

Case Study 9

Peterborough City Council – Joint working

Description: *Partnership working between the council and trade unions through a new Joint Consultative Forum with increased facility time for UNISON representatives which has helped to prevent large redundancies and has led to the introduction of a new pay and grading structure following job evaluation.*

Background

Peterborough City Council is a unitary authority located in the east of England around 75 miles north of London. The council has been Conservative controlled since 2002. It employs over 6,500 people, and has an annual budget of £248 million (2009/10). For its most recent CPA (2008) the council received a 3 star rating and was described as improving adequately. In 2009 the council's business transformation programme won the Efficiency Initiative category in the LGC Finance Awards.

Historically relations between the UNISON branch of 1,500 members and the City Council have been punctuated by disputes and until a year ago could be best described as poor. However, things changed significantly in 2009. At the end of 2008 the council announced that 400 jobs were to be axed with up to 80 compulsory redundancies expected by the end of the financial year. Staff were demoralised and fearful for their futures, and were very concerned about the impact the job cuts would have on local services.

The announcement coincided with a number of new senior appointments inside the council and changes in personnel in the union. Both the threat of redundancies and the new teams provided a much needed catalyst for change. Both sides concluded that the serious problems could be best

tackled by the council and UNISON working together in a more open relationship.

What happened and why?

In February 2009 a new Joint Consultative Forum (JCF) involving top tier managers was established. For the first time senior council officers and union representatives had the powerful forum needed to discuss important issues and reach agreements on many of the key issues that affect staff. The council's chief executive attended the first meeting of the JSF and gave it her 100% backing. And in June the new council leader gave his support to the more open and partnership style of working between the council and the local unions.

The council agreed to increase the amount of facility time to UNISON, the biggest union. This was crucial to enabling the union to consult and communicate with its members and engage effectively with council managers.

UNISON then negotiated a redundancy agreement. As part of its implementation managers and union representatives attended joint training sessions. This ensured that the agreement was implemented properly and that the risk of any misinterpretation was minimised.

Outcomes achieved

As a result of the hard work that followed far fewer jobs were lost, and whilst there were 30 compulsory redundancies this was fewer than originally expected. Overwhelmingly staff at risk were either redeployed or opted for voluntary redundancy.

Rona Henry UNISON's branch secretary pointed out: *"We are expecting financial problems in 2010 but we are confident that by working together we will be in a much better position to protect our member's jobs and services to the local community."*

Another big challenge was job evaluation, where following a major disagreement in 2007 the union had withdrawn from the process. Following a determined effort by both sides the process was reinvigorated. Detailed negotiations led to the introduction of a new pay and grading structure with outstanding reviews completed soon after. This sort of progress would have been unthinkable a year ago.

And the new partnership approach has paid dividends elsewhere. New working arrangements have recently been introduced in the refuse collection service that will mean a more efficient service. The union was able to make sure that members were listened to and their proposals taken on board. The changes introduced have been welcomed by staff who have the benefit of a much better work life balance in their new working environment.

Other service reviews are being carried out using the same principles of partnership working.

What they said...

As Rona Henry UNISON's branch secretary says: *"There are still arguments and differences between the union and the council. The local union is fiercely independent and determined to work in its members' best interests. But we are all reaping the benefits of a more open, partnership style of working. And the fact that our membership is growing shows it's what members want too."*

And the last word goes to Gillian Beasley, the council's chief executive who says: *"We value our relationship with the staff unions. We have found that we can achieve so much more for the people of Peterborough and our staff by working together. We don't always agree and it's not an easy option, but get it right and everyone wins."*