

SAFE TO learn

How can you achieve best value for a school catering to the needs extremely vulnerable and severely disabled children? **Suzannah Wright** spoke to **Michael Unsworth**, SBM at Kingfisher Community Special School in Oldham, about the importance of business managers, ambitious fund-raising and a deep commitment to creating the best learning environment for pupils of all needs and abilities

So you joined in 2001 when the school opened, is that right?

It was a new school and a new organisational structure: an amalgamation of three previous special schools to form one large school for children with severe and complex special needs. That hadn't been done before, certainly not in the local region. The new headteacher needed to focus on this huge area and had the foresight to realise that as he knew little about finance, he wanted someone to manage this area. That's what I started off doing but circumstances meant that my role became much wider straight away. I needed further knowledge to do this effectively and enrolled on the CSBM. That was the catalyst to develop my role from bursar to SBM to reflect my wider range of jobs.

Tell me a bit about the school...

It's an interesting time you've come actually. I've just come out of a meeting with architects as we're at the very early stages of a decent sized remodelling programme. We've got two old schools which are not fit for the kids' needs and our numbers are growing so we're in consultation with architects about how we can best go about preparing for the future. We've got some great plans, but it's also simple things to bring the two schools effectively together – at the moment there are still two staff rooms, and two sets of offices.

In terms of ethos, the school is a really calm, relaxed and positive place, very friendly and inspiring.

The pupils at Kingfisher have enough to cope with in their lives, so we need to ensure that their learning here is individual to them to allow them to achieve and prosper. So we've moved from our original focus which ensuring that this group of pupils who had never been in the same environment before were safe. Now, we still work on caring for them, but we are also very much a learning environment and that's the key to everything: getting that learning environment right.

Before we met I was reading about your multi-sensory Hummingbird Studio, is that part of the journey to a great learning environment?

Yes we employ a wonderfully creative arts teacher and teaching assistant, who work with all the children in the school so it was really important for us to develop a facility where they could deliver the different lessons. →



FACTBOX

SCHOOL: Kingfisher Community Special School

TYPE: Community Special School 2-11

LA: Oldham

PUPILS: 117

BUDGET: £2m

SUPPORT STAFF: 45 FTE TA and 20 personal care assistants then approx 20 on site, admin, finance team

TEACHING STAFF: 23

NAME: Michael Unsworth

POSITION: School business manager

TIME IN ROLE: Eight and a half years

BACKGROUND AND TRAINING:

Previously worked in banking. Has completed CSBM, DSBM, a BA in School Management and is about to undertake the School Business Director course with the National College





I describe the impact of the studio as if these kids are learning about, for example, a jungle, they need to be in a jungle and the studio can create that.

It is fitted with projectors and advanced lighting to change the visual effects, a fantastic surround sound system, and the next thing I'm looking into is equipment which can generate smells. So the studio is something that keeps evolving, keeps changing, it's very high maintenance but it's amazing what our arts teacher can do with it for the kids.

And how was that funded?

It was funded through the Kingfisher Ball, a fundraising event I organise every year. Through that event we've raised just shy of £30,000. It's become the event to go to in Oldham – we hold it in a fantastic venue that holds 180, and this year I've had something like 280 requests for tickets.

And from your newspaper clippings it seems like some famous faces have been involved also...

Yes, John Stapleton and Lynn Faulds Wood come up from London to present it, we've got Paul Scholes, Julie Hesmondhalgh [Hayley from Coronation Street] and John Henshaw has come on a regular basis. That's good for the event as it adds an extra level but it's very much about getting corporate business involved. We've had a lot of big businesses support it, like Virgin, Harrods, Duerrs and Manchester United, along with fantastic support from local business.

I've been to quite a few schools recently who are working hard to build those corporate links, not just for fundraising but for other benefits it can bring to the community also.

Absolutely. We serve all of Oldham so I think it's really important that businesses across Oldham actually understand what we do. It can be quite a scary place to come into because it is so different. So I think there's that social responsibility in a way to broaden people's understanding about what we do.

And how about other fundraising, do you go after any other grants?

Every school will tell you you've never got enough money, but it's particularly pertinent here because we need to develop facilities for every single child so you can't buy things out of the box. If you're buying bespoke gear you pay bespoke prices: a specialist wheelchair will cost around £2,000 minimum and

we don't have access to central budget funding for this type of equipment.

So it's important that when we're planning to improve the learning environment we can tap into grants and try new special angles. We don't tick boxes for many large scale central grants where it's all around numbers of kids and how many different community groups you will bring into the school, so I very much target private trusts rather than big funds. I'm always on the look out and I think that's part of the job – to be open to looking for opportunities.

Do you have any other sources of income apart from grants?

We do generate substantial additional income, of which a large majority is from outreach work for the LA. So that means the LA is using us as experts to develop inclusion in mainstream schools. For example we work on the PIP [Primary Intervention Project] where we have staff who visit local primary schools to work with kids with autism. Then there's lots of moving and handling training, lots of sign language training. We're essentially a contractor to the LA in that area.

Your headteacher is an NLE, and do you get involved with other schools also?

Yes, I work for the National College as an advocate for school business management across the north west. That's around networking, speaking to authorities and other schools about the benefits an SBM can bring. I'm in my second year there.

Do you ever get people who say 'yes but you're in, quite literally, a special case as a special school so it doesn't apply to me'?

I think whilst every school's different, the fundamentals behind the role are the same from school to school – you still need to look at risk, you still need to look at buildings, ICT, finance so I don't see that as an issue and it's not an objection I've come across. The usual one I come across is 'We can't afford it' but then the National College is trying to address that by looking at different models, through the demonstration projects.

Do you need to invest especially in support for staff? It must be quite challenging working in such a complex environment.

Yes we're finding that especially this year, and it will actually be part of the refurbishment focus: improving facilities for staff. We want to create →

a central staff room that is top spec. You see them walking out now and they look physically shattered. It's very different from mainstream teaching – they don't have a class of 30 but when you're in here you don't get a chance to sit down and rest when the kids are getting on with something.

We also need to continually develop the resource and reprographics area to continue to create the individual resources the pupils need. This is a key area of support for classroom staff.

You must have a well-used reprographics unit to produce all those resources.

Absolutely it's a massive cost, I pull my hair out everytime I see the bills but it's how the children learn, so it's up to me to negotiate the best deal I can.

And what else is on the horizon for the school?

There are lots of things – the building work here is just the catalyst really. We won't have the funding to create the individualised learning environment from the building project money. So that's a big challenge for us once we've got the building: getting the kit right that is both individual and flexible.

Increasing numbers will be another one because that brings increased pressure in terms of the mix of the children. And then we'll be looking at the role of the special school. On the one hand you've got an increased move towards inclusion and on the other you've got children like the ones we teach who would never cope in mainstream schools. So there's that challenge in terms of our role within the local authority and what we should be doing to support mainstream schools.

Finally I guess maintaining our outstanding Ofsted, which is going to be tough because now there's a focus on attainment in terms of providing data. That – providing the data – wasn't a focus before and it's very difficult to show for a lot of Kingfisher pupils. So that's a challenge – we should be outstanding because we are outstanding!

And what about the SBM profession, what would you like to see changing for them over the next few years?

I think we're coming to the end of a phase in that the College has done a lot of work in providing a range of qualifications, and this is the time where we need to start moving on again into linking those qualifications into actual roles. You can get someone who calls themselves a school business



Every school has got its own competitive advantage and I think you've got to be able to use what your school is and what it stands for to drive the best deal: when people talk about best value I see it as providing the best for the kids by using whatever strengths you've got

manager and the role is just way off the mark. I think that for the profession to be recognised as a serious one there needs to be a structure around roles and qualifications.

Linking into the leadership group in terms of salaries is another challenge. Certainly in my LA I'm not allowed to be paid on the leadership scale because I've not got QTS but I've got the same responsibilities as everybody else in the leadership team except they're not in a classroom base.

And I think the financial situation will be a influence of course: there's this black hole deficit that has to be addressed and public services will be hit hard. So then the SBM role will become even more vital to make sure scarce resources are better used. And that's a real challenge in a school like this because I can't do any group buying or things like that.

So how do you get efficiency in a special school? Do you have to accept that you can't get many savings and make the most of extra funding?

Well sometimes it's easier to drive a really good deal if I take someone in the classroom to show them the kids we work with. I will be able to say: 'If you can save me some money I can reinvest it here'. I was worried that was being a bit unethical at first but in the end, the money is going back into the kids' education it's not going into my pocket.

Every school has got its own competitive advantage and I think you've got to be able to use what your school is and what it stands for to drive the best deal. When people talk about best value that's what I see it as: providing the best for the kids by using whatever strengths you've got. **EE**

