

**Guidance for school authorities on handling communication
for public private partnership projects**
NOVEMBER 2001 (REVISED APRIL 2002)

Why consult or inform?

1. *Consultation* is a means of gathering information from those directly affected or involved in projects and is the only way for the Department of Education (referred to throughout this document as the "Department") and School Authorities to ensure that the projects are user focused, various needs are met and a better service delivered. *Sharing information* will provide those with no direct input to projects with a better understanding of what is happening and make them aware of any implications for them.

2. *The main benefits of communication in this way are:* -

- Many School Authorities have had little or no previous experience of PPP projects in their areas so it will help deal with the many different levels of understanding of what PPP actually is, and will provide an opportunity to deal with any concerns and uncertainties they have;
- Training for those involved in projects can be quickly identified and action undertaken to address needs at an early stage;
- It will help in the planning of the projects and the prioritisation of work;
- It will create a better working partnership with all of those involved if everyone is kept informed about what is happening;
- Problems can be quickly identified and dealt with; and
- It shows a commitment by the Department and School Authorities to be open and transparent.

3. In undertaking these forms of communication on the projects, people's expectations can be better managed and

fears or concerns that they may have in respect of PPP allayed. People's involvement from the start may also help achieve greater ownership for each project and encourage better participation. It is very important, however, there is an awareness that there will be matters that will be commercial in confidence and therefore not open to disclosure.

Making communication work

4. Having established the importance of communication and the need to consult or inform, it is now necessary to look at ways of making it work.

Consultation

5. It is important to respond to what is learned through consultation and to make changes where possible. Failure to do so will make people become cynical and unwilling to be involved in future consultation. It is therefore necessary to plan consultation and monitor its effectiveness. In order to achieve success it is important to take the following on board: -

Integrate

It was clear from the consultation meetings held by the Department's PPP Unit on '*The Information Memorandum on the Private Finance Initiative in Schools*' (this document can be viewed on the Department's website www.deni.gov.uk) that consultation should be ongoing and become a continuous process throughout the projects. It is therefore important to develop this and enter into a real partnership with those involved.

Consult Early

Where possible, people who clearly have an input to make, should be involved at an early stage in the planning process because once started it will be much more difficult to stop or change things if needed. Bringing them in at a later stage may delay a project as they will not be up to speed on what is happening and this may result in going over ground already covered and agreed.

Targets

It is useful to set targets for consultation during the various stages of the projects, providing that they are realistic, and the process can be managed. This is also a good way of keeping track of what has, or needs to be, done, and

when.

Evaluate

It is important to have a system to evaluate the effectiveness of the consultation so that it can be revised as necessary and used for future PPP projects.

Clarity

It is necessary to set out what is wanted, outline the reasons why and make this clear to those being consulted. It is also important to be clear on areas outside the consultation process, for example, statutory limitations.

Feedback

Both positive and negative feedback should be welcomed and feedback on any changes made as a result of consultation.

Information

6. PPP is complex and new to many people and in particular those who are not key stakeholders. It will therefore be important to take the following on board in respect of this group: -

Clarity

Information should be clear, concise and restricted to the basic facts that will be of interest to this particular audience.

Feedback

Questions should be encouraged and if possible an opportunity provided for these to be asked on a one to one basis.

Timing

It will be important to report to this group as soon as it is possible and identify and agree the appropriate stages

when this should take place.

Who to consult/inform and why?

7. It is relatively easy to identify the key stakeholders in PPP projects. Some of those involved will be the owners and drivers of the projects and will be directly and actively involved throughout the process. Some will be the end users. They are as follows: -

Key Stakeholders

The Education and Library Boards - contracting authorities for the controlled schools identified in their areas and therefore the owners of the projects. They also have responsibility for maintenance in voluntary maintained schools, for providing initial furniture and equipment in those schools and meeting their running costs under Local Management Scheme (LMS) arrangements. The boards are also responsible for the school meals service in maintained schools. The service aspect will therefore have a direct impact on what the boards currently provide.

Trustees of Dioceses - contracting authority for the voluntary maintained schools identified in their area and therefore the owners of the projects.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools - responsibility for school provision in the Catholic Maintained sector.

Boards of Governors - their functions are to manage schools and consist of church representatives and representatives of parents, teachers and Education and Library Boards. They manage the LMS budget in the schools to which they are appointed. PPP will therefore have an impact on how they manage this, as money from their LMS budget will be earmarked as a contribution towards the unitary payment made to the PPP operator in return for the services provided.

Planning Service and Roads Service - these Departments should be made aware of projects at the start in order to ascertain if they have programmed or have long term plans for any schemes in the area of the schools, which may directly impact on the projects. It is important to keep them up to-date on the progress of the projects and keep them advised of developments. By doing this, delays at later stages may be avoided.

Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA) - as soon as surplus land is identified in any project, the VLA should be informed, and its opinion sought on the valuation in order to ensure the smooth progress of a project. This is particularly relevant in maintained school projects where vesting or de-vesting of lands may be required.

Principals and Senior Staff in schools - it will be important to make them aware of what is happening and involve them in some of the stages i.e. design, furniture and equipment and operation of the new school as they will have an input in these areas.

Trade Unions and Teacher Unions - at consultation meetings the Department had with representatives of the various unions a request was made for proper consultation mechanisms to be developed to include them as early as the pre-planning stage in any proposed development process. They expect their rights to consultation to be equal to that afforded to other stakeholders and to have the right to receive and comment on a number of documents relating to PPP projects.

It would be impracticable to copy every document to them due to the sheer volume of documentation, commercial confidentiality and tight timescale. In addition, the subject of the documentation will often be inappropriate to the unions, particularly in the case of the Teacher Unions whose members will not be affected by PPP. The importance of keeping them up to date on developments should be recognised by School Authorities who should ensure that communication is ongoing with them.

The Private Sector - it will be important to make the private sector aware of the educational needs of a project.

Other Interested Bodies

8. In addition to key stakeholders, there are others who will have an interest or may be affected by the projects and whose views need to be taken into account. These are as follows: -

Teaching Staff - it will be important to keep teaching staff in the school informed of what is happening and the impact on them. This will be good for morale, particularly as many will have been working in poor accommodation for a number of years.

Ancillary Staff - until each project is scoped, it will not be clear how these staff will be affected. It will be very important to make them aware of PPP and manage their expectations and, if possible, allay their fears.

Parents - parents may be aware of the announcement concerning the school their child/children attends or will attend in the future. PPP will be new to them and they may be interested to know what the scheme in the school will be i.e. extension or re-build, if there will be any disruption in their child's education during construction and when work on the project will be completed.

The Local Community - in some of the projects there may be surplus land which, if sold, to the private sector may be developed e.g. into housing and this will obviously have some impact on the local community. Even if this is not the case, it is important to make the local community aware of what is happening and perhaps motivate them to take an interest in the project in their area, which may be used by the community after school hours.

Voluntary Groups - this group may have an interest in the third party use of school premises under PPP and it may be useful to make them aware of this possibility, particularly as income generated will be shared by the PPP operator with the school.

Pupils - while pupils will have no direct input to make, there may be some gain in making them aware of the project for their school, as there will be some disruption. They may be interested, at design stage, in what is being proposed and take an interest in the new or refurbished school. This may be beneficial when the work is actually completed and the school is operational.

Note:

This list should not be taken as exhaustive and it is the responsibility of individual School Authorities to ensure they communicate with all relevant stakeholders when taking forward PPP projects.

In order to take this process forward a pro-forma is attached at *Appendix A* for a Project Communication Plan and a pro-forma at *Appendix B* for a Yearly Communication Plan.

Methods of communication:

9. This could be undertaken using the following methods:

Consultation*Meetings/ Written Communication*

10. In this particular instance, consultation can mainly be conducted through meetings and on some occasions via written communication.

Pros

- Meetings are relatively easy to arrange and can provide an opportunity to resolve matters on the spot.
- Written communication can ensure that matters are clarified and easily understood.

Cons

- If people attending the meetings have no mandate to take decisions the process can be delayed.
- Can take up a lot of time that could be spent on undertaking work for the Project.
- If too many people involved these can be lengthy and very little achieved.

Cost

- Relatively cheap.

Audience

- Key stakeholders.

Visual

11. A short video on PPP in NI Schools has been prepared by the Department. This can be borrowed from the PPP Unit and used to supplement information already provided. A data room could also be set up by School Authorities providing information for the bidders such as aerial photographs of the schools, existing plans or sketches etc.

Pros

- A video such as this will be easily understood by anyone and can be used time and time again.
- School Principals could show the video to their staff.
- This video can be up-dated by the Department in the future as projects are completed.

Cons

- May be difficult to find a spare room to set up a data room.
- A member of staff will need to accompany any visitors to the data room.

Audience

- The video will be suitable for anyone but the data room will be particularly useful for the private sector.

Information sharing

Local Open/Public Meeting

12. This would provide awareness of local public opinion on PPP, any issues/concerns they have with it and an opportunity for School Authorities to inform them as to what it is all about and how it might affect them.

Pros

- Provides local opportunities for people to comment on matters that affect them directly or indirectly.
- Offers a convenient and transparent way to demonstrate public consultation and to build up good relationships.
- Can be used to inform the public at the same time as getting views.

Cons

- People who attend are unlikely to be representative of the local population.
- Attendees' ability to contribute to a discussion about PPP will be limited by a lack of knowledge and possible lack of interest.
- Contributions will mainly be about local, topical or personal concerns.

Cost

- Relatively cheap, depending on how it is done. For bundled projects it might be preferable to have meetings located centrally for those involved, rather than having to hold a meeting in each school as the latter would take up a considerable amount of time and in the end may not be attended that well.

Audience

- This would be a suitable means for establishing contact with the local community and could incorporate parents and local voluntary groups.

Open days/meetings

13. These can be informal occasions when users can find out what PPP is about, meet staff, ask questions etc. Or they can be more structured, with formal presentations and discussions. They are useful methods for informing audiences who are relatively unfamiliar with PPP.

Pros

- Can provide some flexibility of when to attend.
- Arouses interest by giving people something to see or do.
- Provides ad-hoc feedback and ideas for change.
- Can be a source of suggestions and comments.
- Gives users a chance to meet School Authority officials and/or Departmental representatives involved, so promoting good relations.
- Provides an easy way to publicise PPP and provide information to users.
- Can help contact future users.
- Provides quick feedback.

Cons

- People who attend may not be particularly representative of users and non-users.
- Feedback may be limited to responses to the information

presented /displayed.

- May get low responses for such a complex topic.

Costs

- This will vary depending on which option is chosen. An open day could be cheap, an exhibition expensive.

Audience

- Teaching staff, ancillary staff, parents, voluntary groups and the local community.

Cascading Information

14. The Principals of the schools, through their regular staff meetings, could pass on information to staff on PPP in respect of their particular school project. If it was felt necessary, the Department, as a follow on to this could give a short presentation to staff and answer any questions. They may however only have a real interest when a design is agreed and the timetable established.

Schools could also use a school news-sheet or letter initially to inform parents that the school's capital building project will be going forward under PPP and further information will be provided as the project progresses.

Pros

- A quick and easy way to pass on information.

Cons

- Information passed on may not be accurate and Principals may not be able to answer some of the questions being put to them.

Cost

Staff time.

Audience

Teaching staff and parents.

Information Technology

15. The use of Internet is growing fast and many people will have access. The Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) PPP Units each have a website, as will have some schools. It would be useful to put some information on this as another way of publishing the projects and reporting on their progress providing it is kept up to date.

Pros

- Relatively cheap.
- Information can be quickly up-dated and amended.
- Information can be spread more widely.

Cons

- Limited access and at the moment will not reach most people and will never reach everyone.

- Needs expert layout.
- Technical problems may be experienced.
- Must be up-dated regularly.

Cost

- Staff time setting up web page and keeping up to-date.

Audience

- Anyone with Internet access.