

**DRAFT**

**Draft statement of**

**Scrutiny Board**  
**(Children's Services)**

**Departmental**  
**Communications**

# Introduction



## Introduction

1. At its meeting on 4 December 2006, Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted concerns regarding the nature, purpose and costs of internal Council publications and newsletters. The Committee resolved that the matter be left to the discretion of individual Scrutiny Boards to investigate in respect of their respective areas of responsibility if they so wished.
2. On 11 January 2007, Scrutiny Board (Children's Services) considered the issue of departmental communications. Members of the Board resolved that a Working Group be established to consider the issue of corporate communications published by those departments within the Scrutiny Board's remit.
3. A working group of 3 co-opted members of the Board, Mr E A Britten, Prof P H J H Gosden and Ms C Foote, met on 7 March 2007 to consider the issue of corporate communications within Education Leeds and Children's Services. The Board Members met with Officers from both departments, the Team Leader for Communications, Education Leeds and the Communications Manager, Children's Services. Prior to the

meeting the Working Group were provided with information about the Education Leeds Communications Project, currently in the implementation stage, to improve the way that the department communicates with its staff, with schools, governors, parents and carers. One of the project's stated objectives was to "increase efficiency and best use of resources in all our communications".

## Comments and Recommendations



1. The Officer from Education Leeds informed the Working Group about the Communications Project, which was established to progress the recommendations of a fundamental service improvement review of the Communications Team function in 2005. The review identified the importance of the e-communications agenda in delivering more efficient and effective transactions and the need to refocus resources to achieve this. It recommended that the next stage of the review should consider how to create a more effective structure for developing the “people” dimension of an effective e-communications organisation.
2. The Working Group asked specifically about the shift from paper based to electronic information on the “Infobase” intranet. Infobase had been in existence for about five years. Only used internally at first, Infobase became available to schools around three years ago.
3. Five years ago, Education Leeds relied heavily on printed publications; weekly and quarterly bulletins to schools and internal staff newsletters, printed information for governors and headteachers. External organisations often sent in batches of printed
- leaflets and other information to be distributed to schools and this was sent via the envopacs. Now, newsletters and other documents generated by Education Leeds were produced electronically and placed on Infobase. Printed material produced by Education Leeds had been pared down and only a small selection of printed information was distributed to schools on behalf of external organisations.
4. Headteachers and teachers could access electronic documents and newsletters on Infobase. One of the aims of the Communications Project would be to develop a system of “tailoring” information to their individual needs through a personal log-in. A programme to provide similar log-ins for Governors was also underway. The large number of governors in Leeds and the training which accompanied providing the log-in meant that the roll-out of the programme would take some time to complete.
5. The Working Group understood the need to meet e-government targets and the reasons behind the move towards electronic communication. It had concerns that the ease of availability of electronic communications might lead to an overload of information where important

## Comments and Recommendations



items were 'hidden' in the morass.

6. Members were reassured to hear that

- staff were asked always to think about whether their message was necessary; and, if so, to tailor their approach according to their message and its recipient(s), rather than simply opting for an electronic option every time
- "gatekeeping" was in place to discourage the use of "blanket" emailing except for very important and urgent messages which must reach a large audience quickly

7. Members were also concerned that schools would now be bearing the costs of printing out material from the Infobase or "virtual" envopac rather than receiving actual paper copies. Paper copies pinned to a noticeboard in the staffroom were often more effective for busy teaching staff who might find it difficult to find the equipment and time to sit down and access information electronically. On this point, members were informed that schools could choose to print out as much or as little of the electronic information as they wanted and to continue to display this for staff to access if they felt the need. There was

also a facility for schools to request paper versions of certain documents and, indeed, one school continued to receive paper copies because they had specifically expressed that preference.

8. The Working Group asked if any printing cost savings made centrally by Education Leeds had been identified and the monies passed on to schools. Members were informed that this hadn't happened yet, however schools had monies delegated to their budgets for paper and printing as a matter of course.

9. Members asked if there had been any feedback from schools about the Infobase and were informed that there was some unhappiness with the system at the very early stages. The reasons for this appeared to have been dissatisfaction with the change itself and also practical problems with the system, which have since been addressed. Feedback about the communications project had been good. A user group was in place which reflected a range of users, from those with a keen interest and particular skills in using new technologies, through to those with no particular interest in ICT and a low level of computer literacy.

## Comments and Recommendations



10. Members heard that email alerts had been used when the electronic system was first put in place, some years ago. The system was not very reliable at the time so alerts had stopped but were due to start again. Alerts were a method where recipients could self-select information. **Headline information was given in an email about several topics and the user could select to read more about certain ones by clicking a link.**
11. The Communications Manager for Children's Services informed members that Children Leeds did not directly produce a lot of information. **Certain organisations or teams took the lead on different issues, so for example, the PCT led on child obesity; Education Leeds led on bullying; Social Services led on adoption. His role was to influence and share best practice. The Communications Manager did not lead a team but worked closely with other teams. Since his appointment he had been meeting with colleagues in children's services departments to find out more about their current communications practices.**
12. Members noted how vital effective communications would be between different agencies, departments and teams to equip the proposed new Children's Services Directorate to carry out its functions and drive wider partnership working to integrate and transform services. They expressed concerns that the Communications Manager would not have a team of people to resource this, whilst recognising that the new directorate would actually be a drawing together of existing partners rather than the creation of a new entity. As such, the cost implications of a new team might be difficult to justify. In view of this, the Working Group felt that it was important that a communications strategy was put in place between the agencies concerned that left no gaps.
13. Members were also keen to find out how much was currently spent on publications within Children's Services, this included the spend by Leeds City Council but also external partners, if that information could be made available.
14. In summary, Members recognise that considerable efforts have been made to improve departmental communications in Education Leeds. Members think this has been effective so far, and particularly welcome the communications project

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initiative, with its clearly stated objectives, benefits and success criteria. Children Leeds is at an early stage and appears to have some way to go in assessing the situation and taking a lead on identifying and disseminating good practice in communications. The Working Group feel that the new Children's Services Directorate should be seen to take the lead on this issue. Scrutiny Board (Children's Services) therefore makes the following recommendation in the light of the Working Group's deliberations:-

## Recommendation 1

***That a Children's Services communications project be set up, including all the relevant partners, to enable the new Directorate to***

- ***take a lead on communications***
- ***assess current practice***
- ***draw the partners together***
- ***assist the Communications Manager, Children's Services in his role to influence and share best practice***
- ***draft a communications strategy***

Mindful of the Working Group's remit, which relates to the nature, purpose and costs of publications, the Board also makes the following recommendations:-

## Recommendation 2

***That costs for departmental publications 2006/2007 be supplied to a future meeting of Scrutiny Board (Children's Services), to establish a baseline figure for departmental publications produced by Education Leeds for comparison with future years.***

## Recommendation 3

***That the Director of Children's Services obtain costs for publications relating to Children's Services 2006/2007 from Council Departments and external partners, where available, to supply to a future meeting of Scrutiny Board (Children's Services).***

## Recommendation 4

***That information on any monitoring process(es) used to evaluate the effectiveness of the corporate communications published by Education Leeds and Children Leeds be supplied to a future meeting of Scrutiny Board (Children's Services).***