

**Alex Douglas-Kane, vice chair of governors at a federation of two small semi-rural C of E primary schools in East Cheshire, recounts an enriching journey**



## Primary federation

The schools are a couple of miles apart and very small: Pott Shrigley has 34 pupils and Bollington St John's 64. The idea of federation arose from the local authority (LA) review of surplus places in 2007. Bollington St John's had had problems, including a period in special measures, and was identified for closure. Parents were horrified and mounted a strong campaign to save the school.

Pott Shrigley, where I was chair of governors, was not directly threatened but we could see that our small numbers and high pupil cost might make us vulnerable in any future review. So in a mixture of altruism, self interest and with regard for community cohesion we approached Bollington St John's with a view to forming a hard federation. Both the school and the LA approved the proposal and the First Church Schools Federation was born.

The chairs, vice chairs, heads and key members of the governing bodies met to decide what the new governing body should look like. The result was a body of 19 members, split equally between the two schools and including the head, LA nominee and the diocesan members. We undertook training in order to get the most from our members' skills and interests. Some members felt they could not give the time needed so there was a welcome addition of new blood.

We were very open with everyone about our proposals. The parents at Bollington St John's were keen as it meant their school would become viable, while those at Pott Shrigley had some concerns, particularly over whether this would in fact be an amalgamation and the school might have to move. We held two well

attended open days with governors on hand to explain the proposals and sent out regular newsletters. We also kept the children fully involved – they designed our joint logo and wrote a list of what they would like to see from the federation. Top of their list was a winning football team, much more of a possibility with a larger pool of talent to draw on!

We decided to retain the schools' separate identities but to have one head and one governing body. Each school has its own vision statement as well as the federation ethos of "sharing our gifts and growing our talents together". The head splits his time between the sites and each school has a director of learning and teaching.

“Already it has had a huge impact on standards”

### Recruiting a head

The head of one school had retired and for the first academic year the other head became the federation head. He then moved to a new position so just as the federation was getting off the ground we had to recruit. That threw up an interesting problem – federations are so new that candidates have no experience of them. Good deputy heads who were ready to step up struggled with the concept of federation. We knew we

needed someone with excellent time management skills and an understanding of the journey schools make on the way to federation and in the end appointed an excellent internal candidate.

The teaching staff are based at their own schools but share planning and cover. Children do shared projects and blog together on the website. They have been spending one morning a week learning something completely different – working in a library, hen rearing, working with the police and learning in a forest school. Not only does this benefit the children, it involves the local community and raises the profile of the federation.

### Teething problems

There have been some teething problems. The schools have different IT systems and separate budgets. However, the LA is very keen for the federation to work and we are working closely to resolve the problems. We are also looking again at the way our governing body works, in particular the committee structures.

We are keen to grow the federation. Already it has had a huge impact on standards: Pott Shrigley was graded outstanding in all aspects in its recent Ofsted inspection and Bollington St John's achieved some of the highest SATS progress scores in the LA. On balance, I would say the experience has broadened the horizons of children, staff, governors and the whole local and church community and enriched us all as individuals. ▲

Our federation is holding a workshop in the autumn term for teachers and governors. If you are interested please call me on 01625 572944