

For Hollinsclough Primary, it was a case of change or die. Now, reborn as a 'flexi-school', it is reaching out to the home-educated community. **Steve Smethurst** reports

Flexing a school's muscles



'I see no reason why part-time education shouldn't be available if it suits the children's needs and learning styles'



It's said that desperate times call for desperate measures and there's certainly a hint of that about the changes at Hollinsclough CE Primary School in the Peak District. After all, not many schools can survive with just five pupils on the roll, which was the situation head teacher Janette Mountford-Lees faced in 2009-10. Having said that, there is also a saying about necessity being the mother of invention, which is perhaps more pertinent given the innovative approach to flexible schooling that Hollinsclough has subsequently pioneered. Janette recalls that during the dark times there was a very real possibility that the school would no longer be deemed viable. This would have been a blow for the staff, the village and the local community, because although it is a small school with

just two classrooms, its wide corridor is home to the 'village office', as well as a nursery, school office, library, toilets and a cloakroom. It also offers an after-school maths group, yoga classes and a monthly family film club. It was against this background that an enquiry came in from a parent who home-educated her children. She wanted to know if the school could take her children part-time – for two days a week. Janette says: "We thought 'why not?' It didn't interfere with what we were doing and we needed more children to attend." It also fitted in with her desire to remove barriers to learning and her belief in 'stage not age'. At the time, her five pupils were of different ages, at different stages and had different needs. The result was that each had an individual programme. "It wasn't something that we did deliberately. It happened because we needed

to do it that way. It had nothing to do with personalised learning at that stage," she says. "However, I do passionately believe that education should be tailored to the needs of each child and can see no reason why part-time education shouldn't be available if that suits their needs and learning styles." Today, there are 19 pupils (10 full-time, nine part-time) with another nine in pre-school, and the school has thrown its doors open to home-educated students with its 'learning hub', which offers regular educational workshops and sessions where home educators can use the school's library, among other resources. With hindsight, it's a move that Janette says better reflects the needs of a modern society. "Becoming a 'flexi-school' has opened our eyes in terms of society's needs and the way they are changing, although it was



CONTINUED ON PAGE 38 ↓

initially like jumping off a cliff and seeing where we'd land. It really opened a Pandora's Box."

Sir Jim Rose, the former director of inspection at Ofsted who authored the 2009 Rose Review of the primary curriculum, feels it has been successful, however. He's been involved with Hollinsclough as an adviser through the charity CfBT Education Trust and says that while it's not necessarily a blueprint for others to follow, it has met parents' wishes and children's educational needs.

"It should provide a helpful narrative that sets out some of the issues for parents, head teachers, governors and local authorities (LAs), should they wish to offer flexi-schooling," he says. "Hollinsclough has taken a flexible approach that enables parent-led educational activities to blend with school-based educational activities."

An alternative offering

The school now offers part-time schooling to those parents in the region who teach their children at home, to give them the option of backing up home schooling with some time in the classroom. In this instance, the child comes in on agreed days, wears the school uniform and joins in with the timetabled opportunities for that day. For those who don't want to commit to this much school time, home-educated children can also attend the learning hub at least once a fortnight with their parents or carers.

The offering – which began in the summer of 2010 – has attracted much interest. Janette recalls: "Once we had the first part-time students, we got calls from other parents who were interested. Then I had the first call from a newspaper and then a television company got in touch and came into the school. Now we have pupils from as far afield as Greater Manchester and Yorkshire.

"One of the advantages of being a small school is that we get to know each child and their family to a depth that may not be possible in a larger school. This means we can give each child a personalised learning plan with all the advantages of one-to-one tuition as well as participation in group work and whole-class teaching."

Organisational and timetabling difficulties have had to be resolved. For example, many of the flexi-schooled children travel long distances and sometimes arrive late to school. Some children feel left out or marginalised if they miss events such as educational visits. Janette was also concerned to ensure that children who attend full time did not feel hard done-by.



One of the undoubted successes has been that pupils who had previously refused to go to school attend Hollinsclough consistently for one or two days a week. "We have even had some children

is that parents flock to primaries that Ofsted has called 'outstanding', not understanding that the grade is usually attained through a culture of test-passing and hoop-jumping."

This has long been a concern of the NAHT and is backed up by the fact that many universities set their own entrance exams to gauge the worth of applicants. As Bina says: "Children who are successful at school win the race to get into universities and it's there that they realise that doing exactly what they've been told to do in order to pass tests is no longer valued. These issues will not be resolved while funding is linked to league tables, and league tables are linked to exam results."

'Naturally inquisitive'

A formidable barrier to home education is that it requires a full-time parent and since there's no funding available for this, it's not a viable option for most families. Access to facilities is also an issue. At primary level you

A CRUCIBLE OF INNOVATION?

Could the flexi-school model keep innovators, school leaders, parents and the Secretary of State happy? Probably not, but let us know what you think

The flexi-school model is likely to appeal to parents who take the views of Sir Ken Robinson to heart. The education guru used his RSA lecture last year to say: "The problem with education is that countries are trying to meet the future by doing what they did in the past and in the process are alienating millions of kids who don't see any purpose in going to school."

This would be music to the ears of home-educator Bina Widdowson (right), a parent who uses the Hollinsclough learning hub. In her opinion – and it's a view that is shared by many home-educators – 'schools are not working'.

She says: "We all know about the proportion of children who leave school without being able to read or write effectively. We know about the violence and disaffection that characterise some schools and we know about the large number of school leaders whose dedication and talent is exhausted after three or four years in the role.

"But what concerns me just as much

can approximate a chemistry laboratory in your kitchen – at A level, that won't do.

Most frustratingly perhaps, finding somewhere to sit exams is also an obstacle. In theory, anyone can sit any exam at an authorised centre, but Bina's experience is that schools are reluctant to let external candidates sit exams.

As such, flexi-schooling offers great opportunities for the home-educator. It also offers options for disaffected schoolchildren. Bina says: "At Hollinsclough, children who have withered in conventional institutions have flourished in a loving home and caring school. Home-educators also value the opportunity to use school to teach specific subjects, such as French and music."

Perhaps of greater import is Bina's view that a school which becomes a flexi-school loses the ability to 'teach to the test'. "Home-educated children will simply hijack banal exercises with insistent demands to

learn something properly. At the same time, home-educated children learn that rules need to be respected, and you need systems to be able to function."

Best of both worlds

So could it be that flexi-schooling offers an opportunity for both parents and schools? It certainly seems to fit in with Michael Gove's vision for schools.

In his speech to the National College for School Leadership's annual conference last year, he said: "If we can develop schools to become crucibles of innovation on behalf of the whole system – working for the sake of all children, as well as meeting the needs of parents who are seeking different provision – then the sum continues to be greater than the parts. And so every school, regardless of its status, works for itself and for the whole system."

• But what do you think? Email us at naht@redactive.co.uk



The learning hub had its first meeting in January with more than 20 parents and children attending – and enquiries are still taken about it weekly. The school hopes that it will provide a stepping stone to flexi-schooling, but so far parents appear to be content to pay a financial contribution to the hub rather than 'going into the system'. They like the idea of borrowing books and other resources and one parent has taken responsibility for developing a loan system.

What the future holds

In terms of progression to secondary, Hollinsclough has made links with two secondary schools, one in Staffordshire and one in Derbyshire. The model under consideration is that children register with the secondary school, but work in the Hollinsclough hub with an outreach worker from the secondary school supporting the school at regular intervals. The school is also exploring the possibility of becoming a registered examination centre for GCSEs.

From the LA perspective, it is recognised that this could become a model for other schools – although clearly not all. It's believed to be the only school in the country attempting to take this approach and to overcome the many barriers to effective flexi-schooling.

Of course, there have been some frustrations, particularly with regard to assessment and registration codes. "It's been like *Little Britain* and the 'computer says no' sketch," says Janette. "With our part-time students who have two days in school and three days out, we have to be careful we don't have Ofsted running down the road to close us down. Registration codes are the worst. We were originally told to use the C code – which gave us a terrible attendance rating – then the B code (where we're responsible for education off site). We just have to hope they don't go shark-hunting on those days as we don't want to be liable! To get around it, we ask parents to sign an agreement to say they are responsible if the child is not in school."

Overall, however, Janette feels that her school reflects the saying 'it takes a village to raise a child'. "My view is that whole-class instruction is not suited to our country's needs – it leaves no room for creativity, collaboration or self-management. It's passive knowledge transfer and an unquestioning requirement to complete assigned tasks," she says.

"Schools still reflect the factory model that suited life a century ago. We need to challenge the assumption that knowledge and expertise reside only within the walls of an educational establishment – ask instead what might be gained from tapping into resources that exist in the wider community and within the networks that people are already connected to.

"Also, parents are increasingly working in more flexible ways but school hours remain the same. All they ever tend to offer is five-days-a-week provision from 9am until 3pm or 4pm. There's no flexibility and we need to move with the times." LE

Find out more about Hollinsclough at www.hollinsclough.staffs.sch.uk