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# Research Associate Full report

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Resource

Clustering together to advance  
school improvement: working  
together in peer support with an  
external colleague

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## Disclaimer

In publishing Research Associate reports, the National College is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of the National College's policy.

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# Abstract

This research study explored how a group of rural primary schools, working together with the same school improvement partner (SIP), could positively affect the leadership of their schools through group strategic planning and the more efficient use of headteacher time and expertise.

By using semi-structured interviews with headteachers and informal discussions with governors, the research investigated whether this method of collaborative working, with a single external professional facilitator, could enhance the leadership of the participating schools. The study concluded that the formation of such a collaborative group could have a positive impact on the leadership of the schools, the wellbeing of the headteachers themselves and the expertise of their governing bodies, when it was led by an external professional who had gained the respect and trust of all members of the group. Although the research specifically explored the role of a SIP held in common, its findings are transferable to any group of school leaders working together with a single external partner such as a national or local leader of education (NLE or LLE).

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# Introduction

This research explored the benefits of cluster-based working involving school improvement partners (SIPs). It looked at how a group of rural primary schools have found that working together with the same SIP can positively affect the leadership of all the schools in the cluster.

SIPs have worked alongside the leadership of schools with the aim of improving individual pupils' progress and attainment through the leadership of learning and teaching. This study looked primarily at the role of the SIP within a rural primary phase cluster and how schools working together collaboratively could affect and enhance the leadership of the schools by offering effective professional development and mutual pastoral support.

The 8 rural primary schools studied varied in size from 35 to 300 pupils, and were situated in either small villages or country towns within the same county and local authority. The schools were all at different stages of the Ofsted cycle and had expressed different needs. While the headteachers had worked together previously in less structured situations, they had not formally collaborated on leadership issues. The collaborative group was led primarily by the SIP and one headteacher who felt strongly that sharing expertise and skills would positively impact on the leadership of all the schools in the cluster.

Schools are becoming more autonomous as the role of local authorities is changing. This has been confirmed by the white paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010), which defines that the primary responsibility for school improvement should lie with the schools, and be supported by highly effective professional development. This may require a change in headteacher leadership style and access to support. The aim of this research was to explore whether cluster peer support facilitated by the collaborative use of a trained external colleague could have a tangible effect on both leadership style and headteacher support, and hence have an impact on school improvement.

The research posed the following questions:

- How can working collaboratively offer **support and training to headteachers**, and what **impact** does that have on their schools?
- How can a supportive group, working together, improve the **pastoral wellbeing** of headteachers?
- How can supported collaborative partnership enable headteachers to think strategically **beyond external agendas**?
- How can collaborative partnership **support governors** in their understanding of school data, through the identification of key points and the sharing of expertise?

In exploring these questions through semi-structured interviews with a small sample of school leaders, this research offers applicable findings and strategies to school leadership teams in wider contexts, to promote reflection on systems and partnerships and how they might best be utilised to make best use of the time and expertise offered by other external colleagues.

It is important to recognise that although from April 2011 SIPs will no longer have a formally defined role in performance management, the generic findings of this research may still be of value as they may be transferable to other groups working with national or local leaders of education (NLEs or LLEs) and other externally provided support.

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# Literature review

## Combating isolation in schools in rural areas through cluster support

This research project studied a group of primary schools in rural locations. The schools themselves varied in size from 35 pupils on roll to 300, based in small villages and towns where they were usually the only school in the immediate area. This brings issues that are often different from those faced by schools in urban areas, as isolation can be a negative factor in whole-school improvement and can also impact on headteacher wellbeing.

As far back as 1987, Bell and Sigsworth (1987: 119) studied this phenomenon and how it affected good professional practice, arguing for organisational settings that encouraged co-operative and critical dialogue between leaders. Clustering can continue to provide such a positive organisational structure for collaborative working across small rural schools:

*'School-focused development in rural areas necessarily involves the "federating" or "clustering" of several schools to achieve an adequately sized teacher group as the basis of developmental action. That necessary bringing together of several small schools automatically makes school-focused development in rural areas distinctively different from that which a large urban school might generate.'*

Bell & Sigsworth 1987: 237

Without such peer support, the imagined or real isolation felt by the rural primary headteacher may eventually undermine their passion for the job and impact negatively on the success of the school. However, a cluster of schools brought together and sharing similar values can encourage and support individual leaders by providing a firm foundation for collaborative growth. The support of a shared external facilitator such as a SIP can enable the articulation and mutual reinforcement of that value system and combat perceived isolation.

## The role of the SIP as an external partner

The concept of the SIP was to make available to school leaders a 'single conversation' about school improvement with an accredited professional partner (DfES 2005: 6). The role was subsequently expanded to include the brokerage of bespoke professional support for school improvement, based on the deep understanding by the SIP of the individual school, its challenges and the support necessary to advance its improvement (DCSF 2009: 10). From the outset, however, it was recognised that such support should not simply be individualised but also collaborative, and that the pooling of resources and expertise, and the sharing of good practice to deal with common issues, would be of benefit (DfES 2005: 29).

This system of quality external support has been extended through the programme of NLEs and LLEs. The impact of this has been evaluated as being highly successful in increasing the leadership capacity of other schools by assisting them in raising standards (Hill & Matthews 2008, 2010). Further, the development of national support schools has extended the collaborative concept of mutual school support. The white paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010), in stating that every school should have access to support from NLEs or LLEs or by working in partnership with a strong school, emphasises that it will support and expand further these programmes to develop leaders within schools, as it believes:

*'After the quality of teaching, the quality of school leadership is the most important determinant of pupils' success.'*

DfE 2010: 20

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## Developing clusters of collaborative leadership

Collarbone and West-Burnham (2008), applying Putnam's model of bonding and bridging, conclude that the need is to move beyond internal school 'bonding' within the institution to external school 'bridging' in collaboration with others:

'For a community to thrive it is necessary to bond and bridge. Bridging involves becoming inclusive, interdependent and heterogeneous. In many ways the traditional focus of school leadership has been on bonding; systems leadership requires a movement to bridging.'

Collarbone & West-Burnham 2008: 28

West-Burnham (2009) further analysed bridging models as networks, clusters or partnerships. A network that is informal may be focused on an area of common interest but have no formal accountability, or may be developed into a cluster which is more formal and structured with an emerging number of roles and responsibilities. A partnership may be linked to the provision of children's services at a local level and federations involve a legal change so that they develop a common identity.

A study of emerging patterns of school leadership (University of Manchester 2008) found that the local context plays an important role in the adoption and development of particular leadership patterns and structures:

'There appear to be three important stimuli for change: local dissatisfaction with current arrangements and/or opportunities for improvement; individual drive and vision at school level; and significant local acts of philanthropy.'

University of Manchester 2008: 8

Arising from such stimuli, Hill (2007: 12) argued that there is a strong intellectual case for working collaboratively. He asserted that lateral learning, applied in a disciplined way, is the key to transformation:

'Collaboration is a key part of the jigsaw in helping to ensure that good ideas and excellent practice don't get "trapped on location" but travel laterally (and vertically) to improve the quality of education provision being offered to each and every student.'

Hill 2007: 14

Smith (2009: 14), in her National College practitioner research project, looked at how such collaborations could be built so as to be sustainable. Open-mindedness to both the benefits and potential for development appeared to be the key:

'Open-mindedness, combined with a sense of pursuing one's own school needs, seemed the cornerstone of sustainable collaboration, with school leaders feeling protection for their individual schools but a willingness to consider changes adopted from elsewhere.'

Hargreaves (2010), in a think piece for the National College that explored the defining features of a sustainable, self-improving school system, recognised this potential for further development:

Most schools have gained experience of working in partnerships and networks of many kinds. Increased decentralisation offers an opportunity to build on these and become self-improving.

Hargreaves 2010: 3

Hargreaves identified the particular benefits of working as a cluster: supporting new leaders, protecting their members, distributing innovation, transferring professional knowledge more readily and becoming more efficient in the use of resources (Hargreaves 2010: 6), which were enhanced by close geographical proximity to facilitate ease of face-to-face contact and mobility of staff between institutions (Hargreaves 2010: 13).

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This review of the relevant literature supports the view that collaboration by working in a cluster can have a positive impact on the leadership of schools. This present research study, while small in scale and restricted to a rural context, considered the collaborative work of such a cluster of schools with a single SIP and identified the wider generic learning that could be gained from such externally supported collaborations.

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# Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research methodology, using a semi-structured interview approach. The interview style allowed for further probing and a more detailed level of response, supported by open-ended questions that allowed comparisons to be made between interviewees' responses.

The respondents were headteachers of eight rural primary schools within the same local area of a shire county. They had each requested, or been invited, to be part of the cluster set up to work collaboratively with the one SIP, whose views were also sought. A similar cluster had been formed several years previously and supplementary views were gained by two of those schools as a sample of other schools working in a similar way. Supplementary views were also sought from governors on an informal basis.

The schools varied from 35 to 300 pupils on roll. They were situated in rural villages and country towns where they were usually the only school in the community. More details of the sample composition are to be found in Appendix A.

The leadership styles and systems in operation varied between the schools, but most of the headteachers were experienced. Three of the schools started the SIP collaborative with job share headships but during the time of the project this picture changed, with one interviewee returning to full-time headship and another moving to a job share.

The interviews were conducted between November 2010 and January 2011. It should be recognised that this study reports the views and experiences of those interviewed on an anonymous basis. No external verification or triangulation of their responses was sought, as the research focused on individuals' perceptions of collaborative leadership and how this project had affected their personal leadership style and the impact it had on their schools.

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# Findings

## Background

The National Strategy Guidance for SIPs (DCSF 2009: 4) identifies headteachers, first and foremost, as leaders of learning. It asserts that there are the highest expectations for the way heads' passion and commitment for learning can influence all aspects of school life. Schools involved in this study therefore hoped that by changing the way they worked, this would encourage that passion and commitment through allowing headteachers not only to receive support from other colleagues but also challenge and training from their SIP. For two years previously, the schools had been working independently of each other on raising standards and so, while the SIP had knowledge of the individual schools, the headteachers themselves had met only through a broad informal network and did not have any detailed working knowledge of the other schools involved. In determining to work collaboratively with a single SIP, the headteachers involved drew on the comparative experience of another small local cluster of schools that had worked successfully together with external professional support.

The SIP was given five days a year to work with each school. Some time was spent on the head's performance management review but the other visits were based on the interpretation of the school's data and how the SIP could work alongside the headteacher in driving forward school improvement. Visits were defined by the local authority's SIP structure and had to include the collection of data requested by them as part of their monitoring role. While the headteachers knew that they shared the same SIP, there was no exchange of detailed information arising from the SIP visits, on confidentiality grounds.

The key focus of this research centred on whether a group of headteachers working collaboratively with a single SIP had benefits for the leadership of the schools and on school improvement which may then be transferable to any group of school leaders working together with an external partner such as an NLE or LLE.

The findings of the research are set out in line with the four research questions posed.

## How can working collaboratively offer support and training to headteachers, and what impact does that have on their schools?

Throughout the project, all the headteachers interviewed were very positive about the impact of working collaboratively with the single SIP. Instinctively they felt that because it had a beneficial effect on them both as people and as professionals, then the effect cascaded down through their staff to their school; but some found it difficult to quantify and qualify precisely the impact on standards within their school. However, for the heads themselves, the impact had been felt in terms of both prioritising time to work strategically and the opportunity to share good practice with each other.

### Prioritising time to work strategically

Education has experienced many changes over previous years through legislation and developments in educational research. Several headteachers commented that it would be good to be left alone just for one week so that they could embed the most recent changes before moving onto the next ones. It was felt that prioritising the workload to secure time for strategic planning brought particular difficulties in small rural schools where the headteacher may also have a teaching commitment alongside their leadership role. There were the same numbers of initiatives as other schools but fewer staff to share the workload and often fewer hours because of the time spent preparing and assessing the pupils' work as part of the teaching role within the school. Consequently, cluster support was deemed invaluable:

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“The cluster has made a huge difference to me, and my school. I felt so isolated and having to ensure that my teaching is of good quality as well as providing good quality leadership was a huge pressure. Every meeting of the cluster is a training session and I have developed good relationships with my other colleagues. In rural areas we need to be in partnerships if we are to survive.”

Headteacher, School B

Primary schools also feel a particular responsibility towards the families within their community and headteachers are often the first point of contact for adults needing advice and support. These occasions are frequent and may be of the nature that ‘cannot wait until another day’. Rural schools fulfil many roles within their communities as they are geographically close to the homes of their communities and over recent years have developed ‘open door’ policies that welcome parents, guardians and carers into the school so that the school supports the family pastorally, developing a stronger relationship that impacts on the learning of the children.

In real terms, this means that the time of a headteacher in a rural primary school may be spent working on immediate matters throughout the day; finding time for strategic thinking was more difficult. The cluster of heads working together with the SIP therefore made it a priority to timetable sessions through the year to support each other in strategic thinking and by pooling ideas and proposals – the leadership of the schools was strengthened by sharing the workload and constructive thinking with the group rather than the individual.

“I have become more aware of external issues and the importance of things. I have developed a better perspective through the cluster with a greater understanding of relevance. I see how other heads are dealing with the job and it makes me more grateful for my own!”

Headteacher, School G

Practically, it was found that breakfast meetings off site were the most productive as heads were not losing too many hours out of the school environment, but the time spent together could be focused, confidential and hopefully without interruption.

## Sharing good practice

Headteachers valued the opportunity to discuss collectively issues of leadership practice and to learn from each other’s experience of implementing them:

“As headteacher models and patterns have changed, I have found the cluster to be very supportive in appraising new practices.”

Headteacher, School G

However, it was not only the headteachers who benefited from this professional dialogue but also the staff within the schools. While the heads met regularly to share leadership issues, the members of staff within the schools also developed opportunities to both work together and support each other. Sometime this was as a result of a priority identified within the group and other times it was requested by staff members.

Newly qualified teachers were enabled to visit a different setting to see good practice but also to visit colleagues who were at the same stage of their career as themselves and were able to give mutual support. Subject leaders met and also shared documentation and examples of good practice. Work moderations were shared from both Early Years Foundation Stage and also Key Stage 1 to confirm both standards within a school and also to give teachers confidence that their practice was in line with other schools. In small rural schools, there is rarely more than one teacher in each Year group and so it is beneficial when they meet other colleagues. In some of the schools, teachers have more than one Year group in a class, or even have the whole of a Key Stage, and it is vital that the staff are given opportunities to moderate their standards externally.

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When a headteacher or the SIP identified a teacher needing extra support to raise their standards within the classroom, the cluster of schools offered non-judgemental opportunities for that teacher to use so that structured professional training could be given. And this was of reciprocal benefit: one teacher commented to their head after one such visit that as host she gained as much from the discussion following the lesson observation as the visiting colleague. It therefore proved to be a valuable tool in raising teaching and learning standards across the schools.

Newly appointed headteachers were allocated mentors from other schools within the county and/or the diocese. This confidential service was seen as a very important component in the professional career of school leaders but the supplementary support offered through working collaboratively with the SIP within the cluster was often felt to give practical and contextualised support through building trust with the same group over a longer period of time. Documentation could be shared and processes defined in the light of collective experience:

*“The cluster gives inexperienced heads a bank of expertise on which to draw that is non-judgemental and supportive.”*

Headteacher, School G

As a large percentage of the rural schools have church status, the church distinctiveness of the school was also inspected as part of the Ofsted inspection cycle. This was another area of expertise available to be shared through the cluster. One headteacher visited schools, at their request, to talk to staff and help prepare them for their Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools (SIAS). This was deemed to be valuable as a high percentage of the schools were subsequently graded as at least ‘good’. Governors were also often included in these discussions and the resulting dialogues could be animated and fruitful as vehicles of professional development. The visiting headteacher was respected as a practising professional coming alongside the school and not just sitting in judgement of it:

*“She made us realise that actually we were doing much of what was expected but we had not recognised it as such. Through discussion we were able to gain confidence about our own practice but also recognise the gaps and had time and skill to create an action plan to develop them.”*

Headteacher, School A

Subject development or processes such as assessment were also identified as areas that could be more fruitful for the schools if worked on together. As part of commitment to the cluster, staff had to be given time to spend with colleagues from other schools and so there was a commitment by the schools, in both finance and resources. If this commitment was not given, then the schools could not collectively benefit from the totality of each other’s expertise in order to amend practice.

*“Through the discussion with other heads, I’ve decided to amend my school development plan because of issues that have been discussed.”*

Headteacher, School G

All the headteachers within the cluster agreed that one aspect of the work that showed a real benefit on their schools was the shared way of working with the RAISEonline data. The detailed knowledge of the SIP of each individual school meant that rather than having separate dialogues, the cluster could come together for a joint meeting, sharing the way the data picture told the story of the schools. This was felt to be both supportive and challenging as opportunities were given for the heads to be critical friends to each other. The SIP set the pace and often the mood of the meeting. Governors from each of the schools joined the latter part of the meeting and the SIP also trained and developed them in their understanding of the data and its relevance to their school:

“Two new governors attended the training this year and felt that it hit the spot! It is hard for governors in a very small school because even though it is data, they know which children are being discussed. Talking in a shared group made it easier and also gave them the confidence to know that our school is on track.”

Headteacher, School B

Such training was local to the schools and therefore easier for governors to access. It was seen as friendly as governors met together and could understand that others were in the same position as themselves. It was non-threatening and deemed very productive, and many commented that it had made a real difference to both their levels of understanding and their relationship with the school:

“Our governors gained so much from the data training that they returned to our own school and led the governors’ meeting, training the rest of the governors who had been unable to come to the joint meeting.”

Headteacher, School G

Evidence was also collected from a comparative cluster which was a similar sized group of rural schools but one that had been working together before the SIP system was introduced, therefore beginning from a different starting point of headteacher engagement. A mid-year review in their second year of operation with a common SIP generated a SWOT analysis of benefits and potential difficulties going forward:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forum to support each other</li> <li>Shared expertise</li> <li>Shared vision for education</li> <li>Good SIP/well led group</li> <li>Feel important</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negligible impact on class teachers other than through the focus of the heads</li> <li>Too many core issues</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Become a trust</li> <li>Continue and develop</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local authority financial support being stopped</li> <li>Lack of belief in group by local authority</li> <li>New SIP</li> </ul>

**SWOT Analysis of experience of engagement with a common SIP**

The heads within that cluster valued both the leadership of one of the constituent headteachers’ lead as well as that from the SIP as the external professional and decided that the positive value of the collaborative would continue after the demise of the SIP system. They were seriously considering working even closer together in the future with one headteacher taking the lead within the group. Such experience shows the generic lessons that can be drawn from both the provision of some form of external support and the consequent upskilling of continuing internal expertise.

**How can a supportive group, working together, improve the pastoral wellbeing of headteachers?**

It was felt by those interviewed that mutual pastoral peer support, evidenced through the building of relationships and the sharing of ideas, could enhance headteacher wellbeing.

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The rural schools in the cluster had between two and ten classes within each school. This meant that the senior management team may have consisted of just the headteacher or may have been as large as three staff. Decisions, therefore, may have had to rest primarily with just the headteacher as there were no other staff with which to share and discuss. The schools also had a high ratio of job shares and part-time staff throughout each establishment so that there were management issues of endeavouring to bring staff together for training and sharing of ideas and policies. Cluster involvement compensated for this:

*“We developed a support network of like-minded professionals that can trust and share.”*

Headteacher, School J

The headteachers had previously found that they had very little professional discussion for the generation of ideas except the opportunities that they themselves created. While there was a deep well of enthusiasm and a willingness to give the time and energies to the success of the school, there was a dearth of focused professional conversation relevant to their own situation. Again, cluster membership alleviated this:

*“I discovered that others had encountered similar problems and was able to learn from their experiences. I have also been reassured that what I am doing is right. It has also deepened our relationships so that I am not afraid to ask, if needed.”*

Headteacher, School B

As regards newly appointed headteachers and aspiring school leaders, while both local authority and diocesan support was available, the cluster recognised that it had a distinctive role in recognising factors threatening the wellbeing of rural headteachers, and a responsibility to model good practice in this to less experienced colleagues.

With a mixed grouping of cluster headteachers, in terms of experience, the building of trust and confidentiality was seen as a vital component in this building of relationships. It was recognised that this would take time to achieve as each head grew at different rates – some colleagues had known each other previously and so were more comfortable in working together more quickly. In comparison, one headteacher reported that it had taken more than a year of being part of another cluster before she felt included and on the same level as the other members of the group. Until she had built those relationships, she felt she gained little from working with the other headteachers, but now she would really miss their support and challenge:

*“I recognise now the value of being away from school but I needed first to build trust in my colleagues before the group was of value to me and my school.”*

Headteacher, School K

In building the trust and confidentiality that were seen as vital components contributing to relationships within the cluster, and hence individual and collective wellbeing, the role of the SIP was felt to be vital. This was shown on two occasions when the SIP highlighted concerns to individual members of the cluster and action was able to be taken by other heads without further formal action being needed on her part:

*“It has been a facilitating process with the SIP as the broker with more being given to some schools than others because it is related to need.”*

Headteacher, School D

On other occasions, the headteachers felt able to use the support of the whole group as a wellbeing resource and shared problems with them from their own school environments. The deep levels of trust and the use of joined-up thinking by the cluster preserved the wellbeing of the headteacher seeking support with consequent benefits to the school as a whole.

There was also willingness within the group to share the SIP time allocation according to expressed need and to use it more flexibly. The fact that the heads worked together meant that some external time was released, and when one head needed more time due to significant professional problems within the school, the group willingly gave some of the joint time so that the SIP could work with one individual beyond the specific personally allocated time:

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“The group has inspired me personally because I am not working in isolation. It has helped me be more aware of leadership possibilities and what I can do in certain situations. Through the generosity of the group, I have received more SIP time which has enabled me to be a more proactive leader developing both my skills and the staff’s.”

Headteacher, School H

From such mutual awareness of need, collective support and flexibility of input across the cluster, trust, commitment and confidentiality promoted by the SIP were reinforced and individual headteacher wellbeing enhanced.

## How can supported collaborative partnership enable headteachers to think strategically beyond external agendas?

### Responding to new agendas

Leaders of schools are subject not only to internally generated agendas for school improvement but also need to take account of and respond to external agendas such as those of government and the local authority and to consider impact and implementation on the individual school. The SIP cluster had an important role in facilitating collective discussion of new agendas and requirements and was together planning how to implement them.

Such awareness of potential upcoming changes allowed advance preparations to be commenced and built into the school’s development plan. The SIP played a vital role in this process as she often had a broader view of educational practices and could bring expertise from other areas of the country and knowledge from sharing with other professionals nationally (unlike the headteacher, who was more concerned with daily priorities within a smaller environment). The cluster therefore was able to build in time to plan and support each other in a strategic sense. It was found that it was easier for two or three heads to work together on developing a new policy, strategy or idea than for each to work on their own, ‘re-inventing the wheel’ as an individual establishment. It was found that in small groups, expertise was shared, ideas challenged and then the result brought to the larger group for sharing. The collective outcome was then taken back and made relevant and individual to each setting by the staff and other stakeholders. By developing such professional dialogue between and across schools, time was saved and expertise shared to mutual benefit:

“Despite every school having some different development points, there are many shared points on which we can work together. Unfortunately Ofsted drives some actions for schools which may take us away from our joined-up thinking. Yet, apart from that my school has really benefited from the good practice I’ve seen elsewhere and the fact our staffs can work together, for example in SEN [special educational needs], Foundation Stage and with resources has made a real difference to our school.”

Headteacher, School A

### Drawing on wider experience

Through working together with a group, the SIP was able to be flexible in organising the time allocation given to each school. This allowed the headteachers to take time out to re-evaluate their vision, direction and skill set. With the SIP as facilitator, the schools were able to look at gaps in their knowledge and/or experience and how the knowledge and experience of individual headteachers could support the group as a whole to fill those gaps, thus positively impacting on the leadership of the schools as a whole. In facilitating this, the SIP was able to input up-to-date, on-the-spot training with a constant update of information that could then be clarified, shared, discussed and assimilated.

However, there were times when experience had to be sought from outside the immediate rural vicinity of the cluster. Although some cluster headteachers were very experienced, that experience was mainly of rural schools within the same locality. It was therefore decided to visit two city schools, in London.

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The headteacher of each London school offered to give presentations as well as learning walks of their schools. Staff from both schools addressed the visiting headteachers, informing them of their in-school projects that were currently making positive effects on the standards within their schools. These sessions were felt to be of value for the host schools as the presenting staff felt valued when they shared their work with heads from other counties. It was also good for their professional development as they had prepared for the visit because, for some, it was the first time they had presented their project externally. It was also productive for the visitors who not only saw examples of outstanding practice on the learning walk but also had the opportunity to have a professional dialogue with colleagues who worked in very different circumstances. All the visiting headteachers felt that they had gained some new expertise and/or ideas from spending a day in such a contrasting environment. The facilitating role of the SIP was an important one on the day as her knowledge of both the host and visiting schools meant that the professional dialogue was deeper and profound learning could take place, providing wider perspectives and deeper challenge.

*“The visit to other schools gave me a different perspective, widening my experience. Seeing outstanding practice made me question our own practices.”*

Headteacher, School G

Within the cluster, professional development for the headteachers themselves was identified as a good use of the time that had been released through sharing a common SIP. The SIP was able to draw on her external knowledge of high quality professionals working in other parts of the UK to guide the heads as to appropriate high quality training providers relevant to the needs of the group. As a result, a day’s training was organised by one of the cluster heads. Other schools in a wider geographical area were contacted and asked if they would also like to take part, resulting in a good quality day’s training for about 30 headteachers. This training was so successful that it is planned to be the first of many such events, using the knowledge base and expertise of the SIP as the initiator.

Some heads saw a future way forward for the cluster was to visit each other’s schools more during the working day for experiences such as learning walks. As trust within the cluster has grown, this was seen as a way of not only initiating professional dialogue on issues and challenges but also providing further support and development for the leaderships of the schools involved.

It was felt that the high quality professional development gained by both external visits and cluster-organised professional development not only increased skill levels but also re-energised and invigorated the leadership of the schools. A headteacher supported this view by saying:

*“As a result, you develop headteachers who are well informed, adapting the changes according to the vision and needs of the schools. They are pro-active, instead of re-active.”*

Headteacher, School J

## **Benefiting from an outside view**

The quality of the external facilitator was felt by the cluster headteachers to be crucial to the work of the group, both in the external view that the SIP brought to the professional collective dialogue but also in their flexible approach to time management according to individual leadership need. Several schools felt very strongly that SIPs were most effective when they were freed from local authority paperwork, and were able to have a consultative role with a clear focus. This could be linked to the standards agenda and would support the raising of standards within schools. It was also felt that effectiveness was increased when schools were more focused on agendas that had been set within the group, using the SIP as facilitator, rather than agendas that had been imposed from elsewhere. Working as a group, priorities could be set to develop opportunities and pathways that supported and developed each other to secure further improvement. This manner of working together was a real change of climate for the local authority instead of the visits solely being regarded as simply a collection of data. A one headteacher trenchantly put it:

*“SIPs have to be school improvers and not just local authority tick-boxers.”*

Headteacher, School J

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For the SIP herself, although she had previous experience of working with schools in partnership, it was the first time she had experienced rural schools working as a cluster. Her external view was of significant value to the group. She was able to identify how quality of leadership could be positively affected by the support of the group especially when the leadership of a school was in difficulty. Such failing leadership could be improved by the sharing of expertise, both within the group but also by using the cluster as a resource for professional development of other staff. The small size of the cluster was a benefit:

*“Because the forum was small, matters could be discussed in much greater detail.”*

SIP

The original clustering of schools with a single SIP had been done on geographical grounds. However, the view of the SIP herself was that for the group to work best, it must be constituted of like-minded people rather than simply be based on geographical criteria. This was supported by the experience of the comparative cluster who were aware that there could be competition between schools who were situated very closely together and so there might be a reluctance to share expertise due to perceived competitive pressures: ‘like-mindedness’ was all-important.

*“Heads who are able to meet together on intellectual and ideas planes, as well as support each other through trust and wellbeing, will be able to move mountains!”*

Headteacher, School K

## **How can collaborative partnership support governors in their understanding of school data, through the identification of key points and the sharing of expertise?**

It is the responsibility of the SIP to support the governing bodies in the performance management of their headteachers. This is one aspect of the SIP role that was kept separate and not shared between the schools. Each headteacher valued the role of the SIP as part of the performance management process as the SIP often guided the governors in their role and also championed the needs of the headteacher, if and when necessary. The governors respected her professionalism and expertise, also valuing her external view:

*“We have all benefited from her wider expertise.”*

Governor, School C

With an impending change from April 2011, when SIPs will no longer be part of the performance management process, governing bodies of schools will have to evaluate the value of this external view. The decision whether to finance the support of an external adviser themselves will have to be made after considering all the pertinent factors. This research, however, found that all the schools placed high value on the role of the external professional in conducting headteacher performance reviews.

One perceived benefit over and above performance management issues has been an impact on the governing bodies that were able to receive locally based training and networking opportunities with other schools. The provision of this in local venues was a significant factor within dispersed rural areas. By working collaboratively on a local basis with a single SIP, time was released to include support of governor training. Governors felt that this was very beneficial and impacted well on their role of providing challenge within the schools. Following a joint training session, one governor commented:

*“I have been a governor for several years, but for the first time I feel I understand the rationale of RAISEonline and how it challenges and supports the school’s view of its standards. Now I am able to have worthwhile conversations with the headteacher and challenge her thinking regarding the school’s interpretation of the data.”*

Governor, School C

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## Navigating a future way forward

In its first year of operation, the cluster group was more reactive than strategic, but such strong foundations had been laid that it was felt the second year could be much more productive in setting up an operational model for the future in which the SIP would have less of a leadership role, while still providing external support, and the direction of growth could come more from the heads themselves. Indeed, such was the perceived value of clustered support that one head asked the local authority if she could change her SIP and join the collaborative because she could see the benefits:

*“Before joining the group I felt out on a limb and on my own. Since being part of it, Ofsted has given my school an ‘outstanding’ for our partnerships and I know that the SIP cluster had a large part to play in that judgement.”*

Headteacher, School B

What is still deemed to be necessary, however, for subsequent years of operation, is a clearer rationale of what the group wants to achieve, and so it is felt that it must learn to be more self-evaluative and create an ongoing improvement strategy for the following year.

*“One way forward is to ask ourselves what makes a school ‘outstanding’ and go and see outstanding practice elsewhere and then support each other in transferring that into our schools. How to move from good to great! The issue then lies in what happens to the school that is not good and how does that fit into the strategy?”*

SIP

Following the discontinuing of the formal SIP process from April 2011, the headteachers within the cluster and the SIP have evaluated the successes of the collaborative venture and have started planning a strategic way forward. All the headteachers who had been involved stated that the facilitating role of the SIP was a vital component in the success of the project. The heads had valued her professional experience, trusted her judgement, respected the level of challenge provided and profited from her wider knowledge and involvement with professionals outside of their own local authority. It was felt that her facilitation role was a vital component of success:

*“The model of the schools working together is a good one but it needs a facilitator.”*

Headteacher, School A

In particular there were two important strands of the project that everyone valued: first, the external perspective provided by the SIP and second, the trust and support which had been built within the group. It was felt to be important to preserve these for the future. It had also been decided that there was a need for the cluster to become more strategic and so it was proposed that the SIP would make bids for finance on behalf of the group that would enable them to continue to work together on specific projects. This would preserve a facilitated focus on school improvement and also maintain an external, outward-looking perspective:

*“I don’t see myself keeping separate as an individual school at all. I see ourselves as a mutually supportive cluster with bids being made for us as a group.”*

Headteacher, School D

The cluster as a whole felt very strongly that so much had been gained by working together that they did not want to lose it.

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# Conclusions

## The impact of collaborative support

All the heads agreed that working together as a collaborative group had a **strong symbiotic impact** on the leadership of all the participating schools, with headteachers recognising that as they gave of their individual time and commitment to the cluster, they also received positive collective support in return. This ability to give and receive support from each other promoted levels of wellbeing that both enhanced and encouraged high levels of effective leadership, with the headteachers feeling they had developed both personally and professionally. This in turn had made a direct impression on relationships within the wider school community and with other external agencies.

The identified impact of working together as a collaborative group varied slightly between each of the participating schools, but each head could quantify it in various ways for their own school as including:

- defining and then refining the strands of leadership that worked best for their particular school
- making them more effective as leaders of learning through providing challenge and confirming good practice
- distributing leadership across the staff, thus enabling staff to feel more valued and effective in their roles
- encouraging and supporting pastoral wellbeing
- sharing the monitoring and evaluation of pupils' work

This impact was felt to be not only due to the collective involvement of the headteachers themselves but also the role played by the SIP as the external professional facilitator. This external perspective was viewed as a vital part of the success of the collaborative venture.

## The enhancement of headteacher wellbeing

Primary school headteachers in rural areas often feel a degree of isolation that can impact negatively on their personal and professional wellbeing. **Collective pastoral support** and non-judgemental challenge provided by the group was valued as an asset by group members, irrespective of whether they were givers or receivers of such support. Such collective support had enabled headteachers who felt their wellbeing was under threat by leadership pressures to move forward positively. In turn, the **growth in levels of trust** built within the group was seen as a key factor in promoting a degree of further pastoral support able to be given to all staff by their headteachers.

## The value of an external perspective

The collaborative group valued the role of a single person taking the facilitation lead and encouraging collective strategic thinking. While this role could be taken by one of the headteachers themselves, it was felt that there were many advantages in having an external professional perspective provided by the SIP held in common as the group facilitator. These advantages were identified as follows:

- A broader national view was being offered by a professional whose knowledge and experience was not limited to a small geographical area.
- A perspective was being offered which was external to local authority structures.
- A joint strategic planning timetable provided a process and channel to inform the local authority as to the needs of the cluster schools, to the advantage of both schools and the local authority.

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- External networking contacts and expertise were available that ensured that there was bespoke high quality training and access to schools with differing educational practices for all the schools within the participating group.
  - There was reciprocal support from other cluster schools that enabled headteachers to reflect on good practice and to develop training pertinent to their own situational needs. By planning together, heads were able to confirm or challenge their own school's practice through exploratory visits to other schools.
  - There was facilitation of greater collaborative trust and respect that led to confidential information being shared and acted on without fear of 'contamination' and competition.
  - There was a cascading of collective professional knowledge and support to mitigate leadership overload.
  - There was a growth in enthusiasm for improving education for all the learners within all the participating schools and a decline in parochialism within individual establishments.

## The support of governors

The leadership of schools is shared between the professional leaders of the school and the governing body. The responsibilities placed on this volunteer group of people are many and varied. This research has shown that when governors are brought together in small groups with the governors of other local schools, this has a significant impact on their levels of confidence and skill, which in turn has a positive impact on the leadership and standards within the schools.

A particular benefit to governors was felt to be from joint locally based training organised and supported by the SIP held in common, which had developed their skills in using greater rigour when interpreting and analysing data, resulting in more defined challenge to secure school improvement. The governors, too, responded well to facilitation by the external professional because they respected the wider professional experience and perspectives that were offered, with a sense that a message is often better received when it is given by someone who is slightly separate from their own school, yet with respected professional experience.

In this research, this role was taken by the SIP, but in the future, such external facilitation and support could equally be provided by an NLE or LLE. The important features reside not in the title of the role but in the capacity to provide a respected external perspective based on successful experience and the ability to build levels of trust and to facilitate mutual collaboration and support.

This research study has shown that the time, effort and trust invested in a collaborative group that is led well by a common respected external professional can reap many benefits for the leadership of the rural primary schools who invest in it.

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## Appendix A

The schools working together in the cluster alongside the same school improvement partner (SIP) are detailed below. They all belong to the same rural district within the same county and local authority.

- School A: small rural primary school with a roll of 70, set in a village
- School B: small rural primary school with a roll of 35, set in a village
- School C: medium-sized rural primary school with a roll of 210, set in a small rural town
- School D: medium-sized rural primary school with a roll of 200, set in a small rural town
- School E: small primary school with a roll of 110, set in a town
- School F: small rural primary school with a roll of 70, set in a village
- School G: small rural primary school with a roll of 90, set in a village
- School H: medium-sized rural primary school with a roll of 300, set in a village

The leadership styles and systems varied between the schools but most of the headteachers were experienced. Three of the schools (D, F and G) started the SIP collaborative with job share headships, but during the time of the project this picture changed, with one school returning to full-time headship and another moving to a job share.

In addition, heads from another primary school collaborative SIP cluster were interviewed on their experiences to give some comparison with the original cluster.

- School J: medium-sized rural school with a roll of 250, set in a small town
- School K: small rural primary school with a roll of 110, set in a village

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