

LARGE BUT LOCAL: UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATIONALLY ISOLATED SCHOOLS.

A CASE STUDY OF A MULTI ACADEMY TRUST 'HUB SCHOOL' MODEL IN THE SOUTH WEST OF ENGLAND

**YEAR ONE AND TWO
INTERIM REPORT**

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Our thanks to the Multi Academy Trust and all of its school leaders for their time and engagement with this research project.

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All of the executive leads and the hub leads are trained in school improvement and, because they focus all of their time and energy into fewer schools, actually what they get is better quality.

School Leader

Introduction

Educational isolation is complex, grounded in location, situated in access to resources and results in reduced agency for schools. Educational isolation is defined as:

A school experiencing limited access to resources for school improvement, resulting from challenges of school location (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2019¹).

The challenge of location is particularly strong for schools in rural and coastal areas. The image of an idyllic country or seaside life, with strong community support for the local schools², continues but is not necessarily the whole picture; some coastal and rural areas have high levels of deprivation, their schools can be isolated from different kinds of support for teaching and learning, and community members do not always support their local school. A powerful indicator of the challenges that can be faced in schools in coastal and/or rural locations is demonstrated in an analysis of the 2014 GCSE outcomes of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, which showed that, as schools' relative geographical isolation increased, so the average attainment of disadvantaged pupils decreased³. A more recent report suggested that this has not changed:

For a given level of deprivation, the attainment levels of pupils living in rural areas were lower than for pupils living in urban areas with a similar level of deprivation. (Department for Education, Rural Education and Childcare, 2018⁴)

At the same time, the government's focus for schools has been predominantly on densely populated and often disadvantaged urban areas⁵ which, in turn, has encouraged educational researchers to focus on the same areas. This means that the difficulties faced by schools in rural, coastal and isolated locations have been relatively under-researched, and that there is little wider appreciation of the challenges they face.

¹ Ovenden-Hope, T. and Passy, R. (2019) *Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England*, Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth

² Cloke, P. J. (2003) *Country Visions*. Harlow, UK: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

³ Future Leaders Trust (2015) *Isolated schools: Out on a limb*, <https://www.ambitionschoolleadership.org.uk/blog/isolated-schools-out-limb/>

⁴ Department for Education (2018) *Rural Education and Childcare*. London: DfE, p.5.

⁵ Central Government education policies, such as the London Challenge.

This project is a direct response to the issue of under-researching Educational Isolation. Researchers from Plymouth Marjon University and the University of Plymouth are grateful for the opportunity to research in collaboration with a medium-sized multi-academy trust (MAT) in a rural and coastal part of the South-West of England. The aims of the study are first, to explore the concept of Educational Isolation in depth and secondly, to examine how its effects might be mitigated by the hub school model adopted by this MAT.

The complexity of Educational Isolation

Part of the complexity in conceptualising Educational Isolation is articulating the way it is experienced differently by schools in relation to their place. We have therefore defined Educational Isolation in a broad and encompassing way. In our report from the Educational Isolation research project, undertaken between 2017 – 2019⁶, we cite the main challenges of a schools' place as:

- **Geographic remoteness** – leaders from rural and coastal schools reported limited access to public transport; the high cost of travel, together with long journeys, were seen to have a negative effect on parental/community engagement with the school and teacher recruitment and retention.
- **Socioeconomic disadvantage** – the same school leaders reported that few large-scale, innovative, local employers in the area resulted in an impoverished type of careers advice; that high levels of seasonal and poorly-paid employment limited young people's expectations; that the absence of sound employment prospects reduced student motivation at school.
- **Cultural isolation** – rural and coastal leaders told us of their cultural isolation, which they believed led to a less rich educational experience for their students than for those attending multicultural schools in cities that have readily-accessible museums, galleries and theatres. Leaders argued that rural and coastal schools needed to invest considerable time, money and effort into introducing children to different ethnicities, cultures and lifestyles, drawing a comparison with more populated areas that have a diverse population and in which there are a range of readily available cultural opportunities. The disparity in school funding between London and more remote areas was seen as an important barrier to offering children these experiences.

Nonetheless, these challenges individually may not result in Educational Isolation. Urban inner-city schools, for instance, may have high levels of disadvantage but still have access to the different resources needed to support school improvement. For example, cultural diversity in cities can widen students' experiences as part of everyday life; there is a larger pool of teachers to draw on for school recruitment; and relatively short distances within cities can facilitate teacher continuing professional development (CPD).

When the three challenges are experienced together by a school, we have identified this as Educational Isolation and seen that it limits access of these schools, predominantly but not exclusively in coastal and rural areas, to:

⁶ Ovenden-Hope, T. and Passy, R. (2019) *Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England*, Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth.

- **A high-quality workforce** – staff recruitment and retention can be more difficult in coastal and rural areas, partly because of the high cost of housing in desirable areas that attract second homeowners and partly because teaching at these schools can be challenging. The resulting high levels of churn can lead to ongoing staff development issues; experienced but possibly underperforming teachers can move around local schools, resulting in ‘coastal churn’; or at the other end of the retention spectrum, a static staff can lead to inward-looking school improvement.
- **School support** – rural and coastal leaders reported high levels of isolation in terms of teacher CPD and/or leadership development because of the long distances between schools, which inhibit opportunities for shared school improvement and networking. They also reported that the cost of sending staff to conferences in major urban areas could be prohibitive.
- **Externally-funded interventions** – rural and coastal leaders told us that they were disconnected from national funding streams, and that this exacerbated disparities in school funding. They argued that deprived areas in cities or towns received ‘*far more funding*’, a reflection of government policy oriented towards large urban areas with high density of population.

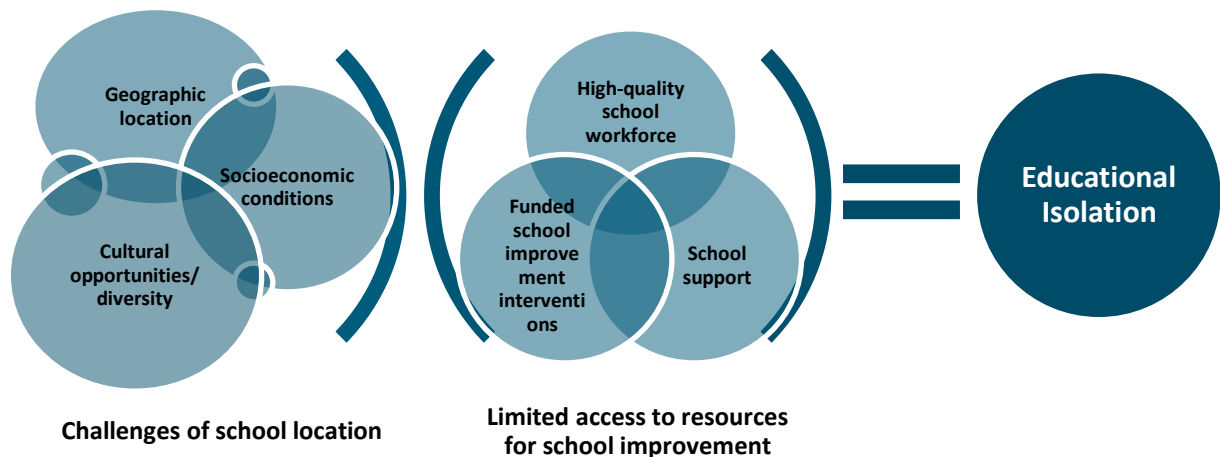


Figure 1: Conceptualising Educational Isolation⁷

⁷ Ovenden-Hope, T. and Passy, R. (2019) Educational Isolation: a challenge for schools in England, Plymouth: Plymouth Marjon University and University of Plymouth, pp.4-5.

The hub school model

The MAT taking part in this project is trialling an innovative 'hub school' model. It is seen as a possible means of mitigating the effects of Educational Isolation in a rural/coastal area by combining the advantages of:

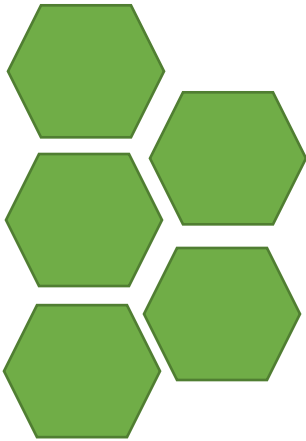
1. economies of scale,
2. streamlining leadership and management processes,
3. clear leadership on school improvement,
4. the advantages of creating smaller supportive, localised school improvement communities.

Schools are divided into hubs so that:

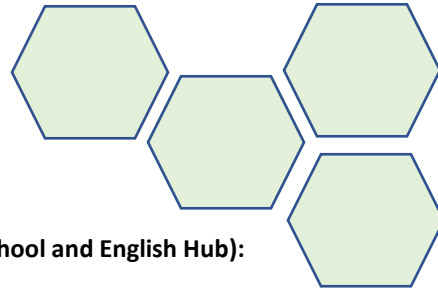
- As far as possible, schools are geographically close to facilitate short travel times between schools for meeting attendance, support and CPD.
- Personal relationships can be maintained, providing immediate support as staff settle into new structures and ways of working.
- The hubs can be roughly equal in size, with around 1,000 pupils in each made up from small to large schools.
- Hubs have a mix of school improvement needs in order to level out these needs across the MAT.

The MAT is led by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and one Deputy CEO, who are held to account by a Trustee Board that has several sub-committees. The Hub Leads join the CEO and Deputy CEO as part of the Executive Leadership Team and are responsible for the schools in their hub. The Hub Leads combine this role with that of Executive Headteacher or Headteacher of one or more schools in their hub. Headteachers are responsible for the day-to-day management of their schools and are part of the Senior Leadership Team. Hubs have some autonomy while subscribing to centrally led principles, processes and strategies; the whole is aimed at creating supportive local communities under the overall leadership of the MAT. A diagram of the hub model can be seen in Figure 2 below.

West Hub: 5 schools

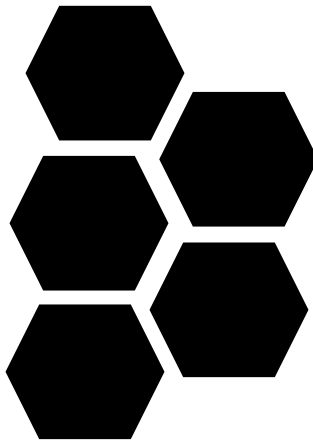


North Hub: 4 schools



Mid Hub (includes Teaching School and English Hub):

5 schools



East Hub: 4 Schools (plus new school opening 2022/23)

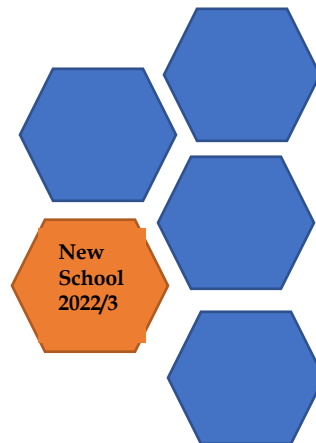


Figure 2: The hub school model in 2020/21

The research project

The research project is qualitative and longitudinal, taking place over the three academic years 2019 – 2022. The aims are to:

- draw on the MAT's experiences to explore the concept of Educational Isolation in depth
- examine how its effects might be mitigated by the hub school model adopted by this MAT.

We are using the methodology of appreciative inquiry (AI), which is a strengths-based, positive approach to leadership development and organisational change⁸. Its action research model of 'plan, do, review' fits well with the Executive Leadership Team's approach of flexibility in response to developments within the MAT, and AIs positive approach matches the MAT ethos of supportive professional development.

Research methods

Research methods are first, to scrutinise publicly available data to understand the MAT's system, its constituent schools and the attainment profile of the pupils. Unfortunately, in both years of the research so far the pandemic has resulted in disruption of the education system, including the cancellation of external exams; no primary school test or exam data were published in 2020 or 2021. This means that our annual interviews with staff members have been our source of information in both the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years.

The project has been granted ethical approval by Plymouth Marjon University, with particular focus on voluntary participation, confidentiality, and secure data management and protection.

Year 1 research

In Year 1 of the project our primary data were collected first from a baseline focus group at the start of the academic year with senior leaders of the MAT, asking about their understanding of Educational Isolation and the hub model. At the end of the year, we interviewed the seven senior leaders, asking for their views on the hub model, its challenges and successes and plans for the next year.

Data from these two methods showed that, despite the challenges brought by the Covid pandemic, the benefits of the hub model were:

1. Opportunities for relationship development, with a '*personal*' feel to each hub.

⁸ Cooperrider, D. & Srivastva, S. (1989) Appreciative inquiry in organizational life, *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 1, pp.129-169.

2. Staff confidence-building through MAT-wide and localised CPD. There was also increased confidence in the model to deliver its aims of centralised leadership with localised autonomy.
3. Opportunities for local collaboration.
4. Ease of communication through the meeting systems set up at MAT and local level.
5. School improvement, through a greater understanding of each school's strengths and needs.
6. Sharing of resources, seen to reduce workload and open staff to new ideas.
7. Financial efficiency, through sharing of staff such as SENCOs and subject leaders.
8. New technology. The technology infrastructure set up enabled staff to keep in touch with families during the lockdowns and subsequently, which was particularly helpful for the families of children with learning difficulties.

The challenges of the hub model were reported as:

1. Allocating schools to hubs. Balancing existing relationships with geographical location, pupil numbers and differential school improvement needs proved to be difficult. In response to these challenges, the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) decided that flexibility was key, and to enable headteachers to choose the 'best fit' for their hub. Schools can change hub if circumstances require.
2. Support and control. All interviewees commented on the challenge of finding the right balance between tight oversight of the model and autonomy of delivery.
3. The Hub Lead role. All Hub Leads identified the need to separate the multiple roles as Hub Lead/Headteacher and find the right balance between them.
4. School resources. Once again interviewees reported that a balance had to be found, this time between generally sharing expertise and prioritising the most important MAT-wide school improvement issues.

Year 2 research process

In Year 2 of the project we conducted the interviews towards the end of the summer term. We first interviewed the MAT CEO to gain an overview of developments in the academic year 2020/21, followed by interviews with all of the Senior Leadership Team who were leading a school - 22 staff members in total. These school leaders had roles that included executive headteacher, headteacher and the four Hub Leads. The aim of the interviews was to explore ways in which the hub school model was functioning for all concerned, the successes and challenges, if the model was mitigating the effects of Educational Isolation and ideas for next steps. The interview schedule can be seen in Appendix 1.

Data were analysed thematically, following the principles of Braun and Clarke⁹ that involve familiarisation, coding, theme generation and writing up. The next section

⁹ Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (n/d) *Thematic Analysis*, <https://www.thematicanalysis.net/>

reports on our findings; all quotations are '*in italics*' and unattributed to maintain participants' anonymity although, where helpful, the interviewee's role is made known.

Year 2 research findings

In Section 4 we report on the changes to the hub model; Section 5 discusses the successes and Section 6 the challenges. Section 7 considers the ways in which the hub model mitigates against Educational Isolation, and brings the report to a conclusion.

Changes to the hub model from Year 1

Interviewees reported the following changes to the hub model:

- The **number of hubs has been reduced** to four from five in the previous year; one school has been absorbed more fully into the hub system, so that there are now four – rather than five – Hub Leads. The aim of this shift was to ensure that there was coherence across the MAT and that all schools were involved in Trust-level communications. This has been a sensitive issue, however, as the ‘absorbed’ school has external leadership responsibilities outside the Trust, and the leaders involved have different views on the way in which it should work within the hub model.
- Following the MAT model of flexibility, **one school has moved hub**. This was partly to be closer in location to other schools, but also because it was felt that expertise within the new hub would be of particular benefit.
- The **Executive Leadership Team (ELT) has been expanded** to include new, cross-Trust roles that include strategic leads for safeguarding, pedagogy, information technology (IT) and career development. This has contributed towards cross-Trust work *‘really taking off’*, reinforced by the policy of encouraging post-threshold staff and assistant heads to lead on specific school improvement issues.
- At the same time, the Trust has streamlined the ELT by **amalgamating the two DCEO posts** into one following the departure of the DCEO Operations to a new post.

While these are structural changes, there have also been several developments relating to roles and functions. These include:

- The timing of the monthly leadership meeting has shifted towards the hubs. The meeting starts with all leaders (i.e. the ELT and all school leaders) together, discussing the *‘main messages that everyone needs to hear’*. It then breaks into hub groups, where local issues are discussed. In the second year of the project, more time has been spent on this second part of the meeting, a reversal of the first year.
- The hubs *‘are beginning to have their own ethos and flavour, glued together by coming together as an ELT and coming together as a leadership team’*. This view was largely unspoken but was a fundamental understanding in many of our conversations; it was illustrated by another interviewee’s comment that, *‘I think it [the model] just*

brings out a sense of community really, but also [of] being a cog within quite a big machine.

The development of hubs' ethos and flavour can be seen in a number of ways, for instance in **following different threads of school improvement:**

We've just set up a network for our TIS [Trauma Informed Schools] practitioners. It's about drawing on the expertise that we've got within our own hub area so, because we are geographically close, it means that it's quite easy for us to travel around and support each other.

Discussing strategies for hub schools:

... to have that opportunity to work closely together and have discussions in ... a trusted group, where we can really discuss some of the decisions that have been made, or unpick some decisions that have been made, or really think about how we're going to move forward in our individual schools, has been great.

And understanding **the depth of talent in the hub:**

'We've put forward a music specialist, who is brilliant, to offer support'.

'The hub model helps me to spot potential and future leaders'.

'We've got an administrator who's an absolute genius at Single Central Record'.

'I'm really eager to share, and very eager to share practice of some of my excellent staff'.

'It's knowing our teams, it's knowing who we can call on'.

'I've got a brilliant ICT lead who did some workshops on using IT with dyslexic children'.

Hub model successes

Each interviewee was asked to what they believed were the three main successes of the hub model in the academic 2020/21 and the three main challenges. Table 1 below shows the five main successes cited by our interviewees, plus the number of times each was mentioned. Not all interviewees offered three successes.

Success	Number of mentions
Developing trusted, supportive relationships	16
Collaboration: sharing knowledge, expertise, resources; CPD	14
Communication through the Trust	12
Support of Executive Leadership Team	9
Staff mental health and wellbeing	6

Table 1: Most frequent interviewee responses to the question 'What have been the three best outcomes for the hub model this year?'

Developing supportive, trusted relationships

As can be seen from the Table above, most interviewees believed that the hub model encouraged the formation of supportive relationships in which trust was building over time. One interviewee commented:

I would absolutely put relationships as number one [success]. And it works because those relationships are so positive and so supportive.

Interviewees reported that these supportive relationships were being forged in a number of ways. In some cases it was about **asking for non-judgemental help**:

I wouldn't feel anything about phoning any of them [other hub heads] and saying, 'Oh god, can you help me with this?' I wouldn't feel like they would then think, 'Oh she's hopeless'. They would just go, 'Oh yeah, good job you asked that because I need to do that too, let's do it together'.

This kind of immediate and trusted response was particularly **helpful for heads new to the role** and who could find the larger Trust meetings a little overwhelming:

I find the big hub, the big Trust meetings quite overwhelming and there are some very experienced headteachers there. So, I kind of keep quiet and write lots of notes and then address it when I'm in my ... hub group.

Creating a safe environment could also involve **having a critical friend**:

The second one [success] would be [having] that critical friend and that safe environment ... where I can actually say, "Actually, I planned two camps this year"

and everybody else goes, "Well you might want to rethink that" ... You can make the mistake openly with your group, so I think that's been really, really supportive.

Another theme was finding helpful **levels of support available during the Covid lockdowns**:

In the first lockdown it was a nightmare, we didn't know whether we coming or going. It took a long time to settle into routines and things, and it was really lovely then to have a team of people that you could phone up or message and just go, "Did you know?" Or, "Have you heard this?" Or, "What do I do about this?"

Having a **'go to' person in the Hub Lead** meant that relatively small issues could be dealt with quickly and locally, offering confidence in decisions made and making the model time-efficient:

A real benefit [of the model] is having a 'go to' person ... where you don't feel like you're putting something too small onto the plate of the CEO, who's got loads of things going on.

These supportive relationships could also offer a **safe platform at Hub level to voice and/or trial innovative ideas and practices** before (potentially) sharing at Trust level:

We are now, as a hub, trialling a way of working electronically, setting up our own team to deliver key outcomes for our hub so that we can then model that and replicate it across the other three hubs.

The final, critical point here is that these positive relationships were felt to **contribute to heads' wellbeing** during the intensely difficult time of Covid-related lockdowns and restrictions:

[Support at hub level] really helps massively with wellbeing. That's our first top agenda item. Every time we have a hub meeting, [name] goes round and checks on our wellbeing. And it feels like a safe place to talk ... and understand that we're in all in the same boat; actually, we've all got similar stories.

It's a lonely job, being a headteacher and being able to support one another [through the hub] ... it's just so needed. Everybody is so busy, and I think just folk knowing that you will get back to them as soon as you can and there's a listening ear there [is important].

Interviewees made suggestions about ways in which to **build on these relationships** in the future. These included:

- Giving more time for Executive Leadership meetings and for Hub Leads to talk to each other. There is potential for hub heads to *'feel disconnected from other hubs'*.
- Thinking carefully about the size of the hubs and ensuring that they do not become *'a bit too big'* to maintain personal connections.
- Enabling more face-to-face meetings, possibly in conjunction with virtual:

'We've got Teams, which has been brilliant ... but there's nothing like that face-to-face interaction, particularly when you're focusing on school improvement or staff professional development'.

Collaboration

Interviewees reported high levels of collaboration in terms of sharing, whether this was in the form of decision-making, knowledge, CPD or material resources. **Sharing decision-making** related to the multiple decisions needed to be taken, particularly during the pandemic:

Without going into the nitty gritty there were lots of decisions we had to make ... from within the hub level, like whether we would be closed on a Friday afternoon for deep cleaning, things like that. That was our decision, but it was nice to have that mutual support to know that other people were doing it and how it was working for them.

Resource-sharing was often seen as an extension to developing/building on local- and Trust-level relationships, with staff members getting to know each other better through the types of collaborative work they were undertaking. Almost every interview was laced with descriptions of how heads and Hub Leads had collaborated with other individuals or schools in a multitude of different ways, from lending minibuses and organising Trust-wide events such as G19 during the international G7 summit in June, to sharing information or designing new forms of CPD at hub and Trust levels.

The Trust **focus on school improvement** was seen to be at the centre of all collaboration relating to teaching and learning. One interviewee spoke of how they believed the hub model enabled high-quality CPD for staff:

Working in those hubs ... allows school improvement to take place at quite an intense level ... All of the executive leads and the hub leads are trained in school improvement and, because they focus all of their time and energy into fewer schools [than local authorities], actually what they get is better quality.

Another research participant reported that the Trust structures and processes enabled **maximum benefit** to be drawn from collaborative CPD:

Part of the problem with CPD events is what happens afterwards, and I've been to numerous things where, for whatever reason, nothing happens after the CPD's been

done. Whereas if you're enabling teachers to network and work together towards a common goal, much more happens - there is much better impact and that's one of the real strengths of being in a hub and a wider Trust.

Some commented on the cost-effectiveness of externally-led CPD that they had shared through their hub on virtual platforms; others spoke of the advantages of recording these sessions so that they could be accessed at a later, more convenient time. Still others, however, **cautioned against moving all CPD** to virtual platforms:

I think there's a danger that we can just say, 'Right let's do everything on Teams', because I think in order to make collaboration work properly, you do need to see the whites of people's eyes and you do need to be able to read the room, which you can't do on Teams ... And as teachers, you need to actually be able to flick through a science book and say, 'Yes this is what ours feel like, this is what the learning looks like'.

Interviewees also reported:

- **Cross- and extra-Trust collaboration.** Heads of small schools and church schools are developing their own networks within, and in some cases, outside of the Trust.
- **Collaboration with schools outside the Trust** on larger events, for example on a Careers Fair planned for 2021/22. One interviewee commented on a *'hybrid model'* of collaboration at hub and Trust levels, but also with schools external to the Trust in order to access *'the best support'* available at the time.
- *'A lot'* of collaboration *'is goodwill; you know, giving staff to other schools to support.'* The longer-term benefit to this kind of collaboration was seen to be in the **professional development** staff gained from working in different schools; this type of opportunity was seen as *'a fantastic opportunity to learn leadership'*.
- **Sharing policy documents and resources on a virtual platform** means that staff *'don't have to reinvent the wheel'* while adapting ideas and practices to their own school context. This helps to cut workload and *'helps massively with wellbeing'*.

Communication

The third most-cited success of the hub model was communication although, as the interview quotations on the next page demonstrate, this is closely linked to the fourth; support from the ELT and Senior Leadership Team (SLT).

Figure 3 below shows that the model of communication adopted by the Trust is hierarchical. The CEO shares information at two Trust levels, ELT and SLT, to ensure clarity and accuracy of message. The information is then discussed in the hub at local level and cascaded at school level by headteachers to teachers and support staff, and teachers to pupils and parents/carers. Interviewees reported clear trust level

communication, with opportunities to contextualise messages at a local level through the hubs to support school level needs.

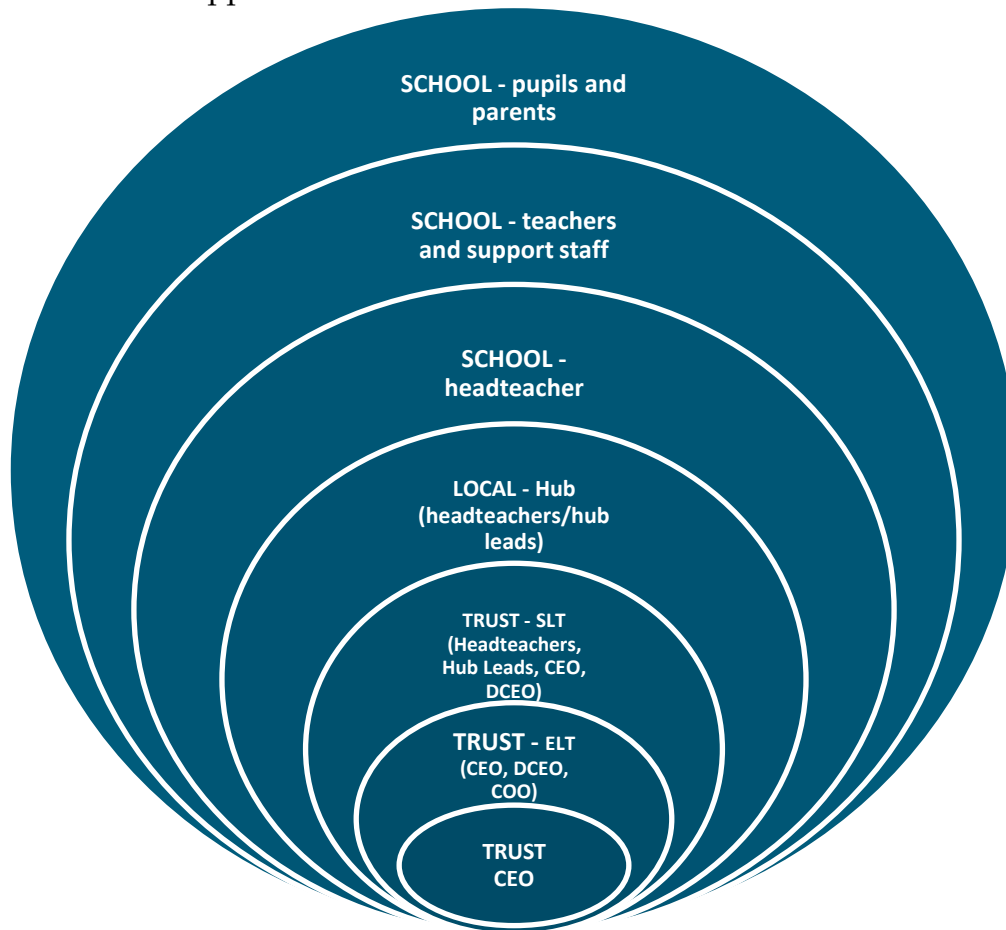


Figure 3: The Trust model of communication

All interviewees who spoke about communication within the Trust were positive in their comments. Themes included describing the communication model in terms of **effectiveness**:

The hub school structure enables a Trust like ourselves, that is geographically challenged at times, to operate very, very effectively. Because what we have is an obviously a CEO and our DCEO, and then we have another stratum which are hub leads and then underneath that, you have your headteachers for all your different schools. So, we are able to cascade and disseminate information in tighter groups ... [enabling] quality discussion where everybody has their voice heard and everybody feels valued.

Clarity of message from the top:

... the reason this Trust works so well with the hub model ... [is] due to the clear leadership at the top, and that clear leadership, having the exec team. It's clearly communicated to us what our roles are; it's clearly communicated to us the

expectations within those roles, and we have regular supervision which checks on how we're going.

Support offered from the top:

Legally, what needed to be communicated and by when [during lockdowns] ... has been consistent and continued, right up until the half term we've just had, as in parents need to still report up to 48 hours after we've gone on half term. So that support has been absolutely amazing. I think the Central Team, if you've got any quibbles or questions they are there in the background, and they've always got your back ... It's good to know that.

The importance of **clarity and support at hub level**:

You have that head's meeting and then we get a chance to talk about the head's meeting [at hub level]. So one of the things that [Hub Lead] will say is, "Any points that came out from there that you just need clarifying?" Effective communication has been crucial.

A developing two-way system:

It's been really useful to hear what hubs are saying to then help us shape our response from the centre. So I hope that that mechanism is being developed (ELT member).

That is **inclusive**:

I see it as like a family. So, each hub within your family of schools, you build up stronger relationships than with other hub schools. I see it as a supportive network of families as well. The hub model for me is all about effective communication, and probably thinking from the CEO and deputy CEO downwards how to get that communication out to all the schools, to all the teachers, support staff, to all the parents.

That is **accessible** to staff members:

I can keep checking in to make sure my ideas are in alignment with the Trust's and purpose, visions and aims. But also, that I'm following the vision, mission and aims of the school, so I'm not taking the school onto a different course. I can professionally ask pertinent questions around all areas of the headteacher role, so I can then be directed to the right part of the central team, or a colleague with that authority across the whole trust, or within our hub.

And **consistent to local communities**:

Through Covid ... we've made sure that there's been a local message coming through all of our schools so we're not getting any of the, 'Well, they're not doing that in such-a-such school' ... On the whole we've made sure that all of our messages have been consistent.

One final point related to the **clarity of Trust vision**, which includes local autonomy for the hubs:

The Trust has been able ... to be really clear about what the aims of a school are, and within our hub we've got all our unique identities. So, each community is different and therefore we're meeting the needs of our local community, but those communities are different so therefore we're going to be acting slightly differently in order to deliver the vision and values of the Trust.

Hub model challenges

Staff cited fewer hub model challenges than successes in their interviews. Some interviewees offered general points to think about in terms of the hub model rather than citing them as direct challenges; other challenges they reported were generally interlinked and often related to Covid. For these reasons we have focused on the themes discussed rather than providing a tally table. In this section we start with issues related to the hub model, then turn to challenges experienced during the last academic year, and finish by considering actions that the Trust could take. We have used fewer quotations than in previous sections to avoid the possibility of interviewee identification.

Buy-in to the hub model

The large majority of interviewees were in agreement about the benefits of the hub model, but a small minority were not convinced that the **financial cost** of belonging to the hub school model was worth it. These headteachers felt that they could use the funds for more focused school improvement:

You know, I can see from my school budget that having a hub lead costs me the same as having a TA would, and I need a TA more because we're really stretched.

Some considered that they **gave more in support than they received**:

It still feels as though we give, give, give but we don't get back.

Poor buy-in seemed to be **related to the hub school groupings**, with relationships established before Kernow Learning Trust and hub school geographical proximity both factors in the headteachers' buy-in to the model. Some with established relationships and/or close locations seem to have formed a closely-knit hub; others found difficulty in adapting to working with the Hub Lead rather than their previous line manager.

The role of the Hub Lead

As was the case with last year's interviews, research participants reported on the **multiple roles undertaken by the Hub Leads**. Some headteachers recognised and were in sympathy with the demands of the role that is combined with school headship:

I would say that it's probably a challenge for the Hub Leads as well to oversee so much. I would say that's probably challenging for them. Not that ... they don't do it brilliantly; I think they have and they've risen to that challenge ... it's a big responsibility to take on at the same time as being a school base themselves.

Headteachers also spoke positively of the levels of support they had received from their Hub Leads over the last year, and appreciated being able to draw on the Hub Leads' experience. They also appreciated the two-way information flows between the ELT and heads. One commented that they had:

... a good hub lead, and I know that if I've got any concerns I can pass them onto her and they definitely get passed on to the higher senior leadership team within the trust.

Challenges related to the role related to:

- **Clarifying the nature of the role:** *'I also think that we need to really be clear on what the role of the hub lead is ... I think we would be better off firmly rooting this in teaching and learning and school improvement'*. To what extent should Hub Leads broker support?
- Understanding and managing the **difference between Hub Lead and other roles**; at times other duties meant that Hub Leads were unable fully to engage with the Hub Lead role.
- Managing the **unpredictability of the workload**. Headteachers with variable levels of experience need different amounts of support at different times, and it may be that more than one headteacher is facing tricky challenges at the same time.
- The **balance between supporting and monitoring** schools.
- The small amount of **time allocated for Hub Leads to discuss and develop** their role.

Hub groupings

A number of interviewees questioned the hub grouping, either directly or indirectly. Issues raised included:

- **Hub size:** How many schools in a hub maximise the strengths of the model? A few interviewees suggested that five to six was the optimal number of schools to facilitate high-quality relationships, collaboration and communication: *'as soon as things get bigger, your ability to be able to be with people becomes smaller'*.
- **School proximity:** A small minority of headteachers reported their school was not within easy travelling distance of their other hub schools; although IT had helped them to become less disconnected, they had yet to feel the benefit of being part of a hub: *Maybe it would if we were in and out of each other's schools ... perhaps that will develop'*. Other issues related to borrowing resources such as minibuses: *'Ideally, all of the schools would have minibuses to draw on'*, difficulties with collaboration over staff recruitment and distance precluding staff sharing.

Small school challenges

Interviewees from small schools spoke about the particular challenges they face as a result of their situation. One commented that *'If you're a non-teaching head, it's a very different role to [that of] a small school'*. Challenges included:

- **Time.** Small schools with teaching heads have less time to prepare for meetings, and may have multiple meetings to attend in one day; this may result in them feeling that *'I haven't had the chance to have the input that other heads have'*.
- Similarly, the **small number of staff** in small schools can mean that teachers have multiple roles: *'often in the small schools, we wear many different hats so we end up in lots and lots of meetings'*, sometimes *'repeating yourself'* through *'being on lots of different committees'*. This can add to time pressures.
- **Curricular development.** This can be a different process for small schools that, because of their mixed-age classes, needs a different approach to larger schools': *Our children don't necessarily go from a Year 3 topic to a Year 4 topic next to a Year 5 topic next because they're all mixed up because they're mixed age ... [a large school is] only looking at one year group ... It doesn't work the same way here.*
- Partly because of the pressures on time, small school heads can feel that their **expertise** – for instance in mixed-age teaching – **is unrecognised**: *'that does chip away at your confidence sometimes'*.

Covid-related challenges

Without doubt it was a difficult year for all; the hub model was in its early stages of development, the shift to virtual communication was hard work, the Trust had to roll out the Teams platform very quickly, and staff, children and parents had to learn to use it. The swift adaptation to the new circumstances, however, was also seen to bring benefits: remote working through Teams saved time and prompted **'huge' professional development**:

We worked really hard on Teams, but what we've learnt, and the professional development within that, was huge ... In fact a member of staff has come and said, "Thank you for insisting that we use that and we do that, because I've learnt so much".

This hard work, however, brought **challenges related to workload**:

I try and protect my staff and tell them what they need to know, so they can get on with their classrooms and the children in their care, but ... sometimes you see their faces: "Oh, argh! I can't believe you're asking us to do this now" ... They always come up trumps, I have to say, but just general day-to-day teaching is a massive demanding job in itself.

And concerns about **the pace of demands** in the workplace:

The pace is overwhelming at times, or most of the time to be honest.

The increased workload led to a leadership awareness of protecting staff wellbeing, however, which in turn meant that **CPD plans were slowed down**:

Covid has restricted us quite a bit. Although we can do a lot of it electronically, we haven't because of workload, because of managing staff wellbeing ... For instance, we were all going to come together to deliver a joint staff meeting virtually last week, and the leaders of each school and the hub lead agreed that actually people have got too much on. Let's postpone that now. Let's think about people's wellbeing.

This, in turn, led to a degree of frustration from some interviewees about the **slow pace of change**:

We've had tremendous plans in terms of what we would be doing, in terms of sharing CPD ... It just hasn't been able to materialise in the way that we have wanted it to, at the speed that we've wanted it to and because of the situation we're in.

Finally, restrictions on meeting face-to-face led to a degree of frustration that **relationships could be 'quite difficult to establish via Teams'**, and that cross-hub relationships were slower to develop because of this. Most interviewees reported that they believed the situation would improve once face-to-face meetings could resume.

Issues for consideration

In response to these challenges, the Trust could consider:

- Ensuring that all headteachers understand the aims of the hub model and how to realise its potential benefits.
- Clarifying the role of the Hub Lead.
- Thinking about the maximum size of a hub, and how the more geographically-distant schools can be supported.
- The ways in which leadership experience is 'dispersed' within hubs.
- Supporting small schools with their various challenges.
- The balance between pressure and support.

Conclusion: mitigating against Educational Isolation

In this final section, we draw the report to a close.

Educational Isolation

While it may be a little early to consider the extent to which the hub model could be mitigating against Educational Isolation, we can make the following preliminary comments:

- **Socioeconomic disadvantage:** Communication within the Trust is helping to raise awareness of and to support schools with high levels of disadvantaged pupils:
[name] 'has been really helpful with supporting me with ensuring that the provision for PP pupils is as it should be because I think, if I'm honest, as a school ... we don't really know what deprivation might really look like and what it might mean to be disadvantaged.
- **Isolation:** The Trust is developing localised working relationships, set in the context of the needs of the local community. This is reducing some headteachers' feelings of isolation:
The reliance on Teams recently and communication has been high amongst all schools really, not just within the hub ... If it wasn't for being in Kernow Learning, and especially within the hub model, I would feel personally extremely isolated.
- **Resources for school improvement:** Collaboration on CPD within and across the hubs is beginning to open up opportunities for pupils in all schools:
We're now part of something very big and we are able to do lots of exciting and innovative and engaging activities. And then we make sure that all of our smaller village schools have equal and full access to them ... I think it [the hub model] has up-levelled the opportunities that are there for our small village schools and I can see that those things are starting now.
- **Cultural isolation:** the Trust is setting up cultural events for pupils, such as the G19 summit. There was belief that the hub model will provide more support with cultural opportunities as budgets tighten:
I think as budgets grow tighter and tighter, and it becomes much harder for us to be able to give additional opportunities, or buy in to additional opportunities, or access some of those, doing it together and sharing, again, that expertise, because there may be people who can provide that within our hub, will definitely help that. So I think that the impact will be more greatly felt in the coming years, rather than this year.
- **High quality workforce:** The focus on school improvement and CPD is leading to high expectations:

I think it's good in that it's a Trust that doesn't stand still and nobody can be expected to just sit in their classroom and carry on. They've all, all, got to just keep learning and be innovative basically. And actually, that is almost an expectation ... I think it's welcome because actually we all learn from each other.

- **Externally-funded interventions:** One externally-funded science project was mentioned:

That has been a joy to see, and to bring that fun engagement back into science, that children do actually really love science here.

Conclusion

The hub model has huge potential to benefit the Trust as it develops and grows, particularly with the number of schools likely to increase in 2022/23. School leaders feel the value of the hub model at all levels within the Trust, for pupils, staff and themselves:

You're not just in a school in your community; you're part of a wider network too which opens up your visions, your values, your aspirations and for the children, your ambitions too. So, you don't just toddle in your little pond, it's bigger than that, it means more than that. It's an exciting part of being a part of this.

The second year of the hub model for the MAT has been 'turbulent' because of the high levels of disruption caused by Covid. However, at the same time, the hub model has been highly successful in supporting headteachers with the multitude of Covid-led demands. The Trust has built on the first year of the hub model and has established a clear framework for collaboration and the development of high-quality working relationships; communication from the Trust has been localised and contextualised for each school; and the focus on school improvement, although 'restricted' by Covid, has continued.

All interviewees were supportive of the hub model, although to varying degrees according to how they believed the model worked for them, and there are suggestions that the model could be highly effective in mitigating against Educational Isolation. The Trust is now in a position to build on this excellent work and embed the hub school model further into their structure and practices.

Appendix I: Interview schedule

1. Please can you tell me your role title and explain your responsibilities in the MAT.
2. Can you explain the hub school model structure in the MAT?
3. Why was the hub model introduced to the best of your knowledge? What was it intended to achieve?
4. Have you seen any benefits of the hub school model – pre and during C-19? Can you explain what these were? Prompts:
 - a. Increased opportunities for Staff CPD
 - b. Increased collaboration
 - c. Increased participation in wider interventions e.g. externally funded?
 - d. Increased support in areas on the SIP
5. Why do you think these benefits occurred? Prompts
 - a. Geography
 - b. Socio-economic
 - c. Cultural
 - d. Pupils
 - e. Parents
 - f. Staff
 - g. Trustees
6. Have you experienced any challenges in the hub school model – pre and during C-19? Can you explain what these were?
7. Why do you think these challenges occurred?
8. Are you going to make any changes to the hub model for next year?
9. Wellbeing of pupils in C-19 in hubs?
10. Wellbeing of teachers in C-19 hubs?
11. Anything else you would like to tell me about the hub school model?