

The More for Less Challenge: improved communication with the Lancashire Schools Portal.

The Challenge

The inspiration for the gate-keeping Schools Portal came from the DCFS (DfE) which, via the Implementation Review Unit, was pushing to reduce the levels of unnecessary bureaucracy in schools and free up time to enable head teachers, teachers and support staff to concentrate on their primary task of providing teaching and learning.



More for Less

Lancashire County Council had a challenging efficiency drive in progress at the time, predicated on more for less and improved services to customers. By bringing these national and local agendas together we created the Lancashire Schools Portal.

The focus was to encourage local authorities and other organisations to reduce the volume and increase the value of materials being sent to schools by developing, adopting and operating a gate-keeping and impact assessment system

The system involves more than simply getting information into schools quickly and efficiently; it is about detecting all material being distributed to schools, questioning whether it should be going in the first place and, where necessary, preventing it from being sent. It's about multilayer communications and plain English, managing the self-creating workload and reducing the impact of communications both on schools and teams within the Authority.

There are 647 schools and Academies in Lancashire and they have 647 ways of managing their school. The requirement was to build a communication system which could accommodate this and could still target individual communications to a school, customised to a set of unique users, and which could be organised and managed at a school level. On this basis, 6236 school based users were identified across the schools who received information in 85 different categories.

The Response

The project, led by Jane Beckford, followed the principles of SPRINT. It started by establishing a number of key protocols to adhere to, as follows:

- The schools would be closely involved in the design and development process right from the start;
- Claims that any data requests are a statutory requirement would be challenged and had to be justified by the claimant, evidenced by producing the Act, which placed the responsibility of completing a statutory return on the school not just the Authority;
- Rigorous gate keeping, driven from a senior executive level, would apply across all Local Authority departments, not just the LEA or Children's Services;

- Data should be collected once and used many times;
- Data collection and sharing should be fully automated;
- Transparency of planned actions and savings would be visible to schools;
- The value of any data collected should demonstrably outweigh the costs of collecting it;

The project team then:

- Went to the schools and asked the head teachers, school managers and teachers, what was wrong with the current system, what they really wanted from it, and identified the top 10 things that they needed us to do that would measurably improve the service for them;
- Learned from Head teachers how schools organised their information and came up with an agreed framework of 85 headings for different categories of information. We did this because we didn't want to impose our own categories, the categories needed to fit organisational information areas recognised and used in schools;
- Every school updated the system to identify which person was responsible for each of the 85 areas within the school. That person then would get the post or electronic communications relating to their areas of responsibility, but unique to each school, governor or Early years provider.

The Result

Vast improvements have been made in reducing the collection of data across the LCC. Jane observed:

“45,000 communications a year go through the portal. We now challenge edicts from the external providers, e.g. DfE or elsewhere, that are informing schools that certain data needs to be supplied. When they ask for data on the grounds that it is statutory we say ‘well then, show us the legislation’. When we do this the requests tend to go away and we reduced statutory return to schools in Lancashire by 2/3rds. We’ve made 17,000 such gate-keeping interventions since September 2009.

“Since May 2008, 253,000 documents, have been shared, viewable at an individual school level, documents that had previously been posted out.

“When we looked at the collection of data internally, we found there were vast amounts of duplicated collections across the council and partners. You’d find people in adjacent offices making individual requests to schools for the same data. We can see all these requests now that we have a single visible route, and we are able to remove the duplications.”

In 2005 research undertaken showed that Lancashire made over 2,500 requests for data from schools through multiple routes, including phone, post, email. About 38% of these requests were for data already held on systems elsewhere in County Hall. By 2009/2010 this had reduced dramatically to 211 collections, resulting in massive savings at both ends and reducing the burden on schools.

The key thing about robust challenges through a single portal is that it forces all communications to come through this one channel. Any emails that go to more than 20 schools are detected and challenged against a schools agreed protocol - a stress buster for head teachers and officers alike.

Of the 83 business processes that the teams have re-engineered, the one that delivered the greatest return in terms of improvement was replacing printed materials with traceable electronic documentation. This reduced the overall bill from £1.6m to £100,000 in the first two years. Another example was a process which had gone from a 3 month exercise to a 3 min one, with vastly improved return rates. The post bags that were delivered to schools weekly by taxi, are now challenged and reduced, with monitored savings of £67,000 year.

The Portal has also got rid of the so-called 'vitaly needed', wet signatures. When we looked at the problem it was found that very few are actually needed although, interestingly, people tend to get very anxious about this. The Audit function in Lancashire have been pragmatic and supportive about where and when documents returned by authenticated users with password protection can be accepted.

The 2 million pound savings in Lancashire comprise both cashable and non-cashable elements. The process re-engineering has identified waste and freed up time for people to do things that couldn't be done before. It has been about creating capacity within the organisation to deliver more for less, and to deliver a service that is measurably better than before.

The future

Next steps are to continue to work with neighbouring and more far flung authorities, bring in FE, the 'Early years' sector and progress work with multiple partnership communications including police, health and fire and rescue.

We are harmonising and streamlining the £40 million traded services relationship between Lancashire CC and schools, to give schools and Academies a transparent and consistent view of 48 traded services.

The School's Portal in Lancashire is now acknowledged by DCSF (DFE) as "at the head of the game, nationally" and discussions are in place across a number of authorities to roll it out, look at remote hosted service or to share the learning that Lancashire have gone through over 8 years to pass on the lessons learnt. We have been involved in discussions to include gate keeping success within an OFSTED or previous CPA framework so that authorities and schools are measured for their effectiveness in this area. The all-party House of Lords Merits committee, concerned and dedicated to burden reduction and challenge, saw our work as exemplary in **reducing front line burdens and getting considerably more for considerably less, by working more efficiently and effectively.**

Plaudits

Finalist in 2010 Orange business award nominated by Treasury office.

Winner of Best Business award, for procurement product for traded services area.

For further information, please contact: jane.beckford@lancashire.gov.uk