



Department
for Education

Running small rural primary schools efficiently

Research brief

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Social Science in Government

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Introduction

1. This research brief is the Department for Education's interpretative summary of the findings of a qualitative research project commissioned by the department to understand how some small rural schools achieved good educational and financial performance. The summary contains short extracts from case studies which are available in the annex. The research was completed by Aldaba (whose full report is also available¹) with visits taking place in summer term 2018 with a report provided in November 2018.
2. The main aim of the research was to identify evidence of good practice for individual small rural primary schools and collaborations.
3. The department designed a sample of small (under 100 pupils) rural primary schools that data suggested were performing well in terms of their pupil attainment, finances, and Ofsted assessments. Nine standalone schools and twelve multi-academy trusts were visited by Aldaba. 14 telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of stakeholders in the education system, including local authorities (LAs), Dioceses, the department's Regional School Commissioner (RSC) offices, and Ofsted.

Key Findings

Funding context

4. Although schools and trusts were purposefully selected to ensure that those interviewed appeared to have good finances and academic performance, they nevertheless reported that funding is tight and that, in some cases, they struggled to overcome financial difficulties. The main funding challenges highlighted by schools and trusts included:

- Volatility in pupil numbers. A decline in pupil numbers causes a significant percentage drop in the school's budget (although it is also the case that an increase in numbers can be disproportionately advantageous).
- Typically staff are more experienced (therefore more expensive) and less likely to leave than in larger and non-rural schools. This can have educational benefits but can make it difficult to manage staff costs.
- The cost of providing cover for teachers who need training can be high in small schools due to the lack of available cover within the school.

¹ "Running small rural schools efficiently" published by the Department for Education, written by Aldaba Ltd (2019)

- Difficulty in negotiating good purchasing deals for small quantities of goods and services.

Potential solutions to overcoming funding challenges

5. Schools and MATs highlighted a number of areas where they felt efficiencies could be achieved, but these were not without challenges:

- Sharing a headteacher – one headteacher can oversee a number of schools in a MAT, but this is more difficult in a standalone school or where headteachers have a significant teaching role. Some schools worried that sharing a headteacher might lead to a fall in academic performance.
- Securing discounts with external suppliers. Most of the schools and trusts saw the MAT model as offering opportunities to achieve savings, mainly by sharing roles and securing discounts in external supplier contracts, but some schools felt they could achieve these efficiencies under the LA model.

Teaching

6. The research found mixed views on the benefits and challenges facing teachers in small rural schools.

- Some teachers like working in small schools which necessitates undertaking a wider variety of tasks that might not be required in larger schools.
- The main challenge was running mixed-age classes, which can include pupils from two to four different year groups. Some felt teacher training was not designed for these types of classes and limited guidance is available.

Difficulty in offering a broad and balanced curriculum

7. Many schools noted that it can be challenging to offer a broad and balanced curriculum.

- Mixed-age classes mean that the national curriculum is organised into rolling programmes. For example, where pupils from two different year groups share the same class, subjects allocated to the two different year groups in the national curriculum are combined for delivery over two school years.
- A mixed age class in a small rural school amplifies the issue of teaching mixed ability groups. One way of overcoming these challenges is to use online learning packages.

Online learning to challenge high achievers - The Consortium Multi Academy Trust

Schools often have only one or two pupils working towards greater depth objectives. These pupils do not have as much opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations around, in this case, maths mastery with their peers as pupils in larger schools. The trust worked with an online teaching organisation to provide mastery maths lessons which saw results improve. The MAT had to overcome the issue of limited broadband connectivity, an issue that was raised by a number of small rural schools.

Recruitment challenges

8. Schools and trusts highlighted that they face recruitment challenges.
 - Most schools and trusts identified headteachers and senior teaching staff as particularly difficult to recruit, while many also highlighted issues finding lower level admin and supervisory staff.
 - Recruiting to remote rural locations (sometimes with limited and expensive housing) was considered harder than recruiting to urban schools
 - To overcome recruitment challenges schools sought to highlight the benefits of working in small schools, such as a wider variety of roles, more responsibility and the chance to develop the skills necessary to teach mixed age groups.

Benefits for small rural primary schools of joining a MAT

9. A number of findings suggested potential benefits for small rural primary schools from joining a MAT. Examples were provided by MATs and standalone schools. These included:
 - achieving efficiencies through a central team;
 - managing in-year deficits across schools;
 - overcoming recruitment difficulties and offering continuous professional development for teachers; and
 - delivering school improvement.

Achieving efficiencies through a central team

10. Standalone schools and MATs felt that the MAT model presented opportunities to make savings through providing central services. The Link Academy trust provided an example of how they made savings through efficient central services.

Efficiencies achieved through a central team in a MAT - Link Academy Trust

The Link Academy Trust is a MAT consisting of nine small rural primary schools. The CEO outlined how they run a central services team including a chief executive, business manager, human resources officer and a range of administrative staff, with legal support and payroll services being provided through centrally run contracts with suppliers. The central team also provides continuous professional development activities to its member academies through contracts with suppliers. The CEO explained the central team cost approximately £400,000 per annum to run but made savings of approximately £800,000, so a net saving of £400,000. The central team also identified benefits that are difficult to quantify, such as enhancing the reputation of all the member academies, engaging with stakeholders about future growth plans, and being recognised regionally and nationally as a potential model for best practice.

Managing in-year deficits

11. Some MATs explained that they gave interest-free loans to the member academies that were experiencing an in-year deficit, subject to a repayment plan that was monitored closely by the trust's central team and which involved paying back the loan within two to four years.

12. Stakeholders (dioceses, RSCs, LAs) agreed that many schools do not appreciate, and current MATs do not fully appreciate, the opportunities for pooling reserves across trusts. Some stakeholders suggested pooling reserves only partially, allowing member academies to keep a proportion of their reserves for themselves but some being used, as required, across the trust.

Overcoming recruitment challenges and offering continuous professional development

13. MATs can run recruitment campaigns for all schools in the trust, but they are also able to offer staff promotion opportunities within the same trust (a point acknowledged by standalone schools). This can help to counter the lack of local labour market opportunities around small schools in isolated locations.

14. MATs highlighted their ability to offer more CPD than standalone schools, with some saying that they provide peer support and a sense of professional community, particularly in the case of more junior staff such as teaching assistants. This support included coaching, which might be facilitated from the trust's central team.

Continuous professional development in a MAT – The Link Academy Trust

The trust monitors the roles available across its academies and estimates likely vacancies and salaries. This enables them to design CPD profiles for the next few years to ensure staff have the necessary skills. Long-term planning means that where staff share training needs, discounts for group bookings can be obtained, making the training cheaper per person. This encourages more strategic planning of CPD.

School improvement

15. School improvement is an area where both standalone schools and multi-academy trusts viewed MATs as being effective. A few trusts referred to their school improvement function as 'quality assurance'.

16. Some MATs have a dedicated school improvement role within their central teams. Staff in this role take the lead in coordinating the school improvement plans for each of the member academies and identifying common priorities that lend themselves to shared activities such as training sessions, class observations, or producing common worksheets and other teaching materials. Some felt that small rural primary schools particularly benefited from these activities because they would have been unaffordable had the schools remained as standalone schools.

17. One MAT (which declined to be a named case study) completed three visits a year to each member academy involving one member of the central team, and two external consultants that worked as school improvement auditors. One of the outputs of the visits was a risk register that estimated the probabilities of member academies underperforming in areas such as finances, leadership, continuous professional development, and pupil attainment. Based on these visits the central team developed a work plan. Schools that faced similar risks were grouped together and offered coaching, training sessions, and opportunities to observe classes at the better performing academies within the trust. Headteachers were also allocated 'buddies' from elsewhere in the trust, which involved peer support and coaching activities facilitated by the central team.

Challenges facing MATs

18. The report highlighted some issues regarding small rural schools that are faced by MATs.

Difficulty in growing trusts to become more sustainable

19. Most trusts saw growth as the best way of achieving a financial balance and becoming sustainable. They considered that by increasing the number of member academies, the contributions from individual members could be reduced and the support received from the central team could be more efficient. However, some felt that encouraging schools to join their MAT had become more difficult with the reduced focus on full academisation (a view endorsed by schools not wishing to join a MAT). MATs emphasised the importance of due diligence to ensure that schools who join share their ethos and that the trust will be able to meet their school improvement and resource needs.

Some LA maintained small rural schools do not wish to convert and join a MAT

20. Most schools understood there were opportunities within MATs around school improvement activities, sharing resources, and potentially achieving savings, but some felt these opportunities were already available as part of other models.

21. Other issues schools mentioned being barriers to joining a MAT:

- The perception that headteacher, and other roles, might be at risk of redundancy or becoming shared across member academies.
- The commitment of Church of England dioceses to maintaining the family of church schools means there is less scope for Church schools to join non-Church MATs.
- Local authorities may not be ready to make the capital investments required to meet the standards that MATs consider to be acceptable before conversion.

Annex 1 - Case Studies

Online lessons at multi-academy trust - The Consortium Multi Academy Trust

Context

This is a large trust with more than ten member academies of different sizes. In the majority of this trust's member academies, especially the smaller ones, there can be at times only one or two pupils working towards greater depth objectives. These pupils do not have as much opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations around maths mastery with their peers as pupils in larger schools.

Practice

To provide pupils with the opportunity to meet their greater depth objectives, the trust worked with an online teaching organisation to provide mastery maths lessons.

The sessions were taught once a week. The pupils were able to login at the same time and, therefore, engage in mathematical challenges and conversations with other pupils working at a similar level of maths.

The programme faced some technical challenges. Internet connections did not always work when the lessons were planned, which resulted in delays and some lessons being re-scheduled.

Results

Pupils reported that, once online and connected, they enjoyed the lessons. Around 50 per cent of the pupils that took part made progress above the trust's expectations.

The trust has plans to improve their approach to greater depth objectives in maths. Whilst there was some improvement in maths, the programme did not always offer the maths mastery conversation that the trust had hoped to offer. This was irrespective of the technical challenges mentioned earlier.

The trust's education team are now investigating in-house systems of connectivity that could be used to provide a similar programme.

Efficiencies made running central services in a MAT – The Link Academy Trust

Context

This is a small trust with fewer than ten member academies, which are all small rural primary schools. The contributions from its member academies to the central team are among the largest in the sample of participating trusts.

Central team services

The central team has a number of roles, including chief executive, business manager, human resources officer, and a range of administrative roles. Legal support and payroll services are provided by the central team through contracts with suppliers. Similarly, the central team also provides continuous professional development activities to its member academies through contracts with suppliers.

Taking everything into consideration, the central team requires an expenditure of approximately £400,000 each year.

Practices

The central team decided to compare this figure with the savings it believes has helped achieve. This was with a view to understanding its cost effectiveness better.

The savings identified by the central team include the following:

- Reduction, relocation, or replacement of teaching staff.
- Use of high-level teaching assistants to reduce expenditure on agency cover teachers.
- Special educational needs resources, and support to disadvantaged pupils provided from the central team, including replacing some roles that used to be hired directly by each individual member academy.
- A cheaper photocopier deal reduced previous photocopier expenditure by 50 per cent, from £4,000 to £2,000
- Bulk purchase of consumables for all member academies, as opposed to separate purchases.
- Funding applications perceived to have been successful as a result of the skills and expertise held by the central team, which was not necessarily available before the trust was set up.
- Information Technology (IT) review resulting in cheaper back-up services, newer and cheaper personal computers for classrooms, cheaper website hosting services, and a free IT review and audit, with total savings amounting to £18,800

Results

In total, the annual savings estimated by the central team were approximately £800,000.

The central team also identified benefits that cannot be quantified, such as contributing to enhancing the reputation of all the member academies, engaging with stakeholders about future growth plans, and being recognised regionally and nationally as a potential model for best practice.

CPD in a multi-academy trust – The Link Academy Trust

Context

This is a small trust with fewer than ten member academies, which are all small rural primary schools. Conscious of the challenges around recruiting staff, this trust developed an approach to monitoring its staff numbers and training needs.

Practice

This trust monitors the types and numbers of roles available across its member academies. Through a set of templates, and associated monitoring work, the trust estimates future staff numbers, including likely vacancies and salaries.

In addition, the trust estimates future needs in relation to continuous professional development for each type of role. For example, at the time of research the trust had this for 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21.

This monitoring work is underpinned by a set of assumptions that are acknowledged and updated as time progresses.

Results

One of the advantages of this approach is that the trust can anticipate future training needs and make decisions that can result in savings. For example, if different individuals will need the same type of training just one year apart, the trust may decide to agree a date in the middle for everyone to participate in the training and secure better prices for a larger group.

Similarly, the trust can anticipate future situations where larger numbers of staff concentrate around a particular type of role and pay scale, and make appropriate decisions in advance, for example, in case other combinations of roles might be more appropriate.

Another feature of this monitoring work is identifying individual members of staff that may be in a position to coach others in the future. Again, this helps the trust to match internal training capacity and needs.



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