Better Together
Models of collaboration for small schools

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Introduction

This booklet is for:
• Headteachers and governors of small rural primary schools
• Local authorities, especially those largely serving rural areas.

It is based on a recent research project, funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and conducted in three rural local authorities – Cornwall, Norfolk and Northumberland.

The project investigated the potential for, and likely benefits of, more formal collaboration among a sample of small schools. It aimed to show how working together in formal collaborations might help to overcome some of the challenges facing small schools today. These challenges were named by schools as:

• The multiple roles played by the headteacher, often including a large teaching commitment
• Difficulties in recruiting heads and other staff
• Limited capacity to respond to some national initiatives
• Increased vulnerability caused by falling rolls
• Fewer opportunities for delegation and professional development within a small staff.

This booklet aims to give practical examples of some new approaches that schools might consider. It shows how three actual groups of schools might develop formal collaborative structures which would enable them to:

• provide broader and richer experiences for pupils
• widen opportunities for collaborative staff development at school level
• enable more effective staff succession planning
• generate value for money savings.

"(It’s) not just about sustaining what you’ve got, it’s about moving the schools on" headteacher
**Informal collaborations**

Most small schools collaborate with others in many different ways:

- **Networks for personal support**
- **Sharing expertise and resources**
- **Organising professional development**
- **Arranging joint pupil activities.**

Informal collaborations have served small schools well, and have contributed greatly towards the richness and variety of children’s learning experiences. But there are difficulties:

- **There is added pressure on a small staff team**
- **They are often dependent on specific funding**
- **Key players may move on and not be replaced**
- **Development priorities may change**
- **They can lack permanence.**

Informal collaborative arrangements may be based on local authority structures, national initiatives or personal networks. Where they are strong, they offer a good foundation on which more formal, harder models of collaboration may be built. These formal models of collaboration can give all the advantages of informal collaboration with fewer of the drawbacks.

“There’s no-one to delegate to; I’m the only full-time member of staff”

headteacher
Formal collaborations

Formal collaborations have a legal basis and are therefore more likely to bring lasting improvements which permeate the schools. Formal collaborations can include:

**Sharing staff and facilities**
Staff are employed to work across a number of schools. This can lead to a sharing of expertise, better distribution of roles and responsibilities, and enhanced professional development opportunities. Staff members – teachers, teaching assistants or administrators – may be contractually employed by one school with other schools contributing towards the cost, or have a part-time contract with each school. Through joint purchasing and sharing across sites - staff, functions, facilities and technology – the schools can benefit in ways they would not be able to afford separately; overall savings can be reinvested.

**Sharing a headteacher**
A single head runs two or more schools. Known variously as shared headship, executive headship or management partnership, there are a growing number of examples to be found nationwide. Sometimes seen as a temporary arrangement – for example, one head looking after a nearby school pending the appointment of their own head – but increasingly to be found more permanently. There are likely to be wide-ranging benefits resulting, for example, from improvements in leadership and from more opportunities for delegation.

**Sharing a governing body**
This type – known as a hard federation – is where two or more schools have a single governing body. A variation of this model – commonly known as a soft federation – is where the schools retain their own governing bodies but delegate powers to a joint executive committee. Potential benefits include the pooling of budgets and easier deployment of staff across the federation.

**Sharing a trust**
A trust school is a local authority maintained foundation school supported by a charitable trust, which holds its land and appoints some of its governors. The trust partners might include higher education institutions, further education colleges, other schools, charities and businesses. Trust schools are able to manage their own assets, employ their own staff, and set their own admissions arrangements. The trust may appoint governors to the governing body of more than one school – often referred to as a shared trust.
Variations on a theme
There are many ways of collaborating formally and different types are not mutually exclusive. For example, schools that share an executive head may have at least some staff working at both school sites, or have staff with responsibility for an area of work in both schools. Likewise, schools which share an executive head may develop collaborative governance arrangements. Schools with a shared trust may also decide to federate. In all types, the schools remain separate legal entities – with, for example, their own admission arrangements and their own budget share.

Schools might progress from one type to another, for example sharing a headteacher (executive headship) and then also sharing a governing body (federation) or vice versa.

The likely benefits
The evidence of recent research is that they can bring some or all of the following benefits:

- Increased long-term viability of the school in the village
- Improvements in the quality of leadership and management
- Better work-life balance for the headteacher
- More chance of recruiting high quality staff, at all levels
- Enhanced opportunities for leadership development
- Broader and richer curriculum experiences for pupils.

“Things have evolved naturally, an incremental and needs-based evolution” headteacher

The following pages show how a range of formal collaborative models might be developed in real school situations. Three groups of schools – in Norfolk, Cornwall and Northumberland – were examined to see how they might extend their present informal collaborations in a more formal direction. The models were developed following discussions with the schools themselves, and represent just some of the paths they might choose to follow. They are, however, hypothetical; the schools are not committed to pursuing the suggestions made.
The case study schools – Norfolk

The local authority context
Norfolk is characterised by:
- A high proportion of small schools, many serving isolated areas
- Extensive informal collaboration between schools (both self-organised and local authority sponsored)
- A growing trend of formal collaboration (mainly executive headships)
- Financial support for executive headship models.

The schools and their communities
The two schools are situated in sparsely populated fenland country. Work is mainly agricultural, much of it seasonal; there is significant rural deprivation. Pupil mobility is high, which is reflected in fluctuating rolls, changing school populations and uneven year cohorts.

Hilgay Village CoE Primary School
- The school has fifty-six pupils, with significant mobility of population
- It has recently reduced in size from three to two classes
- The building is ‘just adequate’, with no hall
- The head has a class teaching commitment of three days a week
- There have been recent difficulties relating to staff illness and absence.

Ten Mile Bank Primary School
- The school has twenty-nine pupils
- It serves an isolated farming community with significant social deprivation
- The head teaches a class for four days a week, and is the only full-time member of staff
- The school is now successful, but formerly was in special measures.
The case study schools – Norfolk

Current position

**Ten Mile Bank Primary School**
- Headteacher

**Hilgay Village CoE Primary School**
- Headteacher

**GOVERNING BODY**

**STRONG INFORMAL COLLABORATION**
- Shared staff professional development
- Joint curriculum initiatives
- Common arrangements for extended services

**SCHOOLS’ ASPIRATIONS**
- Create more time for leadership and management
- Trade staff expertise and broaden pool of skills
- More innovative approach to the curriculum

**OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**
- Teaching heads with insufficient time to lead and manage
- Schools serve similar villages, three miles apart
- Few opportunities for delegation
The case study schools – Norfolk
Future possibilities - Hard federation

Ten Mile Bank Primary School
Ten Mile Bank Primary School

Hilgay Village CoE Primary School
Hilgay Village CoE Primary School

SINGLE SHARED GOVERNING BODY

BENEFITS
- Opportunities to deploy staff more flexibly
- Resources can be shared between schools
- Improved financial efficiency

NEEDS
- Governors to be convinced of long-term benefits
- Headteachers who can collaborate effectively and work through a shared governing body
- Single governing body to uphold Christian ethos, as Hilgay is a church school
The case study schools – Norfolk
Future possibilities - Executive head

Ten Mile Bank Primary School

Executive headteacher (no teaching responsibility)

Hilgay Village CoE Primary School

Assistant headteacher

BENEFITS

- Improved leadership - no class responsibility for head and more time to lead and manage
- More opportunities for distributed leadership
- Schools less vulnerable to closure

FINANCIAL DETAILS

- Executive head paid enhanced salary (half by each school) to reflect increased responsibility
- Assistant head (with teaching responsibility) is also shared between the schools
- Schools need to employ additional teacher(s) to cover the headteachers’ former class teaching time
- Further savings can be reinvested (for example, in HLTA and/or TA support)

NEEDS

- Headteacher vacancy or vacancies
- Assistant leader to be appointed
- High quality teacher to take over head’s teaching
- Head to service two governing bodies
- Agreement to maintain Christian leadership, as Hilgay is a church school
The case study schools – Norfolk

Future possibilities - Hard federation with executive head

BENEFITS
• Improved strategic leadership through shared headteacher and governance
• Enhanced opportunities for flexible deployment of staff
• Better staff development opportunities

FINANCIAL DETAILS
• Executive head paid enhanced salary (half by each school) to reflect increased responsibility
• Assistant head (with teaching responsibility) is also shared between the schools
• Schools need to employ additional teacher(s) to cover the headteachers’ former class teaching time
• Further savings can be reinvested (for example, in HLTA and/or TA support)

NEEDS
• Governors to be convinced of long-term benefits
• Headteacher vacancy or vacancies
• Assistant head to be appointed
• High quality teacher or teachers to take over heads’ teaching role
• Agreement to maintain Christian leadership as Hilgay is a church school
The case study schools — Cornwall

The local authority context
Cornwall is characterised by:
- A high proportion of small schools, many serving isolated communities
- Schools collaborating informally through self-selected clusters
- Regional networks to encourage collective solutions to current issues
- Increasing headship recruitment problems
- Advice for schools wishing to consider formal collaboration.

The schools and their communities
The four schools are situated on the Lizard peninsula. This is an area of outstanding natural beauty, which traditionally supported fishing, farming, mining and quarrying. Work is now mainly to be found in farming or in the holiday trade. There is a large amount of seasonal employment and many families exist within a low wage economy; some are in temporary accommodation.

Garras Primary School
- The school has twelve pupils, of whom ten are boys
- Numbers have declined sharply recently
- It shares an executive head with St Martin-in-Meneage school
- It serves an area where there are many second homes but local deprivation
- The head has no class teaching commitment.

St Martin-in-Meneage Primary School
- The school has forty-two pupils
- It shares an executive head with Garras school
- The building mainly consists of old temporary classrooms
- The head has no class teaching commitment.

Landewednack Primary School
- The school has seventy-five pupils, in three classes
- There is an attached children’s centre serving the wider area
- The school has benefited from high staffing stability
- The head currently teaches for one-and-a-half days a week
- There is only one full-time member of staff other than the head.

Grade Ruan CoE Primary School
- The school has seventy-three pupils, in three classes
- The head teaches for one-and-a-half days a week, though this was expected to increase
- Parts of the school building are in need of refurbishment
- School population mobility is high, with a quarter of pupils living in temporary accommodation.
**The case study schools – Cornwall**

**Current position**

**Landewednack Primary School**

**Garras Primary School**

**Grade Ruan CoE Primary**

**St Martin-in-Meneage Primary School**

**GOVERNING BODY**

**SEPARATE GOVERNING BODY**

**Informal collaboration within the Lizard cluster**

**EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER**

**Headteacher**

**Children’s Centre**

**OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

- Four small schools; two smallest in executive headship arrangement; one a CoE church school, voluntary controlled
- Schools serve an isolated rural area on the Lizard peninsular
- Landewednack has wide range of resources and would provide a potential hub for extended services
- Landewednack has a number of external partners

**SCHOOLS’ ASPIRATIONS**

- Sustain viability of each school through more effective collaboration
- Work closely with other Lizard schools, sharing skills and possibly staff
- Improve the provision of extended services based on the Lizard
The case study schools – Cornwall

Future possibilities: Shared trust

Landewednack, Garras and St Martin could all gain foundation status and acquire a trust which is shared. Grade Ruan could not acquire the trust, as it is a church school and therefore already has its own foundation. However, either its foundation or the school itself could become a member of the trust.

**BENEFITS**
- Puts existing informal collaborations on a formal, statutory footing
- Ensures long term commitment of schools to each other
- Expertise of external partners can be shared
- Facilitates wider use of resources

**POSSIBLE OBSTACLES**
- Long distances and poor transport links between schools
- Limited range of external partners in rural area
- Foundation status brings additional management responsibilities
The case study schools – Northumberland

The local authority context
Northumberland is characterised by:
• A three-tier system of first, middle and high schools, currently under review
• Many small first schools, often serving a scattered rural population
• Informal collaboration through self-arranged clusters
• Local authority geographical ‘partnerships’, often covering a wide area
• Local authority encouragement for implementing new models of leadership.

The schools and their communities
The schools are located to the west of Alnwick; three are very small first schools, the fourth (not a small school) the receiving middle school. The population they serve is widely scattered; children often come from isolated farmsteads and have few opportunities to socialise. The local community is mixed. Most are in lower paid or seasonal employment, for example in farming or tourism. There are some in professional employment or self-employed – including artists and craftspeople, and those who have made a lifestyle choice to relocate to a rural area.

Netherton Northside First School
• The school has sixteen pupils; numbers are declining
• Most pupils live in very isolated settlements
• The building is in good condition, and generous in size
• The school will shortly link with Harbottle with an executive head.

Harbottle CoE First School
• The school has twenty-three pupils; numbers are rising
• It serves a very scattered population
• It has links to many outside organisations
• The head will shortly take on a shared headship with Netherton Northside.

Thropton First School
• The school has forty-four pupils and serves a wide catchment area
• It has foundation status
• The head teaches for sixty per cent of the week
• The building has recently been extended and includes a nursery.

Dr Thomlinson CoE Middle School
• The school is the receiving middle school for the three first schools
• It has 191 pupils on roll
• Facilities and resources are more extensive than neighbouring first schools
• Many staff have specialist subject expertise.
The case study schools – Northumberland

Current position

The case study schools

- Thropton First School
- Harbottle CoE First School
- Dr Thomlinson CoE Middle School
- Netherton Northside First School

Current position

- Extend collaboration by sharing facilities, resources and staff (for example specialist teachers, school business manager, HLTAs)
- Continue to develop a creative, local curriculum

Opportunities and challenges

- Three very small first schools and one middle school in close proximity
- All face an uncertain future, with falling rolls
- All may become primary schools following local authority re-organisation
- Middle school has more extensive specialist resources
The case study schools – Northumberland

Future possibilities: Hard federation

Harbottle CoE First School

Executive headteacher

Opportunities to share resources and staff

SINGLE SHARED GOVERNING BODY

BENEFITS
- Builds on existing executive headship and further strengthens strategic leadership
- Enhanced opportunities for flexible deployment of staff
- Secures long-term commitment of schools to the partnership

NEEDS
- Governors to be convinced of long-term benefits
- The governing body to uphold Christian ethos, as Harbottle is a church school
The case study schools – Northumberland
Future possibilities: Soft and hard federations

**Thropton First School**
- Headteacher
- Nursery

**Netherton Northside First School**
- Headteacher

**Harbottle CoE First School**
- GOVERNING BODY

**Dr Thomlinson CoE Middle School**
- Headteacher

**Executive headteacher**

**Joint executive committee of three governing bodies**

**GOVERNING BODY**

**GOVERNING BODY**

**JOINT GOVERNING BODY**

**BENEFITS**
- Greater efficiency in finance, resources and administration
- More flexible staffing, shared across the schools (including, for example, a school business manager and ICT technician)
- Better learning opportunities for pupils (through sharing of resources and facilities)
- Improved leadership and professional development opportunities for staff
- Mutual support during transition to primary status

**RATIONALE**
Soft and hard federations work together in this model. The soft federation enables the four schools (including the two schools in a hard federation) to collaborate formally. It avoids the problems that may be encountered in trying to form an overall single governing body across all of the four schools.

**NEEDS**
- Governors to be convinced of long-term benefits of arrangement
- Joint governors’ committee with delegated powers
- Capacity of the three headteachers to work together on strategic issues
The right model

For each group of schools, the right model will be the one that best fits circumstances and needs. Each arrangement brings its own potential benefits:

- **Executive headship** – the opportunity to extend the influence of the best leaders and to improve leadership at all levels.
- **Federation** – the ability to pool budgets, and to share resources and staff more easily.
- **Trust status** – the benefits that external partners can bring to school improvement, along with the self-governing aspects which come with foundation status.

Different options will present their own advantages and disadvantages, depending on the circumstances. For example, trust status allows the involvement of external partners but requires a change to foundation status and the additional responsibilities which that entails. Executive headship which links church and non-church schools will need to have regard to the continuation of the schools’ specific ethos. Federation can only involve maintained schools but does not require a change in category. Schools retain their religious designation but federating may require additional considerations if the schools involved are of different types (foundation and community, say). Opportunity, vision and local context, therefore, will all play a part. Entering into a formal collaboration may often be more like a journey than an event. In one case, executive headship might be the first stage; in another it might be federation. Once the first step is taken, it is likely that further ideas for formal collaboration will present themselves. Innovation tends to release creativity, enabling new opportunities to be sought and found.

**The role of local authorities**
Pressing concerns about the vulnerability and viability of small schools, together with the growing evidence of the advantages of formal collaboration, highlight the need to plan more strategically for the future. Local authorities and, where church schools are involved, local dioceses, have a key role to play in promoting change, for example through:

- advocacy of models which are suitable for different situations
- provision of training programmes for governors and school leaders (including potential leaders)
- specific advice to support schools’ own plans for collaboration.

“It’s right on the money, exactly what’s needed – federation would seem to be the way to go”
chair of governors
Making it happen

Good planning and preparation – at all levels – will be essential to ensure a smooth transition from informal to formal collaboration. The following considerations will be important.

**Weighing up the alternatives**
- Who are our potential partners?
- What models of collaboration would fit our circumstances best?
- What are the potential advantages/disadvantages of each?
- Which are most viable and most sustainable?
- Who can help us in the process?

**Identifying the potential obstacles**
- Who might think they are losing out?
- Who will be most unsettled by the change?
- What specific issues are there – staffing, accommodation, statutory considerations and so on?
- Is the plan affordable – in the long as well as the short term?

**Communicating the vision**
- What matters most to people?
- How can we generate enthusiasm and commitment for change?

- What will be the real, tangible benefits of our proposals?
- What do we expect the schools to look like in the future?
- Who can help us get our message across?

**Taking the community with you**
- How can we enter a dialogue with all stakeholders?
- What are likely to be their biggest concerns?
- What form of consultation should we undertake?
- What is the best way of winning over the sceptics?

Schools might want to make use of the NCSL’s six step method (see page 22 for details) to help them explore the new models of leadership which might emerge from formal collaboration:

- Shared purpose and vision.
- Defining the partnership.
- Types of shared provision.
- Form and location of leadership.
- Boundaries and form of governance.
- New relationships and alliances beyond the partnership.

“Someone needs to have the vision and the belief that it is possible”

headteacher
Next steps for small schools

Headteachers should…

• Reflect on how current informal collaborations could be made more formal and more lasting.
• Evaluate specific models of formal collaboration, their applicability and how they might benefit the school.

Governing bodies should…

• Investigate the potential opportunities for different models of formal collaboration with other schools.
• Formulate a strategic plan for securing and improving the long-term viability and effectiveness of the school.
• Follow the statutory process for becoming a hard federation, soft federation or trust if any of these models are decided to be appropriate.

Local authorities and dioceses should…

• Develop a strategic plan for promoting formal collaborations between small schools.
• Provide the necessary advocacy, support and challenge to increase the take-up of formal collaborative models among small schools.

“If it benefited the pupils and the community, we would certainly want to do it”

headteacher
Further information

This booklet is based on the findings of a recent research report Better together: exploratory case studies of formal collaborations between small rural primary schools. (DCSF 2009). The full report is available on the DCSF website, www.dcsf.gov.uk/research

The DCSF has recently published a booklet How hard federation can help your school (DCSF 2009), which offers detailed guidance on how to embark on federation, stage-by-stage. See www.publications.teachernet.gov.uk and search ‘hard federation’.

For the DCSF’s federation website, with details of regulations and procedures, see www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/federations/regulations/?version=1

For federation case study information (not necessarily small schools), see www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/federations/1827657/?version=1

For information about school business managers, see www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes-index/csbm-index.htm

For information about new models of leadership, see www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofleadership-index.htm For the exploring models of leadership toolkit (referred to on page 20), see www.ncsl.org.uk/publications-index/publications-display.htm?id=30910&idnum=61

To access information and support on becoming a trust school, contact the Trust and Foundation Schools Partnership www.trustandfoundationschools.org.uk

For specific guidance on becoming a trust school, see the trust schools toolkit www.trustandfoundationschools.org.uk/pdf/Trust%20Schools%20Toolkit%20(revised%20October%202007)%20FINAL%20amended%20Jan%202007_806.pdf

For statutory guidance for local authorities and governing bodies on trust school proposals, see www.dcsf.gov.uk/schoolorg/guidance.cfm?id=25

See the following reports for recent research into formal school collaborations (not all in a small school context):


