

Reviewing the role and remit of our support staff:

the introduction of a Business Support Team to the Department for Children, Schools and Families

Summary

This case study tells the story of a Hertfordshire County Council initiative to review the work of its support staff and make the best of the administrative and support roles. This was achieved by changing and reorganising the many tasks and activities performed so they were as efficient and effective as possible.

Authority/partner organisation(s):	HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
Improvement East theme:	PERFORMANCE
Improvement East initiative (workstream):	CHILDREN'S SERVICES
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Main messages

In striving to ensure the Council's support staff were providing the most efficient service, the Service Support Implementation programme was established. The aims of the programme were to:

- Provide valuable support close to the business
- Develop a formal career structure for administration and support staff
- Recognise opportunities offered by location and technology changes
- Ensure our staff have the right skills to do the job
- Further enhance the continuous improvement agenda of the county council

Case study

Throughout Hertfordshire County Council, it had been identified that there was a decline in 'generic administrative' tasks and instead an increase in the demand for 'specialist' support. All the evidence suggested that the quality of service could be improved; support staff job satisfaction increased and efficiencies made by making sure that the Council up-skilled staff to meet both the needs of today and those of the future.

Over the past two years the Council had implemented a wide range of technologies aimed at improving efficiency and flexibility. Upgrades such as Lotus Notes enhancements and Call Director (a telephone system which allows calls to be redirected to any number when not in the office), as well as the ongoing roll out of e-filing were fundamentally changing the role of support staff. Employee Self Service / Manager Self Service further developed self-reliance for officers and managers and decreased demands on support staff time.

Budgetary constraints on the department were also requiring services to prioritise resources in teams and although it is evident that the majority of teams are unable to function effectively without support it is sometimes difficult to match this with the need to deliver services at the frontline.

In addressing this issue, the programme began with a Service Support Review in November 2007. This involved the gathering of 'big picture' data, both in meeting the review team and providing information about the many aspects of how support was provided across the authority. The aim of

the Service Support Review was to look at how the whole Council can make the best of its administrative roles by changing the many tasks and activities performed to enable them to be as efficient and effective as possible. The review also looked at how the many service support functions are organised.

The County Council's Strategic Management Board of Chief Officers received a report providing the findings of the first phase and made recommendations for the way forward. There was full agreement to the report's recommendations. The themes included:

- A recognition that many staff are now providing a specialist support service rather than a more traditional administrative role.
- Most parts of the authority are benefiting from the impact of The Way We Work which brings together new office locations, new ways of working and new technology. Together these strands deliver services more efficiently as most is made of resources. The impact of these changes offers the opportunity to look afresh at the supporting roles and to make sure the most is being made of these advances.
- The changes to support services (HR, H&S, ICT and Finance) have focused on bringing together professional communities to support the organisation. This review recognises that in order to be effective service support needs to be as close as possible to the service that their team provides rather than in a centralised arrangement.
- Hertfordshire wants to be an authority that provides the best public services in the country. To be more effective it is necessary to continue to look at the many processes and procedures that drive the work, so ways can be identified of reducing bureaucracy and becoming more efficient with limited resources. Implementing changes for how service support provided is considered a long term continuous process of improvement and not something that can be done overnight, with just making cosmetic changes.
- There were many examples of good practice which enable support staff to develop their careers into specialist areas for example moving from an administrative role into a front line social care or engineering role. In most cases these are informal arrangements which can now be taken forward across the organisation so that service support staff can see and take advantage of the possible career pathways open to them.

A central project team was put in place which managed the roll-out of the programme initially. Leads were identified within each service area to manage the departmental arrangements and they were responsible for ensuring all timescales and efficiencies were met. The central team were only in place for one of the four phases and the responsibility to undertake the remainder of the programme now lies within departments.

Throughout the rollout of the project, a number of risks were identified which required management by the central project team:

Line management

For a number of teams, the implementation of different arrangements meant that there was a change in line management for a large number of support staff. Historically, staff had been managed off-line from the teams they supported by Administration Managers and the new arrangements deleted these positions and Team Managers undertook the management role. There was a lot of concern raised from support staff regarding their perception that Team

Managers did not have the skills and experience to manage support roles. Team Managers were also concerned about having to manage additional members of staff.

To mitigate against this, CSF differed its approach to management responsibilities based on the particular needs and pressures of individual services. For example, some teams only have one member of support staff and it was considered appropriate, and in most cases welcomed by the team, for that member of staff to be managed by the Team Manager. However, in the case of social care teams, there would have been a need for Team Managers with already very heavy demands on their time having to take on the management of at least two members of staff and the CSF Board agreed it would be appropriate to introduce an additional junior management role to ensure support staff were managed appropriately. These management roles have responsibility for a number of teams and also manage processes which ensures a consistent approach across the service.

Pressure on professional staff

A major reason for this review was the introduction of more self service technology for managers, however, managers were concerned that any reduction in support would mean more pressure on professional staff to undertake particular duties. Managers were encouraged to utilise the new systems and support was provided as necessary to ensure they were confident in using the technology.

Staff engagement

One key risk was ensuring support staff and managers were appropriately engaged in the process and were enabled to have their say in proposed structures and changes in ways of working. To ensure this was achieved corporate-wide briefings were offered to all Council staff. This provided an overview of the whole programme and the way in which it would be rolled out within individual services. In addition, the programme was undertaken in phases and there was a robust communications strategy for each phase.

Briefings were held for all staff identified as being in scope at the beginning of each phase, which was also attended by their managers. Pre and post implementation surveys were undertaken to ensure staff had a good understanding of the reasons for the programme and how they felt about the proposed way forward. Formal consultation documents were issued to all staff in scope. During the one month consultation process, individual one-to-one sessions were carried out by managers with each member of staff and there was also service briefings which presented the structures and gave support staff an opportunity to feedback what they thought would work well and what issues they thought needed to be overcome.

As part of the review, the County Council introduced two Business Support roles, and within CSF a Business Infrastructure Team was created. This team now provides off-line challenge and support to all teams, monitors compliance on Council initiatives and requirements and ensures the infrastructure is efficient and effective to allow teams to deliver their service to the best of their ability. This team have implemented the majority of phases of this programme and have built up knowledge and understanding of the teams and their staff which has enabled them to support staff and managers with any queries they have had.

Toolkits have been prepared for use by all departments, along with milestones to be achieved. Progress is monitored by a Countywide group of Assistant Directors.

In terms of resources, the funding for the central team was extracted from the identified efficiencies and no additional funding was made available for those leading the programme within individual services.

Although there is an end to the programme, in terms of reviewing the roles of support staff and making efficiencies, the introduction of the Business Infrastructure Team will enable continuous challenge and improvement by:

- Looking at processes and procedures
- Ensuring people's time and expertise is used to its full potential
- Establishing and introducing more efficient ways of working

By improving the way administration and support across Children's, Schools and Families is delivered, better outcomes will be achieved for our services. In addition, more structured and fairer progression opportunities are available for our staff who provide the support.

Key outcomes

The introduction of the Business Infrastructure Team is ensuring managers are more supported in providing their service. This team is responsible for ensuring that all CSF teams have everything in place to enable them to do their jobs most effectively and six months after the establishment of this team there are positive signs that the team are making a real difference. The team also have a large role to play in ensuring compliance with the Authority's statutory responsibilities, along with supporting the links with the work of our corporate centre. There has recently been a need to undertake a huge data collection exercise on the work of every team in CSF and the Business Infrastructure Team championed and co-ordinated this huge piece of work which was delivered to a high standard within the required timescale.

A substantial amount of savings has been achieved as a result of the deletion of administrative management posts and refining processes within teams. The Programme is nearing completion and it is anticipated that a gross total of around £800,000 will have been saved after funding the creation of the Business Infrastructure Team.

Teams are now benefitting from support staff being considered as full members of the team with more management oversight of matching tasks against the priorities of the team. Support staff are able to understand more fully the role of their team and contribute in a much more focused way by liaising directly with team members, being part of team meetings and being fully engaged in determining the best ways of working to ensure the team delivers it's service in the most efficient and effective way possible.

There is now a corporately recognised professional career progression scheme for all staff. Within Children, Schools and Families, a decision has been taken that all support posts are within scope for career progression which will improve retention of staff.

Learning

The main problems that arose and were managed, are outlined above. Within Children, Schools and Families there were some difficult challenges in engaging support staff in a way that they felt they were being listened to. This was attributable to the perception that nothing would change and the programme would not be seen through to the end, as had been previous experiences.

Critical factors for success were the introduction of generic role outlines for support staff and a real feeling that a consistent approach was being undertaken across the whole authority. Efficiencies were required to be demonstrated both in terms of money and in the way support was being delivered to teams.

Success was only achieved by ensuring that support staff felt that the people involved in the programme were genuinely listening to their concerns and acting upon them.

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