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COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

By Bill Alexander

Summary

This report makes proposals for a communications strategy for integrated children's services.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The 'For Scotland's Children' report emphasised the importance of effective communications across agencies and with children and families, including to help ensure:
- A shared vision, a common purpose amongst partners which is understood and adhered to
 - Public statements, frequently revisited, about the purpose and ethos of the service.
 - Clear and effective links between practitioners and those responsible for planning/policy in relation to the service.
 - That staff are able to talk in an informed and confident way about how service users move through or experience the service.
 - The availability of opportunities for service users to talk about the service and to have these views taken on board via appropriate structures, including the participation of children and families in the monitoring and evaluation of the service.
 - The availability of clear information about services which is disseminated appropriately to other agencies and potential users.
 - That partner agencies, where appropriate, utilise research and pilot studies to create an evidence base for service developments.
- 1.2 Significant attention has been given in Highland to the achievement of effective, clear and consistent communications, but there has never been an explicit communications strategy for integrated children's services.
- 1.3 Accordingly, a recent Highland Council internal audit report recommended that "a communication strategy should be developed and adopted."

2 Background

- 2.1 A communications strategy is a working tool to manage progression from the current model of communications to a new model¹. Like any strategy, it takes us from where we are now, to where we wish to be. Accordingly, the strategy must

¹ Improvement & Development Agency, August 2007, www.idea.gov.uk

begin with an understanding of past and current performance with regard to communications.

2.2 We need to be clear who the key stakeholders are that we require to communicate with. With regard to integrated children's services, these are:

- Managers of services
- Practitioners in services
- Children and families
- The wider community

2.3 Further, with regard to each of these stakeholder groups, we need to be clear about:

- Communication objectives.
Measurable targets, to set as aims, and to evaluate success in achieving the strategy.
- What we intend to communicate.
This is largely determined by the business of the Joint Committee, and those services for children that involve the collaboration of two or more agencies. Critically, this involves the service delivery objectives and targets identified in the children's plan and more recently in the Single Outcome Agreement. It includes the various processes that are critical to the achievement of better integrated services, and the objectives and targets in the children's plan.
- Appropriate and effective mediums for communication.
This is more complex, as communications about integrated children's services take place in addition to communications about services for children within each of the lead agencies. Accordingly, a balance has to be struck between communications that are undertaken through single agency mediums, and those which are joint, as part of integrated children's services.

3 Communications in integrated children's services

This analysis of performance is not a comprehensive audit, but it provides an overview of past and current communications about integrated children's services to each of the stakeholder groups.

3.1 Managers of services

Over the period of the last two Children's Services Plans, the plan has been the central medium for the communication of key issues to both managers and practitioners across agencies.

It was intended that this communication would largely be through the forhighlandschildren.org website, but while the website has been complimented by external agencies and regulatory bodies, recent consultations indicate that managers find it helpful but unwieldy to use as a working tool.

Key managers with particular interests are involved in strategic planning groups for the children's plan. As part of their role, they are involved in consulting and

disseminating communications to wider groups of managers, as well as other stakeholders.

The role of the Chief Officers Group, and the involvement of the Head of Service at the Child Health, Education, Culture & Sport and Social Work Management Teams have helped ensure consistent communications at senior management level. The former organisational structure across the Council, and different administrative boundaries across the lead agencies, did not always enable these communication channels to be replicated with middle managers or managers in specialist teams.

The former Integration Managers played a significant role in ensuring effective communications with local managers, through a range of mediums – including, critically, at Area Children’s Services Forums (ACSFs). On a number of occasions each year, this was reinforced by local themed ACSF and pan-Highland JCCYP seminars.

A small number of managers have been involved in the various reference groups associated with the development of the integrated assessment framework and Getting it Right for Every Child. This kept them very involved and very familiar with current issues, but did little for the wider group of managers. More recently, this has been addressed by a significant number of awareness-raising events, and very recently the different programmes of GIRFEC training.

E-mails were and continue to be the most frequently used medium of communication with managers across agencies.

The new organisational structure for the lead agencies in Highland, and the revised structure for integrated children’s services, has created more seamless opportunities for effective communication with managers. The structure brings ECS and Social Work Services for children with additional support needs together, within one organisational umbrella, and with a high level of co-terminosity across Police, Council and NHS Highland in the three areas.

A recent NESTA/Young Foundation report on innovation in public services states that “the JCCYP and Chief Officers’ Group ... supported by operational structures created to implement the new strategy, manage service delivery at the frontline, and communicate consistent messages throughout different agencies.”

3.2 Practitioners in services

It should be expected that most communications for practitioners come from their direct line managers, and are therefore largely dependent on the communications processes described above.

Other means have been used to supplement management briefings:

- Like managers, practitioners have indicated that they find the website useful, but unwieldy.
- Practitioners were able to attend local ACSF events, which were highly rated. Many also attended the pan-Highland seminars in particular areas of interest.

- Hundreds of practitioners have attended awareness–raising sessions on GIRFEC, and more recently the training programmes – but these have only generally involved those based in Inverness.
- A regular integrated children’s services newsletter provided key information about current service and policy issues and change processes. This newsletter was positively evaluated by HMle, but has not been issued for some time, largely because there have been an increasing number of single agency newsletters and other communications providing similar information – albeit to a broader and less discrete group.

The recent NESTA/Young Foundations report commented that “communication and consultation among staff [in Highland is] widespread... This assisted staff in engaging with the innovation process and making them aware of the overall vision for the future of the Highland’s Children’s Services”.

The recent Highland Council audit report noted that “staff are given the opportunity to feedback on any problems and to influence planning and policy through the consultations dealing with specific issues held by the strategic groups.”

Various Highland inspection reports have commended communication with practitioners in children’s services.

3.3 Children and families

The Joint Committee has placed a high priority on effective communications about services with children and young people and their families.

The recent HMle follow-through child protection inspection report indicates that “very good progress has been made in involving children and young people in policy planning”, as evidenced by the annual ‘apprentice days’, the appointment of the Youth Convener.

However, the Highland Children’s Forum, Committee members and officers of the lead agencies have all acknowledged the significant challenge of ensuring effective communication with service users, and the need to achieve further improvements.

3.4 The wider community

For Highland’s Children 2 identified the need to ensure that the wider community was well informed about many aspects of children’s services. This is an important feature of GIRFEC implementation, and an improvement objective for child protection and youth justice services.

A major public awareness campaign about child protection and related aspects of children’s services, has taken place over the last 12 months. This included posters, TV and radio adverts, and a newspaper supplement. The campaign was highly commended in the recent HMle inspection.

Discussions have taken place in a range of community settings, including some of the new Ward Forums, about measures to tackle youth crime and anti-social behaviour.

In the Highland Council's 2007 public performance survey, a small majority of those consulted stated that they were either "very" or "fairly satisfied" with services to protect children from harm. A large majority though, indicated that they were "fairly dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with services to reduce youth offending.

Further, more than half of those sampled said that they were worried about anti-social behaviour by young people and youth crime in their communities. Around a third said that they were worried by youth crime. Both of these were placed in the top half of those services identified as being important to people.

Similar results were identified in earlier but more detailed community surveys for the JCCYP by the University of Edinburgh.

4 Communications Strategy

- 4.1 It is proposed that the communications strategy for children's services should continue to be built around the children's plan, which will itself be built around the high level community planning objectives set out in the Single Outcome Agreement.
- 4.2 It is further proposed that an interactive website should continue to be the focal point for the plan and the strategy, which should be refreshed, to ensure it is accessible to these different groups.
- 4.3 However, use of the website needs to be supplemented by a number of dedicated measures, directed at particular stakeholder groups for particular purposes. These are set out overleaf, and greater detail is provided about the proposed mediums – with actions where appropriate.

COMMUNICATION WITH	OBJECTIVES	WHAT WE INTEND TO COMMUNICATE	MEDIUMS FOR COMMUNICATION
MANAGERS OF SERVICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managers express confidence that they are familiar with current issues and developments, and feel equipped to present these to staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vision, principles and ethos Major strategic issues and developments Detail of FHC3 targets, improvement objectives and delivery strategic in relation to particular service areas Roles and responsibilities of agencies and professions Impact of service changes on agencies and teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised FHC3 website Management structures Three-yearly Joint Committee seminars Service specific strategic planning groups Dedicated email communications Service Manager Groups Service Manager locality Groups and themed events
PRACTITIONERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners state that they are kept up to date with service issues and developments in their particular areas, and can easily find out other information should they seek it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vision, principles and ethos Major strategic issues and developments Detail of FHC3 targets, improvement objectives and delivery strategic in relation to particular service areas Roles and responsibilities of self and others Impact of services changes on teams and individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised FHC3 website Staff briefings Core information included in service specific newsletters Service Manager locality Groups and themed events
CHILDREN AND FAMILIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service users state that they understand the role and responsibility of processes and systems they are involved with Service users state that they know how and where to engage in consideration of service issues and developments Service users know where they can get access to independent information, advice and support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role and responsibilities of agencies and professionals Detail of FHC3 targets, improvement objectives and delivery strategic in relation to particular service areas Service outcomes, performance and quality Access to independent support and advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised FHC3 website Practitioners clear about explaining processes, systems, roles and responsibilities Information leaflets Clear points of contact, signposting information, advice and support services
WIDER COMMUNITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public consultations evidence awareness of service issues and performance Communities express higher satisfaction in services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service outcomes, performance and quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised FHC3 website Meetings within existing community structures, particularly ward forums and specific interest groups Targeted awareness raising campaigns

5 Mediums for Communication

- **Revised FHC3 website**

The existing website is used by managers, staff and families, and is highly commended by regulatory bodies. However, it is increasingly unwieldy, and does not provide specific or seamless access for different stakeholder groups.
ACTION: Opportunities to be pursued for partnership with compatible developments, or further investment in existing model.
- **Management structures**

Opportunities are provided by new structure and organisational model across agencies to ensure consistent communications across management structures in the lead agencies.
- **Three-yearly Joint Committee seminars**

These have been established by the Joint Committee.
- **Service specific strategic planning groups**

The structure of strategic planning groups needs to be reviewed as part of the management of the Single Outcome Agreement, but it is envisaged that there will continue to be key children's plan groups.
- **Dedicated email communications**

As opposed to Integrated Children's Services newsletters, it is envisaged that the Head of service will continue to supplement use of the website by targeted and specific email correspondence.
- **Service Manager Groups**

Service manager Groups will be the main focus for communications across the Area / CHP.
- **Service Manager Groups, locality groups and themed events**

The former Area Children's Services Forums provided a means for the larger network of local managers to meet, network and consider key local and strategic issues. The larger Areas cannot replace this function.
ACTION: establish locality meetings for managers and key groups of practitioners within each Area / CHP.
- **Staff briefings**

The main means for staff to be familiar with issues and developments should be face-to-face briefings from managers.
- **Core information included in service specific newsletters**

The regular integrated children's services newsletter has not appeared for some time. There are now a number of service-specific newsletters. It is proposed that these are used instead.

- **Practitioners clear about explaining processes, systems, roles and responsibilities**

The main means for service users to be familiar with issues and developments should be face-to-face discussions with practitioners.

- **Information leaflets**

There is a need to review the published information available to service users, and to provide new information leaflets in a range of areas. Funding is available in parenting and GIRFEC budgets.

ACTION: Review available information, and publish new leaflets.

- **Clear points of contact, signposting information, advice and support services**

CHIP+ provides the main umbrella signposting service, but there should be a review of the various means that parents access guidance about independent advice, information and support.

ACTION: Review of points of contact, signposting information advice and support services.

- **Meetings within existing community structures, particularly ward forums and specific interest groups**

- There needs to be a sustained approach to communications with communities through existing structures, particularly with regard to youth crime and anti-social behaviour.

ACTION: Review and activities to be addressed in community safety partnership.

- **Targeted awareness raising campaigns**

Further to the success of the child protection campaign, there should be awareness raising campaigns in other areas, commencing with 'Getting it Right for Every Child' and youth crime and anti-social behaviour services.

ACTION: Plan and initiate campaigns.

Recommendation

The Joint Committee is asked to consider and agree this communications strategy for integrated children's services.

Bill Alexander

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