

THE WESSEX GROUP CONTENTS

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This booklet describes the Wessex Group of Sixth Form Colleges, the work that it has done and how it is planning to develop. It examines the benefits of partnership working and offers some suggestions for a template of activities which colleges working collaboratively might explore.

Further detail about some of the work is described in other booklets in this resource and there is also a separate section about establishing partnerships.

WHO WE ARE

The Wessex Group of Sixth Form Colleges is a partnership of 11 sixth form colleges in Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton. Originally known as the Hampshire Sixth Form Colleges' Partnership, it was established in 1997 with 10 colleges, Alton joining in 2003 when it changed its status from a tertiary college. The initial impetus was the need to formalise some joint purchasing agreements, though there had been prior work relating to a desire to jointly strengthen the services offered to students.

The 11 colleges are:

Alton College

Barton Peveril CollegeEastleigh

The Sixth Form College Farnborough

Havant College

Itchen CollegeSouthampton

Peter Symonds College
Winchester

Portsmouth College

Queen Mary's College Basingstoke

St Vincent CollegeGosport

Taunton's CollegeSouthampton

Totton College

Between them, the colleges cater for about 20,000 16-19-year-olds and around 9,000 adult learners. This large network of specialist centres was established in the 1970s by Hampshire County Council which was at that time responsible for the colleges within the now unitary authorities of Portsmouth and Southampton. The Wessex Group exists alongside 10 FE colleges including the specialist land-based college at Sparsholt. There is also a small number of school sixth forms in the grea.

The Wessex Group of Sixth Form Colleges is a diverse group and there is considerable variety in terms of size, curriculum offer, ethnic diversity and levels of disadvantage. Coupled with this, the sixth form colleges are usually the main competitors for each other. The tensions that this sometimes creates could be magnified in a tight financial climate where the threats of mergers or closures are more strongly felt. However, the colleges recognise the benefits for their students and communities of working closely in partnership. They believe that they add up to more than the sum of their parts and are mutually strengthened by their commitment to collaboration and a shared vision. Principals are committed to continuing to fund the partnership and want it to do more in the future.

In other words, being clear about common interests and goals means that working together is often less complicated than it might be.

DEALING WITH DIFFERENCE

One of the strengths of the Wessex Group lies in its ability to work together despite its differences. One strategy has been to foster sub-groups within the partnership. These can work together on issues which are of particular concern to them – so long as the Wessex Group is aware of the activities and any lessons are shared.

For example, colleges working in similar communities along the coastal area (Portsmouth, Taunton's, Itchen, St Vincent, Havant and Totton) have created the Solent Colleges Innovation Partnership to investigate ways of developing shared services. The colleges' close geographical proximity, together with similarities in the communities they serve, led them to establish this group with a specific purpose. However, the lessons and experiences of the group are shared through the Principals' Group (see page 6).

Similarly, the Wessex Group's Self-Development Initiative works through two sub-groups of colleges with their own approaches to peer support and review of self-assessment (booklet 5, page 6). The groups meet together periodically in order to ensure that the strengths of each group are shared and the value of different approaches discussed. Colleges in both groups take part in an annual programme of development visits whereby departments needing support in a particular aspect of their performance are matched with a department in a college with strengths in that area.

The size and concentration of the colleges within the Wessex Group of Sixth Form Colleges mean that together they represent more than 11% of sixth form colleges nationally. Approximately one in every 25 young people studying A Levels in this country does so at a Wessex Group college.

Three of the 11 colleges were assessed in their most recent Ofsted inspections as outstanding for 'overall effectiveness' and five were considered to be outstanding in 'leadership and management' and 'capacity to improve'. Of the 55 grades awarded by Ofsted to the 11 colleges, none was less than satisfactory and 44 were either good or outstanding.



WHAT WE DO

Members are united in their belief that their purpose is to serve the interests of young people – and in different ways adults – in their respective communities, without wishing to identify boundaries. Their concern is for improvement of provision for all young people in the region, whether they are already enrolled students. not vet 16 or, indeed, not enrolled at any of the 11 sixth form colleges. For this reason, the members engage in partnership and collaboration with many other institutions and agencies to enhance opportunities for young people and to avoid damaging the provision of schools, other colleges or other interested parties.

Extract from Wessex Group Concordat

The Wessex Group of Sixth Form Colleges formed to maximise collective strength in ways that provide value for money and best serve the needs of young people in its communities.

A number of approaches are taken to achieve this, including:

- Encouraging and facilitating networks of staff and managers in colleges (see booklets 5 and 6)
- Sharing good practice to improve services to students (see booklets 5 and 6)
- Negotiating with service providers for discounts for group purchases (see booklet 8)
- Providing local training opportunities using external and in-house expertise (see booklet 7)
- Collaborating on quality assurance and improvement (see booklet 5)
- Responding to and influencing national educational developments (see this booklet).

Further detail can be found on all of these activities and approaches in separate resources found in this pack (see references to separate booklets in brackets throughout the resource).

HOW WE OPERATE

The strategy and direction of the Wessex Group of Sixth Form Colleges is set by the Principals' Group which meets around seven times a year. In addition to the opportunity to share ideas and concerns about current developments locally and within the sector, there are always agenda items requiring a collective decision or response.

Separate, full day strategy events have been organised approximately every two years which usually signal the need for a response to major national changes or particular local circumstances. For example, the group has met to determine a strategy for ensuring influence with local authorities following the announcement of the Machinery of Government changes in 2009.

PRINCIPALS' GROUP AGENDA

Typically, Principals' Group agenda include:

Partnership business – a report from the Partnership Manager about activity, contacts outside the Group eg with joint suppliers, HE, local authorities, exam boards.

Presentations to the group – in the past these have included exam board chief executives, university Vice-Chancellors, the Learning and Skills Council, directors of children's services, a Secretary of State, ministers and leaders of major government reviews.

Major, current policy discussion – Principals debate and clarify their thinking on the major funding and policy issues of the day. This may lead to a decision to respond jointly to any consultation or to lobby collectively as well as individually for improvement. It may also be the start of a new initiative for the group as a whole.

Sounding board – Principals have an opportunity to seek advice from colleagues about a current issue or to develop a shared understanding of a new development.

Report back from external meetings – Principals report back to their colleagues from other organisations and executives where they have a wider responsibility eg membership of 14-19 strategy boards, national representation on UCAS, the Sixth Form Colleges' Forum, Association of Colleges, exam boards etc.

Governors from the colleges' corporations have been involved in shaping the approach taken by the group on major national initiatives, for example via joint strategy evenings or briefing events.

Membership of the Wessex Group was originally dependent simply on whether or not the organisation was a sixth form college within Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton. However in 2010, in recognition of the importance placed upon the role of the Group in working collaboratively on quality assurance and improvement, it was agreed that membership should be dependent upon members meeting specific criteria laid down in the Wessex Group Concordat.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership of the Wessex Group is open to any college which:

- has formally designated as a sixth form college
- is located in Hampshire,
 Portsmouth or Southampton or the Isle of Wight
- is a signatory to the Wessex Group Concordat
- agrees to identified levels of performance which signal the need for support
- agrees to accept support from other members to improve performance where necessary
- agrees to offer support to other members to improve performance where necessary
- pays a financial contribution to sustain the Partnership
- attends and contributes to Partnership groups and activities
- agrees to consideration by existing members of application for membership
- agrees to a probationary period followed by assessment of compliance by existing members before membership is confirmed.

Extract from Wessex Group Concordat

All colleges are signatories and the Concordat has been agreed by college corporations.

STAFFING

The Wessex Group is run by three part-time staff seconded from partnership colleges. A **Partnership Manager** works three days a week and runs the activities of the Group including the planning, design and commissioning and/or delivery of major programmes of staff development for staff at all levels in colleges; and servicing all peer networks other than those managed by the **Curriculum Network Development Manager** (also working three days a week).

The Curriculum Network Development Manager's work involves the management of an extensive network of around 40 Curriculum Support Groups which meet each term (see booklet 6). A part-time **Administrative**Officer provides support and an office base for the two peripatetic managers.

The Chair of the Wessex Group (a Principal) line manages the Partnership Manager who in turn manages the Curriculum Network Development Manager.

FUNDING

The funding of the Wessex Group is largely by a **subscription** fee from members which covers the salaries of its staff. In addition, income is generated by non-Wessex Group member subscription to the Curriculum Support Groups. Some grant monies have also been obtained but this is less sustainable than the annual subscription.

All training and larger scale programmes are run by the Group on a **break-even** basis. Each event is costed and bills apportioned to those colleges taking part. The majority of events take place in colleges and the Wessex Group has agreed standardised charges for use of college facilities (free) and catering for partnership events. Peer groups and Curriculum Support Groups are not costed separately unless they agree to invite a paid speaker/trainer to their meetings at which point the costs are shared between the participants.



WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF WORKING COLLABORATIVELY?

A breadth of expertise and experience is regularly shared at all levels in peer groups for senior managers; clerks; governors; staff development officers; Vice-Principals; personal assistants; curriculum heads; directors of finance; human resources; exam officers; directors of quality; equality and diversity co-ordinators; Principals; newly qualified teacher induction managers.

Home-grown talent – Wessex Group staff benefit from a career path within Hampshire supported by a comprehensive leadership development programme. The programme is designed to reflect the needs of the Wessex Group colleges and is regularly reviewed by an executive group for leadership programmes.

Each programme – for future, middle, senior managers and support staff team leaders – has been shaped to address the changing needs of the Group using

in-house and specially commissioned trainers and facilitators. More information about the programmes and their impact can be found in booklet 4.

Preferred customer status with some exam boards and other suppliers has not only led to significant real and notional savings; it has also allowed the group to negotiate local bespoke training events and a rapid response to problems if they arise.

Value for money – the Group has negotiated several discount arrangements for bulk purchase (eg for energy supply, insurance, office supplies and software) as well as significant notional savings in running in-house bespoke leadership development programmes.

Profile and influence – the concentration of colleges and the regularity of meetings has meant that the Group can attract key players (eg Secretary of State, ministers, MPs, Foster, Tomlinson, Ken Boston etc) to its meetings and events. It also has a ready-made forum for discussion when Principals return to the Group from various chairing or representative duties on international, national and local bodies.

A united front – the power of the Group's message is increased through joint responses to local and national consultation. It is also afforded some collective protection through its membership – like wagons in a circle.



WHY DOES IT WORK?

Members of the Wessex Group of Sixth Form Colleges have considered some of the reasons for its success and achievements. Various groups within the partnership have been consulted to find out why they thought that the Group operated successfully. This has allowed us to distil some of the key lessons for others who may be thinking about establishing or further developing existing partnerships.

The responses have indicated that there are many reasons for the effectiveness of the partnership of colleges in the Wessex Group.

- There is agreement on strategy and focus at Principal level
- Colleges share an ethos and philosophy
- Resources and skills within the Wessex Group are shared in partnership activities – and everyone benefits
- Geography helps there is a concentration of colleges in a relatively compact and accessible area
- There is a shared recognition of the benefits of unity
- The strength of the partnership has increased over time

STRATEGY AND FOCUS

- We focus on areas that we can make progress with
- We are clear about our direction.

PEOPLE AND RESOURCES

- Principals and staff invest their time and commitment to meetings and other activities
- We make full use of the existing resources in our infrastructure – from making meeting rooms available, to senior staff involvement in training programmes
- Our external roles and responsibilities bring an extra dimension to the intelligence of the Group eg via representation on national committees
- Distributed leadership different people are allowed to take the lead in different contexts. We share the workload and share the leadership of different tasks which leads to strengthened participation and an investment in the partnership
- The Partnership Manager works at a senior level and has the right skills and attributes to do the job
- The Group enjoys firm chairmanship. Meetings are well structured and agenda items are contributed by everyone.

GEOGRAPHY

 There is a concentration of colleges in Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton which makes it possible to be in reach of many colleges without long journeys.

¹ Including Principals, Vice-Principals, staff development officers, past and current delegates on leadership programmes, peer network members

ETHOS AND PHILOSOPHY

- There is an ethos of mutual respect and trust
- The members share values and culture and are working towards the same goals; a drive for development and improvement is part of the collective DNA of senior managers and staff in partnership colleges
- There is a shared sense of ethos in terms of how we deal with students – even with very different cohorts of students, the language is the same
- The primary focus of the Group is a collective commitment to positive outcomes for students and young people in their communities – ahead of any financial benefits
- The Group also shares a strong philosophy of valuing and recognising staff
- Group members feel that they have developed the ability to listen closely to each other and are open to differences of opinion – indicating Group emotional intelligence
- There is very little posturing about each college's achievements/strengths
- The ethos of collaboration at Principal level is a strong influencing factor for the behaviours of other staff – subject staff and others know that it is normal to share resources and problems.

STRONGLY RECOGNISING THE BENEFITS OF UNITY

- All staff recognise the mutual benefit of partnership – all give and all take
- Despite differences in terms of size, curriculum offer, ethnic diversity and levels of disadvantage, there is recognition that 'what unites is more important than what divides'

- Collective support and personal support provide a foundation for further collaborative work
- Sharing practice helps to improve quality across a large number of providers
- Advice is given generously across all groups. Staff recognise the partnership as a meaningful supportive network – not just in meetings
- The Group's financial rewards and value for money for shared contracts are strong drivers
- Bespoke leadership programmes are seen to have a genuine impact on the institution when participants return
- The concentration of colleges and the number of students represented provide good leverage in bringing in national expertise from our contacts outside the partnership.

LONGEVITY

- The age of the partnership has been an important factor in building strong, trusting relationships between staff in Wessex Group colleges
- The partnership has existed for a long time and has been able to develop many facets and activities. There is an expectation that the Group will continue to deliver joint activity
- The longevity of the partnership has meant that developments have had the chance to refine, improve and perpetuate; developments come from developments.

WHAT NEXT?

Many of these views emerged from various groups of partnership staff including Principals, Vice-Principals and members of Curriculum Support Groups.

'NO MAN IS AN ISLAND'

Although the Wessex Group has gained strength from working together, there are opportunities for other advantageous links with organisations and interests within and outwith the geographical bounds of our partnership.

Some of these connections have already been made and any improvements would be to strengthen those. For example, the Wessex Group has long-standing contact with other FE providers in the area through both a joint Principals' group and an offer of membership of the Curriculum Support Groups to any local subscribers teaching the 40 curriculum greas which meet regularly. The Wessex Group is first point of sixth form college contact for the local authority with the largest number of sixth form colleges in the area (Hampshire) and the links and relationships developed extend well beyond individual Principal level into other peer groups and joint activities such as conferences. There are strong, joint links with local universities which have led to shared development opportunities for staff and for students and improvements in the mutual understanding of the progression from sixth form to higher education. The established networks and peer groups provide a ready-made platform for dialogue and this has facilitated timely discussion focused on action.

IMPROVING LINKS WITH UNIVERSITIES

The Wessex Group identified improved links with higher education (HE) as a priority. They wanted to establish a sustainable way of:

- increasing HE input to the development of students and staff in sixth form colleges
- helping to prepare students for university life
- raising student aspirations about applications to HE
- improving chances of success in UCAS applications
- developing a shared understanding of the role of Extended Projects in the application process
- sharing knowledge of changes to curriculum – from C2K to Diplomas and the International Baccalaureate.

The Group was able to adopt a number of approaches to ensuring that the links were well established and long term:

Development work via Curriculum Support Groups – university staff attend the groups by invitation and universities provide expertise and resources for a range of annual development opportunities eg Physics summer study day; Maths teaching workshops; English and Critical Thinking competitions; Geography and Environmental Science study days.

Membership of higher education institutions (HEI) – the Curriculum Network Development Manager attends admissions tutor committee meetings at a local HEI and she and the Partnership Manager meet regularly with university outreach staff to share news and to gauge potential for future developments.

HEI representation on partnership corporations – the Group has attempted to increase contact with senior HE staff by attracting them on to corporations. A number of colleges have former and current HE staff as governors and Vice-Chancellors from all local universities have attended Principal meetings as part of a series of planned dialogues.

This activity is over and above that which is conducted by individual colleges. It could be improved by creating more consistency in the relationships with the different local universities and in the spread of subject areas that take best advantage of the resources and expertise from higher education.

In other situations, Wessex Group links with external organisations may be more tenuous or one-dimensional ea where the point of contact is at only one organisational level or dependent upon individuals. Time and resource constraints are to some extent to blame, although the best external links have been developed from a pressing policy imperative (eg the Machinery of Government changes) and/or a **deliberate strategic** decision taken by the Group (eg improving links to higher education institutions). It is important to keep these priorities under review and to identify stakeholders/interested parties so that future links with them can help to improve the chances of success.

The Group's leadership programmes (see booklet 4) provide staff in all their colleges with the opportunity to learn from and with their peers. The programme underpins the Group's strategy for succession planning and our own research² has shown that of those completing the programmes and experiencing a promotion etc, most remained in their college or moved to another college in the Group. This has the advantage of keeping our talent within the Group, but it has the disadvantage of limiting shared learning to a defined. relatively local area. We are currently developing approaches to tackling this issue eg through widening access to programmes, extending the work shadowina scheme outside Hampshire.

²LSIS and the Partnership's Review of Leadership and Leadership Development in Hampshire Sixth Form Colleges Liz Winn and Jo Dale, April 2010

TALK FOR TALK'S SAKE?

Just because people like meeting with their peers and sharing concerns and triumphs, doesn't make it intrinsically worthwhile. One of the dangers of a well-established network of peer aroups is that the original purpose of meeting may be lost. The Wessex Group has worked hard to ensure that, for example, the Curriculum Support Groups (see booklet 6) are managed and developed, rather than simply facilitated. The appointment of a Curriculum Network Development Manager was considered essential by Principals and the Vice-Principal (Curriculum) network provides oversight and direction. Similarly, the Principals' Group's periodic sessions to review purpose and direction help to maintain a focus which is intended rather than accidental.

However, a review of the work of the groups and their impact is probably something which could be further evaluated. We know who meets, when and what they talk about. We know that resources are shared and problems discussed. We know that some collective concerns are summarised and raised with external organisations (eg exam boards) and that sometimes, as a result, things change. We know that shared training needs can promote the provision of local events at a reduced cost to individual colleges. We have some soft evidence that motivated members of groups actively adopt and adapt the lessons from their peers into their own practice.

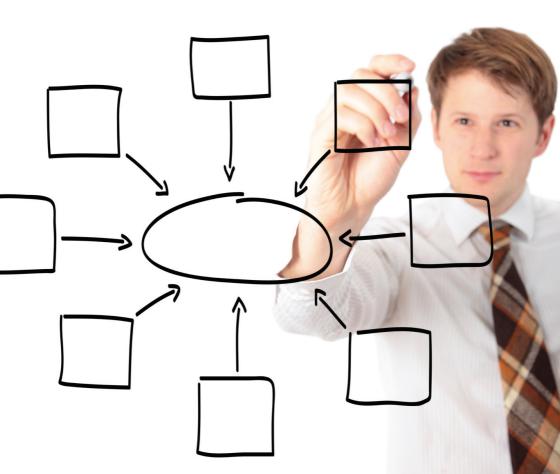
However, we do not yet have a clear understanding of what would maximise the impact of all of this learning and sharing and that is something that we need to work on.

IS IT TOO EASY?

Wessex Group colleges are on the whole comfortable about sharing their problems and identifying areas where they are not as strong as they might be. Curriculum Support Group members will report worse than expected results to their colleagues; Vice-Principals will confess to a lack of thorough understanding of a new policy; they and directors of quality will readily identify areas in their college that need support in order to access a development visit in another college. Colleges invite peers in to review selfassessment procedures, to inspect an area of work or teaching and to validate their judaments about the performance of their college. There is a spirit and expectation of openness which has developed over time and which is essential for maximising the benefits of the collective expertise across all 11 colleges.

For now, detailed performance data is shared on a case-by-case basis. There is no Group review of colleges' performance data and it is left to an individual college needing support to identify the need and to ask for help – indeed this is a requirement of membership. The Wessex Group is planning the development of a range of clear, transparent and agreed **performance measures** in order to strengthen its collaboration on quality assurance and improvement.

This will also necessitate agreement about the level and type of data to be shared routinely across the partnership of colleges. It will formalise a host of self-regulatory Group initiatives and has the potential to add some grit to the oyster. It will be a planned improvement and the impact on peer groups and mutual trust will need to be carefully managed.



WHAT DO YOU NEED TO MAKE A START?



Partnership

The following information also appears in booklet 3.

PATIENCE

It takes time to create and sustain an effective partnership; time to build relationships and develop trust. This is especially true when organisations may be competing for students. A decision to join forces, for whatever reason, can only signal the beginning of a process rather a permanent reality. There are likely to be threats and risks to a partnership throughout its life and its long-term viability could depend upon the degree to which its members chose to address or ignore them.

For example, although the Wessex Group of Sixth Form Colleges formally established itself initially to become a bulk purchaser with specified traders (including exam boards); it had its antecedents in joint quality initiatives such as External Quality Review (EQR) which was established by Hampshire colleges in 1993 to continuously improve teaching and learning through peer review - see booklet 5, page 4. This background, with its focus on mutual improvement. led to a wider arowth of activities under the partnership umbrella which was crucial in developing trust amongst participating colleges. By sharing expertise and intelligences,

collaboration and mutual support increased and the impact of competition was moderated to a degree. The growth of trust was aradual and, to some extent, has to be nurtured each time a new group is created or when new individuals join. Even after being in existence for well over a decade, the need continues for the Wessex Group to address the impact of competition on the nature of the partnership. At a recent strategy discussion Principals agreed to develop a shared understanding of responsible competition. They have developed a Concordat which recognises that the driving value of the partnership is in looking after the needs of the local communities – rather than individual colleges.

TIPS

- Don't expect overnight success
- Starting with one activity and moving on to others can work but;
- regularly revisit the purpose and values of the partnership
- review the risks to the partnership and agree how to tackle them
- keep working on relationships especially if tensions emerge.

INVESTMENT

Wessex Group members invest time, money and commitment to sustain the Group. The benefits of the partnership are dependent upon governors and staff at all levels contributing time and expertise – via peer groups, input to staff development activities, peer reviews, sharing resources and by simply being available to respond to queries that emerge from colleagues in other colleges.

To a large extent, this commitment and the resulting time given and taken is the life-blood of the Wessex Group. It would severely undermine the strength and purpose of the partnership if it were not there, and contributes to the development of strong relationships. However, Principals decided that for this to be used most effectively, a Partnership Manager would be appointed. This part-time post is funded through an annual subscription as is the part-time post of Curriculum Network Development Manager. As a result, each year the Principals commit to the future of the partnership by agreeing to jointly fund these posts³.

The leaders of the partnership have invested in senior staff with the right skills and attributes to run and develop the activities and networks of the Wessex Group.

³Each contract is for two years and the dates are staggered so that in any one year, only one contract is up for renewal

LEADERSHIP

Principal-level commitment to the partnership is vital. Their leadership provides a precedent for all other partnership activity. They establish a **common purpose** and a shared vision. They articulate the values of the partnership. They condone and encourage collaboration at all levels in partner colleges so long as it has an outcome linked to the shared goals of the Wessex Group. They are key to the development of effective working relationships throughout the partnership.

TIPS

- Consider appointing someone at a senior level to manage the work of partnership
- Recognise that time and money will be needed

VALUES

These are the things that the Wessex Group thinks are important and which drive its actions.

We believe:

- that working collaboratively helps to strengthen the services offered to young people
- in promoting educational excellence and opportunity across the area
- in fostering a learning culture through honesty and openness
- that collaboration and mutual support moderates competition
- in developing staff through shared development opportunities, succession planning and networking
- we need to understand and respond to the wider operating environment
- in valuing diversity within the partnership and beyond.

In addition to the belief of Wessex Group members that by working together they can have a positive effect on the quality of provision for young people in the area, there is a strong sense of **perceived necessity**. There is a need for partnership in providing a strong local and national voice for members; in affording some protection in numbers and organisation, and in creating a recognisable entity with which other bodies can have a dialogue.

'If it wasn't there, we'd have to invent it'

TIPS

- Establish a common purpose
- Agree a set of values
- Lead by example
- Remind each other of the benefits from time to time

There are a number of different routes to building an effective working partnership. There are various models for organising the work that you do; different types of activity that can be managed; different lifespans and ambitions; and different aims and missions. Whatever you decide to do and however you want to organise yourselves, the most important starting points are **shared goals** and a commitment to **invest** in something that will lead to short and long-term benefits for the group and for your own college.

























This resource has been written by Liz Winn www.wessexsfc.ac.uk

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