

Better together – A year in a Co-operative Trust

In May 2013, seven Birmingham schools made history by forming the first Co-operative Trust of schools in the area. But is there really strength in numbers? **Vicky Hewitson** looks back on the Trust's first exciting year.

In May 2013, seven forward-thinking schools, six primary and one special school (Coppice, Four Oaks, Langley, Little Sutton, Hollyfield, Moor Hall, Whitehouse Common), and their partners made history by forming the first **Co-operative Learning Trust** in Birmingham.

Having worked well together in the past, the schools formally established the collaboration with a view to inspiring excellence and furthering opportunity for all, and are now known as the Four Oaks Learning Trust for Excellence. By forming a Co-operative Trust, each school retains its individual autonomy and governing body but is also able to offer more exciting opportunities to its pupils, staff and wider community. Retaining individual autonomy was crucial for the schools as they considered their options in the current political environment dominated by on-going educational reform.

Rachel Davis, Chair of the Trust, explains: 'We wanted to proactively respond to the current landscape rather than sit back and wait for the changes to hit us, but we all knew we wanted to retain our autonomy and independence. As a group of high achieving schools with experienced headteachers, we wanted to lead our own schools. We were keen to protect our individual identity and didn't want to become clones of each other. Retaining what is unique and special about our schools was important because that was what had made us successful.'



'What we did want to do was learn from the strengths of each other, continue to share our excellent practice and work together so we could be the best we could be. The Co-operative Trust model offered us that opportunity.'

The Trust schools undertook a robust consultation process supported by the Co-operative College and the final decision to proceed lay with the governing body of each of the seven schools.

What is the Co-operative Trust model?

Essentially, trust schools are maintained schools supported by a charitable foundation. Although there are various forms of trust model, the Co-operative Trust Model has become very popular. Co-operative Trusts adopt a co-operative model for their structures and governance. This usually involves:

- adopting co-operative values and principles
- ensuring that the key stakeholders such as parents, staff, learners and members of the local community have a guaranteed 'say' in the affairs of the organisation.

The schools forming the first Birmingham Trust were required to change from community to foundation, giving the governing bodies greater freedom in running the schools. They have engaged key partners to support the achievement of the trust's vision, namely Birmingham City University, University College Birmingham, the King Edward Schools, Sutton Coldfield Rotary Club, and the Co-operative Society. In the Trust model, the partner foundations appoint some of the governors. The aim is to use their experience and expertise to strengthen the leadership and governance and hence to help raise standards.



The Co-operative Trust model is a membership-based model with people from the stakeholder groups becoming members of the 'educational co-operative'. There is clear evidence from Ofsted reports of existing co-operative schools that the co-operative dimension provides benefits in terms of curriculum, sustainability of school improvement strategies and further raising of aspirations across school communities, as well as more effectively promoting community cohesion.

The co-operative movement offers a range of curriculum materials to the schools and encourages the Trust to address educational initiatives through local, national and international engagement. The Local Authority also continues to challenge and support the schools and take an active part in helping the schools and the Trust address national agendas.



A community of shared values

The Trust's priorities are to inspire excellence by striving to continually improve the quality of teaching and learning, furthering aspirations among all members of the learning community, harnessing resources efficiently in the interests of excellent outcomes for all, and finally, providing and sustaining the wellbeing of all concerned to enable enjoyable and effective learning.

These priorities are underpinned by the core co-operative values of democracy, self responsibility, self improvement, co-operation, strong sense of community and working together to strengthen that community.

The Co-operative Society encourages schools to work collaboratively to achieve the widest possible impact, rather than working alone or in competition with each other.

'We aim for our schools to be the preferred choice – for young people and parents when selecting a school, as well as for staff when seeking a position in schools,' Debbie Allen, headteacher at Whitehouse Common, explains. 'Strengths and areas for development are openly shared and solutions provided from within the strong partnership, thus ensuring a cohesive approach to the pursuit of excellence in education and high aspirations for the whole learning community.'

One year on: What's the impact?

Since forming the Trust last summer, four schools have been inspected by Ofsted. One went from 'satisfactory' to 'good' and three were awarded 'outstanding' status. There is no doubt among the senior leaders that the work undertaken within the Trust contributed to the inspection outcomes.

Andrew Steggall, head of Moor Hall, recognises this: 'The knowledge gained from work across the schools has had a significant impact on the development of teaching and learning at our school. For example, observation of good practice in different settings provided the clarity we needed to advance the development of individual targets for our children and improve the use of the classroom environment.'

Preparing for inspection

In addition to the expertise of very experienced headteachers within the Trust, there is also a National Leader in Education (NLE), a Local Leader of Education (LLE) and two Ofsted trained inspectors, as well as expertise in Special Educational Needs. One of the Trust schools is also part of a federation, bringing specific knowledge in the relevant governance and management arrangements.

The Trust schools have used this expertise to develop a rigorous review process to ensure high standards are constantly maintained. The headteachers form a mini inspection team and undertake regular reviews in each of the schools in the Trust. Each review takes into consideration any specific focus identified by the recipient school and involves robust data interrogation, interviews with SLTs, lesson observations, book reviews and pupil conferencing. Evidence-based feedback is provided, highlighting strengths and areas/suggestions for improvement and development.

As well as delivering tangible outcomes for the schools and the children, this 'critical friend' intervention enables the whole school to confidently feel Ofsted ready and have a clear understanding of what to expect. Furthermore, embedding monitoring and self evaluation techniques within schools also enhances the staff self-reviews, giving them more ownership of their own professional development.

Implementation of the review across the group of schools has enabled the benchmarking of judgements. The team is now highly skilled in making robust and consistent judgements of school performance, as well as recommendations to move the school forward.

In accordance with the Learning Trust values and cooperative principles which brings a responsibility for all schools to work collaboratively for the benefit of a wider community, the impact of this work can be wide reaching. Working in pairs, Trust headteachers are already implementing this observation framework to review schools outside of the Trust area, and the model will be used to support school improvement strategies across the city.

Supporting staff at all levels

The knowledge gained from work across the schools has had a significant impact on the development of teaching and learning within the Trust schools. At an operational level, both teaching and non teaching staff at all levels within the schools have been encouraged to work together to share excellent practice, support development and tackle new agendas introduced by both local and national government. Representatives across the schools and partners work together to develop curriculum, share expertise and learning from one another, devise common policies and take ideas and best practice to suit the individual needs of each school.

Working groups have been tackling topics including performance management, maths assessment, the early years programme, special education needs, moderation of Year 6 work, school procurement and developing a strategic approach to the use, management and teaching of ICT across the schools. Furthermore, significant training and support has been in place from all the schools for the Trust NQTs.

Anthony Smith at Little Sutton Primary described how these had benefited him: 'Visiting other schools, observing lessons and having to think about providing constructive and challenging feedback to colleagues has been a real eye opener. It has given me a totally fresh perspective on the content and delivery of lessons. For me personally, this team approach has been key to improving my own teaching and developing my practice to 'good with outstanding features. What's more I have found some great friends and colleagues to share the highs and lows of life as a NQT!'

Sharing expertise and saving money

Working together and sharing costs has enabled the schools to attract high calibre trainers to explore the new curriculum as well as reinforce teaching techniques such as effective questioning. Staff have worked collaboratively to create common policies, including the response to leave of absence in term time and e-safety which also

evolved into the development of shared workshops for parents across the Trust.

The involvement of partners in specific working groups has provided opportunities and value for all. For example, the ICT Strategy Group has facilitated computing-based placements for students within the Trust schools to accelerate teaching and learning in this area. Likewise, the university leader for teaching maths is looking to undertake research within the schools to understand the barriers to learning for some pupils in maths which is preventing them from progressing. The hypothesis assumes that children are not secure in understanding the connections in mathematical concepts – for example, between multiplication and division – but due to curriculum pressures, learning is moved on. The fragility of the learning is not immediately evident, however it has implications for progression at later stages of learning. The potential for developing these partnership relationships further is significant – something the Trust is highly ambitious to achieve.



Following the reduced role and provision of services from the local authority, the Trust has developed a joint approach to commissioning service providers. Fiona Woolford from Langley School explains: 'The purchasing power this generates enables negotiation of highly competitive rates as well as flexibility within service provision. This has been particularly beneficial to the smallest school in the Trust and the special school, as the service provision has been more tailored to meet our specific needs and ultimately more cost effective.'

Recently, the schools subscribed to a local mentoring service which charges a fixed fee. Given the reduced scale of need in these two schools, they were able to negotiate one fee to cover both settings.

The schools have also embarked on the employment of shared staff to work across the group to achieve efficiencies and be flexible to respond to the changing needs of each school. This has included a Business Manager and a Strategic Lead for ICT. The opportunities are endless.

Everyone plays a part

The children have been involved in dedicated collaborative activities, raising money for the **Rotary campaign to end polio**. Students from the partner universities, facilitated Trust working days, exploring the Trust values with all the year groups. The

undergraduates are currently undertaking assignments comprising the creation of a Trust brand incorporating a logo and website design.

The university stated: 'We are encouraged by the range of opportunities that are presenting themselves for both our students and staff. The benefits extend beyond teaching students across other faculties such as marketing and design – there have also been incidental opportunities for our staff generated through the Trust. A member of staff from a different department has become a governor for one of the Trust schools. Obviously, everyone stands to gain from these types of relationships and the potential for the future of the Trust is strengthened.'

It can be lonely out there...

The impact of this structured approach to collaborative working has been significant for the headteachers.

'Running a school is an exciting, rewarding and challenging task,' says Richard Green, headteacher at Coppice Primary. 'I feel very privileged to be in this position. However it can get lonely. Quite rightly we are constantly accountable to all our stakeholders – pupils, parents, staff, governors, authorities, inspectors and so on. While we work hard to meet their needs, sometimes it can feel like no-one is looking after our own individual needs. With ever changing expectations in education, we have been able to offer wonderful support to each other to work through them. As a result, I know I am more effective at meeting all those needs and feel confident about facing the challenges that lie ahead.'

The Trust headteachers have developed a highly professional working relationship creating both formal and informal opportunities to share information, discuss new policies and approaches. They regularly benchmark performance and explore different approaches such as the use of pupil and sport premium.

There is no requirement or pressure for the schools to standardise structures or delivery, however good ideas are invaluable. For instance, three schools have transformed the structure of their governor's meetings to become more streamlined and efficient whilst maintaining their focus and purpose.

Catherine Lewis, headteacher at Hollyfield Primary, explains: 'Following a collective review of the management of our governing processes, we have made amendments. Now we get through the business quickly and efficiently and the time spent preparing my headteacher's report has significantly reduced. Everyone has noticed the difference. The meetings are more engaging and we have the opportunity to really debate the important issues whilst still complying with the business requirements. There is now much more focus on looking to the future.'

Trust in the future

The focus for the first year has been building professional relationships and strong foundations based on trust and respect, as well as identifying areas for truly beneficial collaborative working. The impacts are already evident and the motivation amongst all staff and partners to keep building the Trust is strong.

Heather Sutton, headteacher at Four Oaks Primary, reflects: 'There is no doubt that the outcomes for children are tangible. There is so much more the Trust can achieve. This is just the beginning. The future is exciting. Opportunities are endless.' Moving forward, the Trust will build on maximising relationships with partners and increasing the impact of the Trust on parents and the wider community.

One year on, headteachers from Birmingham's first Co-operative Trust are in the driving seat, facing the challenges and opportunities presented by the changing educational landscape together. Furthermore, their options remain open for future development including academisation should they be considered appropriate.

Vicky Hewitson is Strategic Business Manager for the Learning Trust for Excellence.

If you would like to find out more about the Four Oaks Learning Trust for Excellence, or are interested in the Trust undertaking a review of your school, please contact the Chair, Rachel Davis, National Leader of Education at r.davis@littlesu.bham.sch.uk.