



Buckinghamshire County Council

Report

Childrens Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

AGENDA ITEM 4

Title: Communications with Schools project

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Recommendation: Members are asked to note the development of a Coordinated Communications System for communication between Council-based staff, school-based staff and governors, as a result of the Communication with Schools project

1. The Communication with Schools project was initiated in response to a number of factors including:
 - Feedback from schools and governors expressing dissatisfaction with communication matters,
 - Feedback from the Ofsted Inspection of the LEA (February 2004) and the results of the Audit Commission survey (2004)
 - Internal monitoring and self-evaluation
 - The Government's agenda for reducing bureaucracy in schools, and the role of the LEA in supporting that objective
2. The project forms part of the LEA's Post-Ofsted Inspection Action Plan and also forms a key part of the overall strategy for partnership working. The project also takes account of the Customer First initiative.
3. The Communication with Schools project began in September 2004. The desired outcomes of the project were:
 - Improved partnership working between schools and the County Council which reflects respective roles and responsibilities
 - Streamlined information flow between schools and the County Council which meets the needs of both parties
 - Consultation which is regarded by all parties as genuine, clear and productive

4. The project team presented the details of the project outline to the Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 September 2005.
5. The project has been well received by schools, with 218 schools (91%) being represented during the audit phase in the Autumn Term 2004. The audit phase also included discussions at the Buckinghamshire County Council management teams across the Council. The full Audit and Research End Phase Report is available on SchoolsWeb.
6. Following the extensive audit and research phase to determine the views of school-based staff, governors and County Council-based staff and including national research of good practice in other Authorities, five recommendations were presented to the Project Management Board, which approved the recommendations:
 - Implement a coordinated system for all communication to schools, with agreed protocols, processes and standards for Buckinghamshire County Council staff and schools. This will include the further development of the content of the SchoolsWeb to ensure that it provides an extensive resource for schools.
 - Provide comprehensive contacts information with organisational structure and line management responsibilities on SchoolsWeb and within the Schools Directory.
 - Implement a revised and coherent structure to the framework of meetings that involve headteachers, school staff and governors and ensure that the framework is clearly understood by all stakeholders.
 - Develop effective data sharing processes between Buckinghamshire County Council and schools, including a clearer planning framework.
 - Work with schools to determine and disseminate good practice in terms of managing communications received within schools.
7. As a result, a consultation exercise was undertaken with all stakeholders in February 2005. At its meeting in April 2005, the Project Management Board received the results of the consultation exercise with stakeholders. Statistical analysis of the responses showed a high level of support for the recommendations, with the overall percentages for those questions where the response was "Yes" ranging from 77% to 98%. When the "Yes" responses and the "Agree in Part" responses were added together, the level of support ranged from 97% to 100%. In the light of this positive response, the Project Management Board approved the further development and Implementation of the five recommendations.
8. Through feedback at a variety of meetings with schools, and through direct feedback from the schools representatives on the Project Management Board, it is known that the outcomes of the project are fully supported by the schools community.

9. An Implementation report was presented to the Corporate Management Team on May 11 2005 and to the Project Management Board on May 19 2005. The Implementation Plan proposes putting into effect the new coordinated communications system, encompassing the five recommendations, from September 2005. The Implementation Plan has been forwarded to the Cabinet members for Schools, Children and Young People and Resources for final approval.
10. In the paper "Partnership Working" (May 2005), the Strategic Director (Schools) sets out Buckinghamshire County Council's vision for the education of children and young people. The paper includes the following extract:
"In order to improve outcomes for the children and young people of Buckinghamshire, schools and the Local Authority are committed to working together. We all recognise that better outcomes for children and young people will only be achieved if we build on partnership working. Partnership is different from consultation. Genuine partnership is about planning and working together, not only to achieve shared objectives, but also to contribute to the achievement of each other's objectives. In developing our partnership working, it is recognised that difficulties may occur from time to time and it is the hope and intention of all concerned in this partnership that early dialogue will take place in order to minimise these difficulties."
11. The paper outlines the Buckinghamshire County Council approach, which includes:
 - *"to develop partnerships based on trust, transparency and professionalism with schools, their governors, the local authority, the dioceses and other partners in the education service;*
 - *to provide clarity about the respective roles and responsibilities of schools, their governors, the local authority, the dioceses and other partners in the education service."*
12. The Communications with Schools project and its outcomes in terms of the coordinated communications system represent one element within this wider programme for improving the relationships between Buckinghamshire County Council and schools and developing true partnership working.
13. Throughout the project, stakeholders have emphasised the significant importance of communication and consultation and the desire for this to improve. The outcomes of the project are based on extensive research, providing a comprehensive understanding of the needs of all stakeholders with respect to communication. The coordinated communications system, therefore, has been designed to offer clarity of roles and responsibilities and allow stakeholders to work together to bring about change, in the way in which we do things and also through the values and behaviours that underpin our interaction with one another.

14. The Implementation Plan entails the School Communications Unit having responsibility for ensuring the implementation, ongoing management and review of the system. The total annual increase in costs is estimated at £55,000.
15. Assessing the financial impact of the proposed changes is difficult to do because of the numbers of officers involved across the Council. It is expected that the new arrangements will enable offsetting savings to be achieved as the effective channelling of communication to schools through the School Bulletin should reduce the administrative time required and reduce the overall volume of paper and distribution costs across the Council. This will be reviewed following the rollout of the new system.
16. The costs for the remainder of 2005/2006 will be met from within existing Schools portfolio budgets. The additional £55,000 in costs will need to be secured for 2006/2007 to ensure the continuation of the new System. There will be an assessment of associated savings as part of the Medium term planning process to determine whether the necessary funding can be obtained and, if necessary, the appropriate bids will be made.
17. The success of this project requires the commitment of all parties to the agreed ways of working. Protocols and customer service standards underpin the coordinated communications system but it is the delivery of the system through the actions of individual stakeholders that will determine whether the benefits are realised in practice. Success rests on all stakeholders sharing a firm commitment to the objectives of:
 - Improved partnership working between schools and the County Council which reflects respective roles and responsibilities
 - Streamlined information flow between schools and the County Council which meets the needs of both parties
 - Consultation that is regarded by all parties as genuine, clear and productive.
18. The anticipated benefits of the Coordinated Communications System are:
 - Clarity of roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders
 - Communication based on a customer-focused ethos
 - Correspondence between stakeholders is appropriate, necessary and timely
 - Channels for communication are clearly understood by all stakeholders
 - Management of communication between stakeholders is effective
 - Requests for information are necessary
 - Information collected is used and shared effectively
 - Information is provided in the most appropriate format
 - Contact information is clear and accessible
 - Consultation practice is based on a transparent framework of meetings between County-based staff and school-based staff, with a clear purpose for meetings.

19. In order for the coordinated communication system to be effective and deliver benefits to all stakeholders, it requires the commitment of all parties to the agreed methods of working. This includes an expectation that all stakeholders will:
- Adhere to the communication protocols and customer service standards, and raise awareness within their team, school or governing body
 - Obtain advice, guidance or clarification on school communications matters, as needed, from the School Communications Unit
 - Notify the School Communications Unit of any communication that they believe does not follow the protocols, to support the monitoring of the system.
20. From the Implementation date the system will be kept under review and it is anticipated that the arrangements may require minor adjustments in the early days to ensure their relevance to the needs of stakeholders.
21. The project will end at the meeting in September 2005. An End Project report will be produced and the Project Management Board will be asked to establish whether the project has met its objectives and produced appropriate outcomes and to formally draw the project to a close.
22. A formal review, including extensive consultation with stakeholders, will take place in February 2006 to evaluate the impact of the coordinated communications system and review whether the identified benefits have been delivered in practice. The success criteria will be linked to the desired outcomes of the project (improved partnership working, streamlined information flows which meet the needs of stakeholders and consultation which is genuine, clear and productive) and the Audit Commission data regarding communication matters, allowing comparison with other local authorities.
23. A programme of ongoing review is planned. In particular, during 2006, the review would continue to evaluate the effectiveness/impact of changes to the new system (especially the changes in the meetings framework, which have a later Implementation date), consider any changes required by the development of Children's Services and consider the Implementation of school impact assessments. The use of a school impact assessment template ensures consistency in determining the likely impact of proposed initiatives/activities in schools prior to the commencement and would inform decision-making on whether the initiative/activity should be implemented.
24. Responsibility for all review work associated with school communications would rest with the School Communications Unit and would form part of the Policy, Planning and Performance Service Plan.