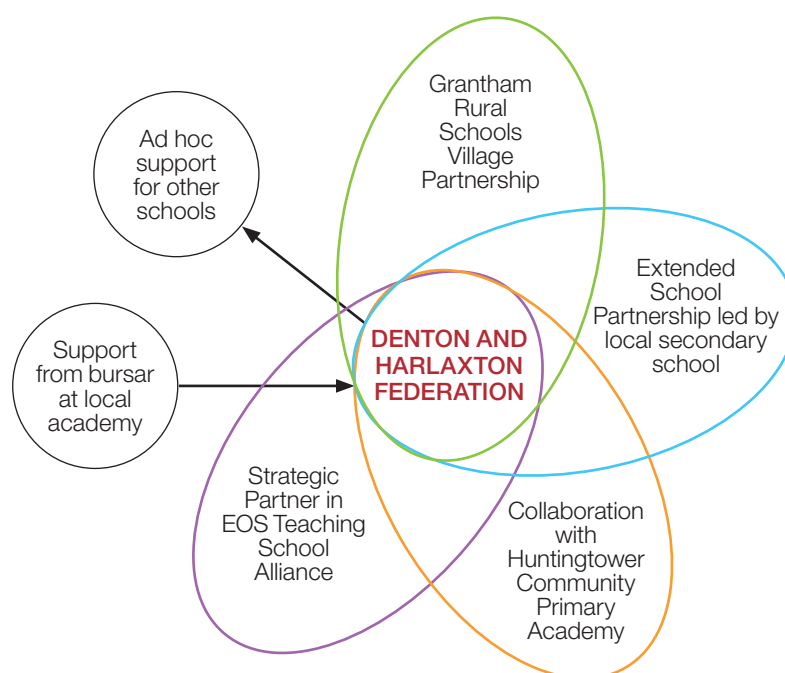
The headteachers of the schools take advantage of the time at the CfBT termly briefing sessions to meet and coordinate their partnership activity. They share the self-evaluations of their schools, their performance management arrangements and their experience of the Ofsted inspection process. They have not yet undertaken joint learning walks in each other's schools but that could come. They have also ensured that other senior leaders within their schools are involved in partnership activity to help consolidate the leadership of the partnership. Governors from the schools within the partnership are supportive of the collaboration. They have met and sat in on each other's meetings but as yet there has been no shared governor development.



Other partnerships

In addition to the partnership with the local schools the federation also works with a number of other schools and partnerships (see Figure 19).

Figure 19: The Denton and Harlaxton Federation partnership networks



For example, Denton and Harlaxton are strategic partners in the EOS teaching school alliance which is led by Hartsholme Academy in Lincoln. This is providing an opportunity to build on the work that Sheri is already doing to support other schools – sometimes informally and sometimes as part of a more formal arrangement often brokered by CfBT. Sheri has also agreed to take on leadership of the alliance’s work supporting recently qualified teachers.

The federation is able to benefit from the alliance by sending staff to Hartsholme to observe their work on project learning and this is helping to broaden staff horizons and encourage them to be creative and innovative in planning their termly themes.

Denton and Harlaxton also have three other partnership relationships. They are with:

- Huntingtower Community Primary Academy in Grantham; the schools exchange staff, undertake joint lesson study and collaborate on staff development
- the school cluster linked to the local secondary school; this link dates back to the Extended School initiative and the schools collaborate on providing creative arts opportunities for pupils and on Year 6 to Year 7 transition issues

- a local academy whose bursar provides financial reports for governors on a contractual paid-for basis.

Benefits, challenges and future developments

The combination of the federation and partnership has helped to develop a more confident and mature set of teachers and this in turn has helped to strengthen teaching and learning in both schools. Previously teachers were at risk of being too insular – they were just teaching their class and year group in a small school. Now they are able to observe teaching and learning in a number of different contexts, to plan together and to challenge and to be challenged on their practice.

Sheri feels that although key disciplines on lesson and data tracking are becoming embedded the federation has not yet reached its full potential. There is more to achieve in terms of staff raising their expectations of pupils and being more creative in developing a project-based curriculum. The federation development plan has also identified the need to strengthen team working so that staff think of themselves as one unit – irrespective of which school they happen to work in.

As for the partnership with local schools, there is a risk that it will run out of steam now that the dedicated funding is exhausted and there is no external incentive to collaborate. However, the schools have maintained their relationships and

'The joint training sessions will continue because they have been valuable and it is financially advantageous to run them jointly.'

(Executive headteacher, Denton and Harlaxton Federation)

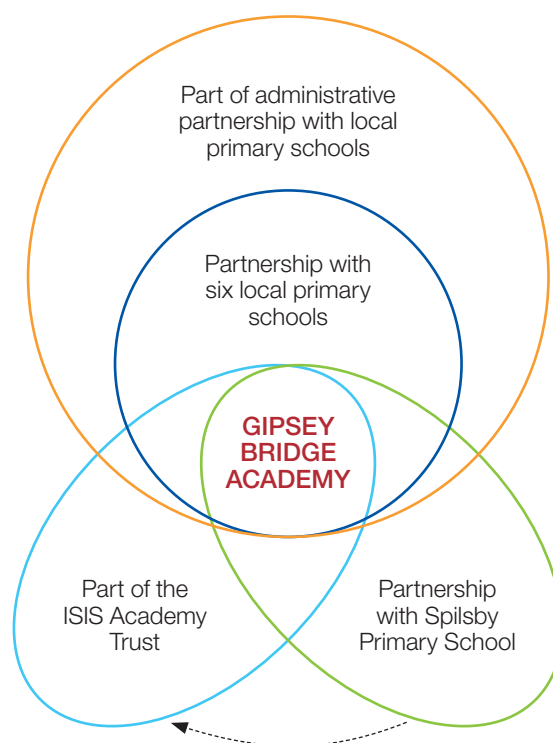
The question will be whether the partnership evolves to the next level to provide mutual challenge as well as support and can manage a change of leadership as and when one of the headteachers moves on.

The challenge for the teaching school alliance is to identify a clear mission and strategy, and agree and implement some defined priorities, given that Hartsholme Academy's links with the innovative US charter school, High Tech High, will provide exciting opportunities to develop new approaches to teaching and learning.

Gipsey Bridge Academy

Gipsey Bridge Academy is a primary school of 100 pupils just to the north west of Boston in Lincolnshire. The school has four classes: a reception class with 15 pupils and three classes with around 30 pupils, each covering two year groups. It uses structured project learning as the basis of its curriculum. The headteacher, Gavin Booth, who took up the post in September 2010, was the school's fourth headteacher in four terms. In October 2009 inspectors judged the school to be 'good'. As Figure 20 shows, the school is involved in a series of overlapping and interlocking partnerships – which vary in both their focus and methods of working. There have been four main drivers of partnership working.

Figure 20: Gipsey Bridge Academy's partnership networks



Working with other new headteachers

Gavin's appointment to Gipsey Bridge coincided with several other local schools appointing new headteachers. The heads made links as they met at induction sessions and they shared the same mentor provided by CfBT for new heads. To begin with, the headteachers of the six schools in the partnership (which includes two schools in a hard federation and two church schools) focused on supporting each other as they grew into the headship role. They shared their staffing plans, their self-evaluation frameworks and the procedures used for appointing staff.

As they built up trust they became more collegiate and started discussing the strengths and weaknesses of their respective schools. The rural nature of their collaboration and the fact that the schools were no threat to each other in terms of attracting pupils helped to ease the path to deeper partnership working. The partnership then moved into supporting teaching and learning through



joint training days, moderation activities, curriculum development, learning walks and sharing and analysing data.

Support from the local authority

This process was encouraged by CfBT, which during this period was rolling out the scheme to incentivise and promote partnership working between schools in Lincolnshire (see section 1.3). The local cluster was one of the early adopters of the proposals – although the partnership found the original concept of the scheme to be somewhat rigid:

'We just wanted to focus on outcomes for kids rather than on shared appointments and back office functions. Our priority was to release heads from doing so much teaching so that they had more time to lead teaching and learning both within their own school and across the partnership. However, we recognised what CfBT was trying to do and worked with them to prepare and revise a business plan that resulted in autumn 2012 in us drawing down our allocation of £100,000.'
(Headteacher, Gipsey Bridge Academy)

The funding was mainly used to enable headteachers to have the time and support to work together and coordinate joint activity, though a portion was also allocated to staff training and the development of SENCOs. Gavin has himself moved from the position he inherited of teaching for 0.4 of the week to having no timetabled teaching commitment. He achieved this by replacing higher paid staff, as they left, with teachers paid at a lower point on the pay progression scale and by upskilling higher level teaching assistants to take on cover responsibilities. Releasing the headteacher from day-to-day teaching responsibility:

'... had a big impact for me and the school. It enabled us to up the pace of change and moved the quality of teaching and learning forward at a much greater pace.'
(Headteacher, Gipsey Bridge Academy)

CfBT has also been supportive of a local administrative school cluster. The remit of this group, which includes schools beyond the six in the local partnership, helps schools to reduce their costs and obtain better value for money. It jointly procures goods and services such as grounds maintenance, stationery and supply cover. Gipsey Bridge is still part of this partnership even though it is now an academy.

Becoming an academy

The opportunities provided by the academy programme provides the fourth driver of Gipsey Bridge's partnership working. Gavin feels that:

'One downside of local partnerships is that schools have the same issues, problems and perspective – everything is localised and there is a risk that schools become too similar and inward looking. You need to maintain a school's distinctiveness to be competitive and attractive to parents. We also needed to broaden our experience of educating pupils with special needs and children from different cultures.'

This provided the spur to see what an academy partnership could offer. Leadership succession was also an issue.

'If I moved on and the governors couldn't recruit a new head they might get swallowed up by a large academy chain. Governors did not want this, nor did they want to be part of a secondary-led

academy trust. They were clear that they wanted a primary-based arrangement that preserved the school's distinct identity.' (Headteacher, Gipseley Bridge Academy)

The academy partner that Gipseley Bridge chose came through Gavin teaming up with a former colleague who had extensive experience of leading school improvement, inspecting schools and curriculum development. The vision was to set up an academy chain of like-minded headteachers who saw developing teaching and learning as their priority and valued the autonomy and identity of their own schools, but wanted to operate within a framework of mutual challenge and support.

In February 2013 Gipseley Bridge and Greengate Lane Primary School in Sheffield became academies and formed the ISIS multi-academy trust. A third school is expected to join the trust in early 2014. Teachers in the two academies, along with other schools that have formed a partnership relationship with ISIS, are working together through joint projects. One project, for example, centres on teachers using iPads to record learning journeys. School leaders are undertaking reviews of each other's schools and reporting the results to governors and the ISIS trust board. Gipseley Bridge has also been able to take a School Direct trainee through Greengate Lane's link with Sheffield Hallam University.

The trust has retained local governing boards to oversee the day-to-day running and performance of the individual schools. Three governors from each school, the two headteachers and a chief executive officer form the trust board. *'It feels as if we are building a plane as we fly it'*, is Gavin's take on the financial and administrative issues that the trust is finding its way through.

Supporting another Lincolnshire school

The final driver of Gipseley Bridge's partnership work has come from a more recent link with a school of 190 pupils in Spilsby – a 25-minute drive from Gipseley Bridge. The previous headteacher left the school having been there for a relatively short period. The governors received only two applications for a replacement and were unable to make an appointment. Gavin, who had previously in his career applied to lead the school, was alerted to the situation by CfBT. This led to a discussion with the governors of the Spilsby school and an agreement that Gavin would act as headteacher of the school, spending three and a half days a week there from September 2013.

The governors of Gipseley Bridge had a long and difficult conversation before the arrangement was ratified. The governors had held many discussions over the years about partnering with schools and 'managing changes in headship' was a constant theme. They wanted to get off the roller-coaster ride of 'find-a-head, lose-a-head, have-to-find-a-head-again' and recognised they would need to adapt their approach to do so. They knew that small schools were often used as a brief stepping stone for headteachers en route to the headship of a larger school and that this was, as the chair of governors put it, *'unsettling and impedes the ability of the school to move forward'*.

Governors were also aware that if they blocked the link with the Spilsby school they risked losing their headteacher in the medium term and so they accepted the arrangement, appreciating that:

'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.' (Chair of governors, Gipseley Bridge Academy)

However, it was not just Gavin's role that was the issue. The governors were also concerned that the deputy head would have to reduce her time in class to act as head of school for that part of the



week when Gavin was in Spilsby. But the advantages of supporting the leadership development of the deputy head outweighed the disadvantages of children being taught by more than one teacher.

The Spilsby governors advertised again in the autumn of 2013 for a new headteacher but this time only attracted one applicant and again made no appointment, and so Gavin's role has been extended for the whole of the 2013/14 school year. Spilsby pays the ISIS academy trust for the use of Gavin's services.

Gavin's aim is for the partnership between Gipse Bridge and Spilsby to be based on mutual learning between the leaders and teachers at both schools. One of his early decisions was to hold a joint training day for staff from Spilsby and Gipse Bridge. He has used the learning mentor at Spilsby to help set up a recently established post targeted at pupils on the pupil premium at Gipse Bridge. A maths consultant from Spilsby is being used across the two schools. In addition the deputy head from Gipse Bridge is sharing her expertise in designing and implementing project-based working.

Reflections

The partnership strategy adopted by Gipse Bridge has brought all sorts of benefits. It has enabled staff and governors to become more aware of and draw on a much broader range of educational ideas and resources. The school has moved away from a 'it's just the way we do it here' mentality – which had been a limiting factor in the development of the school. It has also provided superb personal career development and leadership development experience for staff working in a small school:

'This has been a huge bonus for us and we envisage will continue to be so by attracting higher calibre staff to perhaps engage with us for longer.'
(Vice chair of governors, Gipse Bridge Academy)

Involvement in the ISIS academy trust has helped to sharpen governance.

'The head reports to the governing body, the governing body report to the trust... If I am required to present reports to my colleagues on the multi-academy board regarding standards and use of resources, I in turn use this as an opportunity to reflect upon and evaluate these points. Are we happy with the level of progress? Is the appointment of a learning mentor the best use of resources? How would an outsider... view the way that we judge standards and use resources?'
(Chair of governors, Gipse Bridge Academy)

However, there are also challenges. Being pulled in too many different directions is one risk.

'What we need to do now is to see how collaboration can meet our needs and hopefully other schools will see how we can help them.' (Headteacher, Gipse Bridge Academy)

There is also the issue of developing the links within ISIS while still being an active member of the local partnerships. On this Gavin sees the multi-academy trust as providing a source of ideas about the curriculum and classroom practice and a means of being involved in teaching and learning reviews, while the partnership with local schools is about practical hands-on work and development between leaders, teachers and support staff. Governors recognise that they have a challenge to adapt their thinking and ways of working to be relevant to exercising oversight of schools on several sites.

St Margaret's Church of England Primary School

St Margaret's Church of England Primary School is a voluntary controlled school of 48 pupils in Withern, in the north east of Lincolnshire. The number of pupils is rising and children come to the school from local villages and towns up to seven or eight miles away. Reception and Key Stage 1 children form one class. Pupils from Years 3 and 4 and Years 5 and 6 are taught in two separate classes in the mornings but learn together as one group in the afternoons. The headteacher, James Siddle, came to the school in September 2011. He spends half of his time teaching. The school was inspected within a few weeks of his arrival and was judged 'good'. In 2013 all pupils in Year 6 achieved level 4 or higher in reading, writing and mathematics in Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests and all pupils made three levels of progress.

Partnership development

At the same time as James took up his post, an executive head was appointed to run two other schools with which St Margaret's had been working in a soft federation. The focus of the executive head was on making the arrangement between the two schools work. This resulted in them becoming a hard federation and a loosening of the links with St Margaret's.

When CfBT proposed the partnership strategy for small schools James' instinct was to identify a partner with whom he could build a strong relationship. Although it was not so local he decided to team up with the headteacher of his former school in Stickney, 35 miles away. This in turn provided a link to New Leake Primary School as the headteacher of Stickney had been asked to take on the executive headship of the school. The fourth school in the partnership is Partney CoE Primary School – which is equidistant between St Margaret's, Stickney and New Leake.

The schools started off by agreeing their partnership values and aims – see Figure 21.

Figure 21: Values and aims of the Stickney, New Leake, Partney and St Margaret's schools partnership

Through our collaborative partnership we will work together to provide teaching and learning of the highest standards to ensure our pupils are given the best possible start towards a successful future. We will:

- improve standards of writing through exploring a variety of strategies, including new technologies and sharing expertise
- support early years foundation stage teachers by developing assessment resources, the learning environment and shared knowledge practice
- narrow the gap through providing enhanced support for pupils with special educational needs or disabilities
- implement new ICT systems to promote progress and achievement



- invest in, value and promote children's thinking and voice in each school and between schools
- work harmoniously with families, the church and the community to be supportive and treat all members with mutual respect
- share finance knowledge so all schools succeed in maximising resources.

Like other schools in the county, the partnership had reservations about CfBT's plans for employing a shared business manager and SENCO but were able to swiftly agree a business plan that reflected the spirit of what CfBT was trying to achieve. The St Margaret's part of the approved bid included provision for an additional half day a week for the school's SENCO; additional time for administrative staff to enable them to focus on more strategic business management issues; upgrading the school's wi-fi system to support better use of digital technology when working with other schools; purchase of iPads; staff training; release time to enable staff to work in other schools; transport of staff and pupils between schools; and joint governor events, leadership-away days, review meetings and partnership celebration events.

The schools also agreed a 'heads of agreement' that they all signed, committing each school to the partnership. The text was adapted from the draft memorandum of understanding drawn up by CfBT.

Partnership activity

The partnership has concentrated on delivering the activities envisaged in the business plan. The key strands of activity between schools have been:

- learning to apply joint professional development (JPD); all teachers are working with a partner in another school. One of the St Margaret's teachers described how she had been to visit a colleague in New Leake. She observed a lesson there and the two teachers then planned a lesson together. Over the course of the next few weeks they each delivered the jointly planned lesson in their respective schools observed by the other and provided feedback to each other. They followed this process for two cycles and then had a consultant who modelled a lesson for them. One teacher was initially slightly resistant to engaging in JPD but the fact that James as a teaching head was participating helped to give the programme credibility. The partnership is holding a joint INSET day to review the experience of being involved in JPD and to plan the focus of activity for early 2014 which will be on improving feedback to pupils
- using digital technology to enable pupils from different schools to work together; groups of pupils from different schools used blogs, Skype and visits to each other's schools to listen to and provide feedback on each other's work. Teachers will also use a combination of meetings, email, Dropbox, Skype and phone calls to plan the project jointly and deliver different aspects of it
- training in how to use iPads, maximise the value of outdoor learning, including involving and working with parents and using film and media to support teaching and learning; St Margaret's and Partney have also collaborated on using an educational psychologist to provide training in the areas of autism and dyslexia



- support for NQTs to enable them to travel to observe practice in other schools, observe how a leadership team works, and talk with and learn from other colleagues about teaching a cross-phase class
- joint meetings of school councils that enable pupil leaders to see how they operate in other schools and bring back ideas to their own schools
- training for governors across the partnership on issues such as performance management.

Governance and leadership of the partnership

Each school in the partnership has appointed a lead governor for collaboration. Once a term the chairs of governors and the lead governors from the four schools meet. Usually there is a presentation and discussion on one of collaborative strands – sometimes via a short video. Governors will also discuss issues relating to finance and training.

The headteachers meet together in the time set aside for cluster discussion at the termly CfBT briefing sessions. But they will also speak and email each other on at least a weekly basis. The four schools, by agreement with CfBT, now share the same professional adviser and this is also helping to bind the schools together.

When a new headteacher for Partney was appointed, the role of the partnership was included in the job description for the post. The governors were also open to involving a representative from one of the other schools in the appointment process in order to ensure that all candidates appreciated the significance of partnership working to the life of the school.

Wider partnership working

St Margaret's and the other schools in the partnership are also part of the KYRA teaching school alliance which is led by Mount Street Primary Academy in Lincoln. In particular they are benefiting from the talent management strand of the teaching agenda. The schools are working on mapping out a leadership development pathway for staff from NQT onwards. This includes developing a matrix that links a teacher's position on the pay scale to the sort of performance and role that should be expected of them. This work has been extremely helpful as St Margaret's has just started thinking about succession planning and leadership development.

The alliance is providing access to the National College's licensed providers for leadership development. Each of the schools in the partnership is also taking one School Direct trainee from September onwards.

Partnership impact

The impact of the partnership is being felt at a number of levels. First and foremost there is a strong conviction that pupils are gaining immensely from interacting with other pupils of the same age. As one teacher put it:

'The children are really inspired by the contact [with pupils in other schools]. They love using blogs and Skype and evaluating each other's work as part of a larger group.'

The partnership is looking to capture the value to pupils through interviews with pupils and assessing pupil progress for a given year group compared with same period the previous term, or year, before and after a specific JPD project is carried out.



Second, it is enhancing professional development and providing the sort of opportunities that teachers in a larger school would enjoy on an everyday basis.

'A teacher in a small school is very isolated. To have someone else to plan with on units of work and bounce ideas off is very valuable.'

(Teacher, St Margaret's CoE School, Withern)

The contact with other teachers means that they are teaching in different ways and having an opportunity to test new approaches – and gain feedback. The impact of the professional development is then being assessed through classroom observations. Teachers are also being encouraged to capture the value of their learning together through joint blogs, podcasts or videos that they can bring to joint training sessions.

Third, the partnership is providing mutual support for the headteachers. And fourth, it is helping governors to gain more perspective on what their role is:

'Sharper questioning from governors has made my life a bit more difficult but in a good way.'

(Headteacher, St Margaret's CoE School, Withern)

Challenges of partnership working and potential future developments

The two key challenges relate to finance and geography.

St Margaret's' share of the £100,000 funding for the partnerships was just under £20,000 and it was for one financial year – though it was helpful that there was a provision to be able to carry over some of the budget into another year. By October 2013 St Margaret's had spent around two thirds of its allocation. When the funding runs out James is relying on *'skilful management of the budget to maintain the core elements of the partnership working, including the digital technology'*. He has made a budget allocation to enable teachers to have time to meet up with colleagues from other schools.

Teachers working together on JPD initiatives is not expensive. *'The costly bit is moving pupils around and enabling them to meet up in each other's schools,'* says James. So the focus is on trying to negotiate deals to minimise transport costs.

This point illustrates a wider problem. The geography of the partnership works but the spread of the schools and travelling distances involved are not ideal. Having a greater number of more local partners would make it possible for contact between staff and pupils to be more intensive. So enlarging the partnership to eight, to facilitate working through two more local groups of four could be a possibility.

Previously James has not seen executive headship as being something for him but the experience of being involved in the partnership has changed his perspective and he would now consider this if the right opportunity came along. The governors have also thought about this and are prepared to countenance James heading up more than one school, recognising that it could help to retain an able and successful headteacher at the school.



7. Partnership working in small rural primary schools in other local authorities

This short report summarises different approaches adopted and encouraged by county councils in England to partnership working between small rural primary schools.

7.1 Methodology

Researchers undertook a short online search to identify approaches in large rural counties in England. We looked at reports, websites and working papers in statistical neighbour counties of Lincolnshire (identified by an asterisk). We have also included other large county councils which we have identified as having done some work in this area. The county councils included in this summary review are:

- Cornwall
- Cumbria*
- Derbyshire*
- Devon
- Essex
- Norfolk*
- Northumberland
- Shropshire*
- Suffolk*.

Due to the secondary data collection method used, the information provided only reflects the approaches that were identified online within a short timescale which have been published and therefore may not reflect the situation as it stands now in each county. Nor does it provide a comprehensive list of all approaches adopted by these local authorities; instead it provides a flavour of the type of approaches adopted by a selection of counties.

7.2 Overview of findings

All of the county councils included in this review had a mix of formal and informal partnership working within their rural primary schools.

Informal partnership included clusters of schools and collaborative working between schools. In most county councils these collaborative partnerships included schools across different phases of education or included wider services such as children's centres (Norfolk, Cumbria, Derbyshire, Devon and Essex). In a small number of councils, these partnerships were between small rural primary schools only (Suffolk and Cornwall). In some of the councils, informal partnership working was seen as a temporary approach which would eventually develop into more formal partnerships including federations and trusts (for example Norfolk and Cumbria).

Formal partnerships such as federations and trusts were in operation in all the county councils, although to a lesser extent than informal partnerships. Formal partnerships were often seen as a



way of addressing capacity and improving viability in small schools and were often being promoted to schools by councils (Shropshire, Cumbria and Norfolk). Some county councils were also encouraging executive headships (for example, Norfolk, Devon and Cornwall) as a way of alleviating issues of headteacher recruitment.

The section below gives a brief summary of the partnership working in each council included in this review. Sources for the following information can be found in the References section at the end of this report.

7.3 Partnership working in councils

Cornwall

There is a well-established network of self-selected 'clusters' of small schools in the authority that are well regarded by headteachers as a valuable resource and source of support. The clusters are exploring the use of virtual communication to enable staff, pupils and governors from different schools and locations to work together more closely. There is also a support network for the development of extended services which encourages collaborative working. The local authority advocates executive headship as a means to alleviate the issues of headteacher recruitment, surplus places and poor accommodation in small rural primary schools and there are examples of such arrangements in place. Federation and shared trust status are other forms of collaboration available, though are less prevalent.

Cumbria*

Cumbria advocates various models of partnership working to promote the efficiency and viability of small primary schools, including:

- flexible management arrangements
- collaborations
- formal federations
- trusts
- clusters of small schools working together.

All primary schools in the authority are supported to join extended schools' clusters to enable them to provide a broad range of services. The dispersed small rural primary schools are further encouraged to form part of a 'hub' arrangement, which may lead to trust/federation development in the longer term. The hub-and-spokes model for service delivery links smaller providers – the spokes – to a larger, central provider – the hub. Through this model of collaborative working, all schools should be able to provide breadth of curriculum and extended services, be able to withstand the turbulence of staffing issues, support distributed leadership and improve outcomes for all pupils.

Increased collaboration and federation are seen as options in addressing issues of surplus capacity in small rural schools and improving their viability. Co-location of services and all-through schools are also being explored as a means to reduce surplus places, share costs and facilitate improved local access to services. The local authority has developed a network of key service centres based in towns with secondary schools; the footprint of the centre will correspond to a cluster of extended schools and feeder primary schools.



Derbyshire*

Derbyshire has developed 'learning communities' of schools and other providers of learning within the community that work collaboratively to improve learning for all age groups. This is an integrated, cohesive and combined approach in which each centre accepts a shared responsibility for the achievement and progress of learners across the whole learning community.

Derbyshire has ten learning communities covering the whole of the county. Collaborative working and planning is taking place in all of them. The learning community may include: children's centres and other early years providers, primary, secondary and special schools, local authority support services, FE colleges, support centres, work-based training providers, adult and youth services, primary care trusts, voluntary agencies and other appropriate groups.

The authority has held discussions with a number of infant and junior schools that are considering formal mergers to create new primary schools. Federations of schools are encouraged where it is felt that this may lead to raising standards and there are examples of federations in the county. Co-location of special schools on the same campus as mainstream schools is actively encouraged and seen as reaping benefits in terms of improved facilities, resources and staffing. Strategies to amalgamate infant and junior schools to remove surplus places in very small rural schools have been used in the authority.

Devon

There is a long-standing and established structure of partnership working among schools in the authority that work together in: local learning communities (a collaboration of education providers in a geographic area including primary, secondary and special schools and children's centres), federations (a family of schools set up by formal agreement, sharing a single governing body), management partnerships (schools working as separate institutions but sharing one headteacher with a formal joint governors' committee overseeing the partnership), multi-academy trusts and cooperative trusts (schools supported by charitable foundations and schools which embed cooperative values and principles) and partnership foundation units (where a school and pre-school provide integrated early years learning). There is concern regarding the vulnerability of small rural schools, especially due to recent changes in the funding formula.

Essex

There is an established structure of both informal and formal partnership working in the county which is encouraged and promoted by the local authority. Formal partnership arrangements which primary schools may enter include: multi-academy trusts (governance by one trust and a board of directors), umbrella trusts (a group of schools working together under an overarching charitable trust, where each of the schools under the umbrella is run by an individual or multi-academy trust), federations (where a single governing body takes responsibility and accountability for two or more schools), and teaching school alliances (a group of schools and other partners that are supported by the leadership of a teaching school which leads on teacher training and professional development; within the alliance, schools support each other by offering CPD or hosting initial teacher training placements). Other more informal partnership working takes place between small primary schools and their local secondary schools. Primary schools can also opt to work with a School Improvement Partner who provides challenge and support to structure school development.

In March 2013 the local authority convened four conferences across the county and invited the chairs of governors and headteachers of all primary schools to attend one of these events. The



aim was to explain the benefits of primary schools working in partnership with each other and to present a range of different partnership models for schools to consider. The conferences included an external speaker and case studies of existing partnerships – both from within Essex and from other counties. The local authority followed up these conferences by setting up a dedicated webpage containing further information on models of partnership and using visits by its primary advisers to encourage schools to consider collaborative strategies.

Norfolk*

Norfolk has formed a working group to consider the specific issues associated with small and undersized schools. Part of the response to these issues is the recommendation of support for governing bodies to explore collaboration, joint management, federation or amalgamation and school clusters to create greater efficiency and sustainability in school management.

The following forms of collaboration are evident in the authority:

- Management partnership (i.e. executive headship). The local authority promotes the model of executive headship (termed 'management partnership') and numerous schools in the county adopt this approach, helping to make small rural primary schools more viable, while also improving leadership capacity and educational provision. These arrangements are supported financially through the funding formula.
- School clusters (i.e. groups of local schools working together to coordinate learning across the age ranges). Small rural primary schools participate in local authority cluster groups that include a local high school working with its feeder primary schools. School clusters are funded by the local authority and are felt to provide professional and interpersonal support, opportunities for collaborative training and provide greater access to resources, expertise and curriculum enhancement.
- Federation (i.e. shared governing body). While the council supports federations, these are not yet widespread in the county.

A report produced by the working group recommended that the authority should develop a strategy to further encourage and support the creation of federations for small schools. Partnerships between schools are recommended as being temporary arrangements and seen as part of the development to more formal federations which have single leadership and governance.

Existing collaborative arrangements between schools in the authority have been found to reduce the pressure on headteacher appointments and have improved teaching and learning within the schools. The consultations carried out by the working party indicated that the most frequently mentioned solutions to dealing with the problems of small schools were collaborative arrangements such as shared headteachers, cluster working, partnership working and federated governance arrangements.



Northumberland

Informal partnership working among small rural primary schools in the county predominantly took the form of participation in well-established, self-organised clusters of small groups of neighbouring schools. Cluster activity focused on curriculum innovation, professional development and personal support for headteachers. Small rural primary schools were also working in partnership with local high schools and their corresponding network of feeder primary schools. Possibilities for more formal collaborative arrangements, such as different leadership models and federation, were viewed by headteachers and the local authority as being key to the future viability of small rural schools. However, the local authority did not initiate such arrangements or provide financial support for such structures. Geographical factors impeded the ability of the small rural schools to offer extended services, even through collaborative means.

Shropshire*

In 2009, an independent policy commission on primary school organisation recommended that there was more scope in the authority for partnership working both between schools and with their surrounding communities. There were cluster arrangements in place for small rural schools to work together, though there were few examples of federations, all-through schools and of extended services in small rural schools. The commission recommended that more formal partnership arrangements among schools could alleviate some of the challenges faced in terms of headteacher recruitment and leadership issues, better use of resources and improved teaching and learning. The commission also recommended that more could be done in small rural primary schools to work in partnership with other organisations and other schools to provide extended services. There had been closures of small rural primary schools and amalgamations where schools were geographically close. The authority was sceptical about the costs associated with federation and the adverse implications for schools' identity and creativity.

After the commission had made its recommendations, the county council proposed to close a number of primary schools. However, in February 2011 the Cabinet of the county council recommended that the governing bodies of 20 infant, junior and primary schools (including some schools previously earmarked for closure by the council) should give formal consideration to federations and recommended the creation of eight federations. Not all schools agreed to becoming federated and explored other formal collaborations.

Suffolk*

The authority is in the process of developing the conditions and infrastructure for effective school partnership working, seeing numerous mutual benefits for the schools involved in terms of finances, sharing resources and expertise, professional development and improving teaching and learning. The authority is trialling the introduction of a 'families of schools' model which groups schools with similar pupil profiles in different geographic areas to work in partnership on school improvement and provides a 'critical friend' with whom to share strengths and explore problems. Each family of schools will set objectives and agree a shared improvement plan. This model will further develop the existing structures of cluster working in the county.

The authority is also pursuing models of collaborative professional development to improve teaching and learning. The authority promotes and provides information to schools on federation and other formal partnerships. The development of more partnership working is seen as contributing to the longer-term sustainability and viability of small rural primary schools.

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CfBT Education Trust
60 Queens Road
Reading
Berkshire
RG1 4BS

+44 (0)118 902 1000
www.cfbt.com