NCSL National College for School Leadership

Inspiring leaders; improving children's lives

6

Section 6 **Headteacher interviews**

6.1 Introduction

The two previous chapters have presented aspects of SBMs' reactions to the CSBM and DSBM courses, derived from interviews with SBMs. In a few cases we were fortunate enough to be able to interview headteachers whose SBMs had undertaken the CSBM or DSBM course, or in some cases both.

As noted in chapter 3, the sample was opportunistic in that we were dependent upon their availability at the school on the day we had arranged to meet the SBM. The circumstances varied from school to school; in some cases the head joined in the conversation with the SBM at the start and then left, while in others the head agreed to be interviewed separately.

In the following sections we present the views of interviewed headteachers on two subjects: SBMs, and the role of local authorities.

6.2 Headteacher data

The school phase of the interviewed headteachers is reported in table 6.1.

Table 6.1: School phase of SBMs' headteachers

Phase	Primary	Secondary	Other	Total
CSBM	3	2	1	6
DSBM	1	3	–	4
Total	**4**	**5**	**1**	**10**

The headteachers' circumstances varied considerably. One was new in post, having come from a local school where she was used to having a business manager. Another, although experienced, was just starting to lead a confederated school. One was leaving her post to become a training consultant, while another was leaving for a new school as the present school was being amalgamated. Two were about to retire and two more were very experienced. One had been a head for 20 years. Additionally, one of our interviewees was the manager of a group of local authority-based peripatetic SBMs.

6.3 Headteachers on SBMs

All the headteachers interviewed spoke very favourably about having SBMs. The data gathered is presented in three categories:

- reasons for having a school business manager
- the SBM role and its development
- benefits of having a school business manager

6.3.1 Why have a school business manager?

Headteachers varied from the pragmatic to the visionary in their reasons for employing a school business manager. Our first head said that a school business manager weakened the grip of her deputy head, for whom important decisions often had to wait:

People say ... "Oh I've got a deputy head who does that" and I think "Oh more fool you." I don't see how you do the two roles because something suffers and that would be both the jobs.

I thought, "This is crazy"... we were a grant-maintained school, we were having a big grant for [refurbishment] and the foremen came to me and said "What colour do you want the rooms painted?" "I can't tell you. Terry [the deputy who dealt with finance, site and all that] is teaching French." I thought, "This is absolutely mad." You need someone who can say, "I want it white or whatever colour" – now.

Another head reported that the opportunity to restructure his SMT was key in enabling the school to employ a school business manager who had experience in the private sector, and who could take some of the load away from him:

The opportunity arose because one of our assistant headteachers in our management team was promoted to deputy head. So, we thought that we would need a business manager ... We were also interested in the skills that [our appointee] was bringing from the private sector and that was also reinforced by the fact that she was studying for the SBM course at the same time. So, that gave her clearly an edge in terms of her interest, mostly in the educational world but also by bringing in a set of standards, rigour and a different outlook. You can't get people to become heads at the moment ... and part of the reason is the amount of additional work. My SBM takes the load off and deals with them and ... also she's brought back strategic planning elements.

Other heads were very clear that they couldn't think of a situation without a business manager:

I could not conceive it without one. Not at all, not at all.

You don't realise the enormity behind the job that's there, so it was wonderful really to have somebody there.

6.3.2 The SBM role and its development

Two heads were concerned about the perception of the SBM role by others in the school, and thought that this needed attending to:

I felt that the profile of what she was doing needed to be raised. I wasn't happy that people were looking at her still as a secretary and calling her a secretary and her role was clearly becoming far more than that.

... in lots of other schools ... the business manager is seen just as a bit of an extension of the office manager and is put upon and taken for granted and not treated as the elevated person that they really are. I think ... that it is very important to change the culture in schools.

In addition to the perception of the role and status, two heads raised concerns about SBMs' salaries. They felt these were inadequate for the job they were doing.

There was recognition that for the SBM to fulfil their role appropriately, schools would need to be developing further aspects of managing the support staff network. Two heads commented upon this, and it is worth pointing out that this was also a point made earlier by DSBM candidates:

[Her role] will become more strategic and [we have to] make sure that we have the trained expertise below [her] to carry out the kind of day-to-day duties ... I think the role will continue to develop. It's very much part of looking at being a member of the senior management team.

Another headteacher commented that, in her view, this was being done by her business manager:

I would actually say increasingly that she leads, because she has created team leaders and the team leaders increasingly take on the role of managing their own areas for their own number of colleagues ... But she has led by example and she has created. She's changing the culture. She's actually empowering people to lead in their own areas.

A key feature of headteachers' comments about how they saw the role developing was in terms of a whole-school view and a strategic vision:

The role of the business manager was less to do with managing and financial and all the rest of it and much more a member of SMT.

That is a whole-school role (leading on performance management across the school for all staff) which is not ... strictly speaking separate from the role of the business manager. This is a proper SMT role and I see that as a quite significant departure for her.

Moving on beyond that, one headteacher was thinking about how the networked learning community to which he belonged could be developed much more radically into a local group of schools with an executive head, and what the impact of this might be for the business manager:

... we've already talked about your role developing into [one] where you almost shadow me as a different kind of PA that strategically advises and works as a longer term strategic business manager, because I think we're already raising income here through using our expertise.

The same headteacher made several suggestions as to how the business manager role could be developed and what this might require. Given his interest in both the public and private sectors, he suggested that:

... anybody who's been through this school system and tends to stay in a school business manager role within the school system would need some time out to go and work in industry for a placement, just to get a feel of how it's like outside, because otherwise you get a certain [view of the] internal politics of school work.

And as a counter to this approach, he had arranged for his business manager, who had come to the school from the private sector to:

... mentor a couple of pupils in Year 11 as part of their exam preparation. They're hand picked: don't worry, they are not lunatics but they are two nice quiet girls who need organising and confidence building.

Headteachers in our sample were seeking forward-looking ways to develop the SBM role to include both educational and business aspects, first at a level where individual pupils were involved and secondly at a strategic and visionary level, where the SBM might be working for a board of directors of a group of local schools.

6.3.3   Benefits of having a school business manager

As part of our interviews, we asked headteachers what tangible benefits a school business manager brought for them. Headteachers reported benefits in five areas:

- for pupils
- for the school
- for support staff
- for the headteacher
- for the school as an organisation

6.3.3.1   For pupils

Benefits to pupils were reported across the whole range of schools, from the smallest to the largest. Innovative and forward-looking headteachers pointed out how their SBMs were able to help pupils, in terms of both the structures they had created and the processes they had introduced. This had led to greater value for money which in turn had had an impact in the classroom, with schools being able to afford, on a sustainable basis, additional resources:

... joint booster sessions: the fact that we can go on educational visits to support our curriculum – jointly – and share the costs so that we can have more visits out, wonderful impact really.

The fact that because you now have a confederation shared business manager you can have a teacher for Years 3 and 4, 5 and 6 – that has definitely, definitely made a difference to the educational standards of the children.

She's involved her pupils. She is ... heavily involved with Young Enterprise. She has taken or accompanied school parties on trips. She has as much if not more recent experience of pedagogy in regard to school business than any others because she has said she is more of a learner than the rest of us.

The new systems that she has put in place are all about being more efficient, which frees people up to concentrate on the children.

But she's also gone into the classroom and worked in business studies with pupils.

6.3.3.2   **For the school**

Headteachers reported schools receiving substantial benefits, in terms of networking and knowledge transfer which the courses have facilitated, and in terms of the leadership of the school. Senior staff are able to concentrate on the teaching and learning side of the school:

We see [her] as part of the senior management team in school – very involved with governors and external agencies. Looking after that wider area of finance, computer administration, the premises, those are the areas that she has been given responsibility for. Then that frees up the deputy head, assistant head to concentrate on the educational side. They are both interlinked and they are both absolutely necessary one for the other.

She is the oracle as far as everybody is concerned.

It was her idea that we did Investors in People. She pushed me to do it … It was her idea, but when she came, she came from a health organisation. She said how valuable it had been in terms of teamwork and I thought, "OK, right, we'll go through that" … I went on the training and I thought, "No, actually this is going to really work with school improvement" and we got rewards and that's wonderful and it just helps everybody pull in the same direction and that was through her.

6.3.3.3   **For support staff**

All the headteachers in our sample spoke positively about the support staff in their schools and the ways in which their SBMs have contributed to developing, and in many cases managing, support staff. This is because the SBM is an approachable figure, able to build productive relationships, or in some cases to act as a champion for support staff:

I have a teaching assistant team as well [and] from September we will be moving them from class to class: a teaching assistant is not there for an individual teacher, they're there supporting the children … and I found that [our SBM] can actually talk to them on that level and they can actually say things perhaps to [her] that they wouldn't to me, but we get to their things in time.

When she first came, she had huge amounts to do and she saw her first priority as being to raise the profile and the status of all support staff who have always been valued in the school because that's the way we are, we are that kind of community … Nevertheless, they had no say [in the running of the school], they had loads of chocolates and biscuits at Christmas and buffets but in terms of their career structure there was none.

It's trying to make sure that we were increasing the learning of everybody ... on a whole range of courses, and their IT skills have greatly increased. [Our SBM] has helped to devolve responsibility down to support staff and also we've developed a sophisticated performance management system there.

6.3.3.4   For the headteacher

A point made repeatedly by headteachers was the value they personally placed on having a school business manager; in particular the difference it made to their workload and the support it provided them in other ways as well:

I couldn't have done the workload unless I knew I had someone like her there.

For the first time in a small school I've got the luxury of having a senior management team.

She has complete control (in her job) to say that today it is this premises matter which is important and there is no teaching in hand. For me I have been head here now for 21 years and it is a pity it didn't come 20 years ago.

... it has enabled me to be free enough to ... get on with those things that actually I'm being paid to do.

6.3.3.5   For the school as an organisation

Many headteachers reported that their SBM was a key part of the total way in which the organisation functioned. This was particularly important in the case of the confederated school, where the SBM had a central part in the head's thinking on running a group of schools:

If you are small schools then you are going to go for confederation, don't just confederate the head, confederate with the administration because this makes it positive, absolutely positive.

6.4   Headteachers on local authorities

Whilst the scope of this study does not include interviewing local authority staff, during our discussions with headteachers the role of the local authority was mentioned. This is not surprising, bearing in mind the influential role local authorities can play.

Invariably headteachers cited occasions when their local authority supported or assisted them, or gave good advice and guidance. However, there were a number of instances where local authorities were perceived as less than helpful and on occasion uncooperative and obstructive:

X is a hopeless, really hopeless authority, brought about by their lack of support really and it's quite a difficult authority.

A specific issue relates to SBM pay and conditions, as this headteacher reported:

It is a source of huge embarrassment to me that I have so far failed to ensure that [my business manager] is remunerated, that her salary is in line with the kind of job that she does. I wish I could find some way of correcting what is a serious devaluing of the job that she does. I look her in the eye and around this table, she's paid £10,000 or more less than other colleagues and she does easily as challenging and responsible a job as they do.

Some local authorities have essentially left headteachers and the governing body to determine conditions for their SBM. Others, through job evaluation exercises – for example, the recent Staffordshire exercise, reported in the Times Educational Supplement – have had a negative impact. Invariably they have the effect of constraining flexibility and the potential to conflict with the aims and objectives of the BDP: it is difficult to encourage colleagues to take on a broader, more complex and responsible role if the reward package does not reflect the new role.

The impact of this issue in isolation is relatively minor. It can, however, be a powerful disincentive when it comes together with a headteacher who for some reason wishes to maintain the status quo, as this comment from an SBM shows:

In our recent Ofsted inspection draft report, the inspectors referred to the 'SBM/Bursar' ... but our head insisted that the term be removed from the draft report – as if to say I'm not part of the place.

6.5   Summary

This chapter has provided views from headteacher interviews on the SBM role and on positive and negative impacts of local authority involvement on this role.