Using collaboration as a strategy for improving schools in complex and challenging circumstances:

Six accounts of practice

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Introduction

This report contains six accounts of practice created as part of an investigation of the potential of collaboration between schools as a strategy for supporting development in schools facing complex and challenging circumstances, commissioned by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). The accounts formed the basis of a summary report, *Using collaboration as a strategy for improving schools in complex and challenging circumstances: What makes the difference?* which is available at http://networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk

The accounts investigate thinking and practice in a sample of six groupings of schools where there was reason to believe that collaboration had had some impact. These examples varied from groups that had volunteered to work together to groups that had done so in the context of incentives, and others that had been subject to external pressure to collaborate. The groups were all well established and there was some evidence that they had had an impact on practice in the member schools, particularly those facing complex and challenging circumstances. Mostly the groups served urban areas, and they included primary, secondary and special schools.

The study was carried out by a team consisting of Mel West, Daniel Muijs and Mel Ainscow from the University of Manchester, working with Anne Francis and John Hull, both of whom are former headteachers with experience of working with the Manchester group on research and development projects. Additional contributions were made by Chris Chapman from the University of Nottingham, who is carrying out a series of related studies, and Mark Hadfield of the University of Wolverhampton.

Account of practice 1

Enlightened self-interest allied to strong moral purpose

"Shire11 started from our own interests and needs. Then we found that the national [collaboration] agenda caught us up. We collaborated on specific issues. Now we reach the point where some of that funding is drying up. We are asking ourselves what Shire11's core practice is all about, instead of responding to someone else's agenda."

These are the words of a Shire11 head who has been involved from the start in the collaboration which began in 1997 and was to become Shire11. His colleague with similar experience says: "We wanted to work together. By working together we had a chance to fund our provision. *We* had owned the problems and wanted to find *our own* solutions. We found collaboration was powerful."

Shire11 traces its origins to 1997. The two prime-moving heads have now moved on. In the last five years more than half Shire11's heads have changed. Despite this turnover, Shire11 continues and develops its activities. It finds that it can readily enlist the loyalty of newly arrived heads.

Background and the context of the collaboration

From the start, Shire11 heads have connected the issues of appropriate provision, educational inclusion and attainment. One of the head teachers said: "We wanted [to establish] a range of provision that met the needs of our youngsters. Compared to other parts of the authority, our results were good. This doesn't mean the diet we were offering was appropriate." A head, who arrived some five years ago, speaks of his unease with discussion of "a curriculum suited to those who might become disaffected". His philosophy of education is that all successful learners want to *apply* what they learn in contexts they understand and value. This is always, and for every learner, a valid choice: "I don't think it is just for the disaffected."

The nature of the local geography and the heads' understanding of the social and economic situation of the Shire11 schools are crucial to the development of their collaboration. "We are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged. Our base funding is poor. We struggle to do the things we want to do. The potential of working together is that much greater," said one of the longer established heads.

In some ways, the geographical spread of Shire11 helped. "We don't have great competition but there are areas where schools clump together and can work together." "There is a level of trust that operates because we are not competing." Covering a distinct area within an English county authority and with a major urban conurbation lying to its northern side, Shire11 did not have a single college provider at its heart. It would therefore need to negotiate and co-operate with several institutions.

The Shire11 schools attracted none of the new post-1997 funding targeted at areas of social disadvantage. "We may be seen as 'des-res' territory but there is also an indigenous, fiercely interconnected, local population who may not aspire. This gives us issues of disaffection."

In 1997, the 11 heads declared a 'polite [unilateral declaration of independence] (UDI)'. They had found their area meetings led by the local education authority (LEA) "hugely unproductive". The issues on the agenda "were not the issues we wanted to discuss". The heads wrote to the LEA to say they would run their own meetings.

The issue on which the heads wanted to focus first was the appropriateness of the Key Stage 4 (KS4) curriculum. Having prepared carefully, they booked a pleasantly located hotel for the day and invited a variety of providers to join them. "We set out our stall and said: 'This is what we are looking for'." "In effect we set up a market place and asked providers to come along. We'll listen to your pitch and shop around a bit. We tried to force up quality."

From this initiative emerged Shire11's first work-based learning programme, with some provision on-school-site and some off-site. Often college staff would teach alongside school staff who gained new skills in the process. These courses would require planning, development and co-ordination. The Shire11 heads appointed a consultant to take on this role. She was a highly experienced former vice-principal of a further education (FE) college and consultant to a local training and enterprise council (TEC).

Shire11 now produces documentation to explain itself and its ambitions. The will to be inclusive and to provide appropriately for all is writ large. Shire11 aims to 'plan collaboratively a coherent and inclusive curriculum for the young people in our area' and to 'provide appropriate progression routes for *all* pupils in Shire11 schools'. It takes a 'collaborative approach to inclusion'.

Scope and impact of the collaboration

The collaboration of Shire11 is particularly interesting in that it predates many of the initiatives later introduced to promote inter-school collaboration. The heads in Shire11 realised very early that only by acting together could they secure provision that would be appropriate for all their students. Collaborating initially about provision they found that by working together they could do many other things better as well.

None of the Shire11 schools faced challenging circumstances. Nonetheless, the heads were aware of the presence in their schools of under-aspiring groups of students. As one head says: "There is real deprivation in this community. You don't see it very often. There is underachievement." The evolving collaboration of the 11 would often focus on improvement for these marginalised students. As a result, GCSE results (five or more A*–C grades, 2001–05) in the 11 schools have risen significantly faster than the national rate.

The LEA had responded positively to the 'polite UDI'. Indeed, noting the success of Shire11's work-based learning programmes, the LEA's behaviour support service offered the heads £180,000 to pilot different ways to inclusion in their area. The heads now took an important decision, electing not to divide this sum equally or pro rata. Instead, they identified four schools which took the lion's share. These schools were best placed to pilot new practice and had greatest need. "We've been seen by the authority to be reducing exclusions. If this goes on, we'll get more [devolved] money."

Shire11 established a pastoral panel which would deal with managed moves. Formerly, the heads had been represented on the LEA board which managed admissions to the pupil referral unit (PRU). "The LEA knew its off-site inclusion provision was ineffective and needed review. They knew Shire11 had the capacity to deliver." "We thought we could take on this process in its entirety."

The pastoral panel focuses on individuals, their needs and finding appropriate solutions. It is now complemented in its decision-making role by Shire11's pastoral forum. Here, groups of practitioners hear presentations, share expertise, commission and reflect on evaluations, seek to avoid predictable crises, and work to inform and develop the panel's approach.

Shire11 has further developed its activities with a focus on tailored continuing professional development (CPD) based on identified common needs and effective networking. An early success in this area was the response to the realisation that most Shire11 schools had a "similar profile of middle leaders". These were, overall, capable staff who had been in post a long time. The heads wanted to "re-energise" these key leaders. Together they commissioned, in these days before the Leading from the Middle (LFtM) programme, a middle management initiative and put a highly tailored specification out to tender. Take-up was very good. "A group of colleagues from our 11 schools were close together and shared ideas." Networks of cross-fertilisation were the result. The heads now identify networking for CPD as their "next wave priority". "We have networked our heads of subjects. The advisory service just wasn't there any more. We plan to let them meet within school time and we'll provide the supply cover." There are plans to share curriculum planning, resources and development, using ICT to link the 11 schools. "That is where we need to go next."

Shire11 began with a focus on an appropriate curriculum, which led to the establishment of its work-based learning programme. A variety of other student activities is now jointly provided, sometimes across the 11 schools, but often by smaller groups of schools whose staff have identified a parallel need. "There is a gifted and talented group. It was one head's passion. There is now a summer school. We facilitate a Duke of Edinburgh (D of E) programme across the area. A central provision was bought and a part-owned member of staff employed. Six schools target D of E at some students who wouldn't normally do D of E. This is inclusive: they gain something in leadership skills and [by working with more advantaged volunteer enrolees]."

Not all ideas that were "one head's passion" have taken root. For instance, one school had pioneered the diagnostic use of a psychometric testing programme allied to its interest in enterprise education and a desire to enhance the ambition of Year 9 students searching for their personal progression routes. "The idea was that we would all use it and share [outcomes]. In the event, only a few used it."

Shire11 has provided a forum for mutual support for the 11 headteachers and other senior leaders. "A key group is the 14–19 curriculum group. This is not heads: it is curriculum drivers and it is autonomous." At the heads' level: "We are a natural network for rolling out initiatives." The 11 heads first shared their progress and experience in terms of workforce remodelling. Then they looked together at teaching and learning responsibilities (TLRs). Now they are looking towards extended schools. Their favoured mode of collaborative working is to set up a Shire11 sub-group chaired by a head.

Sometimes a national initiative, and here specialist schools offers a good example, has been adapted to the different Shire11 context. "We have worked together on specialisms. In 1997, many heads said that they didn't want specialism. It seemed an agenda for inner cities. Then it became obvious that you had to be specialist. So we started to think strategically about that rather than just go for [the obvious choices]. We took a view across the patch. All bar one are now specialist: [and that one] is a Beacon school. We have helped each other's specialist applications."

The heads of Shire11 have an annual two-day "block of thinking time" in a residential setting. This offers both the mutual support and opportunity to identify those future challenges which they will best meet collaboratively. "What is it that we can do better together? What can we do that an LEA can't?"

What, then, after nine years' collaboration in Shire11, is the impact?

It is now the case that 53 per cent (over 1,000 students) of Shire11's current KS4 students are engaged, via in-school and shared provision, on vocational courses which are raising attainment. Shire11 achieves this through effective working with seven colleges and four training providers. Shire11 runs its own pastoral panel, arranging managed moves and, with LEA support, other placements for troubled youngsters. In the autumn term 2005, Shire11 heads set themselves the demanding target of zero permanent exclusions.

"Now we have powerful, quantifiable evidence [collected from staff and students in her role by Shire11's consultant] that there is good coming out of this. She can point to progression rates and routes and customer satisfaction." A head whose school's results have risen steeply says: "I'd attribute that in part to Shire11." He then goes on to speak of Shire11's next development plan. It will include a focus on the comparison of the progress of vulnerable groups within Shire11's schools.

In the area of inclusion and developing improved practice, there is significant Shire11 impact. The LEA has, over time, devolved more funding as the success of Shire11's work has become evident. The decision in the autumn term 2005 to set the target for permanent exclusions at zero has led to discussions with a receptive LEA on how best to avoid the need for the formal, and often fraught, exclusion processes.

There is evidence of impact in what the heads say both of shared moral values and awareness of the progress they have made together. "At the end of the day," says one head, "if we're responsible for the education of youngsters within the Shire11 area, that includes everyone. The good thing is that nobody, as in the bad old days, can just boot someone out. That child remains our responsibility. It makes you think more carefully."

The progress of collaboration may now lead to an impact where one of Shire11's broader stated aims is concerned: to "support the economic prosperity and development of the area". Shire11 began with a student focus, seeking to cater for curricular needs that weren't being met. It has now moved on, realising that well-chosen, vocational courses might also serve to promote wider economic well-being. "There is a defined skills shortage in [this part of the county] in certain areas." The FE college in [nearby conurbation] and the college in [small towns in area] are not able to respond to these particular Shire11 needs. There is a need for plumbing, construction and electrical work. "There is a male market in jobs in this area." As a first step to meeting these skills shortages, several Shire11 schools now offer a range of on-site practical skill-developing projects.

Factors important to the success of the collaboration

Shire11 arose as a practical arrangement. It dealt with issues of non-provision (appropriate 14–19 curriculum) or inadequate and uncoordinated response (exclusion processes). The 11 schools are spread across a largely rural area, thus there was little sense of competition. Its leaders soon found it valuable to consider together their best collective or individual response to external pressures and initiatives. They found that by working together they could attract resources as national pathfinders or as local deliverers and co-ordinators of behaviour support. The interviewed heads with longer experience in Shire11 feel that now, having built trust and shared detailed school-level data, they are ready to ask deeper questions: "What, now, would make our schools better?"

i. Understood flexibility within the 11-strong partnership

The 11 heads have, over time, developed a shared understanding of the extent to which their collaboration should, in a variety of contexts, require them to act as a single unified group. The locally experienced heads make intriguing use of cardinal numbers. On any one initiative, or when interpreting a Shire11 programme in company within a proximate group of Shire11 schools, the group becomes 'Shire5' or 'Shire6'. The nature of voluntary collaboration is that some will run with, and forge ahead with, an idea. Others may wish to stand back, observe and decide whether to join later.

When it comes to negotiating and setting up provision, or to experimenting with an initiative, working as Shire2 or Shire5 may be appropriate. One of the heads, who has been instrumental in the work to do with inclusion, points out that this practice of subsidiarity could not be allowed to apply where managed moves and re-inclusion are concerned. In this arena, they must be Shire11. The quality of debate and the ambition not to exclude permanently in Shire11 have required protocols to be developed around managed moves. The teacher who leads one of the four collaboratively funded school-based inclusion centres and who attends the pastoral panel says: "Managed moves break down if a school feels dumped on. This now doesn't happen in Shire11."

The newly arrived head has already learned from his in-school senior colleagues that equitable practice is a hallmark of Shire11 and is expecting, in his first term in post, that his school will receive an already discussed managed move. This present sense of equity depends on a consistency of practice that has been carefully won. Some time ago, the sharing of information on exclusions had revealed that some schools excluded more readily. One school's exercise of its autonomy was creating pressures on the other member schools. Within a context of respect and trust, and using objective, statistical data, these issues were broached. The expertise-sharing pastoral forum played a role here in sharing preventative practice. Now, there is greater consistency of practice and all 11 schools are fully involved.

There is, however, and will remain, a second sense in which the group must be Shire11. It first became effective because it could use one, stronger voice in dialogue with partners. "We are Shire11. When we talk to other providers or the LEA, we are Shire12. We can work with the special school and with colleges beyond our boundary [as Shire12]." In the case of talking to the LEA about how to pay, for instance, for necessary transport to facilitate a managed move, "that's where the LEA as the 12th partner helps to grease the wheels."

ii. Basing challenge on knowledge and established trust

There is now, it seems, within Shire11's practice of collaboration, an increased propensity to challenge. One of the heads says that they are now "robust enough," as they share data, self-evaluation frameworks (SEFs) and performance and assessment reports (PANDAs) to challenge each other more effectively. The other head, who has been in Shire11 from the start, also sees a process which is leading to more challenge. The heads are now aggregating individual schools' data into a Shire11 data-set (as required in their Education Improvement Partnership proposals), and using their growing awareness of how defined or vulnerable groups progress in their various schools. This is leading to informed challenge: "We are beginning to get beneath the surface."

Leadership in the collaboration

The nature of the collaboration in Shire11 has been described as voluntaristic. "Certain heads have certain passions. We have played to the strengths of individual heads. Heads lead where their passions are. We have rotated the role of chair taking turns but not worrying if someone stays in

the chair for a while." The Shire11 schools may group around a common initiative in smaller combinations but in a constitutional sense they are single entity. "There has been occasional tension between schools that are close together and where there is some competition. These tensions are lessened in the group of 11."

A head who has watched the development of Shire11 over its full nine years notes that Shire11 is not simply the heads at work. "Heads are great at spotting a problem. We are comfortable at coming up with solutions. We are the worst people to implement them." He goes on to point out the importance of appointing the consultant with her leadership and facilitation skills. He notes the way she "pulled together assistant heads and the work-related co-ordinators from our schools". Another head refers to the 14–19 curriculum group as a key group in Shire11. Much of the work in the pastoral panel is led by deputies, assistant heads and heads of centres.

The heads' approach to the constitutional arrangement of Shire11 has been strategic. This quality is noted by one of the heads who has been involved from the start. "To our credit, we always realised there'd be issues about sustainability. We set up the structures." Shire11's documentation describes itself as a federation. The structure of Shire11, above the level of its panels and working groups, features an executive committee (comprising the 11 heads, supported by a part-time clerk and meeting half-termly) and a strategic board (the eleven heads and their chairs of governors plus a senior LEA representative, meeting twice a year). Shire11 is now reviewing its formal and meetings structures. "There are issues for us to address in accountability. We are thinking about how we involve governors and the LEA without [overlapping] structures."

Although they are strategic in their approach to matters constitutional, the Shire11 heads have been responsive and pragmatic in their choice of descriptions of their collaboration. Certainly the notion of federation appealed to them in terms of the expression of common purposes: its use was also, however, a means to engage with offered and potential funding streams. "We work so closely together that we think we ought to present ourselves in terms of data and managing school improvement as an Education Improvement Partnership."

Is the collaboration sustainable?

There is a strong sense among the heads of sustainability. In 1997, 11 heads facing similar issues came together because they thought that, by working together in an enlightened manner, each could better serve the interest of their own school. They have found collaboration to be powerful not only in addressing their initial concerns but in facilitating new insights and developing ways of working on which further gains may be based.

They are aware of the journey they have made together. They began by identifying common problems. As a group they negotiated and put in place their own solutions. Then they were responding to someone else's agenda. Now they are asking their own, more pertinent questions. What is our core practice? What is it that we can do better together? What now would make our schools better?

They speak of a readiness and confidence to challenge each other more effectively. "We are beginning to get beneath the surface."

They have experimented with structures with an eye on the longer term and sustainability. They have deliberately developed structures that involve governors. "When we finalise our ideas about moving to zero exclusions, it will need to be carefully explained to governors to gain their commitment." "There are issues for us to address in accountability." They believe that their structures will lend themselves to the collaborative working on which a range of other imminent

initiatives will depend for success. “We are thinking of some sort of trust with primary care and police involved. We are talking to the LEA about children’s services. They think it is very exciting.”

The Shire11 heads articulate strong, shared values about their moral purpose in seeking to meet the needs of all the young people in Shire11 schools. This is particularly evident when they speak about their ambition to achieve zero exclusions and their willingness to co-operate in managed moves They see sustained collaboration as essential to achieving this purpose.

Account of practice 2

Principled pragmatism leads to greater knowledge, shared values and the prospect of further improvement despite falling rolls.

"We now talk about things we'd never have mentioned outside the four walls of our schools," says a secondary headteacher in the borough. Another head, a member of a different Learning Alliance, noting the imminent ending of the relatively small amounts of European Union (Objective 1) funding which primed the collaborative activity in the three alliances, says: "We'd actually pay to be members. There is obvious benefit. We share common principles of inclusion and personalisation." A third head, who belongs to yet another alliance, sets the newer alliance-focused collaboration in context: "As 14 schools [before the alliances were set up] we were working closely so the alliances in some ways stopped natural collaboration happening. Now we've come through that."

All three heads speak of the imperative better to meet the needs of *all* the borough's youngsters, together to combat "parochialism," and to raise attainment. These shared ambitions are expressed in practical context by their deputy and assistant head colleagues who have led on the operational issues. The assistant head who co-ordinates activities in South East Borough Learning Alliance (SEBLA) expresses a vision of appropriate, personalised provision that "can only be achieved through collaboration". "This is not an alternative curriculum, " he says. "It is *the* curriculum." The deputy who now leads the operational group in WCLA expresses his widened concern: "We need to care as much about what's happening in someone else's school as we do about our own."

Background and the context of the collaboration

The interpretation of earlier DfES initiatives in the borough helped create the context for recently deepened collaboration. A head whose school was from 1998 part of an Education Action zone (EAZ) remembers that his staff first enjoyed collaboration with colleagues in other schools in this context. The hub-and-spoke model of city learning centres, a key element of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) programme, also required collaboration. The process of leadership incentive grant (LIG) peer review was embedded: peers now take part in both the statutory target-setting process and in annual school self-evaluation review. Detailed performance data for all 14 schools is shared in support of these processes. A head from SEBLA says: "Pre-LIG, this trust and openness were not there."

The borough is an English metropolitan authority. At the start of the 1990s, local unemployment stood at nearly twice the national rate and by 2002 was still significantly higher. The local primary industry, and main employment provider, was in steep decline. In 2002, no secondary school in the borough reached the national GCSE average for five or more A*–C grades. Only one school's performance on this measure, however, fell below 20 per cent. Placed in special measures, this school had long been in extreme difficulties which the LEA had proved unable to address. In 2003-04, the schools faced additional uncertainties.

The start of LIG coincided with a decision by the LEA to restructure its learning services and school improvement support systems. A new director of education, taking up post in September 2003, wanted urgently to improve the LEA's knowledge of, and support to, its schools. Seeing the need to rebuild trust between the LEA and its secondary heads, she wanted to maintain dialogue with the heads' forum. Feeling more confident in their combination of 14 represented by the forum, the heads elected to become a single LIG collaborative.

In January 2004, the borough received an Ofsted inspection. Despite the fact that according to the report the new director had 'gained a clear grasp of the weaknesses' and was 'beginning to tackle them', 'the LEA, in its key function of improving education in the borough', was judged 'unsatisfactory'. The restructuring of learning services, which in part explained the heads' decision to act as a single group, had already begun. The Ofsted report went on, however, to insist on the urgency of 'work with relevant partners to develop a coherent 14–19 strategy and to raise the attainment of pupils'. In May 2004, an area-wide inspection of 14–19 provision further concluded that provision in the borough was unsatisfactory.

It was to support this work with relevant partners that DfES facilitated the appointment as secondary strategy consultant, on a temporary basis, of an ex-HMI inspector to strengthen the learning services team. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) also agreed to fund the appointment of an experienced adviser, who had recently undertaken similar work in two nearby LEAs, to lead on 11–19 development in the learning services team.

From these pressures and interventions came the proposal, within an 11–19 action plan, that three learning alliances should be created. The heads agreed to this arrangement in October 2004. The response of the heads shows a principled pragmatism. The chair of WCLA remembers: "The model was halfway between being imposed on us and us being free. We were looking at the authority's plan for 11–19 and wanted to support it." There was a general feeling that schools wanted to support the LEA, which was under severe pressure. The chair of the North East Central Learning Alliance (NECLA), whose school had pioneered appropriate vocational courses and had expertise to share, thinks: "We were ready for collaboration and to offer our experience". He notes that before the creation of alliances, the LEA "had not seemed to appreciate" the potential for improvement represented by his school's innovations.

The three learning alliances were geographic in nature. This was necessary: their role would involve negotiation with colleges and providers which would lead, if appropriate, to shared provision. Each learning alliance was to include representation from work-based learning providers and from the two local FE colleges.

The decision to form the alliances was taken during the process of a wider review of its services and a redefinition of its vision by the borough council. From 2003, it had begun work on what would become the plan for "remaking our borough". Educational renewal was seen as key to realising the vision of a remade "21st century market town". By early 2005, the borough had agreed with DfES its inclusion in the first wave of Building Schools for the Future (BSF). This programme would begin to take effect in 2008 and be complete by 2012. It would involve the replacement of the existing 14 secondary schools by 9 advanced learning centres (ALCs). The detailed proposals for school rebuilding and amalgamations were, however, not known when the membership of the new alliances was agreed.

West Central Learning Alliance (WCLA) included four secondary and one special schools. Two of the secondary schools were centrally located, close to each other, and, under BSF, designated to combine into a single ALC. The other two member schools were located in more distant villages.

NECLA included six secondaries. Two, of which one was a faith school, were next-door neighbours. The faith school would become an ALC on its existing site. Its neighbour was to combine with another secondary to become an ALC on a new site. Similarly, two other member secondaries would join as an ALC on a new site. The sixth member of NECLA, the borough's one secondary in an Ofsted category and now under the temporary leadership of a new and experienced head and about to make rapid improvement, was to become a city academy.

SEBLA included four secondaries. Two would, in their own right, become ALCs. Two would combine as an ALC on a new site.

The geographical basis for the alliances meant that members of each alliance tended to be similar schools. For example, WCLA included the borough's only secondary school with post-16 provision. Its four member schools were those that had, between 2002 and 2005, gained the highest results at GCSE for five or more A*–C grades.

Geography, similarity of context and proximity of member schools have, according to heads representing the three alliances, affected the way collaboration has developed. NECLA, for example, includes a school that is situated some nine miles from the borough's centre. Its head, experienced in vocational provision, welcomed alliance collaboration, seeing in it a means to rectify his school's past isolation. Even more importantly, he wanted to secure better links in order to improve his students' transition post-16. For him, "the size of our alliance was a strength". He understood that the school in his alliance that is due to become an academy, and the faith school that would continue singly as an ALC, were less likely to become closely involved. He explains that the two schools due to combine as an ALC, and his school, ready to link its vocational expertise into a greater whole, were the most ready to collaborate. The chair of WCLA similarly explains that the two schools, designated to combine as an ALC, and "across the field from each other" were more likely to work together in the immediate term.

As they explain the impact and practical results of collaboration in terms of shared activity and provision, the representatives of the three alliances make clear that what one calls the "human touch" will inevitably affect the way collaboration happens. One head says that the "personal philosophy and outlook" of a school's leader will influence the ways schools collaborate. She goes on to remark on the good fortune of the coincidence of her outlook with that of her close neighbouring head, while affirming her intention to go on learning from a more distant head in another alliance. Two heads speak of a similar compatibility of outlook held by the deputies in their closely collaborating schools which face similar issues. "We help each other out. We know each other well."

Scope and impact of the collaboration

The 2004 decision to collaborate in the three alliance groups arose from DfES' pressure over the specific 14–19 difficulty. In the wider context, the borough's schools were already improving significantly. Taking 2002, the year before the start of LIG as the base, the borough has to 2005 improved its GCSE five or more A*–C grades results at twice the national rate. At KS3, mathematics results have improved at three times the national rate. Science has improved slightly faster than nationally and English slightly slower. Collaboration in this borough is therefore particularly interesting. It is not undertaken in response to an external diagnosis of wider inadequacy. Neither does it reflect an entirely free decision by a group of heads.

The main goal of the enforced collaboration in alliances is to provide a broader, more appropriate curriculum to pupils in the borough, especially in specialised vocational subjects that individual schools may not have the resources to supply. The head of a school less closely involved commented in this regard that she did not see the need for a greater involvement as she felt her school was able to offer the full curricular range on its own.

The new chair of WCLA took up this position only in January. (The chairship is rotated.) She saw an opportunity to re-pose basic questions better answered on the basis of just over a year's experience of alliance working. "What is it," she asked, "that we have achieved that the larger group of 14

could not?" The heads agreed that their joint Aimhigher conference had been a success. Shared training events and senior leaders' networking conferences had, in the smaller group, led to specific links on specific tasks. They felt the operational group had made progress in speaking to the college and providers in manageable numbers, as distinguishable individual schools, but presenting common issues. "There were issues there but the alliance helps create dialogue." WCLA is the only alliance that has not yet set up joint courses. "We are at that stage now. We are looking with providers at how to do this."

WCLA has, on the other hand, promoted dialogue at student level through intervisitations by student councils. These are seen as first steps to involving students in discussion of, and preparation for participation in, joint courses. Such intervisitations will also prepare students who are affected by the combination of schools into the new ALCs.

NECLA and SEBLA have developed shared courses. Their representatives are keen to stress that these are the small beginnings of something big.

This sense of something bigger coming is expressed by the chair of NECLA. First he explains how NECLA has developed a more mature partnership with its local college. This involves use of his school's facilities by the college for its students and far better understanding by the college of how to receive the school's leavers. His school now consciously markets itself to stakeholders as a NECLA school. ''We are no longer just an 11–16 school." The alliance is, with the schools, creating 11–19 provision in an area where progression routes and ambition had been missing. Over 200 NECLA students are now placed on shared courses.

For the SEBLA heads, what they have in place is only a "starting point which will lead us into [better] post-16 provision." Two SEBLA schools will run different but complementary performing arts courses, which students from both schools can access. Planning ahead, they are confident that they will establish the demand for on-site advanced courses in the future. This will create valid progression routes. The college is the provider and the two schools will be satellites. Neither of the courses that SEBLA proposes to run is being otherwise provided in the borough. They will meet the needs of children who might not, for reasons of locality and confidence, be willing to attend more distant sites. They will provide for students the challenge of the college experience while maintaining contact with a familiar school base.

The representatives of both NECLA and SEBLA expand on the idea of starting small. "We began with small practicable things [from which we] established principles." The two schools in SEBLA may have "gone ahead". Other schools are likely to join in later. While most collaborative effort has focused on improving the curricular offering, there have also been joint professional development activities that are described as successful.

The alliance representatives, heads, deputies and assistants, share, it seems, a concern both for "remaking our borough" and for the progress of all its young people. This is illustrated by the chair of NECLA: "We need better post-16 provision in our area. It doesn't have to be on my school's site." A SEBLA headteacher too speaks of "meeting the needs of *all our* children".

Factors important to the success of the collaboration

i. Getting the start right

Representatives, at both headteacher and deputy head level, make the point that the creation of improved, co-ordinated, 14–19 provision will take time. They have a clear sense of starting small but getting the foundations right. The head of a NECLA school notes that, in terms of student-to-

student reactions, there have been remarkably few early problems. When the first problem occurred, affecting a visiting student studying on his site, it was swiftly dealt with. "The shared, responsible way this was handled by the two schools was *seen* to be effective." The co-ordinator of SEBLA predicts that a third school will, next year, join the shared provision pioneered by two SEBLA schools, and 30 students will be on shared courses. He says: "Our success will be based on what we do now. We started small."

ii. Funding incentives

The main incentive for collaboration was the heads' shared belief that only through collaboration could appropriate provision be developed. The availability of some additional funding, in addition to DfES and LSC funding for the posts of secondary strategy consultant and the 11–19 specialist adviser, were, however, important. The sources for this funding were Objective 1 (Performance Reserve) and the LSC's Pathways to Success (Phase 2). The borough's EiC panel also agreed to channel Aimhigher funding through the emergent alliances. The co-ordinator of SEBLA explains how he and colleagues have now raised £150,000 to establish a shared construction course, which will start next year. "It is much easier to gain funding now as a group. We have clout. The accreditation board has granted us pilot status as we are four schools and two colleges working together."

iii. Clarifying roles

The three alliances started with similar working and constitutional arrangements. Taking her rotating turn as chair in WCLA, the new chair in January 2006 found it the right moment to review both progress to date and structures. The outcome was a clearer definition of the autonomous role of the operations group of deputies. This group would, in future, send its co-ordinator to represent it at board meetings which previously the deputies had all attended. The chair of NECLA too notes his alliance's clearer distinction of operational and executive roles. The co-ordinator of SEBLA praises the way his board now holds him and operational colleagues to account. "The heads [board] ask us the right questions. Why are you proposing this *now*?"

iv. A single, representative voice

The chair of WCLA explains what her colleagues identified as the single greatest gain of working in alliances. This was in working with the college. The college's representatives to an alliance of five schools were able to comprehend each school's individual position. A single representative in the past meeting 14 heads could not achieve this. "The college has a much clearer view of each school and how it works. The same is true of other providers." For years in larger meetings, those partners were silent: "We've now heard from them."

This improved dialogue has yielded results. NECLA, for example, has declared Tuesdays and Thursdays to be alliance days on the timetable. Options provision is concentrated on these days. The college has found it easier to reach this promising accommodation through the alliance model. The three alliances have identified different days in the week for options. This neat dove-tailing would have been hard to achieve by the colleges negotiating with 14 schools.

There is a second important gain as the colleges listen to the clearer single voice. School students attending colleges, according to a SEBLA head, now get a better deal as colleges and schools work closely together. She recalls with concern the past practice as students were "handed over". "Our relationship with the college provider has changed for the better through [the] alliance."

v. What have the obstacles been to collaboration?

In each alliance there appears to be a centre-periphery model, with some schools deeply involved in collaborating while others are less strongly engaged. The fact that some schools are preparing

for merger creates an additional dynamic within alliances, though it is not necessarily the case that merging schools collaborate most with each other.

The representatives of each alliance are able to identify reasons why some member schools have been less involved. An example might be the pressures and agenda facing the school which will become an academy. It is plain also that what one head called the "human touch" matters greatly. Leaders and school culture must be sufficiently in sympathy if collaboration is to take root.

The headteachers most closely involved in collaboration firstly see it as the only available means to provide a curriculum appropriate to the needs of the borough's young people. Secondly, they articulate shared concern, speaking readily of the needs of *all* the borough's learners. There is, however, another way to approach the idea of collaboration. In this approach, collaboration is seen as one of many instruments that may be used to promote school improvement. This is the perspective adopted by the head who chairs the secondary heads' forum. She questions whether the benefits of working in alliances have in fact, been demonstrated. It is for the LEA, she argues, and not for groups of heads, to speak for the wider community and to articulate the needs of other learners in the borough. She sees collaboration as necessarily based around very specific goals, and doesn't feel that the overarching goal of the alliances in terms of widening curricular provision is relevant to her school.

There is a relationship between experience of, and strength of belief in, the effectiveness of collaboration and a willingness to take calculated risks to make it work. The deputy and assistant heads, whose two SEBLA schools already run joint provision, refer to widely held concerns about the funding of such courses when the Objective 1 funding ends. They and their heads are prepared to take the risk and commit to seeing these courses through. They realise that "not knowing what will happen in 2008 has held some schools back".

There are schools which have taken a smaller part in alliance collaboration. The reasons for this are various. They will include the facts that some schools face other pressing agendas, that some leaders adopt a different perspective on the purpose of collaboration, that some are geographically separated from potential partners, and that some face financial uncertainty. According to one interviewee, collaboration with partners in her alliance had stalled due to a perceived need for these schools to develop their own sixth form centres rather than collaborating with hers.

The fact that the new alliances have cut across existing collaborations can also be a problem in some cases. Several respondents mentioned that collaboration with schools outside their alliance, which had existed previously, was now less common. While it is obviously not the case that membership of alliances means that collaboration outside them is discouraged, this does seem to have been the effect in a number of cases. This was another stated reason for one less keen head, who claimed that she collaborated widely with schools but did not see the need to be restricted by the alliance in doing so.

Leadership in the collaboration

The proposal to work in alliances came from the LEA and addressed a 14–19 agenda which the heads appreciated. The heads displayed a principled pragmatism. They were prepared to make the new arrangements work. The chair of WCLA says of their acceptance of the alliances: "We wanted to support the authority. It had been hammered by Ofsted. It had put a plan together. We could help it tick the boxes." Her supportive, pragmatic approach is clear as she recalls the consultations about the make-up of alliances: "Ultimately there is no ideal [arrangement]. Schools have to fit somewhere."

She speaks reflectively of what additionally has been gained by working in the alliances. “We must build on what has worked in alliances and get back the cross-fertilisation [among the 14].” A head from SEBLA takes a similar view. He recalls the heads’ “genuine debate” about the appropriate levels on which to collaborate, when they agreed the alliances. He thinks debate is now “on a higher level” because they have experience *both* of working as a 14 *and* in alliances.

One of the heads, again reflecting the longer perspective, feels that the base of working as a group of 14 was essential in “the successful creation of the common values of the borough’s heads”. Remaining through the forum as the 14 headteachers with which they started has prevented any maverick head going his or her own way. The head currently chairing the forum, however, does not see the need for the alliances. She sees them as an additional layer of bureaucracy rather than a helpful model for school improvement. She did not feel that the group size of 14 was too large in the forum.

The representatives of all three alliances speak with one voice: working in alliances has been helpful and has, necessarily, been the priority; now is a time for review. The chair of WCLA explains that, after her alliance’s recent exercise in identifying the gains of collaboration, all heads felt “mandated” additionally to pursue other collaborations wherever these might bring value. She gives the example of her own school. She wants to re-establish the collaboration with a NECLA school which has much to teach her school in terms of behaviour improvement strategies. In the geographically based context of WCLA with its schools so similar to hers, she was cut off from this source of expertise.

Among the deputy and assistant heads the belief that they have gained by working in the smaller alliances is strong. The deputy who leads WCLA’s operational group speaks of his own learning journey: “It would not have happened without my work in the alliance.” At one time, he says, he would have jealously guarded his own school’s autonomy: “I have moved on.” Now he uses the words ‘moral purpose’ in describing the potential of collaboration better to meet the needs of all the borough’s children.

Middle leaders in alliance schools speak of what they have gained, as leaders, from alliance collaboration. In ways similar to the heads, an Aimhigher co-ordinator explains his sense of losing familiar support systems when the 14 schools ceased to work as one unit and his uncertainty as he began to work with his fellow co-ordinators in the alliance. Now he is excited by the prospect of shared events and subsequent inter-school student contacts which will raise ambition. A head of department in another school “grew in professional confidence” as he led workshops in WCLA’s now established shared training fays.

To the building of trust, frank exchange is essential. This is illustrated in discussions with operational leaders in one alliance. Two schools have forged ahead in developing shared provision. What is the response of operational leaders in schools not yet ready to do this? It is *now* an acceptance and a positive attitude. A deputy describes the way his school will first observe and, possibly, decide to join in later. This present acceptance and interested curiosity are, he acknowledges, the product of some earlier testing discussions.

Is the collaboration sustainable?

Perhaps the greatest gains from collaboration in the borough lie in the future. The deputy of a school not yet involved in shared provision says: “Shifts are happening” as he counters the expectation that his school could have moved more quickly. “Don’t look too quickly for impact. The

building of trust takes time." His SEBLA operational colleagues are convinced that "ground-to-ground links must continue". Representatives at both headteacher and deputy level in two alliances speak of plans to deepen collaboration in shared CPD. Those whose schools already share provision also see an imperative to move towards common practices in assessment and student tracking.

Between 2008 and 2012, the 14 secondary schools will become 9 advanced learning centres (ALCs). Heads and senior leaders see clearly the importance of collaboration in preparing for this ambitious change. The threat to rising standards represented by the dislocations of amalgamation is real. In minimising the risks and, indeed, in their ambition that the new ALCs should inherit the best of current practice, lie the greatest promise of the borough's collaboration. This purposeful, strategic approach to the nationwide issue of falling rolls is one of the most impressive aspects of the programme. It is clear that this has been used as an opportunity to remake the system rather than being seen purely as a threat.

The two most closely collaborating schools in WCLA are to combine as an ALC. They are geographically close. "We are at the start," says one of the heads. The two schools have collaborated over joint in-service education and training (INSET), and have made shared administrative and technician appointments. They are now looking towards joint teaching appointments. Their two student councils are working together to overcome old rivalries. They are exploring the gains each can make from their two different specialisms.

The two most closely collaborating schools in SEBLA are not scheduled for amalgamation. Indeed, one will combine with a third, as yet less-involved school. The deputy of the third school notes that his school is observing the development of collaborative, shared provision closely, and may well, should financial arrangements be more secure, be ready to join in shortly.

Two schools in NECLA which will combine as an ALC are both participants in the joint provision currently working in three NECLA schools. The third partner school has long-standing experience in vocational provision. Its head speaks of a "lack of preciousness" among the three in sharing ideas and hard-won, work-related contacts. The two amalgamating schools are, through NCSL's Next Practice initiative, looking at ways in which they may, through their governing bodies' co-working, prepare to become an ALC.

If the new ALCs are to be genuinely new learning institutions in which new ways of learning raise standards further, rather than simply amalgamated schools, searching questions must be asked. The experience of collaboration has already enabled such questions to be posed. The deputy who co-ordinates the operations group in WCLA suggests that there must now be discussion to identify those strategies that will provide best "for all the different groups of learners in our borough". At present, all 14 schools share detailed output data. He wants a deeper discussion. He wants to identify those systems and practices that make possible the best outcomes. He wants to widen debate across the three alliances, and to identify the "fundamental school processes" that make the difference. He thinks that the experience of alliance working has led to a sharing of values and shared concern for all learners. Using this as a base, "a smaller group can drive this [identification process] on". A deputy whose school is as yet less involved in collaborative provision has independently come to a similar perspective which he too attributes to his involvement in alliance discussions. He lists all the collaborative meetings and forums in which heads and deputies work in the borough. There must, he insists, be learning here that can be captured. "How are we going to get all this into the new ALCs?" he asks.

The model of collaboration in this borough would appear to be genuinely school-led (with outside facilitation) in terms of its operation, and does not depend on a single charismatic leader. As such, it would appear to be potentially more sustainable and transferable than many other models of collaboration and networking.

Account of practice 3

A federation leading not to dependency and replication but to equality and mutuality.

The federation of Faraday Science College and William Blake High, two secondary schools in an English metropolitan borough, began formally in the autumn term of 2003. The success of the collaboration of these two schools may be measured by the fact that, two years later, the once-failing William Blake High not only almost equals its stronger partner at the crucial benchmark of five or more A*–C grades at GCSE, but aspects of its practice are now seen by Faraday Science College's leaders as developments from which they too can learn.

John Smith and Bill Brown would wish to ascribe the credit for this change in great measure to those with whom they work. Nonetheless, it is plain that the complementary skills and qualities of John Smith as headteacher of Faraday, who had led his school for six years before this federation, and Bill Brown as the associate headteacher who now leads William Blake, were essential in this transformation. What persuaded these two men to undertake such a challenge?

John Smith recalls his uncertainty when, in March 2003, DfES and his borough's director of education asked him to become involved. What, a few weeks later, determined his decision to help, was the sight of some 40 eloquent, handwritten letters from Year 10 students of William Blake explaining their plight. "That stopped me from saying a simple no." Subsequent discussions with colleagues, some of whom had worked in earlier days at William Blake, and who knew the school well, convinced him that he should talk seriously with DfES and with the LEA.

Bill Brown first came to work with the leadership team of William Blake in an advisory and associate capacity from November 2003. His initial brief was to improve teaching and learning and to reform the curriculum. At the end of that term, he was asked by John Smith to work full time alongside the acting head. When, in summer 2004, the acting head became ill, he took over the leadership of the school. In February 2005, the governors of William Blake confirmed him in the headship. With much experience as a deputy head, holding the National Professional Qualification in Headship (NPQH) and in considerable demand as a consultant, Bill Brown had not come to William Blake with any expectation that he might later be asked to lead this challenging school. Why did he take this on? In answer, he explains how he had swiftly come to appreciate the urgent needs of the Year 11 students in the school in particular. John Smith has, he remembers, "this charming way of persuading you to do things". He told Bill Brown that the two of them could only succeed, and that the needs of Year 11 could only be met, if Bill agreed to become the full-time associate head in charge of William Blake. He had to agree.

These two headteachers had agreed to work together in this developing federation motivated by a similar morally inspired appreciation of urgent student need. Their work has, two and a half years later, transformed first William Blake High and, in turn, the relationship between the partner schools. This, suggests John Smith, is "one of the cheapest school rescues on record". Indeed, it may have cost money and resources to Faraday College.

Background and the context of the collaboration

In January 2003, the LEA's officers became aware that William Blake High expected to gain only 10 per cent of five or more GCSEs grades A*–C that summer. An acting head had just taken over since the new head, who had been in post for two terms, had become ill. An established head had left post in 1999. The headship then proved hard to fill. There had in four years been two acting heads.

There were some 900 students in this 11–16 school, with 55 per cent belonging to ethnic minority groups (predominantly Bangladeshi and Pakistani). There was "next to no experience of GNVQ, vocational qualifications or portfolios".

Faraday Science College, an 11–19 school, had 1,040 students on roll, with 88 per cent from ethnic minority groups. That the number of Sikh and Muslim students was evenly balanced reflected "the huge role that this school has played in the local community for years". John Smith became head in 1997. At that point 22 per cent gained five or more grades A*–C at GCSE. By 2005, this was to rise to 56 per cent. He is "not in any way embarrassed" to note the importance of GNVQ routes in this rise. Faraday is nationally one of 20 established extended schools. It was one of the first six schools to gain advanced status for study support. It was part of a national test bed programme for ICT: as part of this initiative, John Smith had been seconded two days per week to work for DfES.

The two schools, so different in their state of health in 2003, were well matched. Partly in order to facilitate his own secondment, John Smith had already created sufficient leadership capacity in Faraday for it to run occasionally without him. The strategies and practices that had wrought improvement at Faraday would prove as relevant to the William Blake context. These included: the creation of an effective, tightly organised leadership team; the tailored restructuring of, and careful appointment to, middle leadership positions; the encouragement of parental and community involvement; and change to a more appropriate curriculum allied to the setting of high expectations.

Scope and impact of the collaboration

John Smith entered into serious discussion with DfES and the LEA in March 2003. He made clear what he considered the necessary conditions for success: "We wanted formal arrangements, an [Education] Improvement Partnership with the [DfES] represented at all its meetings. " He wanted "complete executive management" allied to "absolute support" from both DfES and the borough.

For all the similarities between the two schools, John Smith had a remarkable and clear vision. "We were very clear. We never wanted William Blake to be Faraday number 2." Many federations have involved, he notes, a takeover and a re-making. He wanted William Blake to recover in a partnership with Faraday from which both would gain. An early and practical expression of this vision was his insistence to DfES and the LEA that the governing body of William Blake should be nurtured and retained. "We needed to build a governing body."

Collaboration in this federation is therefore particularly interesting. The staff and governors of William Blake, a manifestly failing school, would have no option but to co-operate in the collaboration proposed. Despite this initial state of dependency on the support of his successful school, from the start the executive head of the federation envisaged a recovery that would lead to a relationship of equality.

By May 2003, the partnership and the arrangements were agreed. The LEA would stand by to fund some early retirements at William Blake. DfES would fund some improvements to fabric. Both would pay grants to Faraday to fund its partnership costs. The aim of the collaboration was simple. William Blake High had to improve or, as the Secretary of State pointed out, it had to close.

In this partnership, William Blake High has improved rapidly. The Year 11 cohort of 2004, about whose futures Bill Brown had been so concerned, gained 24 per cent of five or more GCSEs at grades A*–C). In summer 2005, William Blake's results equalled those at Faraday at 56 per cent. In December 2005, the school received a Section 5 Ofsted inspection. The report spoke of 'strong

leadership'. It stated that the 'capacity to improve further is strong'. 'Organisational and teaching strategies', it said, are 'securely in place'. 'Pupils, staff and governors are rightly proud to be members of the school and its improving reputation is noted well in the community.' The school was graded as 'good' in its overall effectiveness, achievements and standards, personal development and well-being, quality of provision, and leadership and management.

An even more remarkable impact of the partnership is seen in the changed relationship between the two schools: "12 months ago, " says Bill Brown, "Faraday would have told us what to do. Now they ask our opinion." John Smith observes a similar journey: "In year 1 William Blake was very 'done to'. We've now got staff working on both campuses. We see ourselves as one staff. [Good[things go in both directions."

Factors important to the success of the collaboration

The importance to the eventual success of this collaboration of John Smith's clear vision of partnership rather than dependency has already been noted. He was not, however, afraid to refer to, and use, the fact that William Blake High in autumn and indeed throughout 2003-04 faced the threat of closure.

i. Sensitivity but clarity

His first contacts with the staff of William Blake were made in June 2003. With a sensitivity recalled by several who observed it, he sought simultaneously to acquaint them with the dire reality of the school's situation and to offer constructive support. He made clear the imminent risk of closure and that he and Faraday colleagues would take over executive management. If that was the reality, the sensitivity was present in three further points he made. First, and in keeping with his vision, he strove to explain that he would listen and not simply impose Faraday's practice. Second, he promised that change "would not be done aggressively, but it would [have to] be done at pace". Third, he offered support: "We don't think William Blake is a failing school. Otherwise, we would not be here."

These initial messages were "fairly well received at grassroots level". At a management level, there was more difficulty. John Smith did not forget the crucial audience of students (in both partnership schools) and of community. During the summer term, he explained the idea of partnership to students in assemblies in both schools, taking care to deal with the expressed concerns of a few Faraday parents.

ii. Early, reliable diagnosis

John Smith now recognised that an accurate, from-the-inside diagnosis of the issues at William Blake was urgent. "I spent ages walking round and going in classrooms." This was his normal practice in Faraday. He also insisted that all teachers use a simple lesson planner.

In the autumn term, with the partnership formally in place, John Smith began the urgent process of diagnosis. It was at this time that he invited Bill Brown to work at William Blake, initially in the latter's consultancy capacity. John Smith was aware that Bill Brown, when working as a deputy, had played an important role in aiding the recovery of a school in difficulty. He knew of his curricular understanding and grasp. "I needed someone who was prepared to work *for* someone. I needed someone who could get on with staff, do it for the kids and motivate people." Initially, while Bill Brown would be involved in the diagnosis, the main diagnostic strategy would involve the application in William Blake of an established Faraday practice. Faraday has a practice of periodic health checks on departments conducted by Ofsted-trained personnel who have become familiar

with the school and gained the trust of staff. John Smith asked members of this team to visit William Blake in October 2003.

The team's considered judgements were that no subject area was above satisfactory and four were below. John Smith now explained this, partially external and very reliable, diagnosis to the William Blake staff. He used this objective diagnosis to "cut through any complacency" and denial.

The presence of Bill Brown in William Blake sharpened the diagnostic messages. He spoke directly to John Smith. "I didn't tell him quite what he wanted to hear. I thought [in terms of predicted GCSEs for 2004] it was getting worse. We hadn't the time just to [think] long term." When Bill Brown pointed to the urgency of Year 11's needs, John Smith replied: "You'd better fix it then." So from December Bill Brown agreed to work full time.

John Smith and Bill Brown diagnosed further, underlying issues. Many staff (and this became clear when access to whiteboard technology was offered) were unconfident and afraid to fail. Basic systems, especially to do with delegated authority to deal with disciplinary issues, were simply not in place. The senior leadership team lacked the capacity to meet these challenges.

iii. Executive and associate roles

The distinct roles of John Smith and Bill Brown were, from the start, clear but have changed over time. John Smith recognises the evolution in his own practice. In his early years at Faraday, he "dominated the school". Similarly, he was more dominant at William Blake in the first year of the partnership. Now the two healthy schools enrich each other. "It made me change. I had to change. It was good."

Bill Brown looks back over the "most amazing two years." There were so many issues in the school but "John gave me a chance to ferret them out."

"It was very simple: John was the boss. He had already done the business in a similar school to this." John Smith delegated much to Bill Brown, "but there were very clear time parameters for impact." "It's taught me a new way of working," says Bill Brown, "John trusts me to get on with it. If I'm going in the wrong direction, I get a shout."

On support for his own leadership, Bill Brown says: "I'm in the very privileged position of being able to pick up the phone and talk to John. He's done seven years in a very similar situation. Once he's got confidence in you, John lets you get on with it. John has let me grow. Then, if he thinks it can be tweaked, he tells me."

iv. Evident impact: raised morale

Bill Brown felt that urgent action was necessary to help Year 11 students. One of his early, symbolic and important actions was to start Saturday schools. Initially he staffed the schools with people and contacts who "owed him favours". Some established staff were cynical. "They'll never come! They don't come for us!" In fact 35 and 40 students attended in the first two weeks. Soon there were 50. This gave important messages to staff and students. "Saturday school persuaded me," says Bill Brown, "that things could be done."

The support of Faraday in the early stages of establishing the Saturday schools is recalled by the teacher who is now William Blake's community director but who first came to the school with a brief to organise these new supplementary sessions. He explains how Faraday's expertise helped him sort out financial arrangements. He received encouragement and support "just by phoning".

The community director remembers: "The impact of [the Saturday classes] on the ethos [at William Blake] was immeasurable." He notes with pride the way the provision has now widened and developed. The variety of language provision cements community links. The supplementary classes are no longer a response to the risk of under-attainment. Invitation to attend is targeted at students who need further support to reach their potential.

A reason for Bill Brown's concern about the 2004 GCSE results was his discovery that essential aspects of the ICT course had not been covered by his Year 11 students. Partnership with Faraday offered rapid response. The timetable was amended and 70 William Blake students went in the summer term to Faraday on Friday mornings. In the afternoon, they stayed and were taught business studies by a teacher loaned from another supportive school in the LEA. Faraday staff, supporting a specially recruited and recently returned teacher, taught supplementary graphics for Year 11 students.

The impact of these partnership-based, urgent strategies was that the GCSEs of five or more grades A*–C at William Blake rose to 24 per cent in 2004. By September 2004, there was also other evidence of early impact.

During the January and summer terms of 2004, the independent ICT consultant, who had worked with Faraday in its DfES ICT test-bed work, worked in William Blake. His brief was to use his Faraday-based expertise to accelerate progress from a very low base at William Blake. His report noted the need for both investment in kit and accommodation. John Smith now approached the local New Deal for Communities committee. The result, which those knowledgeable about relationships in the community regard as a tribute to John Smith's tact and enthusiasm, was a £0.25 million grant.

When William Blake's students returned in September, they not only heard about their predecessors' improved GCSE results, they saw new ICT systems and accommodation. They saw the visible improvements to the fabric and appearance of the school for which DfES specific funding had paid. The morale of both staff and students rose.

v. Knowledge and practice transfer

The provision of high-quality teaching for Year 11 students on Faraday's site was an effective short-term measure. The swiftness with which William Blake set up Saturday provision indicated more effective knowledge transfer. Both those measures were, however, intended to achieve short-term impact. On the other hand, experience and relevant knowledge were being shared with longer term aims in mind.

Sometimes staff with expertise were loaned to William Blake. An example in September 2004 was the loan of a highly experienced deputy head. Her expertise lay in community provision, links and liaison. The ICT consultant brought contacts with Faraday's content developing team. William Blake part-shared Faraday's finance manager.

As a DfES test-bed for ICT, Faraday had developed an IT learning gateway. John Smith describes this as "the most impressive learning platform technology available – it provides a skeleton on which you can hang school improvement." It will deliver a learning plan to any individual child anywhere. It records, tracks and can accelerate student progress. Use of this learning gateway was swiftly facilitated and embedded at William Blake, the process being supported by the ICT consultant.

John Smith speaks of "a very conscious decision to raise aspiration and belief quickly" at William Blake. The introduction of an appropriate vocational curriculum had been instrumental in the

earlier improvement at Faraday. Bill Brown had first been brought to William Blake because of his expertise and sympathy with such curricular innovation: “We started the same things at William Blake.” Bill Brown describes his contribution: “There’s no rocket science to what we did. I simplified the curriculum and made it vocationally orientated. We play to people’s strengths. We give them something they can do most of the time.” He has an eye, though, for practical detail. His timetables now ensure that, for example, a practical lesson follows a challenging mathematics lesson. All William Blake students now have two hours of ICT per week and are entered for external examinations in Year 9.

vi. Staffing changes

In the past two years, there has been significant change in the staffing of William Blake. Of the 58 staff who began the term in September 2005, 32 were appointed in the last 2 years. This process of renewal has been carefully managed. A feature of the arrangements, which John Smith negotiated with the LEA and DfES as a condition of the partnership, had been that the LEA should fund some early retirements.

In August 2004, eight staff, seven of whom held senior or middle leadership positions, retired early. The departures were managed sensitively. Indeed, several of those departing accepted Bill Brown’s invitation to return part time or on supply. This practice gave to students a desirable continuity and to staff a message: issues concerning structure and leadership are distinct from those to do with teaching ability. Further evidence that these difficult matters were handled with skill lies in fact that many of the established William Blake staff are now reinvigorated and strongly committed.

Bill Brown acknowledges the importance of improved GCSE attainment in summer 2004 in assisting the recruitment of new staff. He describes the partnership’s practice of placing half-page advertisements in the Times Educational Supplement (TES) which describe the way the partnership works. It is plain that his openness and honesty will impress candidates called to interview. “I tell candidates like it is. I ask if they want to come and struggle with us.”

Leadership in the collaboration

The relevance of John Smith’s leadership experience to the needs of the nearby William Blake High and the capacity of his leadership team to release him in summer 2003 are striking. That Bill Brown had both highly relevant experience and strong interpersonal skills is equally striking. These two headteachers, one executive and one associate, distinguished their roles clearly and developed them over time.

During the period of the collaboration, John Smith further strengthened senior leadership at Faraday. He strengthened at assistant head level and internally promoted to deputy level. In April 2004, he appointed an additional deputy to hold a school improvement brief across the two partner schools. He would, at least initially, work one day per week in William Blake. The person appointed had very relevant prior experience. He had been a senior school improvement adviser with the LEA. He knew well the history, context and improving condition of William Blake High. His appointment would further strengthen leadership at Faraday and allow flexibility and capacity to meet the needs, so recently diagnosed, at William Blake.

Just as John Smith and Bill Brown together developed and changed their roles, the new deputy developed his role in William Blake. He had expected to spend his day each week in high-profile, round-the-school activity and monitoring. He swiftly realised that to do this would usurp the role of those now providing in-school leadership. He left it to Bill Brown and his newly strengthened leadership team to do the student-related work. Instead, he did the behind-the-scenes planning

and advising. He held weekly meetings with Bill Brown, the twp of them working in a developing and supportive triangle with John Smith. The school improvement deputy has now been in post for almost two years. He notes that his role in William Blake has changed alongside the school's improvement. He now works with William Blake's leaders on plans for shared post-16 provision and on their joint Leading Edge programme. Their work is a genuine partnership. It is knowledge-generating and sharing where initially it would have been knowledge transfer.

The appointment of the new deputy at Faraday in April 2004 coincided with a restructuring of leadership at William Blake. John Smith and Bill Brown worked together to appoint four new zone directors. They were to work on assistant heads' conditions. The intention was to bring in talented leaders with curricular and pedagogic skills. There was a due selection process but some appointees were head-hunted (the TES advertisement brought in 60 applications.) The roles of the four would span the curriculum and make good some deficits in middle and departmental leadership. These key appointments were closely linked to the appointment of four non-teaching pastoral managers, one for each new house.

Up to this point Bill Brown had worked alongside the acting head who now became ill. It was during this term therefore that, as associate, he took over sole leadership.

In September 2004, the William Blake leadership team was to be: Bill Brown as head, the experienced deputy (initially seconded for a year from Faraday), an established pastoral assistant head, an established data specialist assistant head, an established CPD assistant head and the four new zone directors.

A year later, in September 2005, the CPD assistant head retired. The seconded deputy from Faraday made her transfer to William Blake permanent and diversified her experience by taking up the CPD brief in addition to her community liaison role. Both the established pastoral head who has worked for most of her career at William Blake and the now permanently transferred ex-Faraday deputy make the same points. They are delighted with the improvements at William Blake, proud of their own contributions, and admiring of the sensitivity that John Smith and Bill Brown have displayed. Both feel professionally renewed by what has happened.

Is the collaboration sustainable?

In 2005, DfES withdrew from the formal partnership. This was in recognition of the progress made. It is John Smith who, in the words of Bill Brown, "leads on the strategic or political things". He is the "visionary". In March 2006, the two partner schools lodged with DfES an expression of interest in joint (collegiate) academy status. This, John Smith's idea, builds on his work with William Blake in forging an association of two, different and equal schools which learn from each other. It does not involve the two schools becoming a single academy. Rather it involves the close working of two schools, each with academy status, sharing some core services. DfES has yet to respond to this innovative proposal.

The challenge and reward of working with William Blake have served to retain John Smith in the Faraday headship. "William Blake, and all the work I have done for DfES, have stopped me moving. There's no point in moving now!". Bill Brown was formally confirmed as associate head in single charge at William Blake High by the governors in February 2005. This technically was an extension of his interim appointment which runs until August 2007. This confirmation served, at one and the same time, to bring stability to the leadership of the school, to recognise Bill Brown's contribution but to leave room for future manoeuvre. Looking back on the improvements they have made, Bill

Brown says: “I was aided by a marvellous senior team”. This was achieved by mixing the new “with the good that remained of the old.” He adds: “I’ve now got a senior team that argues with me!” Bill Brown believes his senior team is now so strong that in it lies much potential for further internal promotion to meet future (perhaps academy status) challenges.

The changed relationship between the two partner schools, which from the start was John Smith’s aim and vision, enhances sustainability. The two schools now co-operate with, and learn from, each other. One key focus is the plan for the two schools, with a third school partner, to develop shared post-16 provision. In September 2006, there should be a Faraday post-16 annexe on William Blake’s site. These plans will improve progression rates. A second key focus is the joint work of the LEP to raise standards at KS3, a priority both schools share. A third shared area of interest is to research whether William Blake’s innovations in terms of learning zones and non-teaching pastoral managers are ideas that Faraday should copy. John Smith sums up this new equality: collaboration has provided a new context for learning: “We can try things in two locations. We find some things that will work only in one place. We test initiatives together and more effectively.”

Account of practice 4

In January 2000, an Education Action zone (EAZ) comprising 3 secondary schools, 10 primary schools, 2 nursery schools and 1 special school was created in a borough of London in spite of considerable opposition from parents, unions and local politicians.

Although raising standards rather than collaboration was the focus for the EAZ, significant collaboration between schools has developed as an unintended outcome of its work.

Background and context of the EAZ

In May 1999, the LEA's Ofsted report stated: 'Although there are areas of substantial wealth, the borough includes some wards which are the most deprived in England. Schools in the borough face all the issues characteristically associated with deprived inner-urban areas: pupil mobility, linguistic diversity and poverty. Schools feel they do not receive effective support from the LEA. They are right.'

Following the Ofsted report, the Fisher Family Trust, a charitable organisation with an interest in promoting early literacy and IT, approached the borough with a view to working in partnership in the new EAZ. Gillian Cross, project director of the EAZ, and working on behalf of the Fisher Family Trust described the situation at the time as very difficult: "everyone was having a go at the borough … headteachers were down and depressed". She spent a great deal of time in individual meetings with headteachers trying to determine their needs and showing how the EAZ could support schools. Eventually some of the mistrust was dispelled and the partnership got under way. At the same time as the EAZ was established, local authority services were being contracted out so it was a period of intense uncertainty and turbulence. There was also a great deal of resistance to the EAZ from some quarters, including the unions, who believed this was an underhand attempt to profit from education, rather than a genuinely benevolent approach. However, over time and due to the success of the EAZ, as well as due to the influence of a number of strong and supportive heads, this opposition evaporated.

In December 2004, due to changes in funding arrangements, the EAZ become an EiC action zone. Because of a substantially reduced budget, this led to some changes in the organisation and work of the group, but members still refer to it as 'the zone'.

The criteria used to help determine the composition of the transformed zone give some indication of the background of the schools:

- free school meals – above 40 per cent of roll
- English as an additional language – above 40 per cent
- ethnic minority – above 65 per cent
- mobility – above 20 per cent

The actual average mobility rate for the schools in the zone is in fact 23 per cent, according to the DfES achievement and attainment tables for 2005. The tables also show that while the percentage of pupils with statements of special educational needs in the borough is the same as the national average, the percentage of pupils with special needs but without a statement is 21.3 per cent as compared with 15.9 per cent nationally.

Interestingly, in their applications to be included as a core school, all the schools demonstrated evidence of, and commitment to, working in collaboration.

The zone

The lead partners in the EAZ are:

- Fisher Family Trust, which provides sponsorship and offers leadership in managing change especially in the areas of literacy and ICT
- RM, the largest supplier of computer equipment to education in the UK, which provides advice and support particularly on the effective application of ICT to raise standards
- the LEA, which works with the contractor CEA to offer advisory support mainly from a team of inspectors

In terms of finance, the EAZ received an annual budget of £1 million comprising a grant of £750,000 from DfES and £250,000 from the Fisher Family Trust. RM's contribution was worth an additional £100,000. When the EAZ changed to an EiC, the funding was considerably reduced to £250,000 from DfES, £50,000 from Fisher Family Trust and £50,000 in matched funding, making a total of £350,000. The services of the project director were also funded by the Fisher Family Trust.

The zone is managed by an executive board which is the main strategic body and is composed mainly of headteachers representing the zone schools and lead partners. It determines the zone's priorities and action plans. The action forum is composed of representatives of all zone schools and lead partners. It agrees and monitors the implementation of the action plan.

The project management team is responsible for implementing the action plan and consists of a number of full- and part-time staff led by project director Gillian Cross. The staff team were appointed by Gillian on the basis of her initial discussion with headteachers. As she said, she: "appointed leaders in the field", creating a very strong team with a focus on literacy, numeracy and IT. The strength of this central team was seen by many interviewees as one of the key reasons for the success of the zone.

The remit for the team was to 'raise expectations and standards of achievement, and through good liaison ensure that the work of the zone complements that of the LEA contractor'. The team worked from the bottom up, that is by consulting with schools about their needs and then providing the support for professional development, resources or whatever necessary to help the school raise its standards. The project director emphasised that projects were negotiated not imposed and that the aim was to support as well as challenge.

The work of the EAZ has been led by the project director and the team she appointed, but there was a strong emphasis from the beginning on developing networks and working collaboratively with headteachers on negotiated projects.

A unique model of CPD was developed which was described by the project director as follows:

- an emphasis on continuous improvement – ongoing professional dialogue with a focus on in-class support
- intensive relentless training and development at all levels
- lead teachers, peer coaching – supporting and challenging
- subject-specific network groups to share ideas, plan, create and deliver lessons
- a model for Beacon schools to support others
- an approach that took into account the high level of teacher mobility

The collaboration between schools allowed economies of scale to be exploited and therefore enhanced the provision of CPD.

The zone uses the title Widening Horizons to illustrate its commitment to pupils, teachers and all those involved in the zone. The termly headteacher conferences drive the zone's action-planning and under the broad heading of Widening Horizons, the following priorities were agreed for the new transformed zone (ie, the EiC action zone), to:

- develop the quality of leadership and management
- develop early intervention and parents as educators
- promote progression in pupils' learning
- develop interactive teaching using IT

The new zone has significantly less money than the original EAZ, much funding being given directly to schools, but the director is confident that schools will continue to buy back into the zone and conversations with heads seem to confirm this.

Scope and impact of the zone

In many ways, the services delivered by the zone are similar to that of a small successful local education authority but there are significant differences. "It's our own little LEA," said one head, "but they work for us. They're linked to external agencies but not driven by them." The zone listens to heads and is more responsive to the needs of schools than to the demands of government and this, according to heads, is why it is successful. It is also able to offer more intensive central support to schools than the LEA. The zone works from the bottom up, using data to carry out a very thorough analysis of a school's strengths and weakness, then planning individual development for schools and teachers. All training and input is tailored to the needs of individual schools. In a sense, a new mini-LEA has been created by Gillian Cross, but driven by school needs rather than central government demands.

In May 2001, two years after the establishment of the EAZ and the changes to the local authority, the Ofsted report found that 'communication is established, effective systems are in place, a sense of purpose and optimism has been installed. The LEA is now viable'. In terms of standards, some improvements were noted, but there were still concerns, for example 'the number of primary schools judged good or very good is well below the national rate and that of comparable authorities.'

Team members worked in schools supporting others and eventually developed a group of lead teachers who now work alongside staff. The focus has always been on raising achievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy and much of the development in teaching and learning has been achieved with the use of interactive whiteboards. The zone programme on raising standards in literacy and numeracy had a definite impact on standards from the beginning. For example, at the start of the project, 7 of the 14 primary schools had serious weaknesses or were in special measures. By the end of 2002, no school in the zone was in either of these categories. Three gained Beacon school status, making the total in the zone four. In 2002, 10 primary and 1 secondary school received DfES school achievement awards. There was an improvement in the standards of achievement at KS1, with schools improving at a greater rate of progress than the LEA or nationally. At KS2, the zone achieved exceptionally well in value-added results; they were significantly better than the national estimate at level 4+ by 6 per cent in English and 9 per cent in mathematics and science.

The most recent published results show that while the average point scores for the zone schools is slightly lower than the local authority average, in terms of value-added scores, the schools achieved an average of 101.2, above the local authority average of 100.8 and the national average of 100.2. The most recent Ofsted report for the whole authority (2005) states: 'Outcomes improved in 2004 and are now good. Performance at Key Stages 1 and 3 remains below the national average, but there has been a significant improvement in results at Key Stages 2 and 4 … At Key Stage 2 the rate of progress made by pupils is well above the national average'. These average scores mask some very significant improvements made by individual schools. According to project director Gill Price, the impact for schools where the head is an effective leader and the school is actively participating in the current project, results can be outstanding: for example two schools heavily involved in the maths project achieved KS2 level 5 scores of 59 per cent and 63 per cent.

Through working together in the zone, headteachers have built up high levels of trust which has led to very close collaboration between schools. Heads said they were always socially supportive before the zone existed but that now the focus of their mutual support is on learning. "I felt we were missing out an awful lot," said one head. "Now we are meeting more often and about professional issues so social relationships have improved". A recent survey of headteachers shows that the zone has been very successful in creating a new community of schools and effecting collaboration between schools, partners and supporting organisations. Headteachers are exceptionally positive about the zone. An example of this trust and co-operation lies in the support provided to new heads by colleagues who will in many cases spontaneously offer support, according to one new headteacher.

However, collaboration between schools and involvement in zone projects differ between schools, with schools taking part in projects according to their perceived needs. This has led to a situation in which, according to one interviewee, "the schools with the strongest heads get most out of it". Collaboration with the secondary schools in the zone has not been as involved as was hoped.

Through their joint working, heads identify group issues for development and action which they describe as 'projects'. The central team then supports the planned project in a variety of ways. This support could be, said one head "by answering questions or putting you in touch with someone who can", or the team itself might have the resources to support the project. Currently the headteachers are interested in peer support and the project director "has heard of a good model" which she is investigating before sharing with the headteachers. One head said: "Our agenda develops from things that really matter – that's why you get involved; there is a compelling purpose and the climate encourages you to share". Another said: "One project leads to another – this stems from the professional confidence between people". As well as the zone projects, other initiatives develop from the ongoing collaboration; for example two schools are currently working together on the index for inclusion.

The zone is also seen by schools as a good way of getting to know what is going on in other schools and at national level, and to stay at the cutting edge of developing practice, not least through the expertise of the central team and its national and international contacts.

Developing ICT has been a major feature of the work of the zone from the start, with all teachers being provided with computers and training. The development of innovative and imaginative approaches to the use of interactive whiteboards in teaching and learning across the curriculum has been particularly effective. In January 2006, the zone won the national Becta ICT in Practice Award for Advice and Support; the team was recognised for its commitment to the use of ICT for learning and teaching and its ability to inspire and motivate learners and colleagues to improve

their use of ICT in teaching across all stages of the curriculum. Mention was also made of their 'visionary and sustainable ongoing plans'.

The common theme running through all our discussions with heads was the quality of CPD provided through the zone, its appropriateness for individuals and for schools and the impact this has on teachers, pupils and achievement. London is an area of great staff mobility. The zone now seems to be contributing to greater stability and continuity for schools in the borough. The climate in zone schools is described as being pretty proactive with staff 'up for' training, excited and supported and not afraid to say they can't do something and need support. One lead teacher praised the zone for its "individualised professional development". Because support is available though the zone and because zone schools are improved and dynamic, staff prefer to stay.

Factors important to the success of the zone

As already discussed, the inadequacy of the previous LEA provided an opportunity for the zone to be successful, and in many respects provided a vacuum which the zone has occupied. In addition, the zone employed a very skilled team with a strong leader and used a consultative and supportive needs-led approach to it work with schools and this was extremely powerful.

At the start, the eventual support of some heads, in spite of the opposition from so many quarters, enabled the zone to get going; one head in particular described how he lobbied for the zone to be in his area once he had realised the support it could offer. This head may have been a catalyst for a change in attitude among others.

The zone made detailed use of data to devise tailored support for individual schools and this led to significant school improvements in a relatively short time. This early success seems to have contributed to the extremely positive view that all those we spoke to had of the zone. Its continuing focus on continuous school improvement fits very well with schools' current aspirations and member schools believe in the zone's potential to support them.

Headteachers considered the number of schools in the zone to be just about right to allow collaboration to develop: "We're working from the knowledge of each other and each other's schools" said one." We know which schools are similar," said another, "we'll visit each other's schools to see how they are tackling issues." Heads also commented on the size and make-up of the central team and the importance of the administrative support it provided. There were many practical things that the zone could do for heads, for example making bids for money, and the fact that it could act both as a supporter and as a leader seems to have been a powerful factor in its success.

The clear and agreed rationale for working together was cited as a strong factor in the zone's success so that even the potentially divisive and difficult change from an EAZ to an EiC has been managed successfully.

Some factors that are barriers to success include finding the time for school staff to engage in the various collaborative activities and the differential involvement of schools, in addition to the issue of staff mobility already identified. The former is a common finding in studies on educational interventions, and neither its occurrence nor its level appears specific to the zone approach. It could be said that the strong central leadership and support may mitigate this to some extent compared with the approaches that rely more exclusively on schools' own actions.

The latter refers both to the differential involvement of primary schools in the zone and to the limited involvement of the secondary schools. The former appears linked to leadership and the effectiveness of the school, whereby stronger schools and heads are able to gain more from the project. This 'Matthew effect' is common in approaches where participation in events is voluntary. The lack of involvement of the secondaries seems to be due to historical reasons, the pressures of being a failing secondary in one case, a feeling of being "over scrutinised" in one (high-profile) school, and in one case leadership that does not value the collaborative approach. The larger size of the secondaries also makes contact harder. The fact that the zone is primary-led may have led some secondary staff to disregard it.

i Pressure and support

The word 'support' was constantly used to describe the work of the zone, and heads were keen to demonstrate that they had trust in the support offered. The support of the zone was different from the support of the LEA. "The LEA has a good school improvement team," said one head, "but they are not able to provide the breadth with the same commitment to standards".

Another described the LEA as judgemental; he didn't want to imply by this that the zone was not rigorous, describing its demands as very high. As an example, we were told of the zone's decision to use a new tool, target tracker, for assessment and target-setting purposes. The project director completed the action plan to access the funding, but it was the heads who had agreed that they wanted to use it. Their attitude to its use was different from similar proposals by the LEA. 'Ownership' was a word frequently used by heads when talking about the actions and activities of the zone.

For heads of successful schools, there seemed to be no conflict between the LEA and the zone, though there are apparently difficulties for some schools. Schools with strong leaders, we were told, get most out of the zone.

Leadership in the zone

The project director is seen as a very powerful and influential leader of the zone. According to one head, "The success has a lot to do with Gillian [the project director] and the quality of her leadership." The director talks about collaboration as an unintended outcome of the zone and heads too recognise that without the formality of the zone, collaboration would not have happened.

There is significant evidence both of collaboration between headteachers and of headteachers leading collaborative activities. The words 'trust' and 'openness' were used frequently to describe relationships. "We're working from our knowledge of each other and each other's schools"; "There's an immediacy and a neighbourhood feel to our work"; "We're constantly ringing each other"; "It was one of the best things that happened to me as a new head – I became aware of a great weight of support. Colleagues made contact with me straight away – there isn't a competitive feeling"; "If you're not in a network, where do you go for support?"; "Close collaboration equips you to deal with things on you own, because you are enthused and excited"; "We've created a climate where people can be open and not shot down". Collaboration is not limited to contacts between heads, and other staff network with one another directly as well.

Heads talked with enthusiasm about the many networks between their schools and the opportunities they create for school-to-school visits. They also talked about their aim of developing leadership in a distributive way in and across schools and the Leading from the Middle course currently being provided. The zone has a number of lead teachers in ICT; their brief is cross-

curricular, so that the focus is always on teaching and learning through the use of ICT, particularly using interactive whiteboards. One lead teacher talked about the significant co-operation between schools, which means she is able to arrange visits for her colleagues because she knows the schools so well. However, according to another interviewee, most collaboration takes place in the central team rather than across schools, although direct collaboration between schools has increased over time.

Is the collaboration created by the zone sustainable?

The schools in the zone worked together because of the zone and in doing so built up high levels of trust which led to collaborative working. There is concern that without the support of the central team, the existing collaboration would eventually disappear. Those currently in the zone said they would continue working together while in post as "they are a group of people who care about each other" but they felt that as new staff are appointed it would not be sustainable.

For the time being, however, the fact that they have adapted the zone to the new funding in the EiC demonstrates a commitment to continuing the collaboration. The fact also that those outside the zone want to know what is going on and want to get involved suggests that there is a strong case for enabling schools to work collaboratively.

It was clear from the interviews that the approach taken in the zone rests on strong leadership and vision from Gillian Cross. Furthermore, the model of very skilled experts providing strong and tailored support is one that is cost- and labour intensive. Questions can therefore be raised as to whether this is a model that is easily transferable to other contexts.

Account of practice 5

Learning how to network

School-to-school collaboration is a strong feature of life in one education service in the north of England. It involves a complex arrangement of interconnected networks, within which a variety of structures exists for addressing different agendas. Understanding and reporting what this involves, and how it works, is far from easy.

In order to make some sense of what it involves, this account draws on the experience of primary schools, particularly those in the central district. It also examines the impact of the collaboration that exists and considers the nature of the leadership practices involved.

Background and context of the collaboration

The education service is in an area of considerable social and economic disadvantage. Indeed, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now the Department for Communities and Local Government) places it as the sixth most deprived authority nationally, with over 79 per cent of residents living in the most deprived 10 per cent of wards in the country. Unemployment is high and income levels are low. According to an Ofsted report in 2003, levels of school achievement at that time were low, and the take-up of further education and training poor. It was also reported that there was 'a culture of low aspiration and self-esteem'.

There are 58 primary schools in the authority, 3 of which are special schools. In addition there are 11 high schools, which will soon be reduced to 8 as a result of the government's Building Schools for the Future initiative.

In making sense of the current scene, it is important to bear in mind that there has been a long tradition of headteachers and schools working together for many different reasons and in many different forms. However, it was in 2003 that the current collaborative arrangements began to take shape.

Local authority officers seem to have had significant roles in developing the rationale for school collaboration in the primary sector. In particular, they facilitated the establishment of an executive group which developed the terms of reference for the creation of collaborative arrangements.

The vision statement, agreed prior to the Every Child Matters agenda, seems to be pertinent to the current policy climate:

> *To make universal the life chances of the most fortunate through encouraging visionary and innovative ways in which we can work in partnership in order to foster collective decision-making and joint leadership.*

Similarly, the stated aim places further emphasis on the idea of collaboration:

> *Together we will ensure all members of our communities are healthy, safe and valued, by encouraging them to make the most of learning opportunities, appreciate their environment and make a positive contribution to fulfilling our universal aspiration.*

The primary schools are grouped into three area 'collaboratives', each of which has a lead development headteacher, who is seconded for two days a week to this task. Commenting on this, one of the lead heads explained: "There was uncertainty at first. Heads had to know that this was going to be a different way of working … but [an LEA officer] took time to bring people on board".

The work of the three collaboratives is guided by a set of aims, known as the Knebworth Nine. These are as follows.

With respect to *safety*:

- Children and young people respect themselves, others and the wider community.
- Children and young people are protected from harm, neglect, discrimination and exploitation.
- Families and communities are supported to develop children and young people in a positive way.

With respect to *health*:

- Children and young people have healthy lifestyles.
- Children and young people are protected from risk factors which lead to physical or mental health ill-health or disability.
- All children and young people are given high standards of advice, support and treatment.

With respect to *learning*:

- Children and young people experience achievement and self-esteem.
- Full support is given to children and young people who experience barriers to learning.
- Children, young people and their families are given a range of opportunities for learning and for work.

Together these statements seem to provide a set of values that can be used to draw stakeholders together around a common sense of purpose, something that seems to be essential to effective collaboration. At the same time, they provide reference points against which decisions about priorities can be considered.

In addition to the three collaboratives, there are various other networks in the primary sector. Heads meet with the director each term, when strategic matters are addressed. There is a primary headteachers' forum that meets twice termly, focusing on business matters, buildings, human resources etc; there are local primary–high school groupings; and there are other local consortia, such as a group of five local schools working together on sporting and arts activities. To the visitor this mix of groupings seems complex and time-consuming. However, for some heads at least, these interconnected networks, each with its own agendas and purposes, are seen as being of benefit.

The central collaborative

The work of the central area collaborative is tightly structured around an agreed constitution, which has been agreed by the heads of all 28 schools. The heads meet for two full days each term with a local authority officer to agree priorities and plans. This arrangement was described as "a partnership … with the locus being with the headteachers". One head was keen to emphasise that it was he and his colleagues who set the agenda.

Organisational procedures and commitments are clearly defined. One head explained: "We had to establish rules of membership." So, for example, headteachers are expected to attend all meetings and the remit for the various groupings within the collaborative is tightly defined. Another head commented: "This is a different way of working. You have to attend." One of the drivers for this tight organisation is funding, since monies that are allocated to the group, or bid for by the group, can only be accessed by those members who abide by the constitution. A head commented: "You have to show up to get the funding. If you're not there, you miss out." Responsibility for holding the various budgets is taken on by different headteachers.

The collaborative has had access to considerable funds, devolvement of which is agreed by the members. In the 2004/05 academic year, the overall allocation was:

£100,000 Neighbourhood Renewal Fund innovation
£100,000 Neighbourhood Renewal Fund teaching and learning
£36,327 School Development Grant

Interestingly, it seems that from April 2006 any money available will be given directly to schools, but all the schools in the central collaborative have decided to continue to fund the collaborative.

The developmental work of the collaborative is described as being supportive, long-term and proactive. The business side of the collaborative's work often centres on resources, making bids for funding, mobilising resources and ensuring better use is made of them.

The collaborative also has four sub-groups of schools, referred to as networks. These provide opportunities for closer school-to-school collaboration. Representatives of the schools in each network meet regularly – at least monthly – to identify areas for development and produce joint action plans, focusing, for example, on aspects of the curriculum or creativity. In addition, selected subject co-ordinators are given a budget and an honorarium to run staff meetings and INSET events for all the co-ordinators in their network. There are also four working groups within the collaborative, set up to address issues relating to curriculum, INSET, personnel and resources.

The central collaborative is managed by a steering group of headteachers. It has a rigorous system of planning for the whole collaborative and for each of the working groups, so that the development plans made, for example, by the INSET group must be in line with the overall development plans agreed by the collaborative. In addition to the working groups, there are a number of other networks, including those for deputy heads, special educational needs co-ordinators and teaching assistants that are accessed by all the schools in the collaborative.

To add yet further to the sense of organisational complexity, there is also now an area partnership board, set up to encourage multi-agency working in relation to the Every Child Matters policy requirements. Not all of the heads are involved directly in this arrangement. It is perhaps hardly surprising, therefore, that for some its role remains something of a mystery. As one head noted: "I don't really understand it".

When questioned about the number of meetings headteachers seem committed to, and the amount of time this must take up, the lead head talked about the relationships that are generated through those meetings and the trust that develops. This was mentioned by others too, one head commenting: "I had trouble completing my SEF – no sooner had I mentioned it than I had three or four phone calls and then colleagues emailing me theirs for me to look at". He added: "It's taken a few years to build, but now we've got used to sharing practices and resources and there is an absolute openness to share data and documents".

Scope and impact of the collaborative

i Achievement

Significant developments were noted in an Ofsted inspection of the authority in 2003. In particular, it was reported that primary school standards were rising faster than the national rate for improvement. The report stated: 'The new administration has developed further the existing strengths in partnerships and collaborative working and has taken them to an unusually high level. Headteachers of individual schools see themselves as part of a wider team with responsibility for the education service throughout the borough.' This attitude is certainly reflected in the way headteachers currently describe the work of the central collaborative.

While the heads do not yet have their own statistical evidence of the impact of their collaborative arrangements on test scores, there was a strong belief that the analysis they are currently undertaking will demonstrate its effectiveness. Key Stage 2 performance tables published by DfES in 2005 show that in the authority as a whole the average points score was 27.1, while for those schools in the central collaborative, the average was 27.4, just below the national average of 27.6. The value-added score for the authority was 100.1 while for the central collaborative the average was 100.2, the same as the national average. Overall, the local authority's average score increased at the same rate as the rest of England between 2002 and 2005, from 229 to 234 compared with 234 to 240.

The Ofsted report on the local authority for 2005 stated: 'Outcomes are good … significant improvements have been made to performance at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4. The results for English, maths and science at Key Stage 2 are all significantly above the performance of statistical neighbours with year-on-year improvement'.

ii Development

The collaborative is seen as a vehicle for school development. Peer review has been a central feature of this, so that target-setting is not now carried out individually with school improvement officers, but through meetings of groups of headteachers. Data is shared and colleagues assist one another in identifying strengths and areas for development. Commenting on this, one head acknowledged that "we may not have enough rigour yet", but was confident that the system itself, and the trust and honesty it generated, made it a powerful tool for school development. As yet, not all schools are fully involved in these processes. One head explained the reaction of certain colleagues, commenting: "Some came along but they find they are competing with the school down the road. So they were not prepared to share their data."

The collaborative generates significant professional development that is intended to strengthen practice in the schools. One current area of concern is the lack of new applicants for headships, so an INSET programme for middle managers has been introduced. Work on gifted and talented pupils has also been identified for the current year, as well as the government's Excellence and Enjoyment agenda. This is in addition to the work that goes on in subject leader groups and in the four networks.

iii Solving problems

The collaborative is seen as having an important role in solving problems, as for example the two schools in special measures currently being led by two other collaborative heads. One headteacher took over a school with serious weaknesses. She described the practical support she had received from colleagues in the collaborative, including the loan of teachers to help strengthen classroom practice. This had led the school to be identified recently as the 28th most improved in the country.

Heads explained that relationships between partner heads are the key to the success of such arrangements. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that where strong relationships do not exist, school-to-school collaboration tends to be less effective. Heads felt that this was the case when one school in the collaborative was recently placed in special measures. However, the collaborative is now supporting that school by seconding one of its heads full time to run it and by supporting the deputy head now in charge at the seconded head's school with a weekly visit.

Similarly, a head new to the authority has a weekly support meeting with another head. She described the collaborative as "absolutely invaluable". Before taking up her post, she was invited to the heads' residential conference and since then has got to know colleagues very quickly and found the collaborative enormously supportive. "The collaborative takes up time", she said, "but I don't ever think it is a waste of time. Meetings are very focused, practical projects are agreed and acted on and overall the collaborative is proactive and positive". She also commented on the relationship she has with her school improvement officer (SIO); because the SIO is a member of the collaborative she sees their relationship as a partnership, something quite different from what she was used to at her previous authority.

iv At-risk groups

The collaborative has implemented a variety of shared arrangements for supporting vulnerable groups of pupils. For example, a support system has been established for seven children categorised as autistic.

The special school in the collaborative is now known as the support centre. The partnership arrangements that have developed between this centre and the mainstream schools are described as "very healthy". Members of various support services such as educational psychologists, education welfare officers and speech and language therapists are now based at the support centre and, as a result, it is felt that schools are able to access support and advice more efficiently.

There are similar centres in the other two primary collaboratives. They were described as "the hub of the Every Child Matters agenda". At the same time, new area partnership boards are now being developed as a means of encouraging multi-agency working. These arrangements are being created slowly, as headteachers and representatives of other agencies explore funding arrangements and protocols.

v Use of resources

There is some evidence that processes of collaboration are leading to the more effective use of available resources. For example, there has been concern about the appointment and use of learning mentors. An agreement had been reached that all schools should have access to learning mentors and funding should be distributed accordingly. However, through review it was found that some schools had not appointed learning mentors and were therefore not entitled to the money. Another example given was of a school in the collaborative that had been earmarked for closure; the other schools agreed not to take pupils from the school before it closed so that it would remain viable. The group is currently looking at the impact of planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time as there is concern about the combined impact of PPA, CPD and leadership time on classroom continuity and on standards.

Factors important to the success of the collaborative

Headteachers reported that in the past they felt unsupported by the local authority, a view confirmed by the Ofsted report of 1999 which identified support for schools as a key weakness. 'This led to a lack of challenge to schools and a reluctance on the part of the LEA to disturb the status quo. Resources for school improvement were not directed where they most need to go'. In one sense, this vacuum created the opportunity for collaborative working to be successful, but it was the vision and leadership of the director of education in post at the time which was undoubtedly a key factor in the success of the collaborative. Headteachers agreed that the time spent in discussion with the director and other senior officers in the early stages developing the vision and aims, and the suggested terms of reference, was invaluable.

The initial discussions ultimately led to the constitution agreed by members which seems to be a very powerful factor in the success of the collaborative. Not only the vision but roles and responsibilities and ways of working are very clear. "We spent a lot of time on the vision – what it was about", said one head, "and then deciding on the terms of engagement. We review our vision every year. This year I allowed half an hour for it at our annual conference but in fact it took a whole morning – time well spent". One gets a strong sense of everyone being in board.

The lead headteacher, seconded for two days each week, has clearly been a powerful contributor to the collaborative. Her main role is to hold and manage the budget but she also leads on projects and has a major input into the work of the collaborative.

The funding of course has made it possible for the collaborative to carry out a variety of projects and initiatives as well as provide resources where needed. There is agreement that funding should be put where there is the greatest need, so for example £30,000 has currently been allocated to a school in special measures. Bursaries are paid to the chair and treasurer of the steering group and a secretary attends and minutes all meetings and prepares agendas. Having the funds to do this ensures that the group runs smoothly.

Leadership in the collaborative

Clearly the lead headteacher has a significant role in the group, but there are also leadership roles for many other heads. The chair of the steering group has a significant role in the running and leadership of the collaborative. This position is on a rolling programme with the chair for the next three years already agreed. Similarly each working group – curriculum, INSET, personnel and resources – is chaired by a different headteacher and again on a rolling programme. "There are some key players", said one head, "those with particular knowledge and experience, but our aim is to share the leadership roles".

The collaborative's school improvement officer does not seem to take a leadership role. From discussions with heads, it is clear they consider that because of its diluted role the local authority does not now have the capacity to support schools effectively although "having a school improvement officer in the collaborative makes for a 'smooth relationship' with the local authority", one head remarked.

Although headteachers are the main leaders in the collaborative, there are many opportunities for other members of staff to act as leaders. The curriculum sub-groups that run across the collaborative are very active, and depending on the agreed action plans of the steering group are given budgets to lead and develop projects. The smaller networks within the collaborative also generate their own activities and these are not all driven by headteachers.

Is the collaborative sustainable?

When the collaborative was first established, not all schools were fully engaged but gradually the involvement and commitment of heads has become very strong. One head describes the collaborative as “an evolving model all the time”. There are likely to be considerable changes in the future, funding is uncertain and the role of the lead teacher is to be changed so that the model will continue to evolve.

There is a strong commitment on the part of the heads to sustain the collaborative. They have already agreed to top-slice their Standards grant from April, giving the collaborative enough money to continue while changes to the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund are clarified. They believe that the collaborative must continue as the local authority does not have the capacity to support schools. As one head said, “Nine years ago I was happy to sit in my own school making sure everything was in order. Now I know that together we can share resources and target need. We already support each other, now we are trying to develop a structure where we can self-support”.

Possible implications

The developments summarised in this account illustrate the way school-to-school collaboration appears to be having an impact on educational opportunities in one of the most complex and challenging districts in the country. As we have seen, it is a story of emerging and changing structures, which sometimes appear to pull in different directions. New groupings of schools and other organisations continue to develop, sometimes formally in response to local or national initiatives, and sometimes as a result of shared interests or perceived needs. In this sense, the approach in this authority seems to be less about structures and systems, and much more about social processes, as those involved learn about how to network effectively.

These social processes of learning seem to have had a significant impact on the development of the schools involved and, as a result, appear to have generated a level of trust and openness that enables schools to solve problems and support one another. The approach is built around a well-defined common sense of purpose and agreed commitments. It is then driven forward by the shared leadership of heads, with certain individuals appearing to take on key co-ordination roles. Indeed, one head described the collaborative as being “like a mini-LEA”, run by heads.

Although there is co-operation at different levels within the schools, the impression is gained that heads are at the core of the strategy. Commenting on this, one local authority officer commented: “The heads take too much on. It needs to be distributed more.” Nevertheless, it seems likely that the strong sense of mutual support that has developed among the heads has enhanced the overall capacity of the education system to address challenges in this potentially difficult context.

It should be added that the evidence upon which this account is based is very limited. Given the complexity and apparent promise of the processes summarised here, there is a strong case for a more detailed analysis of what they involve and their impact on pupils.

Account of practice 6

Introduction

This paper is based on interview data collected from one federation during spring term 2006.

Background to the federation policy

Federations are groups of schools that have a formal agreement to work together with the aim of raising achievement and promoting inclusion and innovation. However, they vary considerably in their nature. Federations can involve different numbers and types of schools, and a wide range of priorities and targets can be agreed. Some have strong links with other agencies and services while others do not. Perhaps most importantly, they exhibit a range of structures. At one end of the continuum, a federation can be tightly coupled or hard by creating a joint governing body with legal responsibility for all the schools involved. Conversely, a much more loosely coupled structure is possible where a formal agreement is made between a group of schools to work together on a particular issue or range of issues; these federations tend to be considered soft federations. This paper is structured in five sections. After this introduction, section 2 provides a note on context. Sections 3 and 4 explore issues associated with initiating (early or set-up activities) and implementation (establishing). Section 5 provides a commentary highlighting key processes associated with each phase.

The federation

A note on context

The federation is a soft federation involving one secondary school and four primary schools in the north west of England. Each school in the federation is homogenous in terms of student ethnicity. Three of the primary schools serve Asian communities and act as feeder schools to the secondary school. The fourth primary school serves a predominantly white working class estate that during the past months has experienced an influx of eastern European immigrants. This school is not an established feeder school to the secondary school. In reality, the federation is led by the secondary school and the primaries are engaged in federation activity to varying degrees. One headteacher noted:

> *It is a bit, well, we'll grab the money and run … It was suggested that, should they not make the commitment, should the funding not be withdrawn from that particular school but that was cast aside. We can't do that, well why not?*
>
> primary headteacher A

The LEA has had little involvement and the secondary school has been the main initiator and driver. The federation has two core areas of focus. The first is teaching and learning within KS2 and KS3 transition, that is, the movement between primary and secondary school. One governor articulated the concern from the secondary school perspective:

> *Initially we were concerned about some of the intake we had. About 50 per cent hadn't reached level 4 at Key Stage 2 in English, maths and science … We then had problems making them reach level 5 at Key Stage 3 … So we approached our feeder schools and had meetings with the heads and added another one* [school C].
>
> secondary governor

DfES imposed the second area of focus on the federation. The initial proposal presented to DfES was rejected until community cohesion had been negotiated into the plan. It is likely that this was linked to the socio-political tension that Oldham and other areas of the region were experiencing at the time. In terms of leadership structures within the federation, strategic leadership is provided by the headteachers of each school and a link governor from each school. However, the headteacher and chair of governors of the secondary school act as federation principal and federation chair of governors respectively. The federation has appointed a technician and a data manager. However, it has been problematic appointing a federation manager and to date this post remains vacant. Managerial roles have been taken on by the secondary school head and a middle manager.

Initiating a collaborative: The experience of a federation

Improving transition

The initiation of the federation has contributed to the development of a common language about what effective teaching and learning might look like in primary and secondary settings. A primary headteacher reflected that this process began with visits to each other's schools:

> *Secondary colleagues came down from the high school to see how numeracy was taught in a primary school and that was a big icebreaker. Because, I think they realised what numeracy teaching looked like here and that started to change some of their practice up there, which is good.*
>
> primary headteacher A

As conversations have progressed and trust and understandings have developed, some common approaches to the teaching of subjects including English, maths and science across the phase boundary have been developed. Modern foreign language and music teaching has also occurred across the phases. This has taken place in both primary and secondary settings. Where these initiatives have been most successful, the mix of personalities of those involved has supported the development of positive relationships within a short time-span. In one subject area, progress has been slow. The headteacher of the secondary school realises this is largely due to the secondary school department involved. However, the head has deliberately identified this department for involvement in an attempt to raise their expectations of students and to develop their range of teaching strategies through interaction with primary school teachers. In one case, this strategy may lead to a member of staff moving on to another post in another school. Where there have been issues in developing a common approach, these have emerged from a combination of personalities that have hindered the development of trusting relationships, combined with contrasting philosophical positions in terms of what constitutes effective teaching in different settings.

Community cohesion and national priorities

The community cohesion element of the federation appears least developed. This is not unsurprising as it was not an aim of the federation's bid. A primary head reflected:

> *It wasn't something that came out of the federation schools themselves. It was not why they were joining it. And to have something thrown on, a bolt-on at the last minute, to drag another school in to get the go-ahead from the DfES isn't the best way to achieve the success of that particular aim … It hasn't been a particularly successful part of the federation.*
>
> primary headteacher A

The 'bolted-on' primary school reports broad involvement in the federation, but this relates to increased resourcing through laptops and ICT technicians rather than the breaking down of barriers between communities. While the primary school fully supports the community cohesion agenda, geography and community attitudes often remain barriers to regular movements of students and parents between primary schools. However, the federation continues to challenge the assumptions, misconceptions and values of individual communities in an attempt to break down these structures.

Primary headteachers recognise the role that the federation has played in developing the workforce remodelling agenda, especially in terms of delivering protected preparation time to staff. They plan to use secondary staff to give their teachers non-contact time. However, this poses a dilemma, as currently the primary and secondary teachers work together, either team teaching or observing each other. It would be a loss to those involved if this valued form of professional development were to cease in order to comply with a legal requirement.

Implementing a collaborative: the experience of a federation

Federation leadership

The secondary school leading this federation exhibits an entrepreneurial approach. An important motivator for federating appears to be the accessing of additional funding directly from DfES. The secondary school is also opportunistic in terms of developing networks and activities that can add value to the federation's work. This can blur the edges of what can be deemed federation activity. How can the boundaries of collaboratives be defined? In a sense, this case illustrates the loosely coupled model very well. It is hard to identify what distinguishes this model of a federation from other forms of school-to-school networks or indeed, other collaborative arrangements that schools are involved in. During the early stages of the federation, there was an element of suspicion from the primary heads involved. There was a feeling that federating might be a take-over attempt by the secondary school.

> *There was quite a fear that there would be one governing body for all five schools and, you know, are we looking at some type of 'superhead' position where somebody is taking a controlling role in all five schools*
>
> primary headteacher B

The primary schools were unclear as to the whether the soft structure might progress to hard and were uneasy about this. They were also unclear about the leadership, management and legal roles and responsibilities and how this might impact on their own school governance and autonomy. As the process has developed, these fears have reduced, although there still appears to be a lack of clarity regarding legal issues.

Focus on teaching and learning

In this federation, there is a strong commitment to improving teachers' classroom practice and the experiences of students. The federation provided all primary schools with 30 laptops. This was very well received by the schools and acted to solidify individual teachers' commitment to the process of federating because they recognised the additional resource was having an impact on their teaching practice. Key transition subjects have been targeted and the secondary school has provided the primary schools with subject-specialist teachers to lead and support lessons in the primary school. This is viewed by primary teachers as important professional development. The primary schools have also formed working groups in subject areas to develop joint plans and approaches.

> *There have been observations in each of the schools and sharing of ideas, materials and resources and what have you. And certainly from my perspective staff come back, my maths and literacy staff come back and say: "You know they had a really interesting approach to. I might develop aspects of that." So there's a cross-fertilisation of ideas and practices.*
>
> secondary headteacher

This appears to be a significant opportunity presented by the federation. The federation has provided teachers with the conditions to develop collaborative practices. Teachers are beginning to learn to work with their peers from different schools in a meaningful way to produce resources and to generate and transfer knowledge.

Stretching experiences and developing leadership

Teachers have gained a wide range of insights into different classroom contexts. This has broadened their experiences and understanding of education. The federation has provided opportunities for teachers to take on formal and informal leadership roles. Some teachers have been able to lead groups of peers from different schools on specific issues. Others have been able to see the bigger picture. For example, one of the primary co-ordinators has been promoted to a position in another school. Both the headteacher and the teacher concerned argued that his involvement with the federation had significantly contributed to his CPD and leadership development. The teacher concerned reflected:

> *There are things that I've done via the federation that have really helped me, giving me the chance to look at the bigger picture … In a single-form entry school, you can be come very insular, always looking at your own class, but to stretch that experience out and also to have some managerial role in that – dialogue with the heads, talking about budgets.*
>
> primary teacher

The distribution of leadership within the federation has contributed to building capacity in and beyond the federation. It has provided less-experienced teachers with the opportunity to gain leadership experience, working within a complex initiative across different organisations.

Commentary

The initial analysis presented above offers some insight into the key processes that are likely to support schools in complex and challenging circumstances during the early stages of their development.

Key processes associated with initiating collaborative initiatives in complex and challenging contexts

- *Socialisation of common issues to generate a clear focus for collaboration*
  Stakeholders at all levels must identify their own issues and then socialise them to explore, mediate and negotiate common areas that may develop into a focus that serves multiple needs.

- *Developing an understanding of other stakeholders' contexts*
  Those involved in the collaboration must gain a deep insight into the contexts that exist in the collaborative arrangements. This seems key to the development of lasting professional relationships and trust between individuals. This is also particularly important for schools in complex and challenging areas that in the past may have experienced negative inspections and

media coverage because the process also serves to break down misconceptions that may have evolved from negative publicity, rumour or gossip.

- *Articulating each other's strengths and weaknesses*
  In articulating each other's strengths and weaknesses, it becomes possible to celebrate successes irrespective of the baseline. This is important for communicating the fact that all participants have something to contribute and something to gain from the collaboration.

- *Generating an internal focus and set of aims that align to national policy pressures*
  If the collaboration is to have a chance of developing, the focus must be internally generated and linked to a national priority (eg standards, inclusion, Every Child Matters, workforce remodelling). This ensures ownership resides within the collaboration but reduces the risk of the focus becoming marginalised through interference from external agencies.

- *Proactive drawing on resources from multiple sources*
  Strategic leadership within collaboratives must be proactive in seeking opportunities for securing resources from established and new funding streams if the collaborative is to have a good chance of becoming sustainable. Strategic leadership must also be responsive to changes in the internal conditions and demands of the constituents of the collaboration if it is to flourish.

- *Transparency*
  The collaborative must be seen to be transparent from the outset. Clear boundaries and terms of reference must be negotiated, established and, most importantly, adhered to in practice. Management structures must facilitate rather than clutter the work of the collaborative, and provide lines of communication, confidence and clarity rather than undermining them. Expectations and associated mechanisms for accountability must be well defined.

- *Gain a quick win*
  For schools in complex and challenging circumstances, it is important to achieve a quick win. This can be done by using resources to signal intent and investment by providing each school with a set of laptops or by providing teachers with time to work together on a focused shared need that has a well-defined output and timeline. In short, a positive outcome is more important than the content or value of the outcome itself. The quick win can create a critical mass of staff that buy into the collaboration and achieve a sense of momentum.

- *Focus on classroom processes*
  To focus on classroom processes and student experience provides possibilities for developing conversations around the core business of teaching and learning. Here all involved should have some experience, a viewpoint and a contribution to make. From these discussions, the collaborative can develop a shared understanding and language around teaching and learning from which practical outcomes can be generated that make a difference to teachers and students.

- *Stretching leadership*
  Collaboratives provide opportunities for the distribution of leadership in and across organisations. This can help to develop individual and organisational capacity. Physical gaps can be filled, knowledge can be generated and shared, skills can be enhanced and talent can be nurtured to support the development of the collaborative as an entity.

Clearly, this initial analysis needs further development. If collaborations in such demanding contexts are to succeed, they will need to move beyond the phases outlined above by sustaining collaborative arrangements that meet the challenge of delivering complex solutions for our most vulnerable schools. However, this paper provides a starting point for beginning to conceptualise what elements are likely promote successful collaboration in such circumstances.