

# **Brixham Schools Collaboration**

## **Feasibility Study**

**July 20<sup>th</sup> 2010**

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## **Introduction**

In common with a number of unitary authorities, Torbay is experiencing a fall in the school age population owing to both demographic and economic factors. This has led to the identification by the local authority (LA) of 313 surplus primary places as of January 2010. The study, commissioned by Torbay Council Children's Services and eight schools in the town of Brixham, tested the viability and likely impact of various solutions to address surplus places and examined a variety of collaborative arrangements. It was the hope of the LA that a consideration of collaborative arrangements would lead to a solution for meeting the cost of falling rolls across Brixham. It was an expectation that any solution would result in recognisable and sustainable improvement for pupils attending Brixham schools.

## **Context**

Schools in Brixham have explored the idea of formal collaboration previously. When Torbay Children's Services instigated a review of provision in response to rising surplus places, 2 years ago, it was clear that there was widespread support for a collaborative solution. However, it has become equally clear through this study, that the level of this support varies between stakeholders and, in addition, that there is no widely shared view or understanding of the implications of formal collaborative arrangements or structures. A significant amount of successful, informal collaboration between schools in Brixham is in place. It was both the stakeholders and the LA's view that these might be formalised through a variety of arrangements both structural and procedural.

This, in turn would align with the national policy context which is clearly promoting collaborative, school to school solutions.

Three of the primary schools have religious affiliations and the local RC and CE dioceses have been engaged in the work undertaken to date. The Dioceses are important stakeholders and both have well established policies with regard to the supply of school places. They also have their own developed approaches to collaboration

This study was initiated in order to identify the "business case" for a collaborative solution to mitigate the effects in Brixham of primary school surplus places. It was the intention that the study would demonstrate whether such an approach could offer a viable and sustainable solution. If a viable business case could not be made, following this research, some of the stakeholders had expressed the view that Council should then act decisively to bring forward a plan to remove school places. Stakeholders have been engaged in discussions with the LA for some time and as a consequence there is a shared understanding that action needs to be taken within a clearly defined time scale.

The schools contributing to the study were:

Brixham Church of England Primary School  
Chestnut Primary School  
Eden Park Primary School  
Furzeham Primary School  
Galmpton Church of England Primary School  
St Margaret Clitherow Catholic Primary  
Brixham College  
Churston Ferrers Grammar School.

## **The Study Brief**

Previous explorations of the issue facing Brixham identified a number of implications for continuing with excess places in the primary phase. These included recognition that:

- 25% surplus places does not provide value for money, each surplus place costing at least £250 per year;
- the quality of the educational experience for pupils is adversely affected;
- schools with uncertain futures are less attractive environments for pupils, their parents and staff.
- strategic planning is harder when futures are uncertain.

In addition, the LA, in consultation with stakeholders, indicated that the agreed solution had to meet the following criteria:

- be sustainable – as key personnel can move on;
- bring better outcomes for pupils;
- provide improved value for money;
- recognise and identify opportunities that spare capacity could bring;
- have stakeholder support;
- have schools' support;
- have politicians' support;
- mitigate falling rolls;
- narrow the gap in the performance of disadvantaged pupils against local and national averages;
- raise family and community aspirations;
- enhance community provision e.g.: family working.

## **Methodology**

*The feasibility study consisted of the following stages:*

### **Stage 1 - Desk Research in advance of field work.**

The focus of this stage was to understand the outcomes of existing key plans and how emerging strategy might fit. A range of documentation was scrutinised. This scrutiny included an examination of:

- The Children and Young Person's Plan 2010-2013,
- The Community Plan;
- Draft Regional Spatial Strategy
- Demographic trend data;
- The Torbay Development Framework
- Diocesan strategic education plans and policies;
- School performance data;

- Ofsted school inspection reports;
- The minutes and presentations of a series of meetings held between the LA and schools to discuss surplus places and collaborative arrangements

In addition the desk research made an assessment of the influence of national policy areas that could impact on any proposals and/or collaborative approaches.

### **Stage 2 – The collation of information to inform the discussions.**

The focus of this stage was to form initial hypotheses, ideas and models based on the findings from phase one and to construct a methodology to engage with stakeholders both inside and outside of schools. A briefing paper for stakeholders was drafted and sent to all participants in advance of the field work stage. **(Appendix A)**

### **Stage 3 – Field Work**

This stage involved the posing of questions within a semi structured interview framework contained in an aide-memoire. **(Appendix B)**

Discussions were held with senior managers in Torbay Council, Cllr Anna Tolchard Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Torbay Council, head teachers, and chairs of governors (or their representatives).

The discussions centred on whether establishing an arrangement for a collaboration between schools, offered a viable alternative to school closures. The discussions also took into account national policy thinking, including Academy developments, 'free' schools; and the model of 'schools supporting schools' as well as using schools as community resources.

Stakeholders were also invited to rank the criteria which would shape the agreed solution, in order of importance. This would inform the decision making process and identify any shared perspective. A timetable of visits and interviews was agreed with the LA and the stakeholders; it is included as **Appendix C**

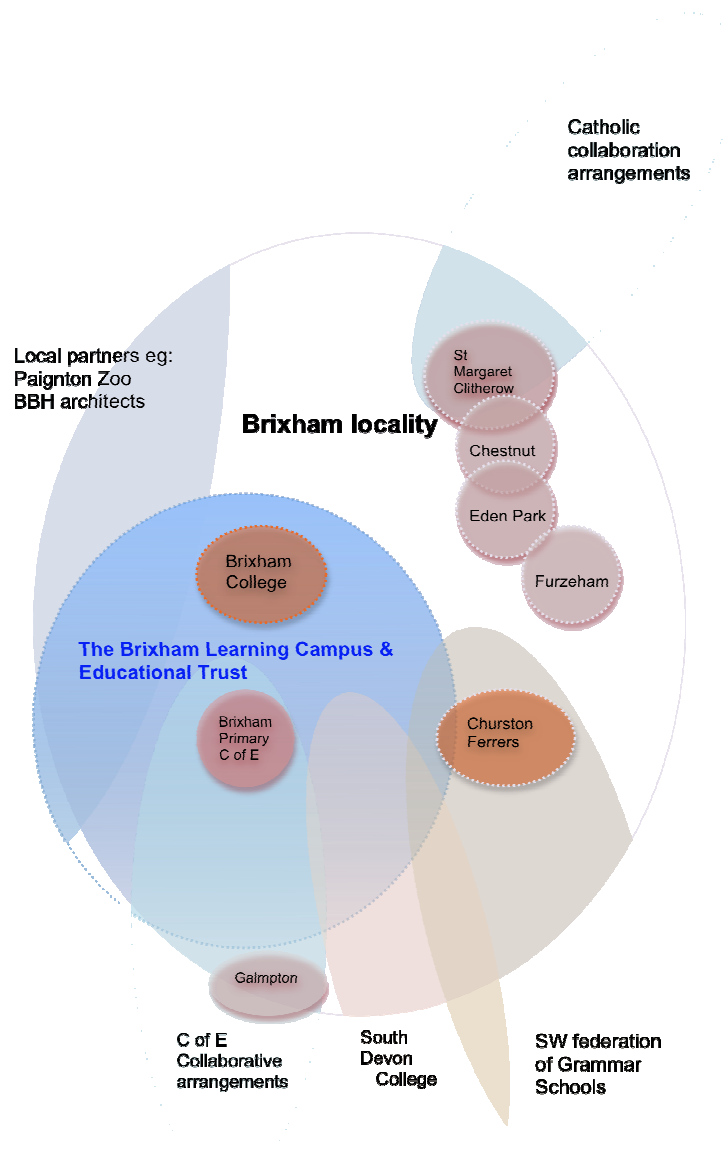
### **Summary Findings**

The study revealed that:

1. There are two issues, one of surplus places and the second collaboration between schools. These are seen as interrelated by the LA, but as distinctly separate, by the schools.
2. it would not be possible to mitigate the effects of 313 surplus places, or reduce this number solely through the establishment of collaborative arrangements between and across schools in Brixham;
3. the stakeholders surveyed recognised the need to close at least one Brixham primary school to achieve a significant reduction in school places and achieve the associated educational and cost benefits.
4. schools are already engaged in a variety of collaborative arrangements. These range from ad hoc co-operation to membership of a formal Trust;
5. the schools recognised that the majority of collaborative arrangements were, as yet, not fully developed or effective;

6. there was a recognition that more formal arrangements were needed to secure the benefits that fuller collaboration and/or federation or Trust status might bring;
7. several schools were prepared to consider a variety of more formal arrangements aimed at supporting and sustaining collaboration, including joint governance;
8. a recognition that a clear vision, facilitation and well managed implementation would be necessary in order to drive and sustain meaningful collaboration;
9. schools recognised the need to carry out a systematic audit of their available capacity to share across Brixham and then design protocols for collaboration. This might include listing ASTs; leading teachers, specific curriculum expertise, innovative practice, effective systems
10. Brixham College has established a formal Trust arrangement which became operational in February 2010. This Trust involves a variety of local partners including Brixham College 11 -16; Brixham C of E Primary School (as an Associate Trustee because of the diocesan affiliation) South Devon College, which provides the sixth form progression; Paignton Zoo; BBH Architects. South Western Fish Producer Organisation and an ICT organization previously Synetrix, (now Capita) are due to join soon.

### **Brixham Collaborative Map – Present Arrangements**



### Stakeholders' views on the options presented:

During the desk research stage, several options were identified that might address both the surplus places and collaborative arrangements that might be put in place. The fieldwork stage gave an opportunity to explore and test these options with stakeholders.

These options were as follows:-

1. Do nothing – status quo
2. School closure

3. Retain 5 schools and reduce places at these schools
4. Retain 5 schools but move to a different organizational model and structure such as Federation or Trust
5. School mergers across one or more schools
6. Any other?

### **1. Do nothing – status quo**

This was unacceptable to all stakeholders interviewed. There was a recognition that action had to be taken and at speed. This has been a very long journey, going back to at least 2005 and the original Brixham review.” “Is there a timeframe for the decision making process, at what point will a decision be made?” There was unanimous agreement that ‘doing nothing’ was not a solution and would merely lead to the protracted demise of the most vulnerable school. “Do nothing means 5 years have been wasted in discussing these issues” “hanging over us – at least 2 years, the bottom line is...is our school going to close?”

### **2. School closure**

A majority of stakeholders recognised that the closure of at least one Primary school would go a considerable way to ameliorating the surplus places challenge. All stakeholders were in agreement as to the school which should close. However it was also recognised that if this school closed then there might be an adverse impact on the immediate community it serves. All possible solutions should have been explored before this course of action was taken.

“LA tried to close a school and didn’t make it work very well, for the children this needs to happen this time, so that there is better resources in fewer schools.” “Parents are leaving before they are pushed,” “this closure by doing nothing, is like watching an animal in distress”

### **3. Retain 6 schools and reduce places at these schools**

This option was rejected by all parties. Schools had varying levels of vacant pupil places and any building of houses across Brixham was not likely to be evenly distributed. The issue of parental choice was also raised, “parents know about all the schools and make a preference especially when there are 3 schools in a row”

### **4 Retain all 6 schools but move to a different organisational model.**

(- structure such as Federation or Trust for a combination of schools.)

The retention of 5 primary schools was not considered viable by those interviewed. Schools did not see this approach as a solution to the surplus places issue. However, there was widespread, though not universal support, for the establishment of more formal collaborative arrangements across all Brixham schools. The notion of an all embracing federation across five schools was rejected as impractical. In the main this was owing to existing diocesan commitments and governance issues related to faith schools. “We are part of a **diocese** and that diocese would never support federating Governing Bodies because of the faith element.” “I have 2 bosses really” “I am not sure of the relationships and communications with the diocese.”

A collaboration, federation or Trust arrangement involving the remaining schools was seen as having the potential to underpin and develop further flexibility in the deployment of school resources. The diocese were already involved as an ‘associate Trustee’ via Brixham Primary School in the Trust arrangements



Conversations of the possible collaborative/federation models between schools, had taken place but the outcomes of these conversations and their understandings, varied from stakeholder to stakeholder.

### **5. School mergers across one or more schools**

There was unanimous agreement that a previous re-organisation had caused a good deal of local disquiet and though now settled as single schools had not, in fact, addressed the issue of surplus places sufficiently, “they are still licking wounds from the amalgamation” and “inherited more staff than was needed from the amalgamation.” However, it was recognised that one possible “merger” would lead to a significant reduction of places, provide enhanced accommodation for the emerging school and provide a community with a continuum of 0-11 provision. This provision might include a Children’s Centre, nursery and primary school. Diocesan involvement would be necessary to facilitate this approach.

### **Options for sustainable change emerging from discussions**

As the study progressed over the three days of interviews, it was clear that the stakeholders viewed surplus places and school place planning as one issue, separate from the future of collaborative arrangements across Brixham schools. The findings are therefore presented as,

- a) reducing surplus places
- b) collaborative arrangements – emerging ideas

#### **(a) Reducing surplus places**

##### **(i) School closure**

Chestnut Primary School should close as soon as possible.

All participants identified this as a key element of a solution. Indeed Chestnut primary school made the point strongly that, ‘we really want a solution’ and that ‘we are frustrated, demoralised and want a decision, any decision which puts us out of our misery’.

They also made a plea for leadership stating that ‘nothing will happen by leaving the schools to get on with it themselves’.

##### **(ii) School federation**

Chestnut Primary school federates with St Margaret Clitherow. This option could be achieved in stages beginning with consultation with local stakeholders about the preferred character and location of the emergent school(s) In order to address the surplus place issue PAN across the 2 schools would have to be reduced by the equivalent of 1 school. Once this is agreed the appointment of an Executive HT would oversee the project.

- This is a sustainable solution that reduces number of surplus places across Brixham
- No formal consultation is required, it can be undertaken rapidly once diocesan agreement is reached.

**(iii) School merger**

Chestnut Primary school merges with St Margaret Clitherow and the emergent school is located on the Chestnut site. This option could be achieved in stages beginning with the appointment of an Executive HT.

- This is a sustainable solution that reduces number of surplus places across Brixham
- Formal notices are required resulting in long timescales.

**(b) Collaborative Arrangements – the ideas that emerged**

All stakeholders acknowledged that individual schools, acting alone, were not able to meet the needs and aspirations of Brixham pupils and their families. The current collaboration arrangements, previously loosely arranged through The Academic Council, though helpful were not sufficiently systematic to allow full benefits to be gained. In addition there was recognition that more formal organisation and management arrangements would be needed if collaboration was to be sustained over time.

There were four main proposals emerging from the conversations;

**(i) A Brixham College Trust**

**The Brixham Learning Campus & Educational Trust** became live on February 11<sup>th</sup> 2010 and is committed to build up collaboration for and on behalf of ALL children and young people across Brixham and the surrounding area. Further details can be found in **Appendix D**.

The Trust is fully functioning and could become the vehicle for fostering collaboration between Brixham schools. All Brixham schools could choose to join the Trust as full or associate members and the Trust could set up a 'Partnership Committee' or similar, of representatives from all schools and relevant partners to develop deeper collaboration. This arrangement could become the secure, sustainable vehicle for operating a variety of collaborative arrangements across a range of schools and partners.

The Trust would provide stable base for contracting and commissioning as the Local Authority and other Partners are 'locked' into arrangements through the Trust, which means that even should personnel move on the arrangements remain in effect.

There was general support from all those interviewed, for a Trust as a more sustainable and stable collaborative solution

*" I believe the future of education is at a school level, joining in and collaborating, we are all too precious about our own schools. I would want to see that the Trust could ensure full collaboration". "We can work in partnership but a hard federation would not be possible as we are closely linked to any diocesan strategy." "Collaborating with the secondary school is an option." "We did look at the Trust option and would consider this again. There is an appetite for this because of the school supporting school model. Working together to improve pupil outcomes would be a driver." "We wouldn't link/federate on our own but the four primaries and secondary would be an option that we would be interested in." ..... quotes from stakeholders.*

### **Advantages**

The Trust includes the 'fishtown' area of Brixham, though 'cowtown' could be full partners. The fishing industry has regenerated itself in Brixham and is now 'booming'. Apprenticeships into this sector are being encouraged by the South Western Fish Producer Organisation. Twelve disengaged students from Brixham College have already taken up the opportunity to work alongside the trawlers for a full week, following their working patterns of 6.00am start and are 'loving it.'

### **Barriers to joining that may be perceived by Brixham primary schools**

- Unknown territory 'not done this before'
- Uncertainty of what a Trust is 'fear of the loss of control'
- Brixham College financial issues could prove to be a liability
- Misunderstanding of the loss of individual school autonomy
- General mistrust as relationships are not sufficiently developed
- Capacity to explain the values, principles and operation of a Trust is not yet available
- Understanding about SLAs and the way they could work is presently limited

### **(ii) Eden Park and Furzeham Federation**

*"Chestnut, Furzeham and Eden Park are all 'fighting 'over the same children." "The Chair and HT met with their opposite numbers, beginning in February 2010. They discussed the potential for federating and were prepared to discuss hard federated arrangements where the governing bodies merged and an Executive HT arrangement could be put in place. The meetings seemed to 'cool' in April and we are not sure how to proceed."*

*"Surplus staff across two schools was recognised as a problem as was performance management and HR generally." ..... quotes from stakeholders.*

Eden Park and Furzeham schools had discussed the possibility of working together in a more formal way, airing the possibility of establishing a joint governing body. However no firm steps beyond informal collaboration, had as yet been taken. This proposal has merit in so far as it would allow a more flexible utilization of both schools capacity and might in time lead to some economies of scale. Both schools however were clear that they wished to retain their own distinct identities.

*It requires "someone to play the pivotal role and keep the momentum going.*

### **(iii) Eden Park and Chestnut Federation**

Eden Park and Chestnut Head Teachers and Chairs of Governors had discussed federating through the early months of 2010. The conclusion reached was that federating "would not solve the surplus places issue."

### **(iv) St Margaret Clitherow and Chestnut Primary schools Federation**

This proposal has the merit of avoiding the most disruptive features of a school closure whilst making a significant reduction in school places. In that St Margaret Clitherow could move onto the Chestnut site. This would release the playing fields that are currently rented from Eden Park School, and provide more spacious and flexible accommodation linked to a children's centre and attached nursery school for a re-located St Margaret Clitherow school. The presence of the children's centre and nursery school would also provide some guarantee of school roles being retained or

even growing. In addition, a community school presence would be maintained. A number of existing collaborative features were identified which would smooth the path to merger.

It was noted that St Margaret Clitherow already work very closely with Chestnut through the running of joint football teams in Yr 5 & 6; joint CPD for staff; the shared use of the Riviera Centre to host the music festival . “Pupils are very close; they play football as a team rather than separate schools.” “staff know each other, there isn’t the separation you might expect”

## Appendices

### Appendix A – The Briefing Sheet

#### Brixham School Project July 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16th 2010

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Mr. Peter Dougill and Dr Caroline Whalley of Owen Education Ltd will be working alongside Torbay Council Children's Services to identify the sustainable option(s) that might include adjustments to the size of schools, school collaboratives and/or federated arrangements and/or school closure.

The session you have agreed to take part in will gain your views on the options and give you the opportunity to talk through the advantages and disadvantages of each of them, as well as rank the criteria, for determining the option, using a prioritizing grid.

#### Identified Options to address surplus places

1. Do nothing – status quo
2. School closure
3. Retain 5 schools and reduce places at these schools
4. Retain 5 schools but move to a different organizational model and structure such as Federation or Trust
5. School mergers across one or more schools
6. Any other?

#### AS BACKGROUND

##### Implications for continuing with excess places

- 25% surplus places is not value for money - a surplus place costs at least £250 per year.
- Quality of the educational experience for pupils is adversely affected.
- Schools with uncertain futures are less attractive environments for pupils, their parents and staff.
- Strategic Planning is harder when futures are uncertain

##### The agreed solution(s) has to ...

- be sustainable – as key personnel can move on;
- bring better outcomes for pupils;
- provide improved value for money;
- recognise and identify opportunities that spare capacity could bring;
- have stakeholder support;
- have schools' support;
- have politicians' support;
- mitigate falling rolls;
- narrow the gap in the performance of disadvantaged pupils against local and national averages;
- raise family and community aspirations;
- enhance community provision e.g.: family working.
- Any others you can think of

##### Questions to explore Collaboratives, Trust and Federations

- Would this be an approach you would endorse?
- What would be the range of collaborations/federations you would suggest?  
How many Brixham schools? Would you want to play a part?
- What might the benefits be e.g. Shared appointments, peripatetic posts

- What would you be prepared to “give’ or ‘give up? ’
- What might be the main inhibitors of progress?
- In your view what would be the best way of taking any option forward?
- How do see the role of the LA in facilitating work across schools in Brixham?

## Appendix B - Questions to explore Collaboratives, Trust and Federations

- Would this be an approach you would endorse?
- What would be the range of collaborations/federations you would suggest? How many Brixham schools? Would you want to play a part?
- What might the benefits be e.g. Shared appointments, peripatetic posts
- What would you be prepared to “give” or ‘give up’
- What might be the main inhibitors of progress?
- In your view what would be the best way of taking any option forward?
- How do you see the role of the LA in facilitating work across schools in Brixham?

## Appendix C - Schedule of visits

<b>Wednesday 14 July</b>		
09.00 – 10.30	Galmpton Church of England Primary School	TQ5 0LT
11.30 – 13.00	Chestnut Primary School	TQ5 0EQ
14.00 – 15.30	Eden Park Primary School	TQ5 9NH
16.00 - 17.00	Cllr Anna Tolchard Cabinet Member for Children's Services	Oldway Mansion
17.00 - 18.00	Michael Moore (Interim Head of Learning)	
18.00 – 19.00	Tony -Jordan	
<b>Thursday 15 July</b>		
09.00 – 10.30	Churston Ferrers Grammar School	TQ5 0LN
11.30 – 13.00	St Margaret Clitherow Catholic Primary School	TQ5 0EE
14.00 – 15.30	Furzeham Primary School	TQ5 8BL
16.30 - 17.30	Jane English and Pete Maunder (Joint Heads of School Leadership)	Oldway Mansion
17.30	Tony Jordan	Oldway Mansion
<b>Friday 16 July</b>		
09.00 – 10.30	Brixham College	TQ5 9HF
11.30 – 13.00	Brixham Church of England Primary School	TQ5 9HF
14.30 - Stakeholders Meeting – all interviewees present, additional to interviewees Chair of Governors at Eden Park Primary. Apologies : Galmpton Primary		

## **Appendix D - The Brixham Learning Campus & Educational Trust -further detail.**

**The Brixham Learning Campus & Educational Trust** became live on February 11<sup>th</sup> 2010 and is committed to build up collaboration for and on behalf of ALL children and young people across Brixham and the surrounding area.

The Trust is a fully functioning, secure, sustainable vehicle for operating a variety of collaborative arrangements across a range of schools and partners. It provides stable base for contracting and commissioning as Partners are 'locked' into arrangements through the Trust, which means that even should personnel move on the arrangements remain in effect.

### ***Members of the trust include***

- Brixham College 11 -16
- Brixham C of E Primary School (as an Associate Trustee because of the diocesan affiliation)
- South Devon College, which provides the sixth form progression
- Paignton Zoo
- BBH architects

### ***Soon to join***

- South Western Fish Producer Organisation and an ICT organization, previously Synetrix, now Capita.

Possible expansion could include more of the Brixham Primary schools, CPD partners and a variety of other arrangements to ensure that commissioning of services into the Trust is effective and can grow over time, presently the Trust 'runs projects.'

The Trust also

- Bids for project money in its own right e.g.: national lottery funding
- Brings economies of scale which could progress into wider service delivery
- Brings extra and broader expertise into the wider Trust partnership e.g: Paignton Zoo have run gifted and talented sessions.
- Facilitates activities e.g.: BBH architects work closely within the existing specialism of visual arts

### **Joining the Trust**

The mechanism to join the Trust as a full member is in place and the process to do so is relatively simple now that the Trust is formed and live.

Interested parties would have to

- Canvass, consult and gain the support for membership from their stakeholders
- Appoint a Director to sit on the Trust board (this could be the HT or a representative governor)
- A member of the Trust board would sit on their GB or equivalent, this could be the same person (to facilitate information flow)
- The status of the new member is registered at Co House

The Trust through the primary school and 2 colleges operates as a 0-19 campus.

Collaborative activities at school level already include:-

- Sharing of staff at 14 – 19 level, Brixham College staff now teach L3 courses and in future could be teaching A level on site, franchised from the South Devon College.



- Additional Art projects are being developed supported by BBH architects
- Timetables are being drawn up across the Trust schools to aide sharing of resources such as space, equipment and staff.
- Transition arrangements across year 6 - 7

In the future the areas of collaboration might include

- Sharing of financial and business management systems
- HR etc

The Trust governance structure is made up of Directors of the Trust.

The Directors of the Trust cannot influence the day to day running of the schools, which remain fully autonomous with their own governance structure and head teacher arrangements.

#### **Advantages**

The Trust includes the 'fishtown' area of Brixham, though 'cowntown' could be full partners. The fishing industry has regenerated itself in Brixham and is now 'booming'. Apprenticeships into this sector are being encouraged by the South Western Fish Producer Organisation. Twelve disengaged students from Brixham College have already taken up the opportunity to work alongside the trawlers for a full week, following their working patterns of 6.00am start and are 'loving it.'

#### **Barriers to joining that may be perceived by Brixham primary schools**

- Unknown territory 'not done this before'
- Uncertainty of what a Trust is 'fear of the loss of control'
- Brixham College financial issues could prove to be a liability
- Misunderstanding of the loss of individual school autonomy
- General mistrust as relationships are not sufficiently developed
- Capacity to explain the values, principles and operation of a Trust is not yet available
- Understanding about SLAs and the way they could work is presently limited

#### **Strategies needed to overcome the barriers**

- Creating capacity to develop understanding within the potential group of primaries and additional partners
- Create clear information for joining and guide and assist the potential member through the process.
- <http://www.trustandfoundationschools.org.uk/partners.aspx>