

National Centre for
Partnership ■■ Performance



**Workplace Change and
Innovation in Ireland's
Local Government Sector**
Partnership in Practice

November 2005

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Foreword

Less than a decade after the publication of *Better Local Government*, the implementation of the ambitious change agenda for local government is now well underway. As the rate of social, economic and demographic change in Ireland continues to gather pace, so too do the challenges for Local Authorities.

For some time now, accounts of innovative and successful change have been emerging from Local Authority workplaces. This report is the culmination of a project by the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCPP) and the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) to research these success stories in greater detail. The report examines how the capacity of Local Authorities to innovate in the workplace is central to the emergence of an enhanced system of local government.

The publication of this report is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it affords an opportunity to examine the issues affecting Local Authority workplaces, and to consider examples of good practice through a series of case studies. The creative solutions to workplace development issues highlighted in these case studies should provide inspiration and encouragement to other organisations in the local government sector and beyond.

Secondly, the lessons from these examples of good practice should usefully inform future policy development at sectoral and national level. One of the key objectives of the Government's National Workplace Strategy is the promotion of workplace innovation through the identification and dissemination of noteworthy examples of good practice. In this context, the publication of this report is a timely input into the work of the High Level Implementation Group established to oversee the National Workplace Strategy.

These case studies show how the political and organisational changes in Ireland's local government system are being underpinned by innovation within the Local Authority workplace. More efficient management and operational structures, more effective information and communication technologies, and more integrated and streamlined financial and human resource management systems, are delivering significant improvements in terms of value for money and levels of customer service. Local Authorities are finding ways to engage more strategically with stakeholders including elected local representatives and the range of public service providers with a role in social and economic development at a local level.

The case studies highlight the success of the partnership approach in effectively tackling strategic and often contentious issues. The nature of the issues dealt with reinforces the view that not only is workplace partnership a valid model for handling significant change issues, but in many situations expedites and enhances the change process to deliver quality outcomes that might otherwise be unattainable. The challenge now for management, unions and employees is to strengthen the capacity of workplace partnership to engage more frequently with such challenges, and to imbue a partnership approach as part of the culture of the workplace.

The rationale underpinning workplace partnership has always been that it offers the best approach to delivering mutual benefits for management, unions and employees. The National Workplace Strategy reinforces this viewpoint, highlighting how the country's future competitiveness depends on a highly skilled and participatory workforce enjoying a high quality of working life. The case studies presented here demonstrate practical ways by which an organisation can harness the goodwill and capabilities of its workforce by proactively engaging and involving staff at all levels of the organisation, and by identifying and responding to their needs and concerns. Some of the case studies profiled here provide models of good practice that are of relevance above and beyond the immediate confines of the Local Authority workplace.

As management, staff and unions in the Local Authority sector continue to innovate and develop, it will be important to keep the research spotlight firmly fixed on what is taking place in this sector, and to profile further examples of good practice in the months and years ahead.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank LANPAG, and in particular Geraldine Browne, Declan Naughton and the members of the Communications sub-group for their support for this project. I would also like to acknowledge the work of the project team including Cathal O' Regan, Alison O'Neil and the NCPP executive. Finally, thank you to Máire Ní Dhomhnaill, Olive Falsey, Patsy McHugh and Ann Walsh, and to all the management, union representatives and staff members from South Dublin, Meath, Donegal and Wexford County Councils, who generously gave of their time to the project. Thank you one and all.



Lucy Fallon-Byrne

Director

National Centre for Partnership and Performance

Chapter 1

Workplace innovation and Ireland's local government system

1.1 Introduction

With a workforce in excess of 33,800 employees,¹ Ireland's local government sector is a very significant public service employer. Given the considerable change that has occurred within Ireland's local government system, it is also a sector that brings into clear focus the type of challenges that will be experienced with increasing pace and intensity in the years ahead, across Ireland's public and private sector workplaces.

Since the mid 1990s there has been a growing awareness among citizens, service users, politicians, State agencies, the business community and other stakeholders of the changing nature of local government. Nowhere, however, are the effects of an evolving local government system more keenly felt than within individual local authority workplaces. It is in the workplace that management, staff and unions are, through a partnership approach, grappling with the daily challenge of anticipating, managing and implementing ongoing organisational change.

In 2004, the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) and the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCP) jointly instituted an examination of organisational change and innovation in the local authority sector. This presented an important opportunity to examine the dynamics of how partnership-oriented organisations have been responding innovatively to the kind of challenges they are encountering in their sector. Case study research was undertaken by the NCP in four local authorities: South County Dublin, Wexford, Meath County Council and Donegal County Council. This research coincided with and fed into the work of the Forum on the Workplace of the Future.

The Forum was established by the NCP, at the request of the Government, to assess how well Ireland's workplaces are equipped to meeting the challenges of the twenty first Century and to chart a course for their future development. The Forum's report, *Working to our Advantage: A National Workplace Strategy*, clearly establishes a guiding vision for Irish workplaces and highlights the need for a concerted focus by Government, employers, employees and unions on driving workplace change and innovation.

The Forum's agreed vision of successful workplaces is based on nine interlocking characteristics (See Table 1.1). Using this shared vision as a broad conceptual framework, this report seeks to explore the process and dynamics of workplace innovation within the local authority sector. The remainder of this chapter describes the role of workplace innovation in delivering the local government change agenda. Chapters 2 through 4 profile the individual case studies and highlight how local authorities are successfully addressing significant organisational challenges in new and exciting ways. Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the practical lessons from the case studies and demonstrates how the practices and approaches used reinforce the vision of the future workplace as articulated in the Forum's report.

¹ There are 29 county councils and five city councils. In addition to this there are eighty town and borough councils.

TABLE 1.1 Vision of the Workplace of the Future

Agile	All parts of the organisation and all employees are committed to the need for change and new ideas. Change is embraced willingly and all employees are constantly alert to opportunities for improvement and innovation
Customer-centred	All decisions are informed primarily by a customer, client or citizen viewpoint, and all employees understand the impact of their work on the end-user of their organisation's product or service
Knowledge intensive	The organisation and its people recognise that the knowledge content of all jobs is important to the organisation's performance and that the knowledge required for all jobs will change and adapt regardless of the nature of the work
Responsive to employee needs	The organisation is alert to the needs and concerns of employees, and understands the importance of quality of working life for employees as individuals as well as for the overall well-being of the organisation
Highly productive	The organisation is structured around a high performance ethos. High performance is actively encouraged and rewarded at all levels. There is a constant focus on opportunities for improvement and a bias towards implementation
Networked	The organisation and its people appreciate the need for external collaboration with business partners and suppliers, customers and research and educational institutions. The organisation is constantly alert to the possibilities associated with collaboration, networking and clustering of activities
Involved and participatory	The organisation values and actively seeks involvement and participation by all employees. The culture, management systems and work processes are all designed to enable employees to become deeply involved in the search for sources of higher performance and innovation
Continually learning	Learning and experimentation are encouraged and there is an ongoing focus on training, skills and learning to increase the skill content in all work
Proactively diverse	The organisation understands the value of diversity in terms of business benefits and employee well being. Diversity is approached as an integral part of the organisation's culture and management

1.2 An evolving local government agenda

The local government system is responsible for the provision and maintenance of much of the essential infrastructure and services that impinge on the daily lives of every resident and business in the State, including road systems, water, waste management, housing, sewage systems, emergency

services, arts and heritage services, and recreational public amenities. Boyle *et al* (2003) offer a useful categorisation of the service programmes of local authorities, detailing more fully the scope of local authority involvement in service provision (Table 1.2). Compared to the majority of EU and OECD States, where functions such as health and education fall under the remit of local government, the range of

TABLE 1.2 Local Government service programmes in Ireland

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1. Housing and building
Assessment of the adequacy of housing and enforcement of minimum standards; management and provision of local authority housing; assistance to persons housing themselves or improving their houses; Traveller accommodation; administration of the social housing options.</p> <p>2. Road transportation and safety
Construction, improvement and maintenance of roads; public lighting; traffic management; road safety education; collection of motor taxation; licensing of drivers, taxi and hackney licensing.</p> <p>3. Water supply and sewerage
Public water supply and sewerage schemes; group schemes; public conveniences.</p> <p>4. Development incentives and controls
Physical planning policy; control of new development and building; development and implementation of a housing strategy; promotion of industrial and other development; urban and village renewal.</p> | <p>5. Environmental protection
Waste management; burial grounds; safety of structures and places; fire protection; pollution control; Local Agenda 21; litter control.</p> <p>6. Recreation and amenity
Swimming pools; libraries; parks; open spaces; recreation centres; art galleries; museums; theatres; preservation and improvement of amenities.</p> <p>7. Agriculture, education, health and welfare
Appointments to vocational educational committees, regional health boards, joint drainage committees; administration of higher education grants.</p> <p>8. Miscellaneous services
Financial management and rate collection; elections; coroners and inquests; consumer protection measures; abattoirs; corporate estate.</p> |
|--|---|

Source BOYLE, HUMPHREYS, O'DONNELL, O'RIORDAIN AND TIMONEN (2003) – CHANGING LOCAL GOVERNMENT – A REVIEW OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT MODERNISATION PROGRAMME

public administration responsibilities held by local government in Ireland is significantly narrower.

In the context of Ireland's growing population, record levels of economic growth, expanding infra-structural provision and increasingly complex challenges for joined-up public service delivery, much attention has been focussed over recent years on the future role of Ireland's local government system.

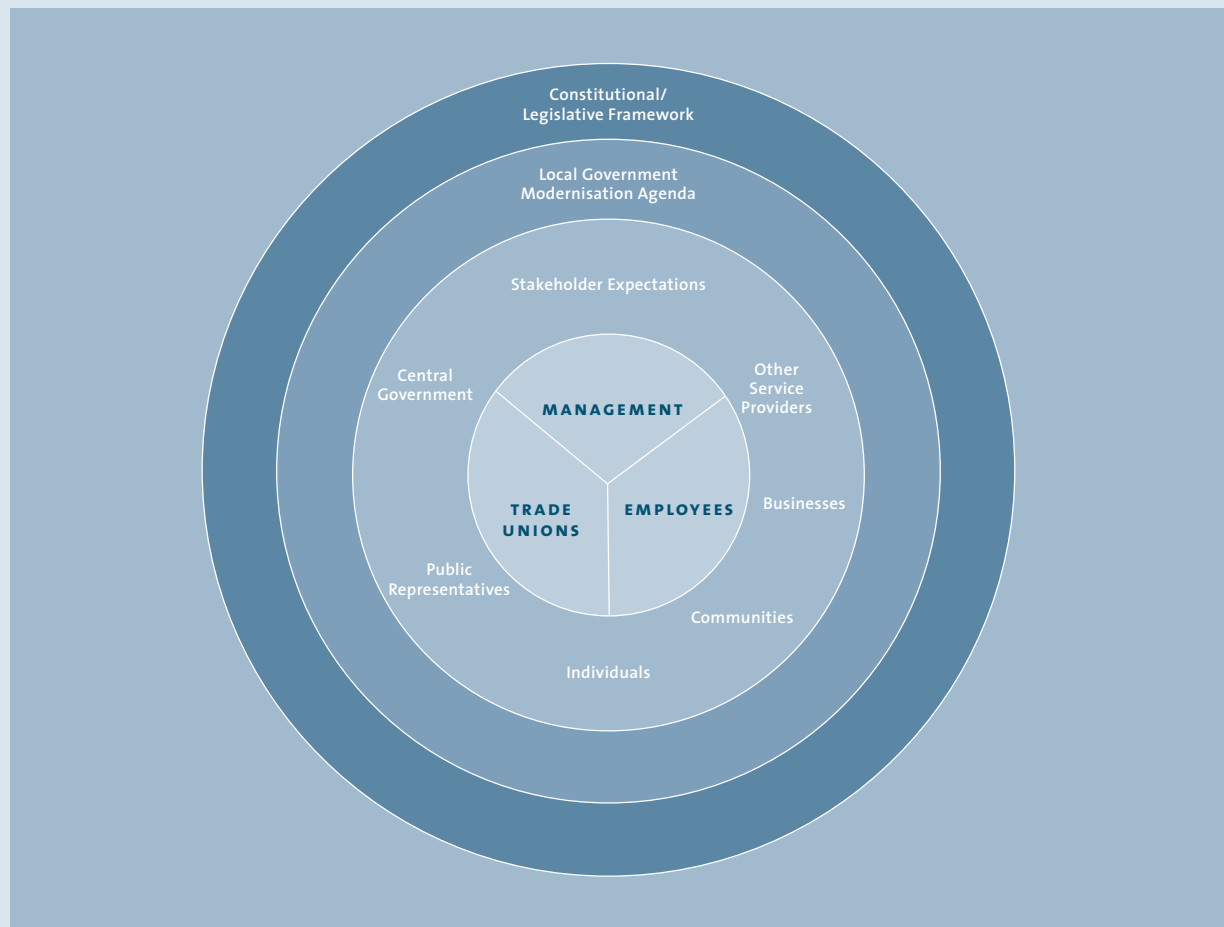
The Government's policy document, *Better Local Government* (1996), set out a new and more expansive vision for local government in the twenty first century. This document recognised the potential of local authorities as a locus for joined-up public administration and as a co-ordinating agent for local social and economic development. The four underlying principles of the Better Local Government vision, which remains the basis for the modernisation and renewal programme for the sector, are:

sation and renewal programme for the sector, are:

- Enhancing local democracy and widening participation
- Serving the customer better
- Developing efficiency in local government
- Providing proper resources to allow local government fulfil the role assigned to it.

The modernisation strategy outlined in *Better Local Government* has underpinned the implementation and ongoing development of the most radical change agenda since Ireland's system of local government was first established in the late nineteenth century. This change agenda is fundamentally altering the way local government is organised, and changes are being experienced at political, institutional and organisational levels.

FIGURE 1 Drivers of change in local authorities



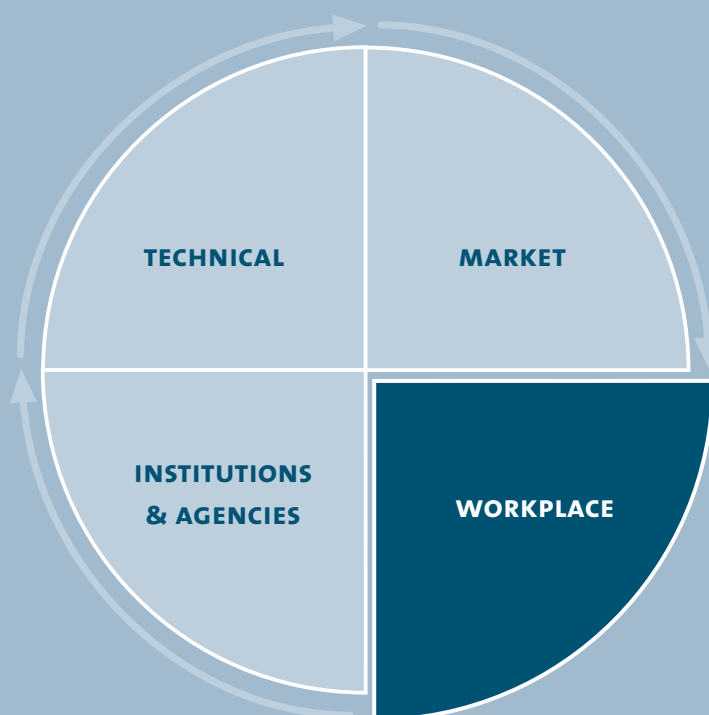
As the responsibilities and roles of local government continue to evolve, there is an increasing range of stakeholders, whose expectations of an efficient and responsive local government are driving the pace and nature of many of the changes within local authorities.

Figure 1 depicts the primary internal and external stakeholders that are driving the change agenda for local authorities.

1.3 A system of innovation in local government

The focus of this report is on how local authority workplaces are changing and innovating in response to ongoing organisational challenges. This is an important issue in its own right, in terms of the benefits that workplace innovation brings to employees, management, trade unions and customers. However, it is important to consider this issue in its wider context, including how workplace innovation contributes to the enhancement of local democracy, the delivery of a better level of service to citizens, businesses, community groups and other customers, and the expansion of the role and capabilities of local authorities.

FIGURE 2 A system of innovation in local government



Source: WORKING TO OUR ADVANTAGE:
A NATIONAL WORKPLACE STRATEGY, 2005, P. 3

One useful way of understanding the strategic importance of workplace change, and the partnership efforts of management, unions and employees, is to consider the four central elements to a system of innovation, as outlined in Figure 2. This model of an innovation system is useful in considering how changes at different levels in the local government system impact on and depend upon each other, and is directly relevant to the case studies examined here.

Institutional innovation

Institutional innovation refers in general terms to the process whereby institutions at a national, regional or local level change and develop in the way they design or implement policies and services.

Timely institutional innovation is indicative of a responsive system of governance that can adapt appropriately to new sets of circumstances. It works best where the innovative approach is systemic, involving multiple organisations working to the same reform agenda.

A key driver of institutional innovation in local government has been the evolving constitutional and legislative framework. The Local Government Act (2001) ascribed new structures, powers and functions to local authorities, and underpins many of the important changes taking place within local authorities.

One of the most important institutional innovations to arise from the local government change agenda has been the redefinition of institutional arrangements between the reserved and executive arms of local authorities. Reserved functions are those performed by elected representatives, including finance, legislation, political affairs, policy decisions and control of the executive branch, while executive functions include organisational issues, service programmes, and issues of local development and local governance, and are the responsibility of the local authority manager.

Innovative structures have been established to put effect to these new demarcations of responsibility, leading to profound changes in the way that local government functions. Local Area Committees allow elected members to represent local issues more effectively to the local authority executive, while Strategic Policy Committees allow elected members to engage effectively on strategic policy issues. The creation of Director of Service roles has enabled better engagement by the executive with these new structures.

The developing role of local authorities, and the better integration of planning and service delivery at a local level, will continue to require ongoing institutional innovation. However, the internal capacity of individual local authorities to adapt to these changes will determine the extent to which the evolution of the local government system will be successful.

Important institutional innovations include the national and local partnership structures of LANPAG, and the shared services models for ICT (the Local Government Computer Services Board) and Human Resources (Local Government Management Services Board).

At a local level, the establishment of City and County Development Boards has been a significant institutional innovation that redefines the arrangements between local authorities and other statutory, community and voluntary organisations operating in the community. It represents a key

development in the evolution of public administration, and means that local authorities will acquire increasing responsibilities for strategic inter-agency planning and service delivery at a local level. In support of this type of institutional innovation, local authorities are engaged in workplace innovations including organisational restructuring, where dedicated Directorates or Units have been set up to work with the Development Boards. Workforce training and development will further enhance the capacity of local authorities to engage in effective inter-agency collaboration.

Market innovation

Market innovation can refer in general terms to the incremental or radical reformulation of an existing market, or the creation of an entirely new market. In the local government sector, changes can be dictated by changes in the regulatory or statutory environment under which local authorities operate.

In coming years, the evolving role of local authorities will result in their involvement in new spheres of activity, with new stakeholder or customer bases. In other areas, such as environmental management and protection, it is likely that the role of local authorities will become much more dynamic as new policies and regulatory requirements lead to new services and products. On each occasion that local authorities undertake new or expanded roles, the capacity of the workforce to engage with these developments will be critical to their success.

Technical innovation

Local authorities have been to the forefront of adopting new technologies, driven largely by the imperatives of operational efficiency and compliance with regulatory requirements. Information and communication technology (ICT) systems for financial management, human resource management, customer relationship management, and document management have been successfully rolled out across the local authority sector. The case studies undertaken in this research highlight the benefit that these systems have delivered for management and staff in terms of improving decision making around resource deployment and scheduling, and streamlining work processes within

and across departments. The case studies also demonstrate how these innovations have a direct impact on the customer by improving access to local authority services, improving response times to queries or complaints, and providing greater transparency in relation to transactions between the customer and the respective local authority.

However, technical innovations are not limited to ICT developments. It is clearly necessary that local authorities are to the fore in responding to and adapting new technologies for key areas such as infrastructural developments, sewerage treatment facilities, waste management facilities and water metering. Given the rapid rate of technical innovations in all of these areas, it is becoming increasingly challenging for local authorities to keep pace with the latest technical developments.

Workplace innovation

A central proposition of the system of innovation model is that while local government change and innovation requires new institutional arrangements, new technologies and new service provision, none of these developments can be effectively achieved without complementary workplace innovation. Workplace innovation is the adoption of new workplace practices, new workplace structures and new ideas about how to do things. In short, workplace innovation is about doing things in a new way.

The development and implementation of workplace practices, structures and relationships that encapsulate a commitment to workplace innovation have the capacity to generate important outcomes for local authority organisations and employees. This approach can enable organisations to greatly improve productivity, provide better customer service and improve service delivery. Employees also gain as issues such as skills, lifelong learning, autonomy and quality of working life become more central to the strategic agenda of the organisation.

1.4 Conclusion

A combination of internal and external factors have collectively heralded a period of unprecedented change and modernisation for the local authority sector in Ireland. The following chapters outline how four individual local authorities have sought to develop creative and effective responses to the challenges associated with ongoing change. In particular they highlight that engaging with effective change has required not only technological, market and institutional innovation but also an organisational wide commitment to workplace innovation. They also demonstrate that the adoption of a proactive partnership approach premised on intensive engagement between management, unions and employees has been a key driver and enabler of organisational change. The emphasis on a partnership-style approach has also ensured that the change agenda has been achieved in a manner that delivers tangible gains for all parties concerned — management, employees, unions and customers.

Chapter 2

CASE STUDY

South Dublin County Council

2.1 Introduction

South Dublin County Council is one of the country's largest local authorities. Its workforce of 1,400 staff serve the needs of a population of more than 250,000 including 78,000 households and 5,500 businesses.

South Dublin is a relatively new local authority, and since its establishment has been grappling with change on an ongoing basis. As the organisation has developed and matured, the demands and pressures on it continue to increase apace. South County Dublin is an area of high population growth, massive local economic development, with several areas of pronounced socio-economic disadvantage. In this context, the county council is subject to significant expectations not just on its delivery of services, but also on its role in providing a coordinating focus for cross-agency service delivery.

South Dublin, for example, is the first local authority to manage the development of a Strategic Development Zone. Adamstown will become the country's largest new town, with up to 10,000 homes being provided along with the necessary facilities and infrastructure to support the social and economic well being of the community. The County Council has a strategic role in the management of this process, and the experience will empower the organisation to achieve better local governance by asserting its capacity to act as the coordinating agent for development and service provision in the area.

The County Council is able to cope with the demands placed on it by adopting a proactive partnership based approach to organisational development and change. The high levels of involvement and participation across all levels of the organisation ensure that management, unions

and employees are fully engaged in driving workplace innovation and change. This case study in particular highlights how South Dublin County Council, in seeking to meet the challenges associated with an ambitious modernisation agenda, have responded by developing workplace practices and initiatives that embody some of the key characteristics of the workplace of the future.

2.2 Customer-centred innovation

South Dublin County Council's delivery of services to its customer base involves thousands of transactions with individuals, community and voluntary organisations, businesses and other service providers on a weekly basis. The fundamental philosophy behind the customer-centred approach in South Dublin is to know what the customer needs and to respond to those needs as efficiently as possible. In an environment with such a high level of interaction with the customer, it is an ongoing challenge to deliver the service levels envisaged. Several initiatives have enabled it to handle these challenges better.

The County Council recently conducted a survey of its population base, and published the results. The exercise yielded valuable information about the public's views, concerns, expectations and experiences of the County Council. The data has also pointed to differences between various districts of the county, and this analysis will enable the local authority to deliver more customised service planning and provision.

Driven by the organisation's workplace partnership process, the council has adopted a Customer Care Plan, which incorporates a Charter of Rights and Entitlements for customers and staff, as well as detailing the levels of service the council is committed to providing.

The Customer Care service of the County Council is charged with being the single point of contact for more than 80 per cent of telephone and visitor transactions. The guiding principle of customer care in South Dublin County Council is that information produced anywhere in the organisation should be made available as widely and as early as possible. This means that intranet and internet facilities are used extensively as a document management system, and Customer Care staff are trained to directly access the relevant information. In circumstances where a query must be referred onwards, the customer care service uses a sophisticated contact management system to instantly assign the query to the relevant person within the organisation. This approach bypasses the traditional 'chain of referral' model, which holds that a customer query must pass through the 'proper channels', moving vertically within a function or department, and moving horizontally across functions or departments, to the point where the query can be appropriately answered.

The innovative approach to customer care in South Dublin relies on ICT systems to provide speedy access to relevant information, and to make effective delegations of tasks. However, the real success has been to realign the entire organisation so that task delegation can take place rapidly, without recourse to bureaucracy and organisational hierarchies.

The use of ICT in South Dublin County Council has a number of other benefits for the organisation. The contact management system where the initial query is logged and classified provides management with the facility to track in real time the amount of and nature of queries being dealt with, the speed with which the queries are being referred to the appropriate person, and the response that is provided. The weekly and monthly reports provide management with high-quality information on the trends in terms of issues, enquiries and response rates.

In terms of improving how it communicates complex arrays of information, the increasing use of GIS technology linked to core databases allows the Council to publish information online dynamically and with a user-friendly, intuitive interface. South

Dublin is also piloting other technologies to 'push' information to its customer base. WAP technology is being exploited as a cost-effective and practical way to notify customers of urgent information. For example, the Council's Parks Department is responsible for the management of one hundred and forty playing fields, which are used by up to ten thousand people on any given weekend. Traditionally, the last-minute closure of playing fields due to poor weather conditions presented a logistical nightmare for this department. WAP technology now enables the Council to instantly notify changed arrangements by text message to approximately 80 per cent of those it needs to contact. Similarly, WAP technology enables the Council to push traffic updates with real time information to the mobile phones of commuters. The ultimate objective of the ICT plan for South Dublin is the implementation of a dynamic system where updating of data will automatically cascade in 'real time' into all appropriate locations on the internet and intranet.

2.3 Responding to employee needs

South Dublin has a workforce numbering in excess of 1,400. Over recent years, workplace partnership has played a highly significant role in the development of a constructive and proactive industrial relations environment. Here we profile two examples of how the organisation, through its partnership process, has been responsive to the needs of a changing workforce.

2.3.1 The Workplace Review process

In 2002, South Dublin County Council and LANPAG jointly funded a survey of the entire workforce entitled the *Workplace Review*. The workplace partnership committee were given the task of implementing this initiative across the organisation, and research consultants were engaged to support this process, which presented complex logistical challenges for the organisation.

The design of the questionnaire was based on a standardised one developed and piloted by LANPAG. Additional customisation of the questionnaire allowed South Dublin to look at issues pertinent to its own situation. Issues covered in the questionnaire included:

- Training
- Career development
- Career progression
- Workplace communication and morale
- Workplace partnership
- Equality
- Bullying and harassment
- Work life balance
- Family friendly practices

The partnership committee initiated this process by raising awareness across all departments and grades about the survey. Briefing sessions were given to each unit of the organisation, followed up by an information campaign using posters, letters and email. Training was then organised for all survey facilitators, who would be responsible for overseeing survey sessions with staff. The IT department supported the provision of an online version of the survey.

Nine hundred and sixty eight staff responded to the survey, representing a 69 per cent response rate. The views of staff from all grades and departments were measured, and a detailed statistical report compiled. An interim report was then presented to the Partnership Committee for validation and development. The final report was published and made available to every member of staff. While the overall findings indicated high satisfaction levels among staff with their employment, there were a range of issues that emerged that required attention. A management advisory report was produced to highlight the key issues to management.

The key outcome of the Workplace Review is the development of a partnership-approved action plan to address issues raised by employees. This action plan constitutes an evidence-based development agenda for the organisation, and highlights key strategic and practical initiatives that will be introduced, resourced and managed effectively by South Dublin County Council. Importantly, the data now establishes a baseline for the ongoing monitoring of progress on employee-related issues within the organisation.

2.3.2 The Return to Learning Initiative

Background to the Initiative

The aim of the Return to Learning Initiative was to deliver basic adult education programmes to vulnerable local authority workers. This initiative was instigated by LANPAG in conjunction with the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), with funding being provided jointly by LANPAG and by the Department of Education and Science.

South Dublin County Council was one of five local authorities that participated in the pilot initiative. On the strength of the successful experience of South Dublin and the other pilot locations, Return to Learning was implemented within all 34 local authorities. In the three-year period between 2001 and 2004, over 1,200 local authority workers participated in this learning initiative nationally, and it is now recognised as a model of excellence for workplace basic education.

Traditionally, the local authority sector has had a cohort of workers who entered the workforce with no formal educational qualifications. A proportion of this cohort is known to have literacy problems. Low literacy levels among sections of the workforce clearly pose certain operational problems for local authorities and their employees. While this is an important issue, there are other more fundamental challenges relating to this problem. For the individual employee, basic literacy issues can inhibit their career progression opportunities within the organisation and also constrain their potential to experience greater fulfilment from their working life. From the employer's perspective, basic literacy issues prevent the development and upskilling of sections of the workforce that will increasingly

require much greater participation in lifelong learning and upskilling. As such, the capacity to maximise the potential contribution of all employees to the achievement of key organisational goals is clearly constrained.

Delivery of the Return to Learning Initiative in South Dublin

In South Dublin County Council the initiative was driven by the workplace partnership committee. The involvement of the partnership committee was paramount, as the issues concerned needed to be sensitively negotiated and planned, in particular the question of the confidentiality of the process for participants. The fact that the initiative was promoted jointly by management and unions through workplace partnership helped assuage fears that the literacy issues of participants would somehow be noted by the Human Resources department.

The programme

In terms of designing and providing the programme to participants, the partnership committee worked closely with the two VECs operating in the area - County Dublin VEC and City of Dublin VEC, whose Adult Literacy Services appointed dedicated Project Coordinators to work with the County Council.

The Adult Literacy Service led the design of tailor-made individual learning programmes, based on a literacy needs assessment using NALA's Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education (ABE).

There are three phases to the Return to Learning Programme:

- Phase 1 consists of a basic literacy programme delivered by professional adult literacy specialists
- Phase 2 involves the creation of a personal development plan with the support of professional career guidance personnel. The focus of this plan is on identifying the next achievable steps for the participant
- Phase 3 assists the participant to progress onto the next step of training – either mainstream training within the County Council, or progression to a more advanced adult literacy programme

The framework for the Phase 1 programme was a 20-week course with 4 hours of classes per week. This was typically organised into two weekly sessions of two hours each.

Marketing the course and recruiting participants

A combination of a formal marketing and recruitment campaign, and informal measures, meant that the recruitment of participants was highly successful.

The formal approach began by the partnership committee meeting with senior and middle management and establishing their commitment. This included agreeing formal arrangements for freeing up participants to take part in the course within their normal working week.

A sensitive awareness campaign was instigated, including posters, information fliers distributed in staff pay packets, memos to line managers, information meetings with videos and presentations.

The programme was marketed not as an Adult Literacy Course, but as a comprehensive development programme including modules on *Mathematics, Introduction to Computers and Career Planning*. It was felt that this approach helped remove some of the stigma that might otherwise have been associated with the course.

A particularly important aspect was the informal part of the campaign, which involved the partnership facilitator working with front-line management to raise awareness among key target groups within the workforce, and to support and encourage potential participants to meet with the VEC Coordinator, who travelled to each of the Council Depots about half a dozen times to meet with staff.

Return to Learning Initiative: Outcomes

The Return to Learning Initiative is widely viewed by employees, unions and management as one of the flagship partnership projects in the organisation. In the first year of the programme alone, approximately fifty staff participated and this translated into seven groups across the county council area.

Apart from Health and Safety training, it was the first formalised training programme to be offered to outdoor staff. The success of Phase I of the programme in engaging outdoor staff (particularly men, who are generally less likely to avail of adult education provisions), and building their confidence, significantly enhances the prospects of an integrated lifelong learning approach that can include all sections of the workforce.

The take-up levels during Year 1 exceeded all expectations, and those who took part in Year 1 have achieved excellent progression outcomes. Many have continued in Year 2 to more advanced adult literacy programmes. One individual took up a place on the Access course for Maynooth University; another left the local authority to take up a nursing training course.

Feedback from participants on the programme has been overwhelmingly positive, and benefits reported include enhanced literacy and IT skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, morale, and empowerment in their job.

From the organisation's point of view, there are clear strategic benefits to the programme in terms of a lifelong learning approach, and it is envisaged that funding for future years of the initiative will come from the mainstream training budget. Significant operational benefits were also reported. For example, the improvement of numeracy skills in particular seemed to have immediate benefits, in that general operatives seemed to become more aware of resource management and conservation issues. Supervisors also reported greater flexibility and productivity in their depots. In addition, there were enormous social benefits for the organisation, with staff from different depots getting to know each other for the first time.

Some challenges will have to be addressed in seeking to build on the initial success of the Return to Learning initiative. Relatively high participation rates to the programme will not necessarily be easy to maintain, as was encountered in the second year of the initiative. However, mainstreaming the programme into the organisation's training provisions, and linking it with career development and progression opportunities, should ensure that the model becomes successfully embedded into the organisation's lifelong learning strategy.

2.4 Conclusion

This case study provides an overview of how South Dublin County Council has sought to address the challenges associated with the ambitious modernisation agenda facing local authorities. Significantly, this organisation has striven to adopt a partnership-style approach to the management and implementation of wide-ranging change. The formal partnership committee has undertaken a number of key projects that have delivered tangible and mutual benefits to the organisation, its employees and customers. The work of the partnership group has been augmented by concerted attempt to foster a more participatory management culture and to enhance employee involvement across all levels of the organisation. South Dublin County Council provides a practical example of the type of attributes that have been identified as being central to the development of successful modern workplaces including being customer centred; responsive to employee needs; knowledge intensive; involved and participatory and continually learning.

Chapter 3

CASE STUDY

Wexford County Council

3.1 Introduction

The focus of this case study is on how management, unions and staff at Wexford County Council has been to the forefront in dealing with the introduction of Public Private Partnerships, which are now one of the most strategic — and contentious — issues for local authorities.

Over recent years, the Government has promoted Public Private Partnerships as a business model for the development of quality public infrastructures and services. The Department of the Environment and Local Government states that local authorities should adopt a lead role in developing such projects. The prospect of Public Private Partnerships playing an increasing role in the work of local government has important implications for the local authority model, and for the management and staff working in the sector. The Framework for Public Private Partnerships³ recommends that the views of stakeholders including unions and employees should be used in selecting, developing and implementing Public Private Partnership projects, and that a partnership approach should be maintained throughout the project's lifetime.

Given that some local authority workplace partnership committees are only recently grappling with the more challenging and strategic issues of workplace innovation, of which Public Private Partnerships are foremost, there has not been a universal acceptance either from management or unions that workplace partnership should be the driving engine for introducing such initiatives within the local authority sector.

3.2 The challenge for Wexford County Council

Over the last two years, Wexford County Council has faced a number of issues that required significant degrees of change and innovation. Foremost among these was the Government's Water Pricing Framework, which requires the universal metering of non-domestic users by 2006, and full recovery of the cost of providing water and wastewater services to non-domestic customers.

When this Pricing Framework came onto the agenda for Wexford County Council, there were 7,000 non-domestic customers in the county. Of these, 4,100 were on fixed charges, while only 1,830 were metered, and much of the existing meter stock was aged. The Council concluded that the initial task facing it was to install approximately 6,800 water meters. This would then be followed by the additional work required to read the meters, maintain the system, and manage the billing and collection of the meters from account holders.

The main question that arose for the County Council was whether its Water Services Section could undertake this challenge within the timeframe required given the limited scope that existed to recruit additional staff, and the limited in-house experience of managing a project of this nature.

3. Working Together for Quality Public Services (2001) Public – Private Advisory Group on PPPs

3.3 Developing a solution

Management initially brought forward a proposal to deliver the project using a public private partnership. Given that public private partnerships were a highly contentious industrial relations issue right across the local government sector, this proposal initially met with strong resistance from the trade unions.

In June 2004, a task group was established under the auspices of workplace partnership, with representatives of all of the interests involved. At the outset, it seemed inevitable that the issue would quickly escalate into an industrial relations problem. However, over a series of facilitated sessions using innovative conflict resolution and joint problem-solving techniques, a new level of understanding between the parties emerged, and a new degree of trust and confidence was established between senior management and senior trade union officials. In addition, a number of staff consultative meetings and task group meetings were held under the workplace partnership process, as well as meetings with the client representative. In a remarkably quick timeframe, the parties reached agreement on how to successfully deliver the project using a mix of private sector and local authority approaches. In achieving this solution, the interests of management in terms of delivering on the project, as well as the concerns of staff and unions regarding their future roles and responsibilities were all successfully negotiated. The adoption of a public private partnership approach represented not only a breakthrough innovation for Wexford County Council in terms of its organisational model, but in national terms was one of the quickest agreements reached to date on the introduction of a Public Private Partnership project in a local authority.

3.4 Conclusion

The example of the introduction of a public private partnership model in Wexford County Council demonstrates the potential of workplace partnership to generate practical solutions to seemingly intractable problems that are central to the modernisation agenda within the local authority sector. In particular, by adopting a problem solving approach and engaging in meaningful dialogue, the partnership group were able to develop a consensus based solution that was not only viable and effective but also met the needs of all the relevant parties. Effective consultation and engagement through the formalised partnership process therefore did not act as a constraint on change, as is sometimes assumed, but rather functioned as an enabler of workplace change and innovation.

Chapter 4

CASE STUDY

Donegal County Council

4.1 Introduction

The story of Donegal County Council is of an organisation where radical workplace innovation and organisational restructuring has led to dramatic improvements for all stakeholders, including management, unions, and service users. What is most noteworthy about this example is the way in which multiple change programmes have worked to substantially complement each other.

In terms of landmass, Donegal is one of the largest counties in Ireland. The county's lengthy coastline to the north and west incorporates several peninsulas with a range of large and small population centres. Some of these smaller coastal communities are quite remote from the larger urbanised centres to be found inland. On the eastern county border with Derry lies Lifford, a small village that for more than a century has been the headquarters of Donegal County Council.

As the role of the local authority expanded over the years, the location of the County Council in Lifford began to pose increasing problems for the organisation. The primary problem was the distance of the County Council from the county's main population centres, and its even greater remove from residents of the coastal communities. For some service users, the most straightforward transaction at the Council offices in Lifford would amount to a day's outing.

The peripheral location of the Council's headquarters also posed problems for many staff, whose commute to Lifford was impinging significantly on their quality of life. The ageing office accommodation at Council headquarters meant that both customers and staff were operating in unacceptable conditions. The Council

system of administration was traditional and bureaucratic, and communications in the organisation was predominantly top down.

These factors combined to create poor morale among staff and management in the organisation, and a poor public profile for the Council. From the early 1990s, it became clear to management and unions in the Council that the existing organisational model would not be sustainable in the long term, and there was a growing acceptance that fundamental organisational restructuring was required. The launch in 1996 of *Better Local Government* simply provided a national context to challenges that were already very real for the organisation.

4.2 Establishing the agenda for change

Planning for an organisational change programme began in earnest during the latter half of the 1990s. Management and unions adopted a partnership approach to the issues, and worked closely together to identify options for the development of the organisation. This partnership approach was adopted prior to the establishment of the formal workplace partnership structures that emerged out of the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000).

A series of expert reviews were organised to seek the views of management, unions, employees, elected representatives and service users on how the local authority could improve the management of the organisation, deliver a better quality of service to the customer, and enhance the working conditions for staff.

A sweeping change agenda emerged from this process, and key priorities identified included the following:

- Decentralise County Council services to regional offices based on the county's five electoral districts
- Provide multi-purpose regional offices that offered customers a one-stop shop approach for all council business and other public service business
- Develop a more strategic role for senior management in the Council, focussing on policy formulation and leadership in the organisation
- Clarify the roles, responsibilities and working relationships in the organisation, and enable greater delegation of authority at each level in the organisation
- Improve human resource capabilities in the organisation, overhaul staff welfare policies, and improve the working conditions of staff.

4.3 Planning and managing the Change Programme

Those involved in planning for change in Donegal County Council recognised that an agenda of this significance required a systems approach, whereby changes in one aspect of the organisation would be planned, implemented and monitored in relation to their dependency and impact on other aspects of the organisation. In adopting a systems approach to the challenge, all aspects of the organisation's relationships with its service users, other service providers, local elected representatives, and the management, unions and staff were subject to redefinition.

This was achieved by using a change management methodology called the *Whole System of Work*. The methodology enables multiple changes to be made in ways where the impact of one change on other changes being made, and on the functioning of the organisation as a whole, is

fully understood and managed. This methodology was utilised, for example, to address the following interrelated issues:

- How the restructuring of accountability through regradings impacts on the organisation's Performance Management and Development System (PMDS)
- How new risk management tools are used as part of PMDS
- How service standard benchmarks and indicators become incorporated into process improvement methodologies
- How changes required from staff in relation to work practices or developments in ICT get incorporated into management development and training programmes

It soon becomes self-evident in any significant change management programme that a 'Whole System' approach to change enables a more comprehensive and sensitive approach to be taken to the impact of change on staff and to the management of change particularly when the changes are organisational-wide in character.

As the priorities from the review process were tackled using this systems approach, the change agenda became translated into a series of achievable objectives, including:

- Creating a new organisation with modern management systems and clear lines of accountability, in pursuit of agreed service standards
- Decentralising service delivery in line with the county's Electoral Areas, and devolving decision-making in relation to individual customers to area-based front line managers
- Establishing Electoral Area Committees with political accountability for delivering council work programmes and services in each electoral area
- Establishing the local authority as a lead partner for integrating the delivery of other public services into the county, and coordinating the planning and delivery of local development initiatives.

These objectives have formed the core development strategy of the County Council over the last number of years, and the Council has been notably successful in achieving them.

The process has been underpinned by an enabling framework including the Local Government Act (2001), which provides for many of the necessary institutional innovations including the separation of reserved and executive functions, the establishment of Local Area Committees, Strategic Policy Committees, and the County Development Board.

Technical innovation has also been a central feature in the emergence of the new organisational model in Donegal County Council. Some of the key challenges around decentralisation of service delivery, including that of creating effective systems for communications and case handling across multiple sites, could not have been adequately addressed without the application of new technologies including web-based document management systems and intranet facilities. The use of IT systems also benefits the customer, through, for example, the ability to access all planning applications and related information over the Council's website.

If the process has been underpinned by formal institutional innovation and technical innovation, the relative success of the Donegal experience can be put down in large part to the vision, determination and skill of management, unions and employees. By adopting an innovative stance towards every issue that emerges, the organisation and those working within it have succeeded in surmounting many challenges over the last ten years. The workplace partnership committee has been the focal point where many problems have been solved, with employees and their union representatives working in close co-operation with the Directorate of Corporate Development and other senior management representatives.

4.4 The new face of Donegal County Council

Area based offices

Since 2000, Donegal County Council has decentralised its service delivery to five area offices, located in Carndonagh, Donegal Town, Dungloe, Milford and Letterkenny. There are several features of these area offices that fundamentally alter the way that council services are delivered to the customer.

The offices are located strategically across the county, providing easy access to both large urban centres and remote coastal communities.

Each of the District Electoral Divisions in the county has an area-based office, thus providing a direct tie in with the Local Area Committee. This allows elected representatives and other representative stakeholders to interact with the Council at a local level, influencing the implementation of Council policy as near as possible to the population being served.

The high-specification offices are designed to award-winning standards, and offer significantly enhanced surroundings for both staff and service users.

Each office operates as a one-stop shop for the service user. Offering the full range of council services to the public, these offices are far more than pleasant outposts of Council headquarters. Full decision-making in terms of planning, service provision, etc. takes place at the office. This decentralisation of decision-making allows the office to factor local knowledge more effectively into the decision-making process, and enables the office to tailor customer service initiatives to the needs of the local population. For example, area offices serving Gaeltacht communities are piloting the provision of bi-lingual services.

The Public Service Centre model

The vision of local authorities becoming the focal point for multi-agency public service delivery is being worked out in an innovative way in Donegal. The buildings which house the County Council's area offices were planned as a focal point for the integrated delivery of public services to the community. Under the stewardship of the local authority, these centres, known as Public Service Centres, operate as innovative one-stop shops for a range of public service providers. Each Public Service Centre operates shared front reception facilities, where trained staff provide the first point of contact for all public visitors, who are referred as appropriate to the relevant service provider. Contact staff are equipped to schedule appointments and process forms for multiple service providers, including the County Council, the Department of Social and Family Affairs, FÁS, Comhairle, and the Health Service Executive.

For many local authorities, the shared services approach pioneered in Donegal will become their next step in developing a strategic local role for the local authority. In Donegal, the Public Service Centre is already providing the arena where the concept can be further developed still, with experimentation taking place on more coordinated inter-agency collaboration. This evolving model places the local authority firmly at the heart of service provision into local communities, and points the way forward for joined-up public service planning and delivery, and better customer experiences.

Management structures

While Donegal County Council's provision of area-based services has led to notable improvements for service users, this innovation has been underpinned by significant back-end innovations. Not least has been the restructuring of management, which has resulted in a new organisational capacity to give effect to service decentralisation and the operation of area-based offices. The creation of a new Area Manager role with responsibility for delivering the full range of council services through an area office enables decisions to be made at the most appropriate levels within the organisation. Area Managers report to Divisional Managers, who are responsible for management and short-term planning for a specific range of services. Each Director of Service is responsible for the management of their service across the electoral areas, and the development of policy for that service in conjunction with the relevant Strategic Policy Committee.

Information is now being managed both on an area basis and on a service basis, and this allows for a complex multi-dimensional picture of the County Council to be managed coherently. The net effect of this re-organisation is that senior management are now freed up to take a more strategic role in developing the organisation. For example, the County Manager now has scope to work closely with the Council's Corporate Policy Group to create and promote strategic plans for the county, in conjunction with government departments and other agencies.

Workplace partnership

Having from the outset adopted a pioneering partnership approach to the change agenda, Donegal County Council enthusiastically embraced the establishment of more formalised workplace partnership structures under the terms of the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000). Since their inception, the formal workplace partnership arrangements in Donegal County Council have played a central role in developing and supporting the implementation of the change agenda in the Council.

With unions and employees working proactively in partnership with management, the needs and concerns of employees have been factored into every stage of decision-making. The result, from an employee's perspective, is a workplace that is virtually unrecognisable from that of ten years ago. Service decentralisation and the ensuing redeployment of staff to the area offices offered many the opportunity to work much closer to their homes, with all the quality of life benefits that that brings. The physical conditions of the workplace have dramatically improved with the newly constructed area offices. The new management structures, and the associated clarity around reporting mechanisms, have created a much more straightforward working relationship between management and employees in the Council.

One impact of the decentralisation programme has been on the social and informal networks among staff, which are now much more difficult to maintain, given that staff are located right across the county. The role of workplace partnership in maintaining lines of communication with employees therefore becomes even more crucial in this context.

The workplace partnership committee has a central role in communicating the needs and concerns of staff and of management. Evidence-based dialogue is driven by exercises such as the *Workplace Review*, which in 2004 benchmarked issues for Donegal County Council against comparable measures across the border in Derry City Council.

Workplace partnership structures are continuing to adapt to meet the changing needs of the organisation and its employees. New area-based workplace partnership committees are functioning to represent area-specific issues to the management of area offices. Staff representatives of Town Councils are now invited to participate in the area-based partnership committees, marking an innovative development in terms of achieving greater local coordination of service delivery.

4.5 Facing the future

The change agenda set out by management and staff at Donegal County Council over a decade ago is now well on the way to full implementation. There have been significant improvements for the management, staff and customers of Donegal County Council. However, with an increasing role in relation to local development and the strategic integration of public service delivery, Donegal County Council now faces important new challenges. Changing dynamics in the local economy will place new demands on the local authority and its ability to deliver a sufficient level of service and infrastructure for the social and economic development needs of the county. Changing models of service provision, including Public Private Partnerships, will mean that the Council must retain its undoubted capacity to be innovative. Given the successes of the past decade, and the ongoing partnership relationship between staff, unions and management, there is every reason to be optimistic about the capacity of Donegal County Council to successfully meet its future challenges.

Chapter 5

CASE STUDY

Meath County Council

5.1 Introduction

This case study outlines how management, unions and staff at Meath County Council successfully undertook a complex decentralisation programme. This programme resulted in the transformation of the organisation from a traditional, centralised structure with poor customer service capabilities to a decentralised organisation with high levels of customer satisfaction and engagement with local stakeholders.

In the early 1990s, Meath County Council was operating on the basis of an organisational structure and administrative bureaucracy inherited from previous decades, with little or no evidence of a capacity for innovation. The County Council headquarters in Navan was the centralised location for servicing the needs of a population spread out across five divisional electoral districts in one of the largest local authority administrative areas in Ireland.

During the period 1996 – 2002, Meath experienced a population expansion greater than any other local authority area in the country, with a 22.1 per cent net increase in its population.⁴ This figure hides an even starker picture of the development challenges facing the county at that time. The western half of the county was experiencing slow economic growth, with the demographic trends showing pockets of rural depopulation. At the same time, the eastern half of the county was becoming host to some of the fastest-growing population centres in Europe, expanding the commuter belt for the growing workforce of the Greater Dublin region.

As the economic and social development of County Meath gathered pace during the 1990s, the County Council began to feel increasingly challenged in its capacity to provide adequate, accessible services to its customers. Part of the challenge lay in the reliance on the County Hall in Navan as the centralised location for all interaction with the public. More of the problems stemmed from the organisational structure, and the difficulties that presented in terms of rapid deployment of staff as issues arose across the county.

5.2 Setting a new strategic direction

Given the pressures brought on by an increasingly inadequate service delivery model for a rapidly growing population, Meath County Council was faced with some significant decisions if it was to improve its overall performance, and in particular its levels of customer service. A landmark strategic decision was taken by the County Council to decentralise its service provision into five key locations corresponding to the county's five divisional electoral districts.

At the time of the decision, many of the necessary circumstances to support this shift in the organisational model were falling into place. In policy terms, decentralisation had become a more realistic proposition with the publication of *Better Local Government*. Elected Council members and Council management were looking for ways to engage more effectively on operational and strategic issues. From a technical point of view, effective systems to support internal communications were available, while database and intranet technologies to store, locate and transfer files and customer contact records across multiple sites made the logistical side of the proposition more manageable.

⁴ Central Statistics Office Yearbook (2005)

5.3 Organisational innovation

The decentralisation process was seen to offer not only a better model of service delivery, but also the opportunity to engage in the most radical root and branch review ever undertaken of the functions and structure of the organisation. The key challenge was to plan and implement this change process in a way that would be supported by all management, employees and unions within the organisation.

An extensive review process was put in place, and the views and suggestions of staff from right across the organisation were sought on the systems and structures that were needed to progress this strategy. Staff at every level in the organisation were canvassed for their ideas about how they, and the organisation generally, could be more innovative in delivering better customer service. In particular, staff members were asked for their views on how they could function effectively in a decentralised service.

It became clear during the review that the key organisational challenge envisaged by management and staff would also be the key determining factor in delivering better service to the customer: how to move from a functionally-organised structure to a cross-functionally organised, decentralised structure. In the words of a senior manager, “We needed to move away from asking our customer ‘Who do you need to speak with?’ to asking them ‘What do you need to know?’”

The review process resulted in a discussion document, which detailed every function of every staff grade within the local authority, and put forward recommendations on how these functions could be made more efficient in the context of a decentralisation of services around the county. This discussion document was adopted by the management team as the change agenda for the organisation.

Then, in a move that pre-dated by several years the establishment of a mandated workplace partnership committee under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000), a joint union-management working group was constituted, whose job it was to distil the discussion document

into an agreed policy position for management and unions. Members of this working group signed off on the resultant policy document as a framework for change. This framework provided the basis for negotiations between individual unions and the management of the local authority regarding staffing arrangements for the new offices.

5.4 The new face of Meath County Council

The capacity of Meath County Council to provide a customer-oriented service has been significantly enhanced since this change process was implemented. In terms of how the organisation is now managed, the roles of senior management have been extensively redefined. The relationship between management and the elected representatives on strategic and operational issues is more efficient. The Directors of Service now operate not just on a functional basis, but have a role in Corporate planning and policy development, in conjunction with the Council’s Strategic Policy committees. Additionally, each Director of Service is designated to interact with one or more Local Area committees.

Since the first decentralised office was opened in 1998, area offices have been set up in six locations, including Navan, Duleek, Trim, Kells, Ashbourne and Dunshaughlin. These ‘One Stop Shops’ offer facilities on a whole range of council services, from grant applications and motor tax services to planning applications and housing services.

Over recent years, customer service has been further enhanced through extensive development of the ICT capacity in the organisation. Aside from an increasing provision of online services to the public, Meath County Council has developed a call management system that has now become a template for other local authorities. The implementation of the Call Management System was driven by the workplace partnership committee, which established a Partnership Working Group to pilot the system. The success of this pilot exercise convinced management and unions of the viability of implementing the system

across the organisation. The system enables staff to log and track all queries to the customer service desk, while management now have an extensive reporting system available that enables them to see in real time the nature and number of calls that are being logged in an area office, and the response times for dealing with those calls. It also allows management to delegate tasks to field staff who can remotely access tasks from the call management system.

The experience of the decentralisation programme has had a lasting impact on how the organisation conducts its internal affairs, particularly in terms of how staff and unions engage with management. It is widely felt by management and unions that the decentralisation process might never have materialised successfully had they not adopted their highly proactive and intensive approach to informing and consulting with staff. This participatory approach ensured that at every critical juncture in the planning process the views and concerns of staff were known to the decision makers, and factored into the plans at the outset. During the latter part of the 1990s, when formal partnership structures were being established, management, supported by the unions, again engaged in an extensive consultation process with staff, so that the agenda adopted by the first partnership committee was one established by the staff themselves.

5.5 Conclusion

This case study demonstrates how Meath County Council has successfully undertaken a complex decentralisation programme. While institutional and technological innovation have been key drivers of this process, the effectiveness of the decentralisation programme has also been heavily dependent on the collaborative and proactive approach adopted by the management, unions and staff. Indeed across the organisation there is now in place a vibrant workplace partnership process that is engaged in a series of initiatives that aim to deliver improvements for the staff, management and customers of the County Council. Partnership is now seen as the first port of call to handle any significant change issue. Equally any developments that impact on the organisation and its staff are all subject to detailed consideration by the partnership committee. As one member of the partnership committee noted, *“the core values of the organisation are sound, and we are now geared to deal with the future more capably.”*

Chapter 6

The emerging workplace of the future – lessons from Local Government

6.1 Introduction

The case studies in this report provide practical evidence of how four local authorities have sought to implement and manage an ambitious modernisation agenda through the adoption of a partnership-style approach premised on increased participation, extensive consultation and enhanced employee involvement. In particular, the case studies highlight how the individual local authorities have successfully developed creative and innovative responses to the evolving demands of their customers and the changing needs of employees in a highly challenging environment. These include external challenges posed by changes in the regulatory environment, ongoing economic and social development, the emergence of new political initiatives and the rapid pace of technological change. Equally, the issues highlighted in this report reflect the current concerns of a sector that will continue to evolve and present new challenges for all the relevant stakeholders.

A central theme of all the case studies under consideration was the recognition that while institutional, technical and to a lesser extent market innovation have all been drivers of change in the local authority sector, the relative success of the modernisation agenda has been heavily dependent on a commitment by management, employees and the unions to ongoing workplace innovation and change. In this context, this chapter aims to provide an overview of the key lessons from the case studies, and the factors that have supported and fostered effective workplace innovation and change. Secondly, this chapter considers a number of the examples of good practice from the case studies in the context of the shared vision of the workplace of the future that has been articulated in the Government's new National Workplace Strategy (see Table 6.1).

6.2 Fostering workplace innovation

The case studies highlight that effective strategic organisational decisions in areas such as service decentralisation, service improvement and lifelong learning require a commitment by management, unions and employees to the adoption of new workplace practices, structures and working relationships. Indeed, across all four case study organisations there was evidence of a real willingness to develop new ideas and to experiment with doing things in new ways.

This commitment to workplace innovation, in areas such as the development of new working practices and arrangements, must be supported and sustained by an appropriate level of resources.

For example, the case studies demonstrate that investment in appropriate technologies, in training and development of staff, and in workplace partnership has the potential to deliver both improved organisational performance and tangible benefits for staff. Continued investment needs to be pursued within the organisation, at a sectoral level with LANPAG and the Department of Environment and Local Government, and at a national level through the Workplace Innovation Fund that has been recommended in the Government's National Workplace Strategy.

6.3 Leadership

The case studies highlight the importance of leadership – from senior managers and trade union representatives – in promoting consultation, employee involvement and participation as an enabler of change. The case studies show that firm commitment from, and the proactive engagement of, top management and senior trade union officials were critical to the evolution of a more robust and effective partnership process, demonstrating the capacity to engage with and drive ongoing change. In particular, the more contentious or difficult the issue the greater the need for management and union representatives to demonstrate leadership and to proactively champion the partnership process as a valuable mechanism for addressing core organisational issues.

6.4 Effective workplace partnership

Robust workplace partnership characterised by high levels of employee and union involvement with management has been a key factor underpinning the successful implementation of change and innovation in each of the case study organisations. Even prior to the establishment of formalised workplace partnership structures, local authorities such as Donegal County Council and Meath County Council had proactively adopted a partnership approach to the management and implementation of organisational change. The emphasis on the adoption of a participatory approach was evident in their willingness to inform and consult with staff and unions at an early stage of the change process.

This was critical because not only did it legitimise change but also gave staff and unions ownership of the process itself. Informing and consulting with staff also served as a mechanism for tapping into the collective knowledge, skills and experience of all employees in seeking to resolve core organisational problems. The partnership process in all four case studies was characterised by the adoption of a strong problem-solving ethos, in which the various stakeholders strove, through intensive deliberation and debate, to generate consensus-based solutions to, often complex, problems. This problem solving

approach was particularly important in terms of stimulating new and creative ways of doing things within the various organisations.

A new shared understanding

As was outlined in Chapter 1, a number of external and internal factors have, in the years since 1996, combined to generate an unprecedented level of change within the local authority sector. What is evident from the case studies is the degree to which organisations have succeeded in fostering a shared understanding of not only the need for change but also of the appropriateness of addressing such change in a co-operative and participatory manner. In particular, core organisational imperatives such as meeting customer needs, service decentralisation and improving the quality of services have come to be seen as shared goals in which all the relevant stakeholders have a role to play in securing a successful outcome. Underpinning this new shared understanding is the recognition that achieving such organisational objectives has the capacity to deliver tangible benefits for all the parties - managers, employees and their representatives.

Across a number of the studies there is clear evidence of the willingness by unions to embrace and indeed champion key business goals and objectives. This has resulted in union representatives recognising that championing the needs of their employees could not be addressed in isolation but rather had to be advanced in the context of a wider agenda of ongoing organisational change. Maintaining a strong focus on customer needs was a guiding principle behind a number of the innovations profiled in this report, including several undertaken by workplace partnership committees.

The case studies reveal that maintaining a strong focus on employee needs was and should continue to be, an integral characteristic of the change agenda. The strong focus on employee needs was important in fostering and maintaining a high trust relationship between management, staff and unions. The case studies also highlight that

organisational innovation and change have the capacity to deliver real and tangible gains to employees. Initiatives such as Return to Learning are a practical example of how employee needs can be met while progressing a programme that also brought gains to management by enhancing organisational capacity and learning. In seeking to continue to ensure that staff and their representatives invest in the change process, it is imperative that the training and development needs of employees are kept high on the agenda of local authorities, and receive adequate levels of investment.

A commitment to enhancing organisational performance

The emergence of a strong commitment to enhancing organisational performance is part of the new shared understanding that has been forged within local authorities. The willingness unions to embrace ‘business imperatives’ and the strong focus by all stakeholders on customer needs have helped engender an organisational-wide commitment to improving and enhancing performance. Additionally, the case studies highlight a number of specific initiatives that have helped to embed a stronger performance-orientated ethos within the local authority sector. The clear commitment to measurement by management, unions and employees at every level emerged as a key dynamic in the development of agreed understandings of, and approaches to, workplace issues. The use of service performance indicators such as staff surveys and public opinion measures ensure a strong evidence-based analysis to the discussion on change, not only at the partnership table but throughout the respective organisations.

Finally, the case studies show that seeking to improve organisational performance has generated an increased commitment to shared services within the local authority sector. However, there is also evidence of opportunities to harness greater potential in terms of the capacity to engage more fully in a shared services approach at a local level between public service providers, at a regional level between different local authorities, and at a national level between local authorities, under the

auspices of agencies such as LANPAG, the Local Government Management Services Board, and the Local Government Computer Services Board. It is therefore necessary that in seeking to enhance organisational performance the initial progress in relation to shared service provision continues to be built upon.

6.5 An emerging vision of the workplace of the future

This study has afforded the opportunity to examine the dynamics of how partnership-orientated organisations have been responding innovatively to the substantial challenge of driving change and modernisation within the local authority sector.

As was demonstrated in the preceding chapters, each of the local authorities have, to a greater or lesser degree, sought to develop innovative and practical responses. In seeking to grapple with the substantial issues posed by the need to meet the demands of both internal and external stakeholders they have not only demonstrated a strong commitment to workplace change and innovation but also embodied many of the characteristics associated with the vision of the workplace of the future.

Table 6.1 outlines a series of practical and innovative examples for the case studies which illustrate the attributes of the future workplace.

The evidence of these characteristics across the four case studies highlights that the process of building the workplace of the future is already underway. This foundation, however, has to be reinforced and in this regard there is a need for a concerted effort by management, employees and unions within the local authority sector to continue their investment of time and resources to the challenges of workplace innovation.

TABLE 6.1 The workplace of the future – examples from case studies

Characteristics		Case study example
<p>All parts of the organisation and all employees are committed to the need for change and new ideas. Change is embraced willingly and all employees are constantly alert to opportunities for improvement and innovation.</p>	<p>Agile</p>	<p>Wexford County Council demonstrates its willingness and capacity to enter a new organisational model with the adoption of a PPP project.</p> <p>Donegal and Meath County Councils demonstrate the way in which radical restructuring of the organisation led to service decentralisation, and to more appropriate management structures. Local area offices are configured to interact with the Local Area Committee, the public and other service providers in a ground-breaking model for local government.</p>
<p>All decisions are informed primarily by a customer, client or citizen viewpoint, and all employees understand the impact of their work on the end-user of their organisation's product or service</p>	<p>Customer-centred</p>	<p>The case studies from Meath, South Dublin and Donegal each highlight innovative approaches to a customer-oriented organisation. The provision of customer service centres, one-stop shops and public service centres are variations on the concept that the local authority should endeavour to make the customer experience as good as possible, with as many queries as possible being dealt with fully at the customer's first point of contact. This process also encourages the customisation of service provision as in the case of Donegal piloting bi-lingual service provision in Gaeltacht areas.</p> <p>Workplace partnership committees have played a key role in improving the customer service ethos of organisations through, for example, the development of Customer Service Charters.</p>
<p>The organisation and its people recognise that the knowledge content of all jobs is important to the organisation's performance and that the knowledge required for all jobs will change and adapt regardless of the nature of the work</p>	<p>Knowledge intensive</p>	<p>In all cases, management were proactive in seeking the views of staff at an early stage in the planning process. The involvement of the workplace partnership mechanism was central in facilitating these exercises.</p> <p>Case and customer contact management technologies have provided essential support to the decentralisation programmes in Donegal and Meath.</p> <p>In South Dublin, rapid access to information is a feature of delivering high quality customer service. Reporting systems are becoming increasingly sophisticated, allowing local authorities to monitor trends on a range of performance indicators.</p>

TABLE 6.1 The workplace of the future – examples from case studies *continued*

Characteristics		Case study example
<p>The organisation is alert to the needs and concerns of employees, and understands the importance of quality of working life for employees as individuals as well as for the overall well being of the organisation.</p>	<p>Responsive to employee needs</p>	<p>Across more than 20 local authorities, including those profiled here, workplace partnership committees have undertaken extensive surveys of the views of staff, including identifying their key concerns and training needs. This review process lends empirical evidence to the development agendas of management, unions and the workplace partnership committees.</p> <p>Being responsive to the needs of employees moreover does not function as a constraint on organisational change and innovation. In Wexford, for example, the introduction of a new public private partnership model of service delivery for water metering was facilitated by a process of employee information and consultation. Additionally the innovative solution that was finally adopted met not only organisational concerns in relation to service delivery but also clearly accommodated the needs of both employees and their representatives.</p>
<p>The organisation and its people appreciate the need for external collaboration with business partners and suppliers, customers and research and educational institutions. The organisation is constantly alert to the possibilities associated with collaboration, networking and clustering of activities.</p>	<p>Networked</p>	<p>Donegal County Council provides an excellent example of a networked organisation. In terms of its Public Service Centre model, there is ongoing development of the benefits achieved from networking with other public service providers.</p> <p>In terms of internal networks, physical decentralisation of service provision is backed up by a well-networked management structure, involving Local Area Office managers, Divisional managers, and Directors of Service networking in relation to service provision and area issues</p> <p>Donegal and other local authorities such as Meath County Council have taken a lead role in driving forward the delivery of better-integrated public services. Their role on City and County Development Boards gives them for example significant scope to achieve a level of strategic coordination with other service providers, and with the business and community and voluntary sectors.</p>

TABLE 6.1 The workplace of the future – examples from case studies *continued*

Characteristics		Case study example
<p>The organisation is structured around a high performance ethos. High performance is actively encouraged and rewarded at all levels. There is a constant focus on opportunities for improvement and a bias towards implementation.</p>	<p>Highly productive</p>	<p>The Department of Environment and Local Government has published service indicators for local authorities, who are required to implement a systematic measurement process to monitor standards and trends across a range of indicators.</p> <p>Arising from the public service benchmarking provisions in <i>Sustaining Progress</i>, local authorities have committed to an extensive change agenda, progress on which is reported to the Local Government Performance Verification Group. LANPAG and the individual workplace partnership committees are centrally involved in reporting to this Group.</p> <p>Donegal and South Dublin are just two examples of local authorities that are systematically engaged in continuous improvement of processes. Much of this is made possible by the engagement of a partnership committee, accurate measures provided by information management systems, and the fact that senior management is now better organised to focus on strategic organisational issues.</p>
<p>The organisation values and actively seeks involvement and participation by all employees. The culture, management systems and work processes are all designed to enable employees to become deeply involved in the search for sources of higher performance and innovation.</p>	<p>Involved and participatory</p>	<p>Across all local authorities profiled in this study, workplace partnership has been a feature of internal management-union relations for over five years. In particular, workplace partnership has played a central role in ensuring that the planning and negotiation of significant change has happened smoothly and effectively. Even where significant change initiatives were instigated prior to the establishment of formal partnership structures, there was a very clear partnership-style approach adopted by management and unions.</p> <p>Donegal and Meath both illustrate for example the significant benefits to be derived from proactively engaging with employees at an early stage in relation to significant change issues.</p> <p>In South Dublin, an interactive intranet facility where any staff member can ask questions of senior management and expect a speedy response, highlights another innovative approach to involving employees in the affairs of the organisation.</p>

TABLE 6.1 The workplace of the future – examples from case studies *continued*

Characteristics		Case study example
<p>The organisation understands the value of diversity in terms of business benefits and employee well being. Diversity is approached as an integral part of the organisation's culture and management.</p>	<p>Proactively diverse</p>	<p>One of the key roles of the LGMSB is to provide support to local authorities on human resource management issues. Proactive policies and guidelines have been developed by the LGMSB in conjunction with the local authorities, on issues including equality and diversity. These policies have been implemented in individual local authorities with the support of workplace partnership committees.</p>
<p>Learning and experimentation are encouraged and there is an ongoing focus on training, skills and learning to increase the skill content in all work.</p>	<p>Continually learning</p>	<p>The Return to Learning Initiative in particular illustrates an acclaimed approach by the organisation to the development of skills and personal confidence among its workforce.</p> <p>The commitment by local authorities to make ECDL-level IT training available to their staff is another example of the recognition of the value of learning in the organisations.</p>

6.6 Conclusion

The case studies present evidence of the good practice that is taking place across several local authorities in relation to driving organisational change and innovation. The issues highlighted reflect the current concerns of a sector that must rise to the challenge of responding to and extending its relevance to a wide range of stakeholders. These case studies, however, represent only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the potential capacity of management, employees and their representatives to work together to find new ways to deliver high quality customised services. While the full potential of workplace partnership has yet to be harnessed in many local authorities, there is no doubt that the involvement and participation by employees and their representatives in the planning and implementation of workplace change is and will remain central to the future success of local authorities.

A key challenge will be for management and unions to give adequate leadership, resources and support to workplace partnership and to test its capabilities by engaging it in the handling of more strategic issues. The recent publication by LANPAG of the document *Handling Significant Change through Partnership* is an important resource to those engaged in workplace partnership across the local authority sector.

What is clearly evident from this report is that partnership works best not when it exists as a series of stand-alone projects, but rather when it becomes an integral part of the culture of the organisation. This is the point at which significant and strategic innovation can best be devised and implemented successfully.

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The National Centre for Partnership and Performance was established by the Government in June 2001 to support and facilitate change through partnership in the Irish workplace.

The Centre's mission is to:

- Support and facilitate Irish organisations in the private and public sectors, to respond to change and to build capability through partnership
- Bring about improved performance and mutual gains
- Contribute to national competitiveness, better public services, higher living standards and a better quality of work life
- Develop a vision for the workplace of the future.