

HIGH ROAD TO WORK ORGANISATION CASE STUDY

MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL



**IRISH PRODUCTIVITY CENTRE
2001**

Abstract

Guided by an overall National blueprint, Meath County Council, one of Ireland's Local Authorities, is implementing a comprehensive programme of change within an overall partnership ethos. At the heart of the initiative is the objective of delivering enhanced services to the local community while at the same time effecting meaningful change in the Local Authority workplace(s).

HI-RES Case Study: MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL

Sector

Public Sector (Local Authority)

Key Words

National example; local empowerment; partnership; structures; consultation; education & training; refining work practices; technology and change.

Table of Contents

Abstract

'Good Practice' Case Study: MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL

Sector

Key Themes

1. Background Information	1
2. Drivers for Change	1
3. Characteristics and Process of Change	1
4. Obstacles to Change	3
5. Risk Analysis	3
6. Benefits of Change	3
Conclusions	4

1. Background Information

The National Agreement in Ireland - *'Partnership 2000'* - was entered into by the Social Partners in 1996 and which was subsequently succeeded by the Agreement *'Programme for Prosperity and Fairness'*, which will run through to 2003, together provide a comprehensive framework for a constructive approach to change which can be taken up and implemented at local level. In the Local Government sector in Ireland this framework is complemented by the change strategy covered in the key Document - *'Better Local Government - A Programme for Change'* (1996) which sets out a comprehensive blueprint for the development of local services through the Local Authority network of which Meath County Council is a part. (*Meath itself is one of the twenty-six counties, which together form the Irish Republic*)

Action in each Local Authority, which are widely unionised, is co-ordinated through a partnership mechanism and assisted by the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) which in turn can fund specific local partnership actions in effecting progress, the most significant of which was the creation of a partnership facilitator post within each Local Authority. Each Authority has of course to tackle its own specific needs in the development of local services to its community and Meath County Council is an example of how the overall task of introducing change can be approached.

2. Drivers for Change

The key drivers for change in Meath County Council could be summarised as:

- The need to accept and deliver on the challenge presented from the National level in the form of twin strategic policies relating to Local Government reform and the creation of a partnership ethos.
- The need to ensure that changes introduced were meaningful and transparent and resulted in enhanced services to the local community.
- The need to develop arrangements that providing platforms for continuing change into the future and one which might be pre-eminent within the overall Local Authority network.

3. Characteristics and Process of Change

The partnership and change processes at local level are harnessed to the delivery of a comprehensive Corporate Plan upon which extensive consultation took place. The Plan reflects local needs and its stated goals are pursued by:

- Achieving measurable progress on performance indicators,
- Implementing Customer service strategies and
- Developing internal Human Resource Strategies to achieve the goals.

In practical terms achievement is reflected through enhanced services in areas such as Roads, Housing, Water, and Environmental protection.

It is important to note that the change process must take place within the conventional framework of a locally elected democracy to whose councillors, the Executive and staff of the Authority report. As the elected councillors, in effect, work in harmony with the management and staff it is possible to envisage the change process as occurring within parallel frameworks of local and workplace democracies.

The partnership process within the Authority is a key element in the introduction of change in Meath County Council and at its centre is a Partnership Committee, which was established in January 2000; this comprises twelve people and has the support of a facilitator. After extensive review the Committee selected six issues upon which it felt partnership could have a significant impact, these were:

- Effective consultation & communication,
- Urban/rural de-centralisation of services,
- Health & safety,
- Team development,
- Service delivery and
- Public image.

The six areas were allocated to six working groups and a total of forty-three people became involved in these groups. Each group set specific attainable objectives and priorities.

It is noteworthy that throughout the work of the groups and indeed in the entire parallel adaptation to change Meath County Council embraced a comprehensive information technology policy involving an extensive education & training programme.

Reporting on progress in 2001 the Partnership Committee notes that consensus was reached on four key objectives:

- The need to create and sustain opportunities for career development and job satisfaction for all staff.
- The need to allow management/staff/unions to take ownership and control over the process of change.
- The need to maximise the benefits of new technology and information systems both for service delivery and staff development.
- The need to seek improvement in work practices through co-operation.

All of the working groups have involved specialist help as required and all reported tangible and measurable progress in the areas selected.

This ongoing partnership effort, co-ordinated through the Partnership Committee, not only covers the specific areas mentioned - in which the working groups operate - but it acts as a discussion forum for idea generation towards the many parallel developments that are ongoing within a complex Local Authority structure.

4. Obstacles to Change

These might be summarised as follows:

- The wish of a minority of staff to retain the 'status-quo'.
- The need to align the pace of change with the capacity of the organisation to absorb it.
- The possible intrusion at times of shifting priorities, which are inevitable in a system, which by definition is governed by local and national political considerations.
- The parallel existence of a powerful and respected adversarial system of industrial relations.

Such obstacles were inevitably and simply have to be respected and absorbed within the overall change process.

5. Risk Analysis

The extent and pace of the change is such that some individuals /groups may, at times, feel outside the process and the possibility could arise that of some antipathy or. In parallel to the change process and central to its success is a significant series of appointments within revised Local Authority structures. It remains a challenge to assure that as the appointees come on board they embrace and support the change process. Financial support for the activities of the facilitator come from the National arena and any future cost reductions that might effect such funding could constrain the partnership approach since the availability of facilitation locally has considerably helped the partnership/change drive.

In early 2002 the County Manager in Meath whose leadership and support of change was exemplary was promoted to a new post in another County and there will be a need to retain the impetus created under his leadership.

In the future it will be interesting to note the reactions of locally elected councillors to the progress made and the need may arise to link the local democratic arrangements in the political sphere with the partnership arrangements emerging in the workforce and beyond.

6. Benefits of Change

To-date:

- A comprehensive partnership approach has been adopted which has led to tangible results.
- Six working groups continue to operate to specific objectives and timetables.

- The 'change through partnership' model is gaining wide acceptance.

Conclusions

With adequate resources and commitment is possible to implement and sustain a comprehensive change programme in a Local Authority structure. A partnership approach can play a significant part in such a change programme and it can be underpinned by relevant structural arrangements and facilitation.

Publication Details

Published by: IPC

Publication date: 2001

Journal: -

URL: -

Revised: -

Notes: -

© IPC 2001. All rights reserved.