



Three years ago, the government looked to develop an online service that schools leaders could use to answer their questions only for the credit crunch to strike and the project to be abandoned. However, Fergal Roche, a former headteacher, did not give in. **Susan Elkin** explains

WHEN IT comes to leadership, the fast-talking 40-something Fergal Roche is a man worth listening to, not least because of his impressively diverse CV.

He was head of Northbourne Park in Kent, where he had taught English, and then of St Andrew's School in Eastbourne.

He left the latter in 2002 when he became education strategy and services director for GEMS, the large international chain of private schools headed by Sunny Varkey with 12 schools in England. Two years later he was business development director of BT's Education and Skills division.

Today Mr Roche is managing director of The Key, the education division of Ten Lifestyle Management which Alex Cheate and Andrew Long founded in 1998.

Mr Roche has 16 staff working directly under his leadership while services such as IT and finance are shared with the company's other two divisions.

The Key is an independent service which supports school leaders by providing practical, researched answers to questions as wide ranging as "how do I cope with an outbreak of headlice?" to "what is in the latest White Paper and how will it affect my school?"

The Key launched in 2007 as a Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) project managed by Ten Lifestyle Management until March 2009.

Then, having been developed, piloted and evaluated, it fell foul of credit crunch related public spending cuts and for the want of a mere £5 million or so – a fleabite in government terms – The Key was axed.

Ten Lifestyle Management, however, has negotiated the right to run it as an independent service. And it shows every sign of being a success.

Around 2,000 English schools are subscribers – a figure which has doubled in the last six months – and around 70 new ones are signing up every week. The service is accessed 4,500 times per week.

The Key works closely with organisations such as Ofsted, the Training and Development Agency for School, the General Teaching Council for England, the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, the teaching unions and almost any other education body which has information and expertise relating to teaching, learning and managing schools, including *SecEd*.

It is also in partnership with many local authorities including Tower Hamlets, Shropshire, East Sussex, Somerset and more because often a policy developed by a local authority can help a school leader with a problem in another part of the country.

So how does The Key actually work? "A school leader whose school is registered asks a question online although his or her name and the name of the school is never published," explains Mr Roche.

"If the question is answered by one of the 1,900 articles already written then we direct the questioner to it. If it's a question new to us then we produce an answer within three days."

Of course, as I listen to all this I wonder whether The Key lives up to Mr Roche's hype. The DCSF dropped it, after all.

When I get home I impartially try out some of those 1,900 articles whose content subscribers can browse as well as asking new questions.

The main headings are Staff, Curriculum and



Going it alone: Despite the government giving it up, Fergal Roche has kept faith in The Key

Learning, Pupils and Parents, Admin and Management, and School Improvement. I click on Pupils and Parents which takes me to more headings from which I choose Pupil-led Initiatives, thence to Pupil Voice where I find eight articles.

I read the one answering this question posed by a medium-sized urban secondary school in the east of England: "How can we gather student perceptions of individual departments?"

The answer briefly describes departmental evaluation work by students using online survey websites such as Yacapaca and Survey Monkey in schools in Suffolk, Stoke-on-Trent, Liverpool and Plymouth – with links for more information. There are also links to relevant articles in *Teaching Expertise* and other publications.

Had I needed this information for professional purposes it would all have been at my finger tips in just a few moments, uncluttered by the usual pages of irrelevant academic verbiage.

And it is that time-saving element which Mr Roche stresses most.

"Heads suffer from dreadful information overload and they get very anxious because, given the volume of material which lands on their desks every day, they often have no way of telling which bit really needs attention and which can be put to one side," he said.

Mr Roche and The Key's communications manager, Catherine Allan, tell me that a school leader reckons to save five hours each time he or she asks The Key a new question and three and a half hours by accessing an existing answer to a previously asked question

– according to a survey of 1,000 subscribers to The Key carried out last year by FDS Independent Market Research.

Tellingly, The Key's IT people can see who is accessing the service and when. Too many school leaders are using the site, asking questions and studying answers around midnight – a clear sign of the workload and stress in this profession – although the commonest time is between 2pm and 3pm.

But how reliable are the answers to the questions? It is, surely, asking a lot to expect a school leader to pin all his or her faith – and maybe reputation – on a few hundred words on a website?

They are written, Mr Roche tells me, by young graduates of very good universities who quickly become expert researchers. They can pinpoint information fast and assemble it in a user-friendly, jargon-free format with links to sources and additional material.

"Our researchers can find the right information far more readily than the average school leader because research is their area of expertise," added Ms Allan, who began in the company herself as a researcher. "But we offer guidance and information – not advice," she continued.

"We actively encourage our staff to become school governors because it's such a good way of finding out what goes on in schools," Mr Roche said, adding that employees get four extra days a year off if they become governors.

Mr Roche himself is acting chairman of governors at Charles Edward Brooke Church of England Girls' School at Camberwell in the London Borough of Lambeth. All researchers, including the ones which are not yet school governors, visit schools twice a term and Mr Roche actively sets these visits up with headteachers.

Well, I've left the bottom line until last. What does it cost to subscribe to The Key? At present it's £480 per year, although this may soon rise by 20 per cent or so.

"We reckon it's equivalent to a single day's external course with supply cover," Mr Roche argues, pointing out that the service actually costs about 47p per hour if three people use it in school (that's the average) 2.5 times per week for 39 weeks of the year.

Some local authorities contribute to the cost for their schools and Durham pays for all new heads to have it.

Mr Roche, meanwhile, jokes that he is so committed to what The Key is doing that he is thrilled to be working in shabby offices behind Topshop at Oxford Circus with tiny carpet-walled, smelly, 1950s lifts (protected by a preservation order) – rather than in the glassy, prestigious workplace at the consultancy he was about to sign a contract with when Mr Cheate ("a very persuasive, driven and passionate man!") talked him into taking this job.

I wonder where he'll pop up next?

SecEd

• Susan Elkin is a former teacher and now a freelance education journalist.

Further information
www.usethekey.org.uk

Union address: NUT

It is time for a change



The NUT and NAHT are balloting for industrial action over key stage 2 SATs. **Christine Blower** explains why

deprivation on pupil achievement is on average three times greater than any other type of discrimination experienced.

Governments now and in the future have to drop their deeply engrained habit of naming and shaming schools as their principal method of school improvement. Parties' election manifestos should contain the commitment that they will initiate a fundamental, independent review of the way schools are evaluated on criteria that success should be celebrated and any weaknesses targeted with guidance and support.

It is time for a change; this waste of our children's education, with all the unnecessary stress and some children being labelled as failures at an early age is a national disgrace. It is unacceptable that some young people start their secondary education already feeling academically inadequate. This is not a positive start, for either secondary teachers or their pupils.

We are not against assessment. What we want is assessment that is meaningful, assessment that is more accurate and assessment that focuses on what children can do, rather than stigmatising them as failures for the things they can't do.

We want all political parties to accept and promote assessment by teachers which arises out of children's learning. It would be a message greatly welcomed by teachers in all phases. It would relieve pressure in the system, lead to better outcomes for teachers and children and, we believe, have parental support.

The government says we need SATs to give parents, teachers and the public the information they need about the progress of children and primary schools. There are more appropriate ways of choosing a school and seeing how it is doing than looking at league tables, such as talking to other parents, reading the school's inspection report, or visiting the school.

The NUT and NAHT believe that parents can get the most accurate and up-to-date information from their child's teacher as SATs do not assess children's achievement across the whole curriculum. Secondary schools also know this, which is why they often retest children when they enter year 7. It is time our children had the education they deserve and I hope the government acts to make this the last year of SATs.

• Christine Blower is general secretary of the National Union of Teachers. Visit www.teachers.org.uk