

Windmill Federation

Theme 3: Small rural maintained schools benefitting from shared service and economies of scale leading to identifiable savings

The Windmill Federation was formed in 2014 and includes 4 primary schools in the rural context of the fens. There are approximately 370 children across all the schools. Deprivation levels vary from school to school with one having just over half (52%) of their children on free school meals. Due to the location of the schools, accessing additional services can be a real challenge for families who often face difficulties with transport or childcare facilities.

The Cluster SBM, Felicity, commenced her role in late 2014 as a result of a successful grant bid. It was clear from the outset that there were three very distinct priorities across the cluster (as below), with Felicity's role being seen as intrinsic for the Federation to achieve these.

- Generate financial savings for the group
- Develop the infrastructure in the schools
- Raise the standards of school maintenance.

ICT infrastructure was a major barrier to the schools operating collaboratively. The ICT capability varied significantly from school to school. This presented problems to staff mobility who found they could not access networks or material when working or attending meetings in other schools. This was also a real challenge for cross-federation working for subject leaders.

The teaching of ICT across the Federation was severely impacted upon by the variation in capability across the schools. Wireless capability was poor and as a result one of the schools could not use handheld devices as the system had no capacity to handle the devices. The devices purchased through a fundraising effort were simply not being utilised – pupils did not have the chance to develop their capability, and the handheld devices were not being used.

In a drive to improve efficiency it was not possible to introduce changes such as cashless catering simply because IT systems were not compatible.

It was clear that rationalising ICT support through a new shared service was critical for the success of the federation and was a key focus for the cluster SBM. However the complexities of the situation meant this was not an easy task and with a need to agree a contract by the 1 April, there were some challenging deadlines.

Through identifying a new ICT support service it has been possible to bring all the systems under the management of one new contract. This has allowed the development of a consistent strategy and ICT network across all schools. As a result of the new ICT infrastructure, capability in staff mobility has improved, there is greater access for them and pupils, and the savings approximate to £22,000 over a three-year period. These savings have provided the opportunity to make further investment into systems hardware, which once installed will improve the quality of access to ICT for pupils and staff. The changes have therefore been very significant in terms of overall improvement in system infrastructure and pupil access to ICT, and really underpin the effective working of the Federation with the support of the cluster SBM.

It was clear that the development of more joint and shared activity across the schools will generate more savings and demonstrate value for money. The introduction of cashless payments has also been achieved and made a real difference to the efficiency of the administration team, and importantly has meant genuine time savings for the cluster SBM, who can then spend further time on the types of initiatives and improvements in infrastructure already outlined.

Introducing a change across any organisation can be a tough challenge. It is clear that the cluster SBM's approach to building trust and gaining the confidence of the decision makers in each school has been fundamental in making the successful move to a new supplier. This also provides a firm foundation for the introduction and development of more shared services. Staff and pupils alike have seen the benefits, and so staff are more open to discussions relating to other areas. Catering is one of the next targets for Felicity.

Looking ahead, Felicity is keen to point out that any new contract requires appropriate contract management and this is a key challenge in the months ahead. It is important to ensure that the schools receive a quality service for from the new provider and so regular monitoring is important.