Hertfordshire County Council: 'the way we work’

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Summary

In 2005, Hertfordshire County Council embarked upon a groundbreaking project, ‘the way we work’, to dramatically reduce their office accommodation. This involved moving 4,500 staff from more than 50 traditional offices to three main bases. Two new bases were created at Apsley in Hemel Hempstead and Gunnels Wood Road in Stevenage. The third base is County Hall in Hertford.

This case study explores how the new bases allowed the council to use more efficient ways of working, promoting flexible working practices for all staff and achieving greater knowledge and information sharing.

Background

Hertfordshire covers an area of 634 square miles and has an estimated population of just over one million, 87 per cent of which live in 45 settlements of more than 3,000 people.

The county has 10 districts or boroughs. Broxbourne, Hertsmere, Watford, Three Rivers and Stevenage are the most urban. East Hertfordshire and North Hertfordshire are fairly sparsely populated rural areas.

Employment in the service sector has risen steadily since 1980, offsetting a shift away from manufacturing industries. Today, financial services, computer-related industry, pharmaceuticals and the film and media sectors are among the major sources of employment in the county.

There are 77 county councillors, elected every four years.

What drove the cultural change?

According to David Lloyd, Hertfordshire's Deputy Leader, the starting point for reviewing the accommodation strategy was to generate efficiency savings. The disposal of 50 properties enabled the cost of relocating to be covered. As a landmark building, the County Hall was retained and refurbished.

The programme was a major opportunity to change the way people worked for the better. It was called 'the way we work' (TW3) because it was not about offices but the way people work – the way they worked with each other, partners and ultimately the public.

The council identified that many people were in offices a surprisingly small amount of time. They therefore did not need to have dedicated desk space. Storage arrangements were also changed, reducing filing space to one linear metre per person. Changing the location, availability of accommodation and working practices has already produced efficiency savings and a 30 per cent reduction in space.

Another trigger for changing the way people worked was to make better use of technology. By equipping buildings with improved IT and telecommunications, staff are more in touch with each other and with residents.

Building ownership for change

From the start of the process, a dedicated TW3 project team was established. This team saw the council through the accommodation moves, which were done in three phases. Initially, 500 staff piloted the new centralised, open plan way of working in the first new location in the west of the county. Once they felt comfortable and enthusiastic, they were used to tell the second wave of 500 staff how the systems and culture worked. This way the staff themselves embedded the culture.

> ”Using staff that had already been through the change was really powerful. They were able to express the concerns felt by all and how they overcame these.”
>
> **Jo Baxter, acting TW3 Change Management Lead**

The next phase was to find suitable accommodation in the centre of the county, and a similar process of furnishing and providing high-specification IT was started.

The third and potentially most difficult phase was to transform how people worked in County Hall. This Grade II listed building could not be redesigned to provide such an open plan environment. Also, the logistics meant that people were moved around while the refurbishment work was carried out. They did not therefore move into the new accommodation together. The transition team had to work harder, with more face-to-face briefings, visits to the other sites, demonstration areas, and opportunities for staff to ask questions.

“It’s about the way people work”

When asked how people have changed the way they work, David Robinson, Project Director TW3, stated that:

“...people used to be very territorial but actually spent very little time in the office. Now we have moved to an open plan environment with informal discussion areas and dedicated meeting rooms. People make much better use of the space available.”

Feedback from staff surveys shows that people are now very positive about their new environment and feel their initial concerns have been addressed.

IT used to be seen as a status symbol – if you were a manager you had a BlackBerry. The buildings have been designed to make the best use of IT so that staff now have the right IT for their job, not their rank.

The way people are managed has also changed; from ‘observation’ to ‘outcomes’. In the past, managers felt confident that people were working only if they could see them. Now managers and their staff might see each other once or twice a month and the culture is one of trust, expecting and allowing people to get on with their job.

Emel Morris, Head of Communications for TW3, explained the process of training people to behave in a more trusting way: “we start with the vision of how we want to be and when we recruit staff we say right from the start ‘this is the way it is’”.

The culture before the transformation programme was seen to be traditional: nine-to-five working, Monday to Friday. Now there is much more flexibility in the mode of delivery, based on the needs of the customer.

Transforming the culture

The results of an in-depth staff consultation included worries about the new working environment.

- Would the noise levels be too great in the open plan offices?
- How will I cope with the lack of an individual base?
- Would 500 car parking spaces be sufficient?
- What do I do about my manager trusting me?
- Where will the team’s microwave go?

Since most staff approached their manager for information, it was crucial that managers recognised that this was not just an office move. This was the development of a new culture, a new way of working with IT equipment, and systems that enabled this to happen.

The consultation also identified that middle managers were a potential barrier to introducing new flexible ways of working. There were very strong opinions about how services could be delivered and people didn’t want to change. To combat this, an extensive leadership and management development programme was introduced.

Managers were encouraged to develop a coaching role that moved them away from a directive to an empowering style. Managers were encouraged to focus on the benefits of flexible working. There was also a need to demonstrate that flexible working arrangements could be applied fairly to help build the support to teams that was not necessarily co-located. What has emerged is that managers are using each other as a resource and support, bringing about ongoing improvements.

Robinson recognised that staff felt there had been many change programmes before. To challenge rumours and give staff the opportunity to ask questions, a dedicated email address was set up. This dealt with more than 8,000 emails in the four years the project ran. There were also weekly emails and electronic briefings to staff and managers. These were supported by discussion sessions so that people could hear the responses to their questions in person.

Managers were given a calendar of events so they would know what was happening and when. They were also trained on how to communicate with their teams so that they were prepared for one-to-one and group meetings. Managers were able to identify those individuals who were having the greatest difficulty in relocating, or in working in a different way. They could then talk to the Human Resources (HR) team about the most appropriate support for them.

A user group was set up at each site to look at ongoing issues. A survey was conducted after the move into each site. These showed that some issues were already known, were being addressed and could be reported on to staff. It also highlight some inconsistencies in how people were behaving; for example, not everyone was adhering to the clear desk policy.

The role of people

One of the key differences for councillors was that the move meant there was not necessarily a council office in their 'patch'. The project team recognised the importance of keeping the members informed so that they were able to answer the concerns of residents and staff.

A significant investment was made in the relationship with Hertfordshire's space planning partner 'MACE', who spent a lot of time getting to know the end-users and what they wanted. Departmental managers were brought together to map out who worked with whom. Worker profiles were built up of who was 'always in', 'sometimes in' and 'mostly out' and a physical audit of how space was used was conducted.

Office furniture was bought to a common standard so that when seating arrangements didn't work the layout was easily reconfigured. Another innovation was to buy dome-topped filing cabinets so that papers could not be piled on top of them, keeping the new environment looking clean, fresh and organised.

To facilitate people's move into the new accommodation, MACE created a 'flight departure board'. This showed when staff were due to leave their old accommodation and when they would arrive in the new. When people 'landed' they were personally welcomed and shown to their desk where all their things had been unpacked.

Future challenges

According to Lloyd, the biggest challenge for the future will be the budget. Changes in demographics will lead to an aging population. An increased legislative burden will mean that there will be less money available to deliver services in a traditional way. "We've taken out the 'easy wins', so now we need to look at real change."

The council has always been fairly good at being innovative. The challenge for the future is to work even more in partnership with other authorities and organisations. The move to greater two-tier and partnership working will require everyone to look at the culture of the organisation and how it relates to others.

Critical success factors

The council was very clear in what it wanted to achieve. For Jane Langton, MACE Workplace Director, it was the clarity of the leadership in Hertfordshire that has enabled the project to succeed:

"Caroline Tapster, Chief Executive of Hertfordshire County Council, is very good. She knew exactly what she wanted to achieve."

Langton also thought that it was important that corporate communications and human resources were fully engaged in the project team from day one and that they stayed there right the way through.

According to Morris, the key to changing the way people work is "open, honest and consistent communications". The importance of face-to-face communication was clearly recognised, as was the time needed to make sure that the same message was being delivered. This investment helped the team stay on top of rumours and prevent anxiety spreading. As Morris observed, "people will forget what you said; they will never forget how they felt".

A summary of the critical success factors:

- a clear vision about what is to be achieved through the change
- clear and visible political and managerial leadership
- adequate resources including money, people and time
- clear, consistent communication
- continuously engaging staff
- a variety of methods for listening to staff
- proactive working to establish a strong partnership with provider organisations
- an ongoing process of consulting and working with unions.

Further information

More information on 'the way we work' programme – on the Hertfordshire County Council website