

Engaging with Excellence

Southampton City Council is “good” in CPA terms so it needed something special in its quest to provide excellent services and to deliver further efficiency savings.

It was critical to share understanding of business priorities and support the development of change management skills. Chief Executive Brad Roynon had used the Business Excellence Model to good effect in his previous role with Carmarthenshire County Council and has championed its application in Southampton. His aim is to identify a path to excellence and to gain a shared view of priorities and the management skills needed to deliver on Council commitments.

Working with Woodward Lewis, a firm of Sussex-based business improvement consultants, and steered by the Council’s Director of Resources, Carolyn Williamson and Head of Policy and Performance, Joy Wilmot-Palmer, a new approach to business planning was introduced to get staff input to priorities. A two-way communication process spread shared understanding of how individual services supported the Council strategies, and related to each other following a recent reorganisation.

“This Council has taken a huge step forward in ensuring direct, face-to-face communication with its staff,” says Mr Roynon. “We believe this is of paramount importance when facing continued pressure to change and Woodward Lewis provided invaluable change management expertise and personal enthusiasm that allowed us to roll this out as a positive experience,” he adds. “It gives me a clear overview of improvement activity across the Council in an easily accessible form and is helping to focus our future management development programme.”

Staff engagement was also a priority and this drove a project which:

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- Engaged more staff in face-to-face feedback and communication at one time than ever before
- Gave a rigorous analysis of service strengths and weakness, and corporate priorities for action without the need for a large audit-style review
- Helped managers to work together within directorates to recognise mutual dependency and opportunities to maximise strengths
- Improved internal communication through the introduction of summary business plans for each service and directorate
- Established a widely welcomed people management charter that clearly sets out mutual expectations of managers and staff
- Achieved a genuine shift in culture towards even better team work and leadership as well as a positive outlook to future Council objectives

“There were already some excellent practices in different parts of the council”, says Maggie Saunders, the project co-ordinator. “We didn’t want to disregard these, and we allowed managers freedom to work within a framework that ensured quality standards of dialogue and communication were applied.” Each service was required to ensure their staff had a voice in recognising service strengths and priorities for improvement, using the Excellence Model framework.

The new approach was designed in consultation with managers in the Council and rolled out starting with the Corporate Management Team and their Policy Co-ordinators. These workshops demonstrated commitment from the top and identified some Council-wide areas for improvement.

All staff were invited to a series of presentations and workshops to suit their working arrangements. In the Environment Directorate, a series of directorate and divisional events and workshops were held, these aimed to engage staff at all levels and from all services within the Directorate. Staff input from these events has been built into this

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year's business and service plans. In Health and Community Care, representatives from newly reorganised services worked on case studies to show how working across departments could directly improve the experience of their service users, using examples of typical cases. Overall, all staff had the opportunity to have their say, either directly at the conferences or through surveys and workshops. Union representatives also attended or had their own workshops.

"This was an ambitious project so we're delighted that it has been such a success for Southampton City Council," says Jane Lewis, partner at Woodward Lewis. "We've worked with many local authorities and we've never come across such a comprehensive and ambitious internal communications and consultation event in another Council. We knew it would take something special for it to work and with a little innovation we believe we delivered just that."

One of the most successful innovations of the project was the directorate conference. This allowed a wide range of participants at all levels across every service within directorates to understand better how each service was interdependent.



Caption: Southampton CC's top management team get involved in a workshop that kicked off one of the largest internal communications and consultation events organized by a local authority.

Formats varied between directorates. The Resources Directorate invited all their staff to briefings and discussion groups, and a massive 92% of the 945 staff came.

Environment held a mixture of management workshops and workshops and focus

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groups with a cross-section of staff to get input to their business plans. Feedback from their management conference indicated that 86% thought the approach was excellent or good. Children's Services and Learning involved key stakeholders and other "critical friends" in a series of events that produced a divisional overview that was pulled together across the directorate. Neighbourhoods invited all 1350 staff to a conference and asked them to participate in an on-line questionnaire. Nearly 70% of staff came to a conference session and about half completed the survey. Communities, Health and Care ran a conference for key staff that demonstrated how working together across the directorate and with partners helped service users, and this resulted in a clear cross-directorate communication plan. Nine hundred and seventy-five staff were briefed about the conference and its results and the directorate reports 100% positive feedback from the day.

Another key to the project's success was the "low paperwork" approach to using the Excellence Model. Developed in the late eighties, with early adopters including the Xerox Corporation, the standard Model is very mature as a product and is still widely used by leading organisations, such as BMW and Siemens to improve performance. It has also been widely used in the public sector, although very few local authorities have used it in all services and those who started and stopped using it cite excessive review processes and too much detail as the main reason for stopping. Off the shelf surveys that are based on the standard Model use management language.

Woodward Lewis trained internal facilitators and helped to develop this new "light" version of self-assessment without a heavy-duty reporting process and no army of assessors. Based on staff feedback, managers held self-assessment workshops that highlighted and prioritised actions. *"We just used the Excellence Model as the basis for some key questions about the way we worked"*, says Jackie Standen, Head of Performance and Policy in the Resources Directorate. *"People were reluctant to facilitate staff sessions at first, but by the end we had people coming back and asking*

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whether they could do more workshops, as they'd found it so interesting and rewarding."

Champions were trained in more detail to moderate the self-assessment process and results, and their work is being integrated with that of internal Investors in People reviewers to maximise use of resources. The actions fed directly into business plans, and addressed areas of risk and opportunity. Directorate management teams reviewed and moderated the work done within each service and pulled together key high-level priorities and themes.

"Our fear was that the Model might become the tail that wagged the dog," reflects Liz Marsh, Head of Environmental Health and Consumer Protection Division. *"We used it selectively in our four-year journey to turn round the Environment Directorate from "one star" to "four star" at CPA, but this was the first time we'd had corporate "permission" to take time out to think about how to really develop further. It has been a really worthwhile process which is enabling us to get across the important message that staff and the trade unions are important stakeholders."*

Following on from the workshops, the Environment Directorate is now undertaking a staff survey which will ensure all staff have an opportunity to feedback their views. *"Our engagement with staff was open and honest, and tailored to the needs of different groups,"* says Liz. *"We strongly believe that we need to focus on all of our stakeholders in order to improve. In particular, the development of managers and staff has led to improved outcomes and will enable us to continue to deliver high quality services despite the need to make efficiencies."*

Plans for the future aim to bed in the good practice that emerged during the launch. The Excellence Model scoring system highlights areas of good management practice, and these are already being shared in management conferences. Tracey Upton, Head

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of HR, and Janet King, Head of Learning and Development, have designed a management development programme, which takes into account the core Excellence Model management competencies and which will evolve in the light of staff feedback, and Janet is taking on the training of in-house Excellence Model champions.

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