

Community Use of Schools in Rotherham

Executive Summary

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1. Introduction

Sheffield Hallam University's Centre for Education and Inclusion Research (CEIR) was commissioned by RMBC to conduct research into the community use of Rotherham schools in June and July 2009. The aim of this project was to:

- establish the current picture for all schools in Rotherham, including the PFI and planned BSF schools
- identify and investigate examples of regional and national good practice, against which Rotherham schools can be appropriately benchmarked
- establish a vision of what Rotherham schools could be like in terms of community access to schools, to inform local strategies and plans.

The research was intended to inform Rotherham's strategy for developing the community use of its secondary schools, its 'Schools Strategy for Change' and plans for the first phase of Rotherham's Building Schools of the Future (BSF).

2. Methodology

The project aims were addressed by conducting:

- a baseline survey of all schools in Rotherham
- follow-up telephone interviews with a sample of eight Rotherham schools
- desk-based research to identify relevant national research, guidance documentation and best practice examples of community use
- follow up interviews with one local authority and three schools as exemplars of community use

3. Survey findings

Responses - 54% of Rotherham schools replied to our survey: 56 primary, 8 secondary and 5 special/PRUs.

Schools with community use - A third of responding schools reported that no community use activity takes place on their premises. Two thirds (68%) indicated some level of community use, which compares to a national figure of 54%¹. However, follow-up interviews with Rotherham schools suggested some had over-represented the true level of community use, by including extended services (e.g. after-school clubs offered only to their pupils) as 'community use'. Therefore, caution is needed in interpreting or generalising from the survey: we cannot extrapolate this to mean that over two thirds of Rotherham schools open their school for wider community access. Also, the finding that 'community' is sometimes interpreted more narrowly to mean the 'school community' or 'cluster learning community' has implications for the ways in which schools conceive of, and develop links with their wider local community.

¹ Wallace et al (2009) *Extended schools – Survey of schools, pupils and parents – A quantitative study of perceptions and usage of extended school services in schools* (DCSF-RB068)

Levels of community use - The 47 'community active' schools facilitated 226 different activities and clubs between them. The average of 4.8 activities per school varied from 2.3 activities for special/PRUs schools to 7.4 for secondary schools. 60% of these schools had between one and four groups/activities running over the course of the year.

Types of activities - Nearly three quarters (72%) of 'community active' schools reported some sporting and physical activities, followed by creative and performing arts (in 45% of community active schools), literacy and numeracy classes (38%), arts and crafts (28%). Often schools running a wide range of sports activities also offered a more diverse variety of other types of activities.

Changes over time - Over half of schools reported that community use had increased in the last 3 years, and a similar proportion envisaged use would increase over the next 2.

Income generated - The average income generated from community bookings was £5,676 in 2008/09, but ranged from £100 - £30,000. The average for primary schools was £2,594 and £21,509 for secondary schools.

Views - Responses to agree/disagree statements indicated that the vast majority of schools consider they play an important role in reaching their wider communities, but have few requests from the local groups to use their premises. All secondary schools see community access as a key priority, whereas only 60% of primaries agreed. Primary schools were more likely to consider there are more suitable facilities available locally and that the additional income is not significant.

Limitations - Secondary schools identified far fewer issues that limit their community use activities. Overall, the most significant factors for (mainly primary) schools seem to be: limited local demand; security concerns; caretaking issues; low income for the effort/risks involved; and the layout of building. The main factors that 'limited schools a little' were: staff concerns; staff capacity; and insurance.

Key policies - Less than a third of 'community active' schools identified specific policies/plans where community use was formally embedded. A few identified that their SIPs and Community Cohesion strategies are including community access.

4. Follow up interviews with Rotherham schools

Following the survey, interviews were conducted with eight Rotherham schools. These indicated that five were proactively engaging with community use; two were passive/reactive to community use and one Headteacher was new to post and did not see community use as a priority.

Proactively engaged schools included some examples of good practice. These schools ran a wide range of activities in partnership with local organisations, groups and other providers, which included offering adult learning classes.

The attitude and ethos of the school leadership towards their wider community seemed to be the most enabling factor - as not all had new buildings, additional resources or excellent facilities. Although most had altruistic motives, in that community use was not done for financial gain, they could see the multiple interlinked benefits for pupils, parents, the wider community and the school building:

'It's made the school the centre of the community because we've got different people coming in for different things and it's making the community aware of what we can provide for them as well. Being part of the centre of the community - it's quite a good place to be'

'We are in an inner city area of high disadvantage...and yet we suffer very little vandalism. No break ins. And I think that the local community value the school and feel that they own it if you like'

A more developed notion of community meant one school had extended activities into the wider community where the most vulnerable young people are likely to be after school:

'It's not just about people coming on to the school site, it's about the school being a key partner across the community – looking at what people want, where and when, and it isn't always going to be in school. It's a bit of a myth that kids want to come back after hours –the ones that need it most won't be here at 5 o'clock at night, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be providing for them, so it's a mixed approach really'

Making the most of their existing building and facilities and having dedicated staffing arrangements were also important factors. Although some had access to additional funding, all of these schools had actively sought funding, resources and volunteers in creative ways through working in partnership with voluntary and community organisations. In contrast, inadequate facilities, caretakers' contract, capacity to market and promote activities and the LA's charging policies were cited as barriers to more community use.

The two **passive/reactive schools** both had comparatively lower levels of community activity taking place. These were mainly developed reactively and less strategically, with fewer community partnerships or efforts made to secure funding. Neither ran adult learning courses and both felt community use had grown slowly or was likely to remain static in the future. For one school, bookings were only made with known and trusted individuals and organisations. Signposting families to other services and activities meant they did not feel the need to provide any extended services on their own site – the offer could be met across the schools cluster. Identified barriers included risk aversion, staff and caretaker limitations, low lettings fee levels, and feeling they had fewer funding opportunities than schools in more deprived communities.

One school could be described as **not engaged with extended services or community use**. This school had a new Headteacher who was still getting to know the pupils, so although generally open to the idea, did not see community use as an immediate priority at this stage. There was no history of pre/post school childcare, nor any perceived demand or need for extended services at the school. Breakfast and afterschool clubs were considered more appropriate for schools with attendance or achievement difficulties and therefore not relevant to their pupils. Again, the caretaker was seen as a potential limiting factor, as was school layout and concerns about the (teaching) staff's capacity to offer more than they already were through extra-curricular activities. Parents' involvement with the school was relatively limited, but this was not seen as a difficulty. Without any external drivers and impetus from the ESPO/LA, this Headteacher's main focus is likely to remain more narrowly fixed on the core business of raising achievement in the school.

These findings indicated that although some schools were making good progress and engaging with the Extended Services/community use agenda, others required more support and convincing that these activities could be of direct benefit to pupils and the school, without being necessarily burdensome. The proactive schools show that a positive commitment and attitude can overcome a number of perceived problems and limitations, and that community use is possible and beneficial to different types and sizes of schools in a range of circumstances.

5. Best practice exemplars

National best practice examples show the important role the Local Authority (LA) plays in strategically developing and supporting schools and partner organisations. The LA and Extended Services Partnership Officers (ESPOs) are critical in providing guidance and support so that each school and cluster can work collectively in meeting the 'core offer' target by 2010.

Evidence from the survey and follow-up interviews shows that Rotherham schools fall into all of the DfES/Suffolk LA stages of development - Level Zero (The Un-Extended School), Level One (Developing Extending Services), Level Two (Developing an Extended School) and Level Three (Developing a Local Strategy).

Examples from Canvey Island School Partnership, Essex; Queen Ann's Community Use School, Fife; and Valley Road Primary School, Sunderland offer further insights into effective practice: having supportive Governors; policies/contracts that cover legal and practical issues; consultation with parents, the community and stakeholders. Caretaking can be a big problem initially, but contracts can be changed to enable 'mobile caretakers' to be paid for collectively and shared between the cluster. The benefits of community use include: reduced vandalism; improved community spirit; improved parental relationships and engagement; raised standards; increased attendance; additional expertise and talents that engage learners; plus numerous unexpected spin-offs.

This is further echoed in the key themes emerging from a wider literature search, namely the importance of: borough-wide planning and strategy; partnership working; management and operational issues; premises and building design; and community consultation and engagement. All require careful consideration.

6. Recommendations

Based on the evidence gathered from this research, these recommendations are intended to inform RMBC's 'Strategy for Change' and developing plans for BSF schools, as well as offering more general suggestions for RMBC, Extended Services and schools.

For RMBC

- ➔ RMBC should be the key driver of Extended Services (ES)/community use to support school clusters with planning, development, implementation and community consultation.

- Ensure that there are strategic links at senior LA level between ES teams and those responsible for wider CYP services; adult and community education; community development; regeneration; local initiatives and funding streams to maximise the opportunities for 'joined up' strategic working.
- Liaise with local voluntary and community organisations, e.g. through the Rotherham Learning Network initiatives involved in promoting and delivering first step learning opportunities.
- Devise a community use development action plan/vision in consultation with other local partners and monitor and evaluate progress against locally set targets.
- Consider changing caretakers' contracts to allow more shift/flexible working, 'mobile caretakers' and/or overtime payments, or enable delivery through more at arms-length mechanisms (e.g. as in the Building Learning Community (BLC)/Private Finance Initiative (PFI) or Building Schools for the Future (BSF) models – see below).
- Consider reviewing charging policies so that schools have more autonomy on fee levels to best suit local circumstances and create some financial incentives to develop community use where possible.
- Set-aside funds to enable schools to make modifications to their buildings for community use.
- Assess the impact that BLC's management of lettings for PFI schools has on their genuine engagement with community use.
- Ensure legal contracts, insurance terms, child protection guidance are clearly and formally drawn up for schools to use – including model contracts, agreements and procedures which schools can tailor.
- Consider LA-wide mechanisms for assisting schools with marketing and promotion so that businesses and wider audiences can have access (e.g. private childcare providers).
- Explore the possibility of co-locating a wider range of services, partners and organisation on school sites to enhance multi-agency working that can collaborate on new activities.
- Ensure that BSF plans include community use as a key part of the contract/specification.

Extended Services

- Identify community use champions from different types of schools/area who can communicate first hand the benefits of community use for their pupils, families and wider communities.
- Where schools are resistant, risk averse or passive to the opportunities, develop supportive but persistent methods to change their perceptions and ethos regarding ES/community use, so that ES/community access becomes a priority for ALL schools.
- Develop seminars/workshops/support geared at Senior Management Teams and Governors to address their needs and concerns.
- Encourage every school (including special schools) to examine what they can contribute to community use and support the development of cross-cluster and individual schools plans.
- Discourage signposting as a way of avoiding ES/community use.
- Audit all schools' activities and plans on a regular basis, as well as the changing needs and feedback from the communities.
- Highlight funding opportunities, support bid writing and encourage cluster schools to support each other in the funding applications.

- ↳ Explore pooling cluster school resources to fund a 'mobile caretaker' and/or a community use co-ordinator who would be responsible for the day-to-day management of lettings, caretaking, funding applications etc.
- ↳ Consider cluster-wide mechanisms for assisting schools with marketing and promotion
- ↳ Encourage schools to have the confidence to take risks, develop something new and take on board innovative suggestions; consider extending cluster activities off the school site, where appropriate.
- ↳ Encourage schools to share, reflect and learn when things don't work out as planned, or from activities that were unsuccessful.

For Rotherham schools

- ↳ With support from the ESPO, investigate the activities, venues and organisations in the cluster locality to assess supply and potential unmet needs/demand – for children and the wider community.
- ↳ Consult and gain feedback from your own pupils and families on the sorts of services and activities they would like to see; consider how to access harder to reach groups.
- ↳ In collaboration with the cluster/ESPOs, consult the wider community about the activities and learning opportunities they would like to see run through local schools.
- ↳ Assess the facilities that are suitable for community use and consider promoting and opening these up - this can be done on an individual school and cluster basis.
- ↳ Develop links with local providers, organisations and individuals who could offer activities and adult learning opportunities.
- ↳ Explore possible funding opportunities to extend the activities currently available across the cluster. Applications with other organisations, partners and schools that have wider benefits are more likely to be successful.
- ↳ Utilise 'free' resources: using volunteers to offer activities; supermarket voucher schemes.
- ↳ Consider how existing initiatives, projects and agendas could be enhanced through community use – e.g. Healthy schools; PSHE; volunteering.
- ↳ Make the school welcoming to parents and visitors; address signage.
- ↳ Be responsive to requests; consider how they can be accommodated, or changes to the buildings that can be made.
- ↳ Evaluate take-up and feedback from activity participants to improve provision; remain open, listening and responsive to parents and community.
- ↳ Ensure that ES/community use forms part of your SIP, Community Cohesion Strategies, Excellence Plans etc, with achievable milestones and outcomes to assess progress.

For BSF

- ↳ Ensure community use is part of BSF plans.
- ↳ Design buildings where community access is built in: separate and shared spaces; zoneable security/access; reception areas that are welcoming and accessible to visitors out of hours; additional spaces, halls and multi-purpose rooms; opportunities for on-site location of multi-agency teams.
- ↳ Organise caretaking arrangements that enable flexible shift working to cover out of hours/weekend/holiday use.
- ↳ Negotiate with schools about how caretaking, managing the building etc can be done to maximise the potential for community use.