

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

EDUCATION COMMITTEE - 29 MAY 2001

COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Report by Director of Educational and Social Services

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To seek approval for a policy on communication within the Department of Educational and Social Services of East Ayrshire Council.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 At its meeting of 16 March 2000, the Education Committee gave its approval for a Strategic Plan for the Education Department 2000-2003. This plan included a statement of vision for communication within the Education Service:

"It is important to ensure that staff and users of the service at local level can come together to pursue implementation strategies. At all stages such strategies, based on partnership, will recognise the coherence of educational provision which is provided by central policies. Such recognition is important to ensure that the core values of Quality, Equality, Access and Partnership are maintained throughout the Council area.

Locally, Elected Members, staff and community representatives know the area and can make a significant contribution to the identification of local needs. It is an important component of this Strategic Plan that a positive response is made to those needs.

The Education Department is committed to effective communication. This will necessitate the presentation of clear, concise and supportive policy statements and guidelines. The well established system of written circulars and meetings will be kept under review in order to maintain effectiveness. Other methods of communication within the area of information communication technology will be adopted as resources become available."

Following a review of communication within the Department, it is now proposed to provide a more detailed policy statement in order that all participants can understand their role in effective communication.

- 2.3 Members may wish to be aware that this draft policy has already been subject of wide consultation. In particular it was circulated for comment to heads of all primary special and secondary schools by e-mail. Contributions were invited from Community Education, Quality Development, Psychological Services, Early

Years and School Boards. The trades unions were also consulted through the informal Joint Consultative Committee, as was the corporate Information Technology Department and corporate Communications Department.

3. CLARIFICATION OF THE TERM “COMMUNICATION”

- 3.1** Communication is concerned with the transmission of information. As such it is a distinct and separate process to “consultation” which is much more about the exchange of ideas in order to shape policy development. It follows, however that effective consultation rests on effective communication.
- 3.2** Effective communication is a collective responsibility involving all who work in and alongside the service. It is often forgotten that communication is a two-way process. It is also “multi-dimensional” in that there is a need for staff to inform each other, parents, pupils, the local community and other agencies as appropriate. Everyone therefore has a responsibility to communicate effectively, it is not solely a “top-down” process. Indeed, there is a major need for the senior management of the service to receive information from all participants in order to inform decision-making.
- 3.3** It would be impossible to map all of the communication links together with the nature of the information that they should carry. An outline of the established communications systems has been drawn up, and this is available for scrutiny. The possibility exists of further refining this outline of network links in the future. Such work might be a profitable area of study for students undertaking dissertation research work.
- 3.4** School boards also have a duty to communicate parents, staff and the community. Presently this is done by most boards using a newsletter, or publication of the minutes of meetings. Chairs of school boards should be encouraged to examine ways to improve communication by methods such as the use of web-sites, or using the local newspapers.

4. ROLE OF DIFFERENT METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

4.1 Informal and Formal Communications

In establishing a Communications Policy it is important to recognise that much important information is shared within an organisation at the informal level. Informal communication should therefore be seen as a key feature of effective working since it has the advantage of being immediate and does not have to rely on formalised language.. Therefore, unstructured or pre-programmed conversations between staff and other colleagues, parents, pupils, or learners in the community have a key role. This should be acknowledged in establishment and service policies. However, informal communication should never be used as a reason for not formalising communication where the situation demands it. Such formal communication is necessary in the following circumstances where:

- there is an issue of child, young person or adult welfare
- pupil progress is giving rise to concern

- issues are complex and a shared understanding is important
- the content of discussions may influence future decision making
- information may be required at a future date
- several participants are involved and need the same information at their disposal
- there is a legal dimension
- issues related to staff working conditions are involved
- it is an issue of policy clarification

It therefore follows that formal communication should be by means of the minute or note of a meeting and the use of letters, memos or newsletters. In so far as this is possible, all communications should be in plain English.

4.2 Meetings

Meetings are an important means of communication and have the advantage of allowing the immediate transmission of messages to large audiences. Complex information can be conveyed and there are opportunities for clarification and feedback. They can be however an expensive way to communicate as they take up substantial amounts of time. It is therefore incumbent on managers at all levels to ensure that meeting time is used as effectively as possible. All meetings should have an agenda or programme, circulated in advance, and they should be followed as quickly as possible with a minute or note. As appropriate, this minute or note should clearly identify agreed actions or specific outcomes.

4.3 Handbooks

Handbooks offer managers the opportunity to provide information to staff, parents, carers or other groups in a concise and easily referenced form. It is a legal requirement that schools should have a School Handbook and this practice is also Authority policy in early years establishments. Social Work establishments all have handbooks as part of best practice. Heads of establishment and service are encouraged to develop Staff Handbooks for their own areas of responsibility. Such documents can be very important for the induction of new staff, supply teachers and probationers. In developing such documents senior managers should be aware of the needs of all categories of staff.

4.4 Circulars

4.4.1 Standard Circulars

Standard Circulars have an established place in the management of the Education Authority. They set out standard procedures and methods of operation. Particularly they offer guidance to heads of establishment, managers and others on key aspects of procedure or policy guidance. Standard Circulars can only be issued under the signature of the Director of Educational and Social Services following completion of the necessary consultative arrangements.

Standard Circulars should be readily available in all establishments and services for scrutiny by all with a need to access them.

At establishment, team or service level, senior managers are encouraged to use local circulars to achieve the same aim as Standard Circulars, but taking account of the local context or needs. Such Circulars would be conventionally incorporated into a Staff Handbook or equivalent document or these may include guidance on where to access them.

4.4.2 Health and Safety Circulars

Health and Safety Circulars are periodically issued by the Authority under signature from officers at Directorate/Head of service level. It is the responsibility of departmental Health and Safety staff to ensure that these documents provide the best and most current advice on the subject. Like Standard Circulars these should be available to all with a need to refer to them. These documents are supplemented by formal departmental structures where meetings discuss health and safety issues.

Risk Assessment folders should also be maintained at Authority and establishment level. These contain the relevant circulars issued by health and safety officers.

4.4.3 Circular Letters

From time to time it may be necessary to clarify a point or issue that is not covered in existing documentation. Or, there may be a change in circumstance that requires immediate action. In such cases a circular letter will be issued. Such a procedure can operate at both Authority and establishment or team levels. Circular letters are ideally consolidated into a single file or group of files for ease of reference and held in the same location as Standard Circular, Health and Safety files and other key documentation..

4.5 Education News

A helpful and valued newsletter, "Education News" is circulated. This details the reports considered and approved by the Education Committee and Sub-Committee. It also highlights "good news" items from Committee, and is therefore a source of information on best practice.

4.6 Corporate Communications Department

The support of the Communications Department offers services in relation to the following areas:

- Graphic artist support for publications and advertising
- Liaison with the media
- Preparation of press statements and news releases
- Advice on the management of information
- Support for the organisation of high profile events

It is appropriate to use the services of the Communications Department when there are items of general public interest. Approaches for support can be made either directly, or through the central services of the Department of Educational and Social Services. Heads of Service require to be kept informed by establishments where it is likely that there may be elected member interest or involvement. It is especially important that any enquiries or contacts with MPs, MSPs or their offices is notified to a Head of Service immediately. Such communication is an expression of a positive partnership in which information is shared to assist the management of the service.

5. GOOD PRACTICE IN COMMUNICATION

5.1 The Foundations of Good Communication

The basis of good communication is the face-to-face contact that is an indispensable part of human relationships. Wherever possible therefore managers and staff in seeking to communicate should promote opportunities for personalised discussion. This may be through individual meetings, small groups, or larger gatherings. Such opportunities give the best chance of ensuring that points of doubt are clarified and that messages are clearly understood and not misinterpreted. They also underline that the individual is committed to the message that they are delivering.

5.2 Protocols

The Education and Social Services Department has a considerable investment in management systems. In order that decisions can be taken at the correct level and with best possible information it is important that managerial levels are not by-passed. Matters will therefore be dealt with at the correct level in the organisation, increasing local ownership and ensuring that responses are appropriately measured. Similarly this will ensure that neither senior managers nor service deliverers will become overloaded with inappropriate information. Intermediate managers at all levels have an important role in filtering, discarding or enhancing information as it passes from level to level. Only when there is a pressing or over-riding reason should stages in the process be by-passed.

5.3 Emergencies and Matters of Concern

There is a considerable amount of public interest in the education service and social work services and their performance. Such interest is welcome as increasing the levels of accountability and therefore contributing directly to the development of service provision. From time-to-time situations will occur that are likely to attract either positive or negative publicity from the media. In such circumstances it is of paramount importance that senior staff on site are made aware of the situation immediately and that they in turn inform a member of the Departmental senior management. It is then the responsibility of departmental senior management to secure the support as necessary of the Communications Department and to inform elected members as appropriate. This latter will generally be done by use of a standard report form. The circumstances in which

it is appropriate to inform Departmental senior management will always be a matter of professional judgement, however, examples might include:

- Incidents involving blue light services
- Civil emergencies
- Incidents where there has been, or is likely to be, local or national press interest
- Involvement of national figures
- Matters of major pupil, young person, adult or staff welfare
- Bereavement
- Pupil success at national level
- Staff achievement in professional, sporting or cultural areas
- Weather conditions

In certain circumstances, such as an emergency school closure it may be important to use the local media, such as the local radio stations to transmit information. This should be done through the Head of Communications.

5.4 Confidentiality

The need to exchange information must always be balanced against the need to preserve confidentiality. Information that relates to the circumstances of particular individual staff, children or adults should be shared on a “need to know” basis. No individual should be the subject of discussion, or identifiable in discussions, at public meetings, including those of school boards. Where written information is provided, both the documentation in question and the covering envelope should be endorsed, as appropriate with the words “confidential” or equivalent. Confidential documents should not be held in open files, nor should they be left uncovered on desk tops. They should be shredded on disposal and should not be copied or summarised without the permission of the writer.

Confidential documents or information should not be transmitted by e-mail or fax, unless it is essential due to emergency circumstances.

The conditions of the Data Protection Act, 1998 must also be observed which covers hard copy as well as electronically stored and transmitted information.

5.5 Use of E-mail

The wide availability of e-mail offers considerable possibilities for the improvement of communication. Unfortunately, these same possibilities mean that there is a danger of the volume of information exceeding the system’s ability to absorb it meaningfully. The following guidance should therefore apply:

- E-mail distribution is best suited to small documents, large documents should be sent by other means.
- E-mail transmissions should be concise.
- Correspondence for general circulation should only be initiated at the level of the manager who has line responsibility for the intended audience.
- Confidential or sensitive information should not be sent by e-mail
- It is not necessary to routinely acknowledge receipt of e-mails

- E-mails should not usually be circulated to an audience the majority of whom have no interest or stake in their content.

Educational establishments and services will be guided further on this issue by the corporate e-mail policy.

5.6 Web-Related Technology

As the Authority and establishments make more use of web-pages and the Internet, web-related technology will become more important in the life of the service. Web-related technology offers the considerable advantage of making information available to parents, teachers and other agencies on a readily accessible basis. Numerical, textual and graphical information can be attractively presented supported by multi-media presentation. The use of such technology does however pose considerable challenges to security. It is therefore a collective responsibility to ensure that information that could possibly be abused does not appear on web-sites. Equally, staff must be vigilant in ensuring that basic measures of network security as defined by the corporate ICT department are always observed.

5.7 E-Government

The government's vision is that all Council services will be deliverable electronically by 2005. In practice this means that throughout local government there will have to be a major review of services and the available supporting technology. There is therefore a clear implication that the Department's overall strategy on communication will require to be framed within the corporate approach to e-government. In turn this will require a continuing review of communication mechanisms between now and 2005.

6. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

- 6.1** This report reflects the established practice within the Educational and Social Services Department. It is the responsibility of senior managers to monitor the implementation of the policy within their own areas of responsibility. In assisting with this process, the following indicators are important:
- Are key messages reaching all who should receive them?
 - Do minutes of meetings reflect effective transmission of information?
 - Are meetings effectively managed?
 - Is effective action taken when a defect in information transmission is detected ?
- 6.2** The effective operation of specific parts of the communication infrastructure will be reviewed on a periodic basis. For example, the operation of Standard Circulars, headteacher meetings and e-mail all have the potential for specific review.

7. POLICY/LEGAL/FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1** Nil

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 It is recommended that Members :

- (i) approve this report as the Communications Policy for the Educational and Social Services Department;
- (ii) agree that the Director of Educational and Social Services invite heads of establishment and services to design their own communications policies taking account of the advice in this report;
- (iii) approve the development of a departmental web-site from within existing financial resources; and
- (iv) otherwise note the contents of this report

John Mulgrew
Director of Educational and Social Services

GRS/GRS
2 May 2001

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. A Strategic Plan for the Education Department 2000-2003, Education Committee,
2. Making the Most of Meetings, Phil Mansell, Framework Press, ISBN 1-85008-135-2

Members requiring further information should contact Graham Short, Head of Schools, (01563-576089).

Implementation Officer: Graham Short

AGENDA