

# **HIGH ROAD TO WORK ORGANISATION**

## **CASE STUDY**

### **BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL**



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#### **Abstract:**

Bristol City Council (BCC) has a record of joint consultation and communication with their trade unions. They have adopted a principle of flexibility, which is pertinent to their structure. This has allowed departmental changes in response to public need where staff can and do work flexible hours in accordance to the requirements of their jobs. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, it highlights the importance of partnership and consultation in internal changes and secondly it is a reminder that the council is a public service and their priorities lie with their clients not their staff.

# HI-RES Case Study: BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL

## Sector

Local Government, Public Sector.

## Key Words

Key Words: Flexibility; joint consultation; joint decision making; equality; union participation; openness.

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## **1. Background Information**

Bristol is the eighth largest city in England with over 405,000 residents and is served and administered by Bristol City Council (BCC), which became a unitary authority in 1996. The council consists of 70 elected councillors who oversee an annual budget of over £600 million and employ almost 18,800 full and part time workers including 7,650 who work in the city's extensive schools network. Bristol City Council is the biggest employer in the area.

BCC operates a cabinet system of government with leadership provided by eight executive councillors and policy and service delivery monitored and developed through an active and effective scrutiny function.

## **2. Drivers for Change**

Bristol City Council responded to general flexibility initiatives from the European Council, which acted as the catalyst for kick-starting different ways of working within the council. There was also a conscious consideration about the Labour government coming back into power and with this new social charters, initiatives and changes that would subsequently take place. Issues of concern were flexible working, retention of staff and moreover retaining the skills of the staff in question.

## **3. Characteristics and Process of Change**

Bristol readily cites their good record of consultation over past years and has high expectation of consultation with the trade unions. The unions therefore get a say in the outcome of decisions proposed due to this communication. Co-operative working is seen as the path to resolving differences. The Chief Executive is considered an actor in forwarding partnership. Although no financial investment was agreed, time was and there was an ethos of seeing where partnership could take the council.

Bristol appreciates the Trades Union Congress (TUC) will be involved in the process. They offer a far wider acceptance and outlook than the traditional 'local' representatives.

From the start, there was deemed a clear understanding about partnership so no written agreement was needed. The council was 'absolutely implicit how partnership was going to work' with both management and unions having equal status at the discussion tables.

At present there is a citywide, council-wide joint consultation committee split into two - one is for teachers and one for non-teacher salaried staff.

The council maintains to seeing policy through once initiated and there is now a monitoring group to see how things have developed. Each department has staff in flexible working. All major policies are reviewed after one year.

The format of partnership approach is joint decision-making and then extensive joint consultation.

## **4. Obstacles to Change**

The various unions have obvious different agendas and attitudes to their representation. Some unions feared that the consultation and partnership path would not work in the traditional 'blue collar' arena. This argument may be more in defence of the unions themselves though, rather than their representatives as Bristol claim the union cite concern over their function diminishing with the process of consultation taking priority.

That said the unions have and had a major part to play, especially with the recent implementation of a single status internal grading structure. The council developed four different grading opportunities based on joint benchmarking basically four versions of same model. Bristol set out to decide jointly with the unions which of these models would be adopted. They admit they succeeded with two of the three representing bodies but the third would not get involved, as it would not 'carry their workforce'.

Generally, Bristol agrees that partnership is not good news for everybody. As with the joint decision-making process, it is not credible for the whole range of employment areas but anything in question does get evaluated to the extent of where it can be extended.

Another obstacle put forward is from managers who complain to not being able to carry out their jobs adequately or sufficiently as their time is taken up with issues and procedures of partnership, consultation and joint decision making.

Tensions arose concerning the Joint Consultation Committee (JCC) framework, the traditional model and partnership working. Bristol made sure that in each of the corporate JCC meetings held they had updated reports of flex working and the work-hours balance.

## **5. Risk Analysis**

A path of formalised consultation in relation to the council's work-hours balance policy has been implemented, although this is not in relation to general human resources matters.

Bristol is also currently working on proposals of performance management at the time of writing. The unions have a vested interest in this initiative and Bristol believes this could well be the next stage in the partnership process.

The council is drafting a new HR strategy also, which will see fruition over the next five years and partnership is considered to be featured somewhere within this.

As for staff, job roles are destined to change. Homeworking and 'hot-desking' (sharing of desks and facilities at various times when people are in the office) policies are being put through on back of these proposed changes in employment structure. Hot-desking is an important topic in terms of accommodation and issues of property (i.e. staff's personal space, discomfort of sharing leading to low production values, etc.). Consequently, the policies proposed are controversial and may see some resistance.

In addition to this, Bristol is due to evaluate their work-hours balance policy in 2002/3 and this will be printed and distributed to staff as an issue of awareness.

Flexibility schemes too have been sought and there are six localised schemes including one for the library service.

## **6. Benefits of Change**

Partnership is seen within Bristol makes managers take a wider and more lateral view of what they are doing. As the council maintains, managing staff and getting the best out of their employees is the first part of managers' duties. Management style must reflect this and partnership, it is argued, allows for this.

The partnership process also affects services delivered to the public. Where some departments must operate, for instance, different opening hours, local taxation for example, staff are expected to work different hours to their colleagues. The flexible working policy has enabled the council to achieve this without any major structural changes.

The trade unions comment now on how open the council is. There is a far more active and earlier participation in partnership development by the unions, more so than 18 months ago.

All the political parties have been in favour of this approach too. Bristol, a Labour run council since 1982, argues that the government 'remembered we're here to give services to public not staff, irrespective of union view'.

That in itself helped the council to facilitate a fairer degree of change, away from traditional method of proposal decisions. Where before there was not always union agreement and staff were not always satisfied, both parties now see this new way as temporary period so, argue Bristol, there is little or no resistance to the changes.

## Conclusions

From the evidence in this case study, Bristol City Council has embraced a path of partnership by extreme joint consultation and decision making with their unions.

BCC saw the possible changes that the new Labour Government administration could bring about and acted upon securing consultation with regards to policies of flexible working and staff retention.

With the Chief Executive on board, management and unions were adamant at how the partnership process would work and adhered to this through a non-written agreement. They ensured that policies were followed through and monitoring takes place with subsequent yearly reviews. This has been supplemented by formalised consultation procedures and proposals of performance management.

The unions definitely play a huge part in the partnership process within the council but issues of representation, how the process will affect the staff and more interestingly the unions caused conflict and contention in some of the Trade union parties. Management too were unsure as to how a path of consultation and co-operation would be implemented on top of the regular workload they had.

The issue of flexibility is among the most important as it impacts on a number of proposals the council has initiated recently, including those of homeworking and 'hot-desking' for staff and flexible hours working to meet departmental requirements. Joint consultation has allowed these paths to be approached and little resistance was seen from staff.

Future considerations include new Human Resource strategies and the continued restructuring of jobs in terms of accommodation and working practices. These will happen through the communication with, and co-operation of the unions which as proved successful to date and of which the unions themselves cite the active participation and openness they experience from the council.

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