

It worked for us

The White Horse Federation, in Swindon, and Education Ossett Community Trust (EOCT) in West Yorkshire, are examples of successful collaborations.

The White Horse Federation is a seven-school federation ranging from a small middle-class primary school in the west of Swindon, to a large multi-cultural school in its centre – and all variations in between. “We first federated with a local primary school in 2010,” explains Hayley Brown, the Federation’s Business Director, “followed by another primary federation in 2011, a collaboration that happened after establishing good links from providing School Business Management, Catering and IT Services. Shortly after that, we federated with another three-school federation, taking our collaboration to six schools in total. Then, in July 2012, we became a MAT and opened Swindon’s first sponsored academy.

“The main reason for collaborating was to bring about greater efficiencies and to share best

practice, but it has actually given us the freedom for many staff to learn without the burden of high training costs. We also benefit from peer-to-peer support and networking, and economies of scale. As a MAT, we have not only gained from streamlining our contracts and service level agreements but also from the requirement for singular rather than multiple purchases, such as accountancy fees. We have centralised our business management functions, and now have dedicated, qualified teams covering the various aspects of this role, therefore avoiding the need to ‘buy in’ this level of skill.”

And for Ossett Academy and Sixth Form College in West Yorkshire, “It was our desire to provide a true education service for 3-18 year olds in Ossett and to have a common entitlement for all children, regardless of which school they attended. That was our driving force for collaborating,” explains Tracy Jackson, Assistant Principal – Core Services at Ossett Academy and Sixth Form College, which is part of the Education Ossett Community Trust (EOCT). >

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Hayley Brown, Business Director of the White Horse Federation





DID YOU KNOW... ?

Further information about collaboration can be found on the Department for Education's website: www.education.gov.uk/a0056911/collaboration-and-federations-an-overview

If you need more help understanding the processes involved with collaboration, please see the 'Driving more from less' article on page 25, which discusses NASBM's guide to collaboration for SBMs.

"We became the EOCT with eight other schools – seven primary schools and a secondary special school – within Ossett in September 2008. Then, following our conversion to an academy in 2011, we entered into an Umbrella Trust (Yorkshire Educational Trust) with three other secondary academies in Yorkshire.

"Educationally and financially, we have seen enormous benefits from sharing staffing, expertise and resources. For example, we have a Trust ICT team that provides technical support for all of the schools, at cost, and ensures economies of scale by sourcing equipment for all of the schools in bulk and negotiating huge discounts that each school alone couldn't achieve. It also makes sense for each partner within the collaboration to specialise in what they're good at, be it HR support, policy formation, professional development or catering provision. Within both the EOCT and Yorkshire Educational Trust, we have examples of this."

"That's not to say that collaboration is naturally easy," continues Hayley. "Everyone in the collaboration has to work towards the same goals, and understand how they are going to achieve them. Ineffective communication coupled with assumptions that we all seek the same out of a partnership can upset the balance of the

sensitive cultures and ethos within individual schools. This can then be both time consuming and unsettling to put right, therefore being counterproductive. It is crucial to spend time getting this right initially."

"That's true," explains Tracy. "I learned quickly that for shared services such as grounds maintenance, it is essential to be clear on everyone's expectations from the service, so this should be detailed in a Service Level Agreement. Without a business model, at least one school will end up losing out so it's essential to protect each school by costing out financial contributions. Establishing subsidiary companies and ensuring that you have adequate insurance is essential, as is engaging a helpful local solicitor. We employed one who had vast experience in trust and charity law, getting us through the legal minefield in the early stages."

"It is important to get all of this right at the outset," ends Hayley, "so take advice if you need it. When we collaborated there wasn't much advice available because some of the concepts were relatively new. But there are some great organisations that support and encourage collaborative working now, such as the National College of Teaching and Learning and, of course, NASBM." ■

