

Case Study – Essex County Council

We are indebted to the Human Resources Department of Essex County Council, who have kindly provided the following briefing on the development of their new pay system.

Project

Essex County Council has been going through radical change. Some of that change has been structural but the more important aspect of the change is cultural. We are seeking to move the organisation to a much more customer focused and facing organisation. One of the mechanisms to support this move has been our approach to pay strategy. We also wanted to implement the Single Status Agreement, which removes the employment conditions divide between some of our staff.

The Agreement, and therefore the approach described in this paper, affects 9,000 of our staff. The cornerstone of our approach was to develop the Essex Competency Framework. This has been designed to set out the skills and abilities (in a way that can be measured) that our staff need to deliver best quality services for the Council. We then sought to incorporate this into our individual performance management system. This formed the foundation on which we could build our new approach. The principles of the approach were that:

- it needed to be simple and consistent
- a member of staff meeting the objectives of their job and their competency statements should expect pay progression
- it should fit with the service planning cycle
- development opportunities should be available, and
- staff at their maximum pay point should be subject to performance review and competency development in the same way so that further development opportunities could be explored

The new system for this group of staff moves away from automatic service based increments, although it still uses the national pay spine up to point thirty-four. It is based on four broad band grades that have been determined by using the National Job Evaluation Scheme. Within each band the first increment is automatic, thereafter performance is assessed against delivery of objectives, i.e. what needs to be delivered, and the demonstration of competencies (i.e. how it needs to be delivered). Objectives come from the job profile for the individual and the service objectives for the service area.

Around six objectives are required for each job and they need to be constructed so that they are easily measurable. Guidance and training is available for managers and staff on how to do this effectively. The objectives are set out at the beginning of each review year in an agreed format and they can be reviewed and amended if things change. In addition, statements from the appropriate four Competency Headings from the Competency Framework are used plus the Technical Professional Competency.

A statement from the Competency Framework sets out what needs to be demonstrated by the individual in their role. An example of a statement is "seeks regular feedback from customers about services provided and uses this to recommend continuous improvements to the service". This statement comes under the Competency Heading 2 "Customer/Client Orientation" and is the appropriate statement for spinal column point 22. Each of the generic competencies has a defined and prescribed statement for every spinal column point. A few of the statements remain the same at all spinal column points; for example, those around equality and diversity, but most become more demanding the higher the spinal column point.

The selection of the Competency Headings from the Essex Competency Framework may be used for individual posts if there are not any similar ones. However, job families have some commonly agreed Competency Headings which are spread across the organisation to ensure that we have consistent levels of service delivery for that function. There is also a Competency Heading entitled Professional and Technical so that job specific competencies are included e.g. social workers. In this way the Competency Framework is flexible enough to cover and be used for all jobs and roles within the Council including the Member role.

For jobs above spinal column point thirty-four and for Members, the Competency Framework is used in a different way. For every year that the group of staff are covered by this scheme, the manager will identify the spinal column point for their members of staff as at the first of April. A database will produce all of the appropriate statements under the selected Competency Heading for that spinal column point. These will be recorded on the appropriate form for the individual together with their agreed objectives for the year. The professional technical statements are not prescribed because they relate directly to the area of work and the manager will draft these with the individual, although there is general guidance in place to assist the process.

Individuals need to demonstrate the level of competency attached to their spinal column point within their broad band grade as well as delivering their objectives before they are able to access their increment. The assessment process is straightforward and is carried out by the line manager and verified by their line manager. The individual is required to note down how they have achieved their objectives and how they have demonstrated their competencies during the review year. The manager will review the form at regular management meetings. At the half year stage there will be a more in depth discussion to ascertain whether there are any development requirements. At the end of the year there will be a formal meeting between the manager and the individual where performance is reviewed and a decision is taken on whether the individual has delivered on their objectives and has demonstrated their required competency statements.

In order to support the process there is a Staff Development Programme in place, which covers all of the Competency Headings in the Framework. Therefore if an individual needs help to achieve a certain level of competency then that support is available. This means that the organisation can continuously improve and at the same time develop its staff. It is important that any such scheme supports the desired culture and is in line with what the organisation is seeking to achieve. Essex wanted to move from a time served system to a system that was rewarding what was important to the organisation i.e. delivering best possible service. The system was designed to do that. In addition it is important that a holistic approach is taken. At Essex people are recruited, performance managed and developed against the same standard; in this case a Competency Framework. In order to support such a radical change it was important that the appropriate information, communication and support was available to both staff and managers. A great deal of effort was put into this in order that the scheme could be applied effectively.