

Open Report on behalf of the Executive Director Adults and Children's

Report to:	Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee
Date:	3 February 2012
Subject:	Strategy for sustaining small and medium sized primary schools in Lincolnshire and creating Collaborative Partnerships

Summary:

Lincolnshire County Council is determined to preserve a sustainable future for primary education throughout the county and particularly in the more isolated rural areas. Over the past nine years, the Council has supported this aim with a variety of mechanisms that have strengthened schools through collaborations, federations and mergers. The core objectives and key strengths of such partnerships have been, and must continue to be, improving the quality of curriculum provision and teaching and learning, whilst ensuring that the needs of vulnerable children are effectively met.

The intention of this proposed strategy is to build on this work to bring groups of schools together into formal collaborative partnerships with additional funding to support infrastructural changes in the areas of teaching and learning, administration and support for vulnerable pupils, with the intention of securing improved outcomes for all pupils.

Actions Required:

The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee is invited to consider and discuss the proposals set out in this paper and the presentation that will be given to the Scrutiny Committee.

1. Background

The Council has a well established history of developing a range of partnerships in all areas of the county and has learnt a great deal about the ingredients necessary for successful collaborations. In the past, school partnerships have often been opportunistic, leading to a number of ad hoc arrangements. However, as significant change is occurring nationally and within the Local Authority, a mixed economy of schools is emerging in the primary sector with Local Authority maintained schools and academies co-existing. The White Paper, The Importance of Teaching (HM

Government 2010) confirmed the need for arrangements to support school to school collaboration, readjusting school autonomy and redefining notions of accountability through federations, groups and chains of outstanding schools, academies and free schools.

The County Council, in turn, wants to create working structures which will be sustainable in such an environment, when the Local Authority funded infrastructural support is likely to diminish or become a traded service offer to schools. The County Council will need to be proactive and encourage structural partnerships between schools if they are to continue to exist successfully in a more market driven educational climate.

In order to support schools in improving standards and ensuring good progress for all pupils, especially those who are vulnerable, we need to find structural arrangements that will not only provide a greater level of resource and expertise in certain areas, but will also make schools less vulnerable to fluctuations in the quality of teaching and learning and leadership at all levels.

Small schools often struggle to generate the time and the high level of skill necessary to manage the business of school administration to best effect and to be proactive in procuring best value services. Similarly vulnerable pupils do not always receive the highest quality of support within the smaller school environment because the resource and expertise is not always available to deal with pupils with very specific needs. Conversely the smaller school environment is often sought out by parents of children with special educational needs because they appreciate the 'family' atmosphere and the thorough knowledge of individual children that is often perceived to be evident in those schools.

2. Conclusion

There is a range of different models that can be used to alleviate the risks related to creating a sustainable future for the rural primary schools. Closing small, non-viable primary schools is not an option unless schools make the proposal themselves. The most common structural solution used by Local Authorities is what is called the "pyramid of schools" where all the feeder primary schools in an area are linked to the secondary school they feed into on transfer. This structure enables some common services to be provided by the secondary school and a genuine family of schools is created; parts of Nottinghamshire use such arrangements. In Lincolnshire this is extremely difficult to achieve in most parts because of the selective system and in many cases the feeling is that primary schools want their autonomy and do not want to be dictated to by secondary schools. Some Lincolnshire secondary schools have over 30 feeder schools, and one has over 40. For this reason pyramid structures are not seen as a viable way forward for all Lincolnshire primary schools although there may be local solutions that are viable.

In terms of ethos there could be merit in developing models where a group of local Church schools come together and another group of Local Authority maintained schools is formed. This should help future academy trust arrangements however distances between Church schools and similarly Local Authority Schools would be

impractical for any sharing of staff across the group and could leave some schools isolated. Therefore this is an uneconomic model at a time when school funding is likely to decrease in real terms. Equally we could ask those schools who feel they want to work together to do so in what are called friendship partnerships. This creates an ad hoc arrangement based on personalities and will not address the long term sustainability of the structure. **We have concluded that we need to put schools in local areas into a single grouping to create a supportive framework.** This structure will be essential whether schools remain within the Local Authority or become academies within a multi-academy trust or chain.

The proposed model is bespoke for Lincolnshire but learning from other Local Authorities and from the ideas of our own schools we would seek to bring together groups of schools into formal Collaborative Partnerships. Within such a partnership we believe it is critical that each school retains its own distinctiveness, character and ethos and, for this reason, the model would not seek to replace Headteachers with an Executive Head, neither would it demand that the schools come together under a single Governing Body. This proposed form of collaboration enables all schools to work together to best effect; it should enable schools to maintain a strong community presence and to satisfy parental expectations, whilst respecting and retaining their individual characteristics. This is critical when over 40% of primary schools are Church controlled.

In order to allow sufficient flexibility within such partnerships, there would need to be a minimum of 210 pupils across the schools. However, an optimum number would be closer to 350 pupils, with no single school having more than 200 pupils. This should ensure sufficient financial resource is available to sustain the model when the start up funding ceases. There will be a partnership premium available on an annual basis as well as some start-up funding.

The Collaborative Partnership model will seek to provide greater expertise at school level by facilitating schools in working together and managing their resources to secure the best possible outcomes for all pupils by the implementation of:

- a. The schools entering into a legal partnership arrangement for a minimum of 5 years;
- b. The strategic leadership of the collaboration being provided through a Lead Strategic Group comprising the Headteachers and Chairs of Governors and be chaired by an experienced Co-ordinator with headship experience;
- c. The Partnership appointing a Partnership Business Manager in order to provide economies of scale in procurement, expertise in financial planning and free Headteachers from those administrative tasks enabling them to focus on their core purpose of improving teaching and learning and raising standards. This may require a reorganisation of existing staffing;
- d. The Partnership appointing an experienced Partnership SENCo to provide the highest quality of support to these pupils within the smaller school environment, providing a level of expertise and focus that has not historically always been available given that the Headteacher frequently assumes this role in small schools;

- e. A coordination role which is responsible for the line management and deployment of shared staff and resource in conjunction with the strategic leadership group of the Collaborative Partnership;
- f. The appointment of joint staff (where appropriate), to provide specialist teaching, supply cover, premise maintenance, curriculum support etc., across the collaboration.

The model would require a significant level of funding to be available for at least 2 years to allow schools to make the necessary structural changes in order for it to become self-sustaining. There are two elements within the funding that will need to be addressed. Firstly, we will need to provide start up funding for the initiative in order to support the establishment of revised structures that will lead to stronger leadership, particularly in the areas of business management and support for SEN and vulnerable children through the use of shared staffing and formal Collaborative Partnership working. Secondly we will need to introduce factors to amend the existing funding formula, a Partnership Premium, in order to create sustainable structures for our small and medium sized schools. There will need to be key criteria to be met in order for a school to access the Partnership Premium, key to this being the agreement by the Chairs of Governors and the Headteachers to work as a single strategic group to a common Partnership vision.

Following the appointment of the shared staff, the Collaborative Partnership would determine the best use of the Partnership Premium funding and would, following the removal of the start up funding, be expected to become self-sustaining and to retain the same level of expertise into year 3 and beyond. Therefore a key function of the lead strategic group during the first two years of the collaboration will be to consider the ideal staffing model across the collaboration and to take steps towards achieving this.

3. Consultation

Informal discussions have taken place with four potential partnerships across Lincolnshire who were already in conversation about potential joint arrangements to secure their futures. The views expressed by these groups of schools have been positive and have informed aspects of this proposal particularly with reference to the role of the Coordinator and the Lead Strategic Group.

a) Policy Proofing Actions Required

Not applicable.

4. Background Papers

Document title	<i>The Importance of Teaching The Schools White Paper 2010</i>
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	<p><i>A study of the impact of school federation on student outcomes</i> Christopher Chapman, Daniel Muijs, James MacAllister August 2011</p> <p><i>Chain Reactions: a thinkpiece on the development of chains of schools in the English school system</i> Robert Hill 2010</p> <p><i>Partnership working through a school company</i> National College for School Leadership resource 2011</p> <p><i>A National College Guide to Partnerships and Collaborations</i> National College for School Leadership resource 2010</p> <p><i>Championing Children, Championing Excellence</i> A Cornwall Response to the Schools White Paper 2010 Cornwall Council April 2011</p> <p><i>Lincolnshire Schools Census</i> October 2011</p>
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