



Workplace Partnership Communications Protocol and Toolkit

November 2008

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1. Introduction

In 2007 the Communications Sub Committee of the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) agreed to formulate a communications protocol and toolkit. The aim was to give practical assistance to workplace partnership facilitators and partnership committees in maintaining a high level of communications with regard to workplace partnership and also to provide a valuable resource to local authorities generally.

A working group, comprised of a representative group of workplace partnership facilitators, was formed and began meeting in September 2007 to prepare the protocol. It was agreed to carry out a survey, through the Partnership Facilitators Network, to assess how workplace partnership communications are currently conducted in local authorities. The working group agreed to extend this survey to workplace partnership facilitators in the Health Service Executive (HSE) to get a broader picture of the situation.

While communications has been a key principle of the workplace partnership process since its inception, this protocol will assist in the delivery of high level communications in line with the EU Directive on Information and Consultation 2002/14/EC of March 2002. This directive was transposed into Irish law in the "Employees (Provision of Information and Consultation) Act 2006". The management and trade unions within the local government sector agreed a framework to meet this legislative requirement. Entitled the 'Agreement on Information and Consultation Arrangements within The Local Authority Sector', it gave effect to the directive and the act and "*set out the ways in which information sharing and consultation will be carried out within the local government sector*"¹

This agreement has been approved by the management and trade unions within the local government sector, working under the aegis of LANPAG with the following context in mind:

- We operate in a highly unionised sector
- A structured workplace partnership programme has been in place within local government since 1999, the purpose of which is to enable a new active relationship in managing change characterised by employee participation and consultation, the development of joint objectives, co-operation and trust and the delivery of customer-focused quality services.
- Centralised, collective bargaining industrial relations mechanisms are used within the local government sector.²

Within this context it is imperative that an effective means of communicating the work of your workplace partnership committee and working groups is put in place. Therefore the key purpose of this document is to enable workplace partnership committees to organise and manage the flow of information in an efficient and effective manner so that stakeholders receive and understand fully whatever is being communicated.

¹ Agreement on Information and Consultation Arrangements within the Local Authority Sector August 2006

² Ibid

This protocol identifies stakeholders and maps their status in the workplace partnership communications process. The toolkit, in a more practical way, sets out a range of techniques and methods to deliver high quality communication activities.

2. Situation Analysis

Since the establishment of workplace partnership in 1999, communication with all stakeholders has been a core principle of the process. Local authorities and workplace partnership committees have invested time and money to raise awareness of partnership in the workplace and to ensure that all staff are familiar with the activities and benefits of workplace partnership.

However, despite these efforts, the need to improve communications with staff is very often identified in staff surveys and workplace reviews. It appears that there are deficits to be addressed especially in communicating the right messages, at the right time and to the right stakeholders.

It is reasonable to conclude that the staff that are involved, or have been involved, in the process are more likely to be receptive to workplace partnership communications. On the other hand, staff who have never been directly involved in the process may not be as open to workplace partnership communications. Workplace partnership committees must also face the difficulty of trying to penetrate the large volume of general communications that are constantly directed at staff. Barriers to communication also include the diverse location of local authority employees together with a lack of access to information technology by a percentage of employees.

3. Terms of Reference

"To research current methodology of workplace partnership internal communications across all local authorities and other sectors with a view to formulating a protocol for best practice in relation to communicating partnership to all stakeholders in our local authorities."

The Terms of Reference to include:

- Conduct research to include other sectors
- Analyse findings
- Draft final protocol

4. Methodology

4.1. Research

The group agreed that research should be conducted with regard to the workplace partnership communication methods currently in place in local authorities. The group formulated a questionnaire for circulation which was forwarded to all local authority workplace partnership facilitators. To widen the scope of the research, it was agreed to circulate the document to workplace partnership facilitators in the HSE.

Response to the survey:

21 Replies were received.
This represents a response of **62%**

4.2. Findings

The following is a summary of the information received:

Question 1

Do you have a partnership communications protocol in place in your organisation?

YES: 12 (57%)

NO: 9 (43%)

Question 2

If so, is it included in the communications strategy for your organisation?

YES: 16 (76%)

NO: 5 (24%)

Comment: Of those surveyed
76% had a partnership committee protocol in place.
24% did not have it included in the communications strategy for the organisation.

Question 3

What methods of communications do you use for partnership in your organisation? – give examples:

Method	Percentage
Newsletter	85%
Staff Briefings	80%
Email	70%
Mail Shots	65%
Intranet	60%
Notice Boards	40%
Annual Report	35%
Pay slips/Wages	30%
Circulations of Partnership Minutes	30%
Staff Meetings	25%
Induction	25%
Staff Handbook	15%
Word of Mouth	15%
Union Structures	15%
One –to- One	10%

Partnership Site on Intranet	10%
PMDS	5%
Verbal	5%
Questionnaire/Survey	5%
"pop up" message on intranet re new information	5%
Communiqué	5%

Question 4

Of the examples you have given above, which do you think is the **most** successful and why?

Example	Percentage
Staff Meetings	20%
One-to-One	20%
Staff Briefings	20%
Newsletter	15%
Email	15%
Circulation of Minutes	10%
Committee Meetings e.g. Partnership	10%
Pay slips	10%
Other Meetings	10%
All of the above	10%
PMDS	5%
Partnership Support Worker (Pilot)	5%
Annual Report	5%
Notice Board	5%
Communiqués	5%

Question 5

Of the examples you have given above, which do you think is the **least** successful and why?

Example	Percentage	Reasons Given
Email	30%	Information overload Not always read
Pay Slip	25%	Net figure is what is of interest Since introduction of Paypath there is a limit to information that can be circulated.
Intranet Access	20%	Not available to all staff
Notice Board	15%	Not everyone looks at them – location
Newsletter	15%	More interesting topics from other areas. Not certain if information has been received by everyone. No guarantee it is read Infrequency Literacy difficulties
Mail shots	10%	Not always read
Annual Report	5%	Synopsis given and annual report not read by all Staff
Verbally	5%	Could be disputed – no record
Employee Assembly	5%	Infrequent meetings
Intranet	5%	Messages are not always read

Circulations of Minutes	5%	Not always read
PMDS	5%	Where it has not been properly or fully embraced.

Question 6

How best do you communicate with outdoor staff?

Method	Percentage
Staff Briefings	45%
Mail shot	25%
Pay slips	20%
Newsletter	20%
Circulation of Minutes	10%
Union Structures	5%
PMDS	5%
Partnership Support Worker (Pilot)	5%
Staff Meetings	5%
Intranet	5%
Face -to- Face	5%

Question 7

How best do you communicate with indoor staff?

Method	Percentage
Email	75%
Intranet	25%
Face-to-Face	20%
Staff Meetings	15%
Flyers	10%
Staff Briefings	10%
Word of Mouth	5%
Notice Board	5%
Phone Calls	5%
PMDS	5%

Question 8

Are you the partnership facilitator solely responsible for partnership communications?

YES: 14 (66%)

NO: 7 (34%)

Question 9

Do you think Partnership communications should be the responsibility of other stakeholders in the process? If so, who?

YES	WHO
	Both management and unions own the process
	Senior Management Team
	Partnership Committees, Area Partnership Committee and Fire Service Partnership Forum
	Trade Union branches and Fireman's Association
	Joint Chairs and Committee Members Communications Working Group
	All committee members
	Organisational approach
	Communications Officers
	Human Resources
	HSCTP Steering Group

Question 10

How do you communicate with other stakeholders e.g. management team, full time union officials, senior and middle Managers?

Method	Percentage
Email	35%
Letter	25%
Meetings	20%
Other Groups e.g. HSCTP	15%
Union Structure	15%
Management Structure	25%
Newsletter	10%
Minutes	20%
Reports	5%
Team Briefings	10%
Presentation to Management Team by Facilitator	15%
Telephone	10%
Communiqué	5%

Question 11

What do you think are the main barriers to communicating partnership effectively in your organisation?

Barrier	Percentage
Time Constraint	25%
Timing of Communication	5%
Perception of Importance of Partnership	10%
Mistrust	5%
Same people on Working Groups	5%
Lack of email facilities	25%
Geographical spread	25%
Apathy	5%
Shoddy communications with Trade Union	5%
No protocol	5%
Stakeholder Attitude	5%
Complexity of some Issues	5%
Partnership as the way to do business is still aspirational for a lot of Senior/Middle Managers	5%
Staff Numbers	5%
Dependence on Others	5%
Releasing of Staff	5%

Question 12

Can you identify any examples of best practice that you have come across e.g. health sector, private sector?

- **Regular planned information sessions**
- **Tele-conferencing**
- **Regular departmental/section meetings with tasks allocated to specific persons**
- **Group texting**
- **Transfer of Undertakings and Protection of Employees (TUPE)**

TUPE is a process of discussion and mediation (very much along the lines of partnership) that involves staff and management representatives when a company is sold. In the process of a company acquisition, there is a defined procedure to ensure that the terms and conditions of the employees are protected and to prevent "asset stripping".

4.3. Identification of Stakeholders

For effective communications it is very important that the workplace partnership committee identifies the individuals and groups that it needs to communicate with, the appropriate methods of communication and the ongoing levels of communication activity required to maintain co-operation and engagement in the workplace partnership process.

The main stakeholders may be identified in the diagram below:

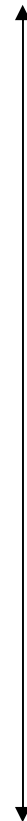


4.4. Stakeholder Analysis

It is very important to analyse stakeholders, with regard to their influence on the workplace partnership process and to ascertain the levels of communication required so that they remain committed to the process. The following diagram illustrates the scale of communication activity that may be required for the stakeholders.

Warmer

- Employees**
- Senior Management Team**
- All Management Grades**
- Union Shop Stewards**
- Union Officials**
- Regional Workplace partnership Networks**
- LANPAG**
- Department of the Environment, Heritage
And Local Government**
- Other Agencies**
- Councillors**



Colder

Mapping the stakeholders in this way helps to assess the communication activity required for each stakeholder group. For example, employees need regular in-depth communications on workplace partnership whereas councillors may only need to be communicated with in relation to certain issues e.g. a change in service delivery.

5. Protocol

5.1. What is Communications?

Communications may be defined as a means whereby people in an organisation exchange information. It is the interchange of ideas, facts and emotions by two or more people. Technically, the communication process involves:

- Impulse - the reason the sender communicates.
- Encoding - finding the way/words/and medium to communicate the message.
- Relay - the sender transmits the message.
- Decoding - the receiver tries to understand the message.
- Feedback - when the receiver acknowledges the message.

During this process many things may happen to distort the message, hence the reason that organisations invest heavily in a variety of communications tools.

5.2. Communication Techniques

The patterns of communication include Oral, Written, Visual and Electronic. Within these patterns, the status of the communication may vary.

Formal Communication

Formal communication often originates from management or line managers and examples include policy statements, procedures, job descriptions and formal communications from external sources. The patterns involve:

- **Vertical** - upward and downward - between management and employees.
- **Horizontal** - flows between people of the same grade in the same department/section.
- **Diagonal** - interdepartmental communication by people of different grades.

Informal Communication

Informal communications involves a more personal approach and can be part of the general working relationships between managers and employees. However, there are three other types of informal communication that need to be considered as follows.

- **Grapevine** - a network of social relations that arises spontaneously as people associate with one another.
- **Rumour** – messages, true or false transmitted on the grapevine.
- **Gossip** - idle talk that may be unhelpful to the communication processes already in place.

Having regard to the above, the importance of formal communications cannot be underestimated to ensure clarity and accuracy.

5.3. Barriers to Communication

It is important to be mindful of the following stages in the communication process so as to achieve successful communications

- **Receiving communications**

The expectations, fears and attitude of the listener may be a barrier to receiving communication and this may well be compounded by inappropriate physical conditions. The atmosphere prevailing at the time of the communication must also be considered.

- **Understanding communications**

The language should be free of unnecessary jargon as it may inhibit understanding, detract from the point and cause undue frustration. The length of the communication may be unsuitable i.e. too short or too long. The clarity of the communication is also a factor as well as awareness at the time of communication. Another issue is the large scale of other communications being issued simultaneously.

- **Work Load- Stress Factors**

There may be an over reliance on others to pass on the message. Timing may be wrong, i.e. too early/late and a lack of follow up. Target audience is very important i.e. the right message to the right people at the right time.

The barriers to communication may be significantly reduced if you remember the following:

- Ensure that you are aware of any issues that might affect the communication.
- Those issues should be addressed before communicating your message.
- Follow-up may be required to ensure receipt of communication or clarification, especially if you have asked someone else to pass on the message.
- Good timing is essential; be aware of other issues in the organisation that might affect your communication.
- Always know your audience and tailor communications accordingly.
 - Short, succinct and to the point may be required.
 - 'Plain English' communication may be necessary.
 - An oral presentation may be more suitable.
 - Opportunity for questions and discussion may be more effective.
 - Use or non-use of technology may have to be considered.

6. What Needs to be Communicated

6.1 Vision

There is a constant and ongoing need to communicate our vision and aspirations for the future of partnership in the workplace, to all of our stakeholders. Stakeholders also need to know the overall objectives of workplace partnership at national level as laid out in the LANPAG Strategic Plan 2008 – 2011 *Enhancing Performance And Progress Through Partnership*. The vision for workplace partnership, as identified in the above strategy, should be reflected in all workplace partnership action plans.

6.2 Challenges

Workplace partnership committees need to formally identify the various challenges which may, from time to time, obstruct the local workplace partnership process, and ultimately effect or delay the change process. Employees may have high expectations of workplace partnership and need to be made aware of challenges such as resources, resistance and industrial relations issues.

6.3 Activities

In as far as possible all workplace partnership processes and activities must be communicated in a structured and formalised manner to all of the relevant stakeholders.

6.4 Benefits

A robust and well structured methodology for workplace partnership communications across our local authorities will have mutual gains for the process. This will lead to better overall buy-in, higher levels of consensus, improved performance, and ultimately better service delivery.

7 Toolkit

7.1 Verbal

Verbal communications, both formal and informal, are key to the successful imparting and sharing of workplace partnership concepts and information. Examples of verbal communications include:

- Telephone conversations
- One-to-one meetings
- Informal networking
- Structured verbal presentations

Points to remember for effective verbal communications include:

- Clarity of thought and expression.
- Avoid over-complicated language and jargon.
- Listen carefully to people's responses.
- Allow people space and time to engage fully in the conversation.
- Avoid argument and ensure that any misunderstandings are resolved as soon as possible.
- Use telephone to enhance communications e.g. follow-up calls, text messaging, group texts.
- Be aware of non-verbal communication e.g. body language, facial expression.
- Ensure that you maintain eye contact with the person or with the group.

7.2 Visual

Visual methods of communications are normally used to make the message more understandable.

Examples of visual communication might include:

- Branding of workplace partnership events
- Flip chart
- Workplace partnership logo
- PowerPoint presentations
- Video/DVD

In the context of workplace partnership communications, visual communications work very well when used in conjunction with speech. The important thing to remember is that visual communication should be carefully designed and used appropriately as the inappropriate use of visual aids can hinder the communication process.

7.2.1 PowerPoint Presentations

Nowadays, it is a rare occurrence to attend a presentation without experiencing the visual communication tool of the PowerPoint presentation. As a means of communication, it can be very effective and interesting. However, if not carefully crafted and prepared, the intended communication may turn out to be confusing, complicated and boring.

20 points for effective communication through PowerPoint presentations:

1. Remember it is not entertainment, it is communication.
2. Ensure that it has structure, logic and continuity.
3. Be consistent with formatting and background.

4. Avoid backgrounds that are distracting and difficult to read from.
5. Use font size 20 or larger – larger for headings or emphasis.
6. Capitalise only when necessary.
7. Avoid over-decorative fonts.
8. Limit the number of colours and use contrasting colours for background and text.
9. Ensure that graphs, pictures etc. are clear, relevant and linked to the message.
10. Include only necessary information.
11. Avoid long paragraphs and too much text.
12. Avoid too much clip-art, and moving objects.
13. Ensure that the presentation is carefully timed.
14. Be careful about the number of slides – that you have enough time to deliver the presentation and/or enough slides for time allotted.
15. Print handouts for your audience.
16. Have a back-up plan e.g. if technology breaks down, have a printed set of slides so that you can present without the technology.
17. Do not read your presentation from the screen with your back to the audience – people can read for themselves.
18. Explain the points and refer to the text and pictures.
19. Ensure inserted video clips work – always test before presentation.
20. Be very familiar with your presentation – practise it until you are totally confident with every aspect of it.

7.2.2 Flip Charting

Flip charting information is a very simple means of visual communications and if well done can be an excellent way to transfer information and knowledge.

10 points for effective communications by flip charting:

1. Write in large capital letters for best effect.
2. Use different coloured markers to highlight key concepts.
3. Leave spaces between lines for clarity.
4. Use bullet points or arrows for lists.
5. Record exactly what has been said. Don't try to edit it.
6. Use graphics or drawings to illustrate points.
7. Number each sheet to avoid confusion.
8. Mount sheets on a wall as they are completed.
9. Ensure that the mounted sheets are in an order that easily communicates the information.
10. Stand to one side so that you can easily point to information.

7.2.3 Video/DVD

Communication through the medium of video/DVD offers a sophisticated technique to get across key messages. The familiarity of this medium may mean that people are more receptive to the communication.

Some points to consider ensuring effective communications through Video/DVD

- Always view material before showing it to your audience.
- Always test equipment.
- Use in conjunction with other communication methods.
- DVDs and videos date quickly so be careful about showing something that is now of a historical nature.

7.3 Electronic

Electronic communications refer generally to messages and information communicated through internet/intranet and e-mail. The main advantage to electronic communications is the capacity to communicate simultaneously to a very large audience. However, the volume of messages channelled through this medium often creates barriers for the receiver.

An effective way of communicating electronically is by attaching the direct link to where the information is stored. You should be mindful, however, that not all of your audience may have access to the internet/intranet.

7.4 Written

Written methods of communication comprise:

- Letters
- Memos
- Circulars

- Reports
- Minutes of Meetings
- Agendas
- Newsletters

The main advantage of written communications is that they are less likely to be misinterpreted.

Key points regarding written communications:

- Be clear in thought and expression.
- Keep language simple as overcomplicated words and sentences only serve to confuse the reader.
- Appropriate use of grammar and syntax.

8 Making Linkages with the rest of the Organisation

8.1 Unions

Union representatives have an obligation to feed back and forth relevant information to their respective unions and the individual members they represent. Minutes of previous workplace partnership meeting should be a standing item on the agenda of their branch/section meetings.

8.2 Management

Management nominees on the workplace partnership committee have an obligation to feedback to the Management Team and Senior Management Group. Progress reports on workplace workplace partnership should appear as a regular item at these meetings.

8.3 Handling Significant Change Through Partnership Steering Group/High Level Group

This group considers new issues raised by management and unions, which are deemed to be of a significant nature and to have an impact on the business, employees and service delivery of the organisation. This group meets two or three times a year and the business of the meetings should be communicated to the relevant stakeholders. Issues on the agenda may be referred to workplace partnership or industrial relations or a combination of both processes.

8.4 Induction

Workplace partnership must be a key element in the induction training programme of your local authority. It is the responsibility of the workplace partnership facilitator to prepare and deliver a

presentation on workplace partnership and the role it plays in the local authority. This information should be tailored to meet the needs of staff recently recruited to the local authority. The presentation should be backed up with appropriate handout e.g. 'Partnership at Work' booklet, current workplace partnership newsletter etc. The workplace partnership facilitator should make direct linkages with the training officer and the training department in the delivery of this programme.

8.5 Health and Safety

There should be a close working relationship between workplace partnership and health and safety in your local authority. Progress reports on developments in health and safety should be provided to the workplace partnership committee periodically during the year.

8.6 Socialisation

The workplace partnership committee should maintain linkages and support staff integration activities where appropriate.

8.7 Service Delivery

Workplace partnership should support the focus on improved internal/external customer service as part of its action planning. This may involve setting up specific working groups to address all such issues and developments as they arise on the workplace partnership agenda.

8.8 Performance Management Development System

The workplace partnership committee should have a steering role in the ongoing monitoring and review of Performance Management Development System.

9 Making Linkages outside the Organisation

9.1 Performance Verification Group

The workplace partnership committee is seen as the forum for processing the change and modernisation agenda highlighted by the Performance Verification Group (PVG). The PVG will then carry out its verification process, which will include site visits to individual local authorities. The workplace partnership committee and the workplace partnership facilitator usually work alongside the senior management team in its annual presentation to the PVG. Links are maintained through the network groups mentioned above or through LANPAG.

9.2 Networks

All workplace partnership facilitators and joint chairs of workplace partnership committees are linked through the regional network system. These network groups meet bi-monthly and are a way of keeping in contact with other colleagues throughout the region for information and support. Twice yearly the joint chair and the facilitator network meet up to discuss and work on partnership related issues together.

9.3 Other Agencies

Examples of how workplace partnership is operating in other organisations may be sourced locally. Links should be fostered with other agencies to gain a wider knowledge of the process. Examples of other agencies where workplace partnership has been developed include:

- Health Services Executive
- Eircom
- ESB
- Institute of Technologies
- Banking Institutes
- O2

9.4 Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group

LANPAG was established to advise and support the continued development of the workplace partnership process throughout all local authorities. Project funding is provided on an annual basis. Strategic plans are developed by LANPAG and may be used as a basis for your local action plan.

9.5 Human Resources Managers/Training Officers' Network

This network provides a forum for discussion and review of general human resources and training matters. Workplace partnership is an agenda item at all meetings. The information from this network can be used as a resource to keep up to date with ongoing developments in human resources and training activities.

9.6 Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government

There should be an awareness of the role and responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEH&LG) in supporting and funding the workplace partnership process in local authorities. The DoEH&LG is represented on LANPAG and information is available through this channel.

9.7 National Centre for Partnership and Performance

The National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCP) has an excellent interactive website which includes many valuable links. The NCP welcome information from local workplace partnerships, and their store of information includes workplace partnership successes which they in turn share with related bodies.

10. Workplace Partnership Monthly Meetings: Follow-up Communications

The monthly meeting of the workplace partnership committee is the key activity of the process and it is at this meeting that important organisational issues are discussed. Specific decisions and actions are agreed and it is vital that these are recorded and communicated to stakeholders as soon as possible.

10.1 Minutes

The minutes of each meeting reflect the business of the meeting and should include, as mentioned above, the issues on the partnership/change agenda and the agreed actions to be undertaken.

The following points provide a process of best practice for circulation of minutes:

- Link of minutes (or summary thereof) should be sent to all staff that has access via intranet.
- Hardcopy of minutes should be made available to all staff.
- Circulation of hardcopy to all depots for display on notice boards.
- Copies of minutes should be sent to all participating branch union organisers/full time officials/corresponding members.

10.2 Specific Agreed Actions

Specific agreed actions to be communicated to staff generally, i.e. change in work practices, new policies etc. it is the responsibility of the relevant department to follow up on the implementation of such practices and policies.

10.3 Committee Members

Both management representatives and union representatives are obliged to engage and communicate the business of workplace partnership with their relevant parties after each meeting.

10.4 Correspondence

All strategy documents agreed nationally and circulated by LANPAG to workplace partnership committees should be brought to the attention of all staff in accordance with the above mentioned recommended communications channels.

11. Recommendations

- All national policy documents relating to workplace partnership should be printed in 'Plain English' to ensure that they are easily interpreted and understood by all stakeholders.
- Documents launched by LANPAG should include an executive summary.
- Networks should be a vehicle for sharing information and maximising the potential benefit of the work undertaken by members of such networks.
- Inter-Regional Networks: formal structures should be put in place to allow all networks to meet and share best practice regarding current workplace partnership developments.