74

The impact of Public Private Partnerships on education

A case study of Sewell Group Plc and Victoria Dock Primary School

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the implications of Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) for education delivery, attainment, attitude, behaviour and attendance. Partnership success factors are identified, and transferable lessons extracted. Barriers to the success of the partnership are explored and suggestions for improvement are made.

Design/methodology/approach – Case study of the first PFI school in the UK. This involved a systematic literature review and collation of data on impact on Victoria Dock Primary School, four face-to-face in-depth interviews with Sewell Group Plc and Victoria Dock Primary School staff, and three face-to-face in-depth interviews with experts in the education sector.

Findings – Findings suggest that the impact of the partnership on education is positive. Pupils perform significantly better than both the average Hull and national primary schools. There appears to be a positive impact on attitude, behaviour and attendance.

Research limitations/implications – Caution is issued regarding generalisability of findings on account of this being a single case study.

Practical implications – The findings have implications for those involved in PPPs, or those considering entering such a partnership. A very useful source of information and advice about the ingredients required for successful partnerships.

Originality/value – This study adds evidence to the existing limited evaluative work that has been completed on PPPs with regard to their impact on education. This includes delivery, attainment, behaviour and attitude, and attendance.

Keywords Public sector organizations, Private sector organizations, Education, Partnership

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Education was the top priority for the new Labour Government in 1997 (CBI, 2005). It was recognised that long-term under-performance in education could not be ignored. Following the failure of traditional approaches to raise standards, it was considered appropriate to make use of expertise wherever it could be found – be it in the public, private or voluntary sectors (Select Committee Report, 2000).

To this end, it is no surprise that Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) have increasingly gained importance as a mechanism in seeking to address this under-performance. The role of PPPs is evident in current government policy, such as there being a greater commissioning role for local authorities within the 2004 Children Act, and the major program of infrastructure renewal; Building Schools for the Future (BSF) (CBI, 2005). Their influence is reflected in the extent of Private Finance Initiative (PFI) investment in education with the DfES (second only to the



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Impact of

Department of Health) amassing "...144 transactions worth a total capital value of £4.1 billion" (HM Treasury, 2006, p. 17) since 1997.

This growing involvement of the private sector in education in the last five years (Davies and Hentschke, 2005) calls for increased evaluation of its impact. Much of the literature (not least that which is produced by the government) exalt its perceived virtues (Bing *et al.*, 2005; Caldwell and Keating, 2004; Davies and Hentschke, 2006; Eaton and Akbiyikli, 2005; Hentschke, 2005) arguing that PFI is a fast, effective cheap way of getting new facilities built – at least in the short term. Moreover, advocates say that many schools would not be built at all if it were not for private finance since the public money is often simply not available. Simultaneously, it is claimed that commercial input not only results in increased quality of service, but also in greater efficiency; creating better value for taxpayers (Arthur Andersen and Enterprise LSE, 2001; IPPR, 2001; BBC News Online, 2003; 4ps, 2005; KPMG 2005; HM Treasury, 2000; PUK, 2006).

That said, the main criticisms of PPPs stem from fears of privatisation and a belief by some that the government is effectively mortgaging the future and that the long-term cost of paying the private sector to run these schemes is more than it would cost the public sector to build them itself (Centre for Public Services, 2001; Audit Commission, 2003; BBC News Online, 2003; Davies and Hentschke, 2006). The criticism from the private sector are focused on the levels of bureaucracy which are a deterrent to the bidding process.

In studying the literature on PPPs, research undertaken includes the development of PPPs, (Caldwell and Keating, 2004) the risks of PPPs (Li Bing *et al.*, 2005; Grimsey and Lewis, 2002), and the quality of PPPs (Eaton and Akbiyikli, 2005). Additionally, much of the research carried out so far has been into procurement, assessment of value for money, risk transfer and accounting mechanisms (PUK, 2005). However, limited evaluative work has been completed on PPPs with regard to their impact on education delivery and attainment. This notion is supported by the Audit Commission stating that there is "... little about what PFI is actually delivering". Consequently, this paper contributes to the closing of this gap at the organizational level via Sewell Group Plc and Victoria Dock Primary School.

The context

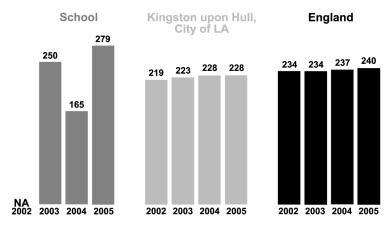
The two partnership organisations under study are Sewell Group Plc (2006) and the Victoria Dock Primary School (2006). The former was founded 125 years ago in Hull, and is a market leading multi-disciplined construction and development group. It is a family owned business, has a £40 million turnover, and employs 250 people. The latter, was the first primary school in the UK to be built under a PFI scheme, and is located in the Drypool ward of Hull, serving the catchment area of Victoria Dock village.

There is a belief both amongst Sewell Group Plc and the head teacher that Victoria Dock Primary School is successful. This appears to be borne out by its popularity with parents and pupils alike (the school is over-subscribed, and a campaign is currently underway for the site to be developed into a through school; thus providing secondary education). Additionally, the financial and social PFI model of the school has been recognised as a national exemplar by Westminster and the DfES; and has subsequently been rolled out in four York schools. Finally, there is evidence of success in the form of inspection reports and exam performance (see Figure 1).



76

Figure 1. Key Stage 2 performance compared to Hull and national average



Source: Ofsted (2001, p. 6)

"Victoria Dock is a good school" (OFSTED, 2001, p. 6) and "standards are above average" (Ofsted, 2001, p. 6)[1]. This is further substantiated by DfES performance data; showing that pupils perform significantly better than that of both the average Hull and national primary schools.

This research study involved secondary research and analysis including a systematic literature review and collation of data on impact in Victoria Dock Primary School. This was followed up by face-to-face in-depth interviews with key staff at Sewell Group Plc and Victoria Dock Primary School. Further face-to-face in-depth interviews with experts in the education sector were undertaken.

Reasons for success of the partnership

The reasons for the perceived success of the Sewell Group Plc-Victoria Dock Primary School PPP are many and varied. In classifying the reasons for success, most of the literature makes a distinction between factors that are essential for success, and factors that are desirable. In order to depict this, a categorisation framework differentiating structural, physical and attitudinal factors was developed. The results from the study have been plotted against this framework, and are discussed in further detail in the following sections (see Figure 2).

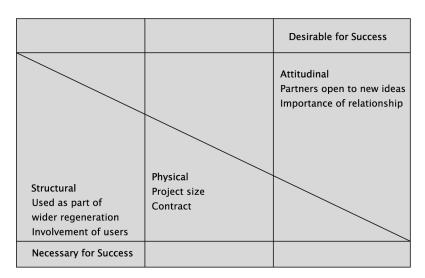
The results suggest that attitudinal factors are the most instrumental in the partnership's success, followed by project size. Although not unimportant, the structural factors and the contract appear to be less so.

Structural

The findings from all three interviewee groups support the literature in illustrating the importance of structural factors i.e. PPP embedded as part of a wider regeneration process. It is evident that the partnership is influenced by the community:

The partnership is wider than just the school. It is the hub of the village (School Participant).





Impact of Public Private Partnerships

77

Figure 2. Classification of success factors

This is recognised by Sewell Group Plc in their business strategy:

We're only interested in what we call community based PFI's where we know that by going in we can actually make a difference (Sewell Group Participant).

Additionally, success of the partnership is attributed to the continued and on-going involvement of users in the partnership process:

We respect that it's their space. We wouldn't just turn up unannounced to fix something (Sewell Group Participant).

This analysis implies that the necessary identified success factors are practical in nature and could be addressed by appropriate policy initiatives.

Physical

Overall, participants partially attributed success to the size of the project:

works well because we're fairly small (School Participant).

Size contributes to success because it not only facilitates a simple management and communication structure, but also has allowed Sewell Group Plc to be actively involved:

I was part of the bidding team and now part of the operational team. They've seen me all the way through (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

The effects of this have been further enhanced by the fact that Sewell Group Plc is a local company and therefore has been able to have a greater presence than might otherwise have been feasible:

Works because its small, a local company, and Sewell use it as marketing tool and therefore pay it extra special attention (Education Sector Expert).

We like small hands on projects...continuity of relationship is the way to build trust and confidence (Sewell Group Participant).



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78

Aside from the size of the project, the contract also appears to contribute to success:

there aren't any contractual issues (School Participant).

However, this is due to its low visibility as opposed to its prominence or comprehensiveness. Interestingly, this directly contrasts with the literature and the experiences of the sector experts interviewed:

Contract negotiations need to be robust. They're a fundamental part of the scheme... once the deal is closed you have to live with it for 25 years (Education Sector Expert).

Indeed, in this case, success can be attributed to the simplicity of, and lack of emphasis put on the contract. Interviewees from both Sewell Group Plc and Victoria Dock Primary School expressed this:

Although we have a PFI contract, I don't think we've ever had it out of the drawer (School participant).

The minimal value placed on the contract stems from the fact that whilst nationally the overall trend in PPPs is towards increased tightening of specifications, simultaneously, (as identified in the literature) there is an emergent group of partnerships that consider referral to contracts as being a last resort policy. Such a practice is identified in this case:

It's not about administering a contract it's about being a good partner (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

You could say we're just administering a contract — which is what PFI is. But if you do that you've failed (Sewell Group Participant).

Attitudinal

Attitude emerged as the primary factor in determining the success of the partnership. It is evident that a propensity for being open to new ideas and ways of working exists on both sides of the partnership:

We're both willing to take risks to get things done (School Participant).

Had no idea what PFI involved . . . but it seemed a bit different so I applied for the job! (School Participant).

Sewell wanted the flagship. They wanted the jewel in the crown (School Participant).

This openness to new ideas is translated into practice with both parties visiting the others' premises for training purposes:

I've attended training sessions at Sewell and vice versa that I wouldn't have got anywhere else . . . this is not typical in PFI . . . our partnership is a bit unique (School Participant).

Although this openness to new ideas can be credited with the success, there are also other factors at play. In particular, this includes the fact that:

Sue...not only had [the] chance to create a school from scratch but also her team. She's not inherited a school, she's created it — not many Heads get that (Sewell Group participant).

... I was the first PFI Headteacher! I'm pretty famous ...!

Works spectacularly well through enthusiasm! It works because we want to make it work (School Participant).

Commensurate with this attitude, all interviewees identified the important role that relationships had had on success. In describing the relationship, interviewees made it clear that the relationship between Sewell Group Plc and Victoria Dock Primary School is strong, close and passionate:

We have a very special and very good relationship (School Participant).

We care about the project and the people. If the school has a problem with us, I take it personally... (Sewell Group Participant).

Such a relationship has been established and maintained as a result of a variety of efforts. On the one hand, there is a lot of on-going face to face contact between partners:

We have a very close relationship . . . I visit once every week or two (Sewell Group Participant).

Consequently, communication is frequent:

its not a case of people hiding things under the table . . . it's a matter of openly communicating between partners (Education Sector Expert).

On the other hand, the partnership has aligned both its objectives and benefits, so that both are working towards a shared goal:

We cemented the partnership . . . by having a community dividend . . . we share these savings with them (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

It's a bank of good will where trust is invested. If we do something for Sue, we know we'll get it back \ldots she might do a seminar for us (Sewell Group Participant).

Equally however, there is a belief amongst both company and school respondents that their relationship has been strengthened through the adverse relationship experienced with the LEA:

...this partnership has probably blossomed because [the LEA has] not been involved... (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

This infers that having a common enemy to fight has served to bring them closer together; fuelling their determination to succeed.

Transferable partnership success factors

When questioned about the likelihood of replicating the Sewell Group Plc and Victoria Dock Primary School success story, (with the exception of Sewell Group Plc) all interviewees claimed that this could not be done:

It won't ever be replicated because there isn't another me and there isn't another Paul Sewell (School Participant).

It's not typical and isn't replicable (Education Sector Expert).



Its not replicable because of the reasons for its success – it's a local company and its received abnormal amounts of publicity (Education Sector Expert).

This is because it is considered to be the result of an unusual formula — many ingredients of which would be difficult to ascertain again. Not least, this includes the novelty value of it being the first PFI School in the country, and the motivation and publicity that has stemmed from this.

Additionally, there is evidence that the Sewell Group Plc have somewhat over indulged the school with their support and involvement (exceeding their contractual obligations) in order to ensure that it constitutes an effective marketing tool. One of many examples of this is their having a member of staff on the school's board of governors. This level of involvement could not be sustained in future PFI schools.

There are generic lessons about individual aspects of the partnership that can be extracted and transferred to other PPP's in an attempt to aid success.

First, there is a clear lesson from the Sewell Group Plc about the importance of simplicity:

Keep things as simple as possible...don't have whole reams of files (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

Don't have too many levels of management – keep the structure flat and the lines of communication short (Sewell Group Participant).

The second lesson to emerge (from the contractors' point of view) concerns delivery of the service. In particular, this requires an appreciation of being involved in a long-term partnership:

Most PFI contracts are almost identical . . . the difference is in how you deliver (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

Understand that it's a long term relationship. You can't just walk away from it when it's built (Sewell Group Participant).

Impact on education

In the main, the results support the notion of there being a link between quality of the school buildings/facilities and educational attainment as suggested by the literature.

Delivery

The positive impact of the PPP on the delivery of education at Victoria Dock Primary School is evident not only in the quality of the building and facilities, but also in the extra learning experiences and activities that have been facilitated, and increased time and focus dedicated by the Head following relinquishing of facilities management. With regards to the impact on buildings, the general consensus from interviewees is that although not an innovative building, it is functional, attractive, well looked after, and conducive to learning:

When you walk on site you'd think it was prepared for a special visit...but it's always like that...it always looks new (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

If the wall is scuffed it'll be repainted tomorrow...we don't wait til the next redecoration cycle...! (Sewell Group Participant).



Impact of Public Private

Partnerships **Partnerships**

We're aware that environment does make a massive difference (Sewell Group Participant).

Additionally, being part of a PPP has meant that Victoria Dock Primary School enjoys high quality facilities:

There probably isn't another school in Hull, or even the East Riding that would have these facilities (Sewell Group Participant).

The benefits of this are recognised by education sector experts:

if we expect kids to do well, its only right to give them the best facilities and equipment.

Similarly, in working with a private sector partner, the children have had access to beneficial extras and opportunities, that otherwise may not have been so forthcoming:

The community dividend included a wildlife area, playground, time-out room and re-stocking the library (Sewell Group Participant).

The kids have gone down to Sewell for a look round and used the board room (School Participant).

Finally, teachers and governors are able to concentrate on raising pupil attainment unhindered by the distractions of poor accommodation:

We take the pain of the buildings away. We make the Head's life easy (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

Off-loaded huge maintenance liability (Education Sector Expert).

However, Sewell Group Plc's input stretches beyond the scope of the buildings; providing assistance with the school finances and other areas:

We get a lot of input of expertise from Sewell into many aspects of school life (School Participant).

All of this contributes to freeing up teachers' time for teaching.

Attainment

The PPP appears to have a positive impact on the delivery of education at Victoria Dock Primary School. However, ultimately the question of whether this translates into good results remains the crucial issue at stake. Sewell Group Plc claims that there is a discernable link:

... the standards are very, very good (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

If you provide kids with the best possible environment to work in, it will impact in terms of their attitude and results. This is highly demonstrated (Sewell Group Participant).

It is unsurprising that Sewell Group Plc have a vested interest in the school's performance, since in part this influences the company's reputation:

The success and standards achieved at Victoria Dock are very important to us... we need it to do well so it gives us a good accolade on our brand (Sewell Group Participant).

That said, these claims are borne out by DfES performance data as previously discussed, since pupils perform significantly better than that of both the average Hull



and national primary schools. This is also supported by interview feedback from school staff.

On the other hand however, it is difficult to know how far one can attribute these results to it being a PFI school, and how far it is purely the newness and quality of the learning environment. Certainly, (and although in the minority), there is disagreement from some of the education sector experts:

 \dots the business case has to prove educational attainment \dots the jury is out (Education Sector Expert).

Attitude and behaviour

There is evidence from the interviewees that the improved space and environment significantly enhances pupil behaviour and self esteem:

I can only think of one incident of vandalism and that was minor. The top of a tap in the toilets had been pulled off (Sewell Group participant).

We encourage pride in the building, and the children do look after it (School Participant).

Similarly, pleasant working conditions for staff and pupils have a beneficial effect on motivation and morale, and new accommodation gives both pupils and their parents a positive perception of their school.

Nonetheless, there is an appreciation that although an attractive learning environment can help to foster desirable attitudes and behaviours, buildings alone are not enough.

You could have a great building and ineffective teachers...you need both, but a great teaching environment acts as a catalyst (School Participant).

The ethos is absolutely critical and that's set from the top-from the Head. But as a company we subscribe to that (Sewell Group participant).

Thus once again it is difficult to gauge how much credit can be given to the fact that it is a PFI school.

Attendance

There was widespread belief amongst interviewees that the nature of the learning environment contributes to pupil attendance. This adds weight to the tentative evidence of there being a link that was uncovered in the literature review:

The kids want to go to school because it's a nice place to go (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

Makes people feel good about coming to work and the children feel good about coming to school (School Participant).

Aside from this, in the case of Victoria Dock Primary School, it is clear that comfortable and welcoming facilities generally make the school an attractive meeting place for all types of community activity. Consequently, the hall, sport and ICT facilities are a valuable community resource.

Barriers to the success of the partnership

Participants were asked about the barriers that might prevent the PPP from being successful. Given that most interviewees perceive the partnership to be a success, responses focused on ways of achieving improved, "optimum" and sustained success. To this end, the main barriers to success to emerge are attitudinal. This includes:

Impact of Public Private Partnerships

- the negative image of PFI;
- politics surrounding the Sewell Group Plc-Victoria Dock Primary School partnership;
- · Hull local community culture;
- local political opposition; and
- · internal partnership relationships.

Participants also talked about a range of practical issues that sometimes constitute obstacles to success. These include:

- · project size risking viability; and
- · financial issues.

Interestingly, there was no mention by delegates of any structural barriers; perhaps partially explaining the apparent success of the partnership.

In classifying potential barriers to success, the literature makes a distinction between factors that make success unlikely, and factors that although individually are unable to prevent success, may serve to hamper, delay or limit success. As used earlier in the depiction of critical success factors, the results from the study have been mapped on a categorisation framework showing structural, physical and attitudinal factors. The results from the study are discussed in further detail in the following sections (see Figure 3).

		Success Limiters
Structural	Physical Project size Finance	Attitudinal Image Politics Hull Community Culture Partnership Relationships
Success is Unlikely		

Figure 3. Classification of barriers to success

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83

84

Attitudinal

First, attitude may limit the success of the partnership because it was widely believed that PFI has a negative image:

Perception that we're a private school-that we get everything given... when my staff go on training days people won't talk to them (School Participant).

People think we run the school. We don't. The head runs the school. We look after the buildings (Sewell Group Participant).

Second, there is a belief held by both staff at Victoria Dock Primary School and Sewell Group Plc that the local political situation has adversely affected the attitude of the city's stakeholders towards the partnership:

there is a lot of opposition to the partnership locally (Education Sector Expert).

Physical

Several participants stated that the small project size (although recognised as a contributor to success), equally represents a potential threat to continued success. This is due to the fact that increasingly, it is at risk of not being considered financially viable. However, pupil numbers reflect the demographic profile of Victoria Dock Village, and therefore out of the partnership's sphere of influence.

Nonetheless, financial constraints remain a real barrier. From the school's point of view the main financial barrier is simply that they have limited flexibility and control over their budget:

Traditional schools have much more flexibility with their budget. They can move funds around more easily than I can. I'm paying things now for 20 years time (School Participant).

On the other hand, from the contractor's point of view, the bidding and procurement process is time consuming and costly:

it can cost a company millions just to put in a bid and then they might not get it... (Education Sector Expert).

It is recognised that this may deter Sewell Group Plc (and others) from applying for such work in the future; posing a threat to possibilities of a secondary school; thus amounting to a barrier to success.

Suggestions for improvement and hopes for the future

Participants were asked about their suggestions for improvement and hopes for the future. These centre round a desire for increases in joint public-private sector working, alignment of public and private sector interests, and LEA involvement. Finally, and perhaps the greatest hope of the partnership, is for a secondary school to be built on site.

Increasing PPP working was thought to be a way of improving education in Hull:

The only way that things are going to get better is by working with the private sector (School Participant).

... 6 PFI secondary schools in Hull are likely (Education Sector Expert).



Additionally, it was felt by some that this could be improved through a greater positive involvement with the LEA:

The LEA could have held it up as a beacon . . . instead they turned their back on it . . . (Sewell Group Plc Participant).

85

Conclusions

Reasons for the success of the partnership

Interestingly, attitudinal factors emerged as being the most critical to the partnership's success. Firstly this manifests itself in partners being open to new ideas. It is this that encouraged the partners to take an initial risk; resulting in them building the first PFI school in the country, and therefore able to create the learning environment from scratch. This in turn has led to considerable fame, and publicity; fuelling staff motivation. It is this same openness to new ideas that has resulted in both partners actively seeking to learn new ways of working from each other – a vital ingredient in the recipe for success. Secondly, attitude also manifests itself in the approach both have towards the partnership relationship. This involves trying to be a "good" partner. As part of this, on-going frequent face to face contact takes place, both actively participate in each others' work, and objectives are closely aligned.

Finally, this takes place against a backdrop of favourable structural factors. In particular this includes the fact that the school was built as part of a wider regeneration initiative. This means that it is embedded within the community, and therefore locally wields considerable influence – serving to further enhance success.

Partnership success factors that are transferable

The majority of participants do not believed that it is possible to replicate the Sewell Group Plc-Victoria Dock Primary School partnership model. Perhaps rather more surprisingly however, (especially given its apparent success) nor is this thought to be desirable. For the former this is because the circumstances surrounding the partnership are unique in that it was the first PFI School. Additionally, Sewell Group Plc have somewhat over indulged the school with their support and involvement (exceeding their contractual obligations) to ensure that it constitutes an effective marketing tool. The latter is due to a perception that it is not cost effective for the LEA, and that such close involvement of the partners in each others' organisations is inappropriate.

Nonetheless, generic aspects of the partnership can be extracted and potentially transferred to other PPPs. The main examples include lessons concerning the importance of simplicity, delivery, and appreciation of the long term nature of the PPP.

Impact of the partnership on education

Overall, it is concluded that the impact of the partnership on education is positive. Four areas of education were investigated; delivery, attainment, attitude and behaviour, and attendance. Regarding delivery, the perceived impact is mixed, and thus inconclusive.



Positively, there is evidence of high quality buildings and facilities; extra learning experiences and activities; and increased time and focus being dedicated to education by the Head following reduced responsibility for facilities management. On the other hand however, there is a belief by a minority of sector experts that the school's independence is compromised; that conflicts of interest exist; and that (to their detriment), other Hull primary schools subsidise it. Thus, the question of where one draws the line for impact must be asked. If it is drawn at Victoria Dock Primary School one can conclude it is positive. However, if one draws the line more widely to include primary education in the city as a whole, the conclusion is negative.

Regarding impact on attainment, pupils perform significantly better than both the average Hull and national primary schools. Similarly, there appears to be a positive impact on attitude, behaviour and attendance. On the other hand, this study has failed to establish cause and effect in terms of how far one can attribute these results to PFI, and how far it is purely having a relatively new and quality learning environment equally achievable via traditional procurement means.

Barriers to success

The vast majority of interviewees believe that the partnership constitutes a success. The issue now is to ensure its sustainability. Interestingly, as with success factors, this research concludes that the main potential barrier to continued success is attitudinal. Firstly, this can be identified in the negative image of PFI. This stems from the misinterpretation that it is privatisation of education. This is a barrier that any PFI school might face. Finally, attitude has emerged as a barrier purely as a result of being situated in Hull, since as a Labour Party strong-hold it is resistant to anything perceived to be related to privatisation.

Practical issues also constitute a secondary potential obstacle to continued success. Primarily, this is evident in the school's size; jeopardising viability. Additionally, the financial constraints of PFI mean that the school's budget is largely inflexible.

Suggestions for improvement

It was concluded that the greatest improvement could be achieved via building an on-site secondary school. Second, it is thought that further improvements to the partnership could be made through harnessing greater LEA involvement. Finally, although already effectively established, suggestions for improvement include further increases in joint public-private sector working, and alignment of public and private sector interests.

Note

1. Year by year comparisons of aggregated Key Stage 2 Level 4 + percentages in English, Maths and Science. The aggregate is defined as a sum of the percentages achieving the expected level in each subject, so maximum is 300 (DfES, 2006).

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Impact of

Public Private

Partnerships **Partnerships**

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88

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