

Case study: Acorn Alliance (Banham Primary)

Theme 1: Strategic planning – the Cluster CBM as a member of SLT and/or working with Governors in the strategic leadership and development of schools/cluster

Theme 6: Joint procurement savings from purchase or renegotiation of a contract

Theme 8: School maintenance savings and shared resources

The Acorn Alliance is based in Norfolk, comprising six schools within the group. The schools have a history of collaboration and share many similar characteristics relating to size, rural location and being central parts of their communities. Headteachers in each of the schools believe that by working together they can achieve significantly more for their schools than they can by working alone. As members of a shared Trust, the schools continue to be part of the Local Authority family of maintained schools, but the change of category allows them to be supported additionally by a charitable trust.

The Cluster Business Manager (CBM) started the role in January 2015 following 20 years in a strategy consultant role for a leading media corporation based in London. As a result, the CBM has brought a wealth of experience of strategic thinking and planning, as well as a desire to move into the education sector to make a difference for children and young people.

Some of the main elements of the CBMs role have been contractual re-negotiation and management, in addition to setting up the systems and processes required when the Alliance becomes a Trust.

Firstly, the CBM audited all contracts across the cluster, including leasing contracts, grounds and premises maintenance, catering, photocopying, energy contracts and all others. This now means the cluster has now implemented an effective contract management system. Having then reviewed the premises maintenance contract, the CBM could see that a repeat-business model was in place and had been for some time. It was generally agreed that the contract was not necessarily working in terms of price and in some instances levels of service delivery, and as a result the CBM has worked with Headteachers to identify a new provider, undertaking benchmarking activities between the current and potential offer.

Overall, the premises maintenance contract could mean a saving of around £5,000 per school, with some small variations according to the school size, meaning £25-30,000 would be saved across the 6 schools. To provide a measured approach to implementation, the CBM and Headteachers decided to test the new contract within 1 of the 6 schools, prior to potential roll-out to the other schools. So far, the new offer has proved very compelling, not only in terms of price but also quality of service. It is anticipated that all 6 schools will be on board with the new contract over the coming year or so, and where the existing contract tied the schools in for 5 years, the current offer operates on a more flexible 2-3 year rolling contract basis.

In terms of grounds maintenance, the CBM could see that in some schools there were jobs that had required urgent attention. In order to have guaranteed continual grounds maintenance arrangements, the CBM set up a grounds maintenance role on a competitive hourly basis, who could

be called upon to undertake quick fix jobs. The role is located within easy reach of every school in the cluster, meaning they can access and fix problems quickly. Feedback suggests that those schools who have required the service are delighted, as it means the schools are not having to wait for jobs to be completed.

In addition to the initial contract auditing, and premises and ground maintenance work, the CBM has been working with the Headteachers to secure the services of an Independent Attendance Officer to work across all of the Trust schools. Due to the new government emphasis on schools reducing pupil absence rates, both the CBM and Headteachers feel that this support, supplementary to the county provision, will significantly assist the schools on the ground. The CBM has also worked closely with the Headteachers to co-ordinate the adoption and implementation of a school-led improvement programme delivered by CfBT. The schools have secured a 50% funding contribution from the Local Authority (worth £2,250) to take part in the School Partnership Programme starting in September 2015. The cost broadly works out at £2.50 per pupil on roll per year.

Due to the CBM's previous commercial acumen, he has developed a wide network of contacts and has developed knowledge of the local Norfolk business world. He is a member of the Regional Association of CBMs and is actively developing links with other schools in the county. He is in the process of finalising a rebranding project for the Alliance schools which will be reflected in school signage. Whilst current quotations for re-branding are in the region of £1250 + VAT, the CBM has been able to negotiate the work for free. The CBM is assessing ongoing broadband and ICT provision across all of the Alliance schools and in many there is now Microsoft 365 capacity thereby reducing printing costs both in the short and long-term. The CBM has also been co-ordinating and working closely with an experienced website designer to launch a new website for the Alliance incorporating the new branding.

An additional role for the CBM involves acting as the Trust Co-ordinator – this encompasses managing and co-ordinating all non-teaching and learning aspects of the Trusts' operation and vision including harmonising core business administrative processes. The role involves a close working relationship with all of the Headteachers in the Trust and Chairs of Governors and resides within the Trusts' Senior Leadership Team. The CBM has been actively working on developing efficiencies through school joint purchasing, identifying shared school improvement priorities and facilitating collaboration as well as identifying and securing additional funding streams. The CBM also facilitates the operation of the Trust through organising meetings of the Trust Headteachers and partners, liaising with Chairs of the relevant groups in setting agendas/distributing paperwork, administering the Cluster budget and acting as Trust 'Company Secretary'. There is significant and continuing work involved on this Trust Co-ordinator role and as a result of their experience and expertise, the CBM has freed up a significant amount of administrative time which had previously been part of the Headteachers' workload.

In terms of future group purchasing opportunities, the CBM is evaluating future catering options for the schools, and is investigating the possibilities of shared staff such as Social Workers, Educational Psychologists and Specialist Teaching Staff to work across the Trust.

It is clear that the CBM has been working on a wide variety of projects, all of which have meant close collaboration with the Headteacher, Governors, County Council, and contractors. This strategic work is leading not only to economical savings, but also progression in the quality of services to the pupils.