

# life after local AUTHORITIES



With support from the LA drying up, primary schools in Blackpool have banded together to form their own support network, as headteacher Michael Shepherd explains...

About a year ago, all the primary schools in Blackpool got together to create the Blackpool Primary Partnership. It was fast becoming clear to us all that, in the future, the local authority would struggle to provide the support we have previously enjoyed and so we would need to take matters into our own hands.

Blackpool is a small, unitary authority with 29 primary schools, three special schools, eight secondary schools and one primary academy. A benefit of such a small authority is that we all know each other well, making it easier to work together and support each other. The downside is limited capacity. Further cuts to school

# 89%

*Percentage of 1516 school leaders surveyed by The Key in October 2011 who reported a reduction in school support services provided by their local authority*



Some schools felt more vulnerable than others and worried about moving away from their existing modus operandi. There were concerns about becoming isolated and losing close contact with the local authority. It took a great deal of discussion to get everyone on board and I don't think any of us are naive enough to believe everyone will contribute in equal measure. There have always been those schools that are more actively committed to working together and again, the partnership recognises this. Most importantly, the heads of the more vulnerable schools felt assured that, should they find themselves in need of help, the partnership has the capacity to support them.

### **29 heads are better than one**

We have decided to meet in four regional clusters of schools each half term. Over the year, each school has agreed to give up six staff meetings to the partnership and the meetings rotate around the schools in each regional cluster with staff from each year group getting together to share, support and encourage each other. Where possible, the host school for each meeting provides the chair and minute taker and each school contributes their thoughts on an agreed area of learning.

We held our first meetings in the autumn term, which helped cement relationships and support between schools - where once this type of practice had been sporadic and ad hoc, it now had firm, strategic footing.

While meetings have a loose agenda, the main purpose is to enable staff to share their practice in these key areas. Next year, we will be introducing subject specialist meetings in

improvement, pupil welfare and other services suggest there will come a point at which the local authority is unable to meet the needs of all its schools.

The partnership is founded on the principle that, whatever route schools take, we will work together to raise aspirations, achievement and attainment for our children and families. Although several schools are considering academy conversion and one has already taken this route, we have agreed that we will continue to work for the good of all our children and communities regardless of any schools' designation. There is less 'anti academy' sentiment than 12 months ago and within Blackpool there is a real desire to build on the collaborative and collegiate approach fostered through the partnership.

When the partnership was established, we spent some time agreeing the terms of reference. This was important as it ensured everyone clearly understood how we would function together. We agreed reciprocity and inclusivity should underpin the partnership.

“The heads of the more vulnerable schools felt assured that, should they find themselves in need of help, the partnership has the capacity to support them”

response to requests from staff and these will alternate with the year group meetings.

Our meeting in January was different from those held in the autumn term in that all schools from each of the four regional clusters met together as four separate forums. Rather than splitting into year groups, each school as a whole was asked to share one or two ideas that were working to improve writing. As the meeting was only an hour it meant one five minute presentation per school. With a little flexibility built into the timings, we managed to cover a wide range of initiatives from practitioners from Foundation Stage through to Y6.

Unlike Teachmeets where people come along to listen and share of their own volition, many teachers at the January meeting didn't choose to attend. Some staff would, no doubt, have preferred their own staff meetings back at their own schools. A few of those presenting were certainly very nervous about sharing with an audience of over 150 rather than a smaller number of colleagues from their own setting, but the evening was a success nevertheless. The presentations were well received and supported, and definitely took some presenters out of their comfort zone. The opportunities for this kind of professional development are generally few and far between and this is something we want to develop as a partnership. We have already held a number of successful Teachmeets across Blackpool and this is an opportunity to take that model and develop it further.

We finished the meeting a few minutes early to give staff time to share emails and phone numbers, to bounce ideas off each other and plan further collaboration. For some, what may have initially seemed an unnecessary gathering finished as the start of

a new way of networking locally.

In lots of instances, the Blackpool Primary Partnership meetings are about reaffirming the things we are all already doing in isolation. In some cases it is about sharing new ideas and initiatives that have proved successful, but most importantly, it is about teachers discussing their practice with other teachers beyond their classrooms and schools.

In addition to the regional cluster meetings, we have established six strategic groups. Each group is made up of headteachers, business managers/bursars and deputies, with a chairs and secretaries agreed at our inaugural meeting. The groups are as follows:

- > Achievement
- > Inclusion
- > Finance and best value
- > Continuing professional development
- > Curriculum development
- > Behaviour and safety

An open invitation to meetings is extended to all the partnership schools. The chair of each group then provides feedback to headteachers at Blackpool Primary Partnership meetings every half term.

We have recently appointed someone to coordinate the partnership. Up to this point the management and strategic leadership of the group has come from heads and deputies, but we always knew this would not be sustainable long term as different pressures in school compete for individuals' time. The local authority has helped to fund this seconded, part time position to give the partnership the chance to develop and we continue to work closely with the LA on many issues beyond their statutory role. They are invited to all strategic meetings and we value their input. We are also looking at joint initiatives with the

## **i** ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Shepherd is headteacher at Hawes Side Primary School, Blackpool and Vice Chair of National Primary Steering Group for the SSAT.



local authority to support different aspects of school improvement. They recognise the need for us to find and develop new ways of working if we are to continue to meet the needs of our schools and communities.

### Building from the bottom up

Next month, chairs of the strategic groups, along with our partnership coordinator, will be meeting a number of website designers to develop an online presence for the partnership. Each strategic group will be able to make the most of the technology available to support staff in our schools by providing an online community to share ideas. The CPD group, for example, will have a leadership pathway of courses advertised online, created in partnership with the local authority and local universities.

Like the other strategic groups, the Continuing Professional Development group is responding to need from the bottom up.

Previously, many courses and training opportunities have been advertised by the local authority and outside agencies in areas they believe will be helpful to schools. Attendance at these events has not been good as the subjects chosen do not always fit in with schools' priorities. We are keen to reverse this trend by providing training in response to requests from staff and schools. Already we have a number of courses running across Blackpool within our schools to keep the costs down. A six session course for support staff is well attended and gratefully received in response to requests; a middle leadership course has just finished; and a preparation for leadership course, in conjunction with Manchester University, has just commenced.

## Are you missing something?

### Accounts of local authority cut backs...

#### NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE

At a time when some schools may need support most, many local authorities are set to devote fewer resources to monitoring and supporting schools' financial management. Forty per cent of authorities responding to an NAO survey do not believe they have sufficient resources to provide effective support to schools and almost half of those authorities are planning to reduce the amount of staff time spent on support.

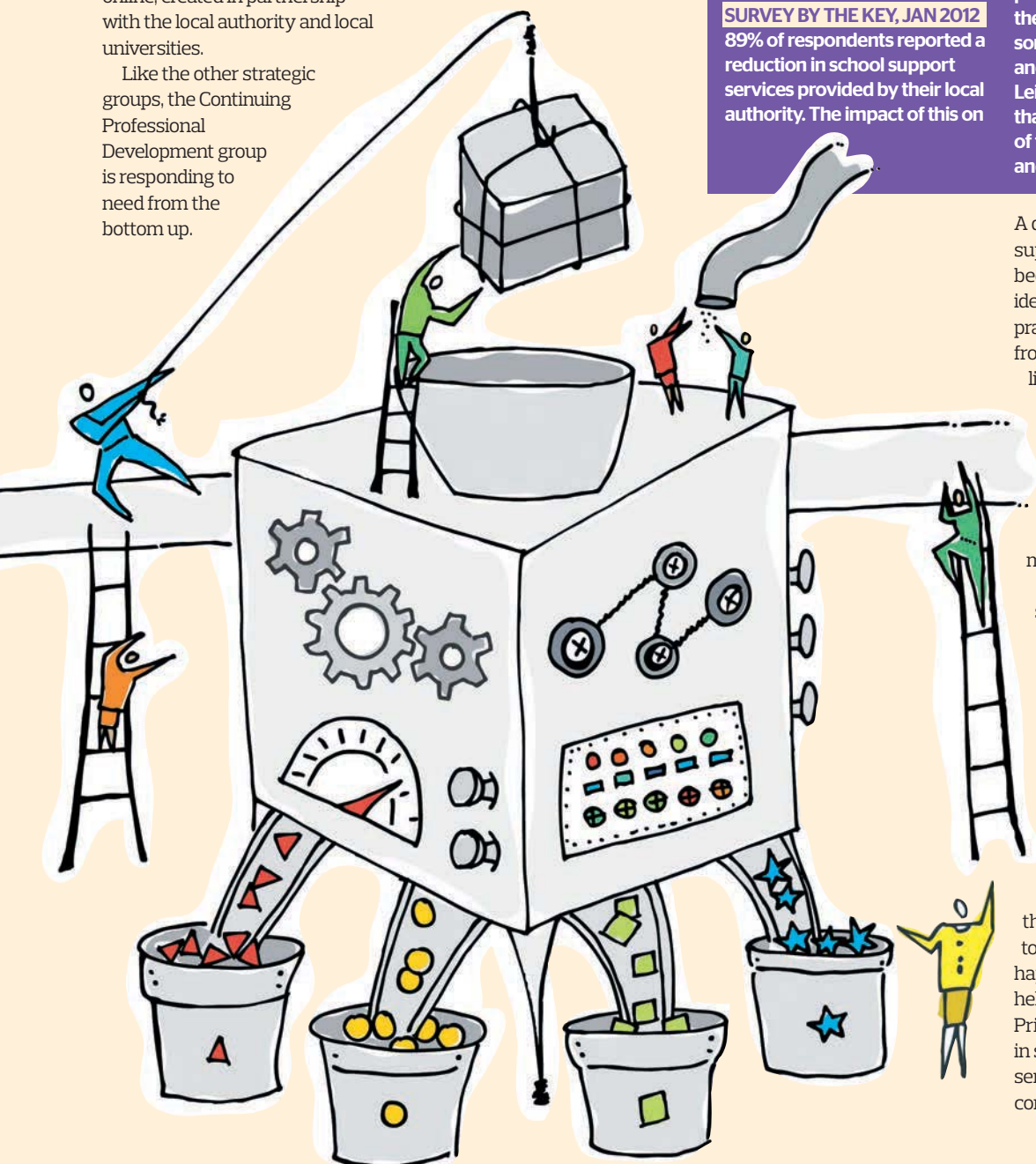
#### SURVEY BY THE KEY, JAN 2012

89% of respondents reported a reduction in school support services provided by their local authority. The impact of this on

schools is reported to be an increased administration load for school office staff, and reduced opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD). Local authority training for school staff is reported to be either much reduced, of a lower quality, or more expensive and therefore less accessible than it was previously.

#### LEICESTERSHIRE TEACHER, FEB 2012

Leicestershire NUT has always argued that the programme of converting schools to academies would have a real impact on the provision of front-line LA services, and so it has proved, with more than 100 people [whose jobs may be cut] paying the price for this ideologically-driven programme. And many of these staff work every day with some of the most vulnerable and challenging youngsters in Leicestershire. Every school that converts takes money out of the County Council budget, and this is the result.



A directory of school-to-school support in key areas has also been created, with schools identifying outstanding practitioners in different areas from the traditional leading literacy and numeracy teachers, to more specialist fields such as sustainability and ecological work. Schools are already consulting the directory to access peer support, which is becoming a more common way of working. As the educational landscape shifts, so too does the partnership. The initial concerns around isolation and vulnerability have hopefully been dealt with and colleagues are happy with the new way of working. The local authority also sees the partnership as something they are keen to work with and have begun to use the strategic groups to support their work, coming to meetings to share ideas, to find out what is happening and how they can help. While still in its infancy, the Primary Partnership is growing in strength and is well placed to serve the children and communities of Blackpool.