

Oval Cluster

Theme 1: Strategic planning

The Oval Cluster incorporates 4 schools based in inner city London, with similar socio demographics, and high free school meal (FSM) levels. In addition to the secondary school there are 3 primary schools; 2 of the schools are academies and have sponsor status. All the schools are good or outstanding. Each of the primary schools has had no structured SBM function and this funding has provided an opportunity to up-skill and train existing staff.

The cluster has bought in a service, with a view to appointing a Cluster SBM once cost savings have been made in Years 1 and 2. The role is to work across all schools within the cluster both with a whole cluster approach and where required, with one-to-one support. Each school is supported by the SBM with time allocated to support and work towards targets.

Priorities identified are:

- Review of school accounts and budgets
- Review of financial controls in schools
- Review of SLA's, contracts, suppliers and procurement
- Approved and best value for money suppliers list across the cluster
- Support and advice for grant applications across the cluster
- Support and training, and one-to-one for smaller schools with no SBM, in order to improve finance skills at a local level
- Higher level SBM support to existing Senior Administration Officer / SBM in post

All the schools in the cluster would like to add more value to their offer for their children; and all schools have areas in which they would like to save money and improve, all of which are related to the SBM function. The schools believe that by having a leading SBM function it would free up both valuable funds and time of the SLT to help them focus on raising standards and improving outcomes for learners.

The cluster SBM started with a desktop review of all school accounts and expenditure on key areas. From this exercise it was possible to identify the need to review contracts and expenditure across a range of areas, and so take a strategic view of finances in these areas. A general theme was evident, namely that whilst the schools operated well with existing suppliers, better value could be sought through joint purchasing and collaboration.

It became clear at the outset that schools in the cluster were not working together in relation to procurement and value for money around existing contracts and SLA's that were in place through different suppliers.

The first area to be targeted was spend on paper and photocopiers. As a result, schools are now paying two thirds less for photocopiers, copy fees and have made a significant reduction in the cost of paper. This initial success is leading to a review of all SLA's and contracts across the cluster and will lead to a recommendation both on a school by school basis and as a group, to look at renegotiating SLA's as they come to an end or are up for review.

In some cases consideration is being given to the option of buying out existing SLA's as over time cost savings will be significant, examples include ICT, Human Resources, Catering and Facilities Management

The learning so far has identified the need to:

- be clear about what it is you are trying to achieve and go about it in a structured and considered way
- be selective in what contracts you review, think about early wins to breed confidence
- think about the length and value of contracts when deciding the order in which you review them.

The challenge for the cluster SBM is identifying how and who in an existing team should be tasked with which areas. They must also bear in mind what can be feasibly completed in time to evidence success in schools with no tradition of collaboration in school business matters. The success enjoyed will lead to improved outcomes in the next two years.