

Woolacombe

Theme 2: Small rural academies benefiting from shared service and economies of scale leading to identifiable savings

The schools in the Woolacombe cluster wanted to achieve increased buying power by negotiating as part of a cluster.

Within the cluster there are 5 rural schools comprised of two Federations. 4 of the schools are within a 13 mile radius of each other. The schools vary in size, from 98 - 210 children on roll and they are all state maintained.

Due to their rural coastal location, the schools face high transport costs on activities such as school trips, competitions and swimming.

The role of the Cluster SBM is varied but the key priorities are:

1. Reducing costs - increasing buying power through the cluster, sharing learning opportunities/best practice and resources across the cluster.
2. Increasing income - focussing attention on grant research and application. Sharing successes across the cluster and applying learnings to each school to increase the chance of a successful application.
3. Reducing Headteachers administration - by taking on key projects, the Headteachers are able to steer the schools strategically with the SBM providing the business management side. Examples of projects include developing an EYFS hub comprising of round the year childcare for 0-11 year olds and 3 key building projects. This has also enabled the Head to focus on developing the Teaching School arm of the Federation which 'already' brings in extra revenue and has the capacity to bring in further revenue.

Swimming is an important part of the curriculum for these schools, not just as a sport but also for ensuring the children learn to be safe around the sea. The only local swimming pool has recently been refurbished and the school was surprised when they saw the cost of hiring the pool had increased by 60%. Although each of the schools was using the pool 38 weeks of the year, block booking discounts were not available. Swimming lessons were already heavily subsidised by the school and parents due to the additional transport costs associated with rural schools. The 60% increase in hiring the pool meant that the schools would be unable to afford swimming lessons for their children.

The business manager approached the local pool facility to negotiate a discount outlining the block booking and provision of education as being key in developing a positive business relationship. After much discussion between interested parties it was possible to agree on a discount and a price which was more affordable for the schools. A price cap was part of the deal and in total a cluster saving of £28,000 was achieved over 9 years. Only those savings to the schools in the cluster have been accounted for, but all schools using the facilities will benefit from these reduced rates, and as such have provided a particular benefit to the local school budgets. The cluster SBM is then able to inform the learning alliance (which comprises of 21 local schools) of these negotiated costs.

The benefit to the pupils is immeasurable in these coastal villages as being able to swim is a basic requirement. The schools have a track record of producing strong swimmers and frequently represent the region in competitions.

Learning points for the cluster have been as follows, and could provide hints and tips to other schools when negotiating alternative contracts and payments:

- Persistence and determination can pay off
- Keep lines of communication open
- Factor in other benefits
 - Improved facility
 - Other schools benefiting from reduced costs
 - Future price increases fixed