PRINCE2®
Programme Management

Voluntary Action Group

› **USING MSP®
FOR A PARENTAL
CAMPAIGN
PROGRAMME**

PeopleCert

1. INTRODUCTION

> "The vision was 'more local secondary school places for local children'."
>
> **Mark Sutton,** Founding Director, Reach Learning Ltd

Adapted from an MSP® Advanced Practitioner dissertation.

The WD3 School Action Group was a parental campaign programme set up using the MSP® framework to achieve its outcomes and benefits. The vision was 'more local secondary school places for local children'. The programme was primarily focused on improving the south of South-West Hertfordshire school district (Rickmansworth, Mill End, Maple Cross, Chorleywood, Croxley Green and Sarratt). This area covered 14 primary schools in this region (with a current student population of about 3,000 children).

When we closed the programme, we successfully announced:

› the opening of The Reach Free School (the first new secondary school in the district for 35 years)

› lobbying the Local Education Authority

› successfully lobbying the Local Planning Authority

› a new permanent home for Croxley Danes Free School in Croxley Green, moving from its currently temporary location in Watford. Decided by Danes Educational Trust.

2. CONTEXT

I had attended a public meeting discussing the difficulties local families had experienced when their child applied for their secondary school. It became clear that, unless action was initiated swiftly, I would find it very hard to get my children into their chosen local secondary school.

To resolve this problem, several parents with children in local primary schools joined me in setting up the WD3 School Action Group. This voluntary sector venture has adopted aspects of MSP to manage its efforts to collaborate with the Local Education Authority (LEA – Hertfordshire County Council), Local Planning Authority (LPA – Three Rivers District Council) and Department for Education (DfE).

Four different drivers assisted us in initiating our change programme:

› There has been increased development in local transport. This has led to considerable inward migration and pressure upon infrastructure.

› The LEA published its assessment of future school requirements and predicted a shortfall of 51 secondary school places in South-West Hertfordshire by 2012/2013 (259 places by 2020/2021).

› The Conservative party's announcement permitting groups of parents and teachers to establish 'Free Schools'.

› A legal judgement determining that school applications by children across LEA borders must be treated equally to those made by children living within the LEA borders.

Since LEA offers automatic entry to siblings and many of our good local secondary schools border Buckinghamshire LEA which demands each child apply to its schools on their own merits, Buckinghamshire children successfully apply to and deny Hertfordshire children entry to Hertfordshire schools.

The WD3 School Action Group committee comprised of six parents of impacted children. All but two members had jobs working full-time in a mix of public and private sector organizations. Therefore, many of us could only commit on a part-time basis. Of the committee members, I was the only one with any experience of working on a major programme or qualified to manage programmes using MSP.

3. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SUITABLE PROGRAMME DEFINITION ARRANGEMENTS

In establishing the right governance for the definition process and subsequent programme, I had to consider the following factors:

❯ I was the only committee member with formal programme management experience.

❯ The committee comprised of volunteers who committed as much as they could, with parents happy to help with one-off events (e.g. arranging, setting up/taking down, and officiating at public meetings).

❯ Two of the committee members were marketing and public relations professionals (they engaged with stakeholders for a living).

❯ There was no formal business entity and associated corporate governance or funding. People participated because they were emotionally invested in the cause.

❯ Funds came from two different sources:

  • Programme management costs (a couple of hundred pounds in total) were covered by contributions made by parents. These usually were offered at public meetings to support a specific programme need (e.g. to photocopy public consultation reply forms for all attendees to take, complete and send to the relevant council).

  • Capability provision and transition costs would be covered by local government and the DfE for LEA-supervised and 'Free Schools'.

❯ The LEA, LPA and DfE positions were predictable and the stakeholder base (mix of public sector organizations, education charity, parents, and community groups) was relatively unambiguous in this community.

❯ My previous experience of working on volunteer initiatives had shown me that asking such people to operate within tight structures tended to demotivate rather than empower them. A less formal approach allied with the opportunity to socialize and express common feelings of ownership, interest and frustrations, encourages further involvement.

  • A church evangelism projects, running a community church, leading a church group for people with learning disabilities.

As Chair of the committee, I determined that a generally light approach to MSP (observing the 7 MSP principles) was most suitable for our programme.

This resulted in the completion of many of the MSP process actions of programme definition. However, given the participants, it was a strength that this happened in a less formal manner. Examples of how we tailored MSP to fit with the specific programme included:

❭ information about the programme's vision, benefits, risks, issues, costs and timescales were presented in a slide presentation at the group's first two public meetings to explain what the programme sought to achieve. This presentation formed the programme brief.

❭ combining the Sponsoring Group and Programme Board roles into the work of the committee to reflect a more informal governance.

Even so, because of the voluntary nature of the programme, there were aspects of MSP that were more consciously established than others. To obtain the support of local parents during the programme, we applied the concepts of the leadership and stakeholder engagement, vision and blueprint themes.

> "We identified and analysed the major stakeholder groups, determining which messages and communication channels were best for securing their commitment."
>
> **Mark Sutton,** Founding Director, Reach Learning Ltd

We identified and analysed the major stakeholder groups, determining which messages and communication channels were best for securing their commitment. As parents, we knew the value of parent email, children's book bags and secured schools' permission to send messages home to parents. We found that ongoing email, telephone and face-to-face dialogue with the LEA councillor responsible for schools and the lead LPA councillor was necessary to remind these key stakeholders of our concerns and build a relationship of respect. Minutes of committee meetings were posted on the programme's blog site so that primary school teachers were kept informed.

> "Rather than record our stakeholder information in stakeholder profiles, we always discussed at monthly committee meetings our perception of the present stakeholder position and what we needed to do to achieve our target."
>
> **Mark Sutton,** Founding Director, Reach Learning Ltd

We determined that community magazines and public meetings in local community centres or schools were an efficient channel for when seeking external contribution to an important milestone (e.g. replying to a LEA or LPA consultation). Rather than record our stakeholder information in stakeholder profiles, we always discussed at monthly committee meetings our perception of the present stakeholder position and what we needed to do to achieve our target.

Conversations at school gates, political party statements made in community magazines, leaflets mailed through our doors, and comments posted on our Facebook page provided feedback about the effectiveness of our communications in terms of how well our messages were understood. Royal Mail change programmes had shown me that feedback about important concerns or queries often only happened when the stakeholder felt comfortable; this was why the socially relaxed milieu of Facebook was a successful feedback mechanism.

> "Drawing on MSP principles, I suggested to committee members a programme vision statement. This was finalized as 'more local secondary school places for local children'."
>
> **Mark Sutton,** Founding Director, Reach Learning Ltd

However, in talking to various stakeholders late into the definition phase, it eventually became clear that to get our message across more effectively, we needed a punchier statement of our intent than that provided in our programme brief slide pack (observing the 'envisioning and communicating a better future' principle). Drawing on MSP principles, I suggested to committee members a programme vision statement. This was finalized as 'more local secondary school places for local children'. Helping committee members to distinguish this from the blueprint proved very helpful; we were able to clearly explain our end goal despite the ambiguity surrounding the capabilities to deliver it. It would have increased early local parent commitment to the programme if this aspect of definition had been pre-established.

Helping the committee to understand the realization of the programme's end goal via a blueprint comprising two intermediate states proved effective when defining what the programme was going to do.

Although, again, avoiding MSP terminology because of the committee-member audience, everyone appreciated that there would be three tranches:

❯ Tranche One showed an understanding of what was possible – to establish a new non-selective 'Free School' operated by a consortium of local teachers and parents.

❯ Tranche Two saw the establishment of this first new 'Free School' in the southern area of South West Hertfordshire. The two most active programme team-members, Carolyn Venn and I, became Governors of this new school, with Carolyn taking up the role of Chair of Governors. This tranche also consisted of the introduction of an improved Hertfordshire LEA secondary school application process, revised so that it more favourably aligned with that used by surrounding LEAs.

❯ Tranche Three saw the establishment of a second new 'Free School' at the northern end of our programme boundary.

Discussions with the LEA and the education charity New Schools Network helped to provide the detail around what could be included in the Processes, Organization, Technology and Information (POTI) sections of these different future states (observing the 'designing and delivering a coherent capability' principle), and from where requisite funds would come. This information was not available when defining the programme, and so its collection was the substance of some of the early projects planned for Tranche One. Thus, the blueprint and resource management strategy were being updated as the programme projects were completed.

4. THE USE OF MSP IN PROGRAMME DEFINITION

The committee was clearly the Sponsoring Group – the parents that comprised this team recognized that they would be significantly impacted by the programme. Each declared their interest in the programme and the role to which they would like to commit their time and resources. As the committee's Chair, I was seen by my peers as the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO). Previous experience was invaluable. It was important to distinguish those on the committee that promised to deliver from those that made but failed to fulfil promises. Because I had no previous contact with my fellow committee members, this discernment sometimes only came from hard experience. One committee-member was keen to participate, but this enthusiasm did not translate into action on tasks volunteered for.

This reminded me that MSP emphasizes the need to apply its stakeholder engagement process to the governance stakeholder category. I became more mindful of the need to thoroughly analyse programme team members (e.g. by talking to mutual acquaintances) before determining their usefulness to the programme.

The committee confirmed that several information sources (resulting from discussions and meetings with the parents of secondary school students, the LEA and LPA) articulated the mandate for the programme:

❯ Year-on-year (LEA published) history of parents in the South West Hertfordshire school district struggling to find their child a suitable secondary school.

❯ The LEA prediction of school-place shortfall.

❯ The views expressed by pressure groups in other regions of our school district and beyond.

Taking the MSP view of this as a programme mandate helped in compiling later arguments and arrangements for the programme (e.g. the slide pack programme brief, vision, and blueprint).

One particularly useful aspect of MSP for defining the programme was its focus on the leadership qualities needed by the SRO. By communicating the disadvantages of the 'do nothing' option and what could be achieved in the future, I helped to foster the community's belief in the need for change (observing the 'leading change' principle).

After a public meeting that promoted our programme work, we had offers from parents to join the committee. At the first subsequent committee meeting, we debated what roles people would undertake or continue, and the team reiterated its desire for me to remain as SRO because the public meeting had shown my ability to influence by communicating effectively in face-to-face and public meeting situations.

One area of the programme that yielded mixed results was information management. We adopted an easy and effective approach: document name and version 1, version 2. However, four factors meant that I did not adequately consider our wider strategy for information management during programme planning:

❯ Since an MSP-light approach was adopted, I did not seek to introduce significant information management procedures.

❯ I am, by nature, a technophobe and switch off when others get passionate about this topic.

❯ My awareness that many of the impacted families in our community did not have access to the internet due to lack of money or education.

❯ My understanding that we needed to exploit 'push' (sent to the stakeholder) rather than 'pull' (stakeholder must find and download it) communication channels during the early processes of our programme.

Nevertheless, the committee continued to keep the blog site (now defunct) and private Facebook page because we recognized that they brought early benefits and credibility to the programme. We were able to point the DfE to the following:

❯ Number of Facebook group members as evidence of parental support.

❯ Programme's mandate and definition on the blog site as part of our application to set up a 'Free School'.

The Facebook page proved important in our stakeholder engagement during the programme. The programme was brought to the attention of teachers that wished to collaborate with us to set up and operate the 'Free School' as a result of a local parent hearing of the programme on the Facebook page. This resulted in a revised programme definition - we no longer needed to commission a project to seek out teaching experts to partner with us in our bid to apply to the DfE to set up a 'Free School'.

At our regular committee meetings, we allocated time to considering the changing programme context. This encouraged committee members to report relevant changes to council or government policy. The result was an informal, effective approach to the MSP risk management process step of identifying (and monitoring) the programme's context (observing the 'remaining aligned with corporate strategy' principle). It was this method that saw a committee member highlight a proposed LEA policy change early in the programme. Due to economic pressures (cause), the LEA proposed cutting back school transport funding (event) which would result in parents having to pay for their children to travel to distant secondary schools to which their children gained access (effect).

This provided another programme claim to a benefit: a new local secondary school targeting local students would negate the need for parents to pay for travel to a distant school (observing the 'focusing on benefits and threats to them' principle). Although we had talked about benefits during programme definition, we had not recorded the outputs from these conversations in a formal benefits map, benefits profiles and stakeholder benefits-distribution matrix of the programme's benefits (or its dis-benefits – such as the impact of a school site on green belt) to help us better sell the programme to the community. In this specific case, a benefit profile defining a tangible expected cashable benefit might have made stakeholder engagement during tranche one easier.

5. INTERACTION WITH THE WIDER ORGANIZATION

The March 2009 meeting that triggered the founding of the WD3 School Action Group took place in Croxley Green at the north of the programme boundary. Most parents attending were from Croxley Green, and some had set up an action group before our own group was born.

> "Our stakeholder analysis demonstrated that it was mostly run by retired professionals."
>
> **Mark Sutton,** Founding Director, Reach Learning Ltd

Unfortunately, having realized that they were not going to swiftly change the LEA applications policy, the Croxley Green group died. Since we had adopted the MSP approach to continually scan the programme's environment for issues and risks, we had monitored the group's progress and gauged that there was more awareness of school shortfall problems in Croxley Green as a result of its efforts. Thus, although not originally within the boundary of our programme planning, we later added Croxley Green to the scope of the programme upon the group's demise.

We quickly identified during the programme that one stakeholder was the Rickmansworth Residents Association. Our stakeholder analysis demonstrated that it was mostly run by retired professionals. Although some of the Association's committee had grandchildren and understood worries about schools, some did not and were aware of the need to represent the wider community (e.g. worry about public transport links to any new school on over-congested roads sometimes affected by overspill from a disrupted M25). To influence and develop an understanding of this stakeholder's thoughts about local school development, our other most active member of the programme team, Carolyn Venn, joined its committee. This opened further programme communication channels (Association meetings and quarterly news-letters), and an ability to partly shape Association responses to council consultations.

At one public meeting, it became clear that a school action group had been formed and active for a year in Sarratt, a local village. One of the group's founders offered to participate in and act as liaison with our programme. She was keen for Sarratt to be included within the programme because, as a small village, Sarratt had less available resources and recognized that the public relations expertise of our committee had resulted in achieving 'a heftier punch'. Following the difficulties experienced with the Croxley Green group, we did not want to lose this opportunity. Seeing her involvement as a Business Change Manager with a local change team helped when engaging with her. We treated her as the voice to the local Sarratt community on the behalf of the programme.

For example, she led:

〉 The Sarratt group's communication to its residents of the need for change due to the longer journey children were taking each year to their allocated school and the further predicted school place shortfall in school places.

〉 The programme's efforts to encourage Sarratt residents to reply to council consultation exercises (e.g. about possible school sites).

> "Having previously reviewed the lessons learnt from our programme's experience with the Croxley Green parents group, we were determined to engage with the Residents Association stakeholder group (observing the 'learning from experience' principle)."
>
> **Mark Sutton,** Founding Director, Reach Learning Ltd

Due to the programme's success in pressuring the LEA into seeking new secondary school sites in South-West Hertford-shire school district, the LPA proposed several school sites in Mill End and Croxley Green in a local consultation exercise (sites A to D explained and located on maps on the following page of Hertfordshire County Council's website: threerivers.gov.uk/page/herts-county-council-secondary-schools-reports). Upon seeing the size of the Croxley Green sites proposed, the Croxley Green Residents Association started a communications campaign seeking to stop what it described as an 'unneeded mega school encroaching upon its green belt'.

Having previously reviewed the lessons learnt from our programme's experience with the Croxley Green parents group, we were determined to engage with the Residents Association stakeholder group (observing the 'learning from experi-ence' principle). In past commercial dealings, I had found that discussions between peers (e.g. directors) engendered mutual respect with consequent collaboration. As a peer Residents Association committee-member, we asked the member of our programme team who was also a Rickmansworth Residents Association committee member, Carolyn Venn, to contact and discuss the issues and, in effect, develop a Croxley Green Residents Association stakeholder profile. This enabled her to effectively engage, resulting in us quality reviewing the material the Association intended to mail through each Croxley Green door and getting some of our programme's messages included. The consultation's response from Croxley Green residents was unusually high and overwhelmingly favoured the Croxley Green or Mill End sites our programme was seeking.

6. CONCLUSION

Given the nature of the programme, a scaled-down MSP approach that still observed the MSP principles (e.g. envisioning and communicating a better future) proved itself broadly successful (e.g. leadership and stakeholder engagement). How-ever, more robust consideration of the different elements of MSP during programme definition, especially its governance (e.g. benefits management and information management), might have established the programme more swiftly.

When we closed the programme, we had successfully delivered the following outcomes:

❯ Opened The Reach Free School in a temporary location in September 2013 before moving to its purpose-built £19m permanent Maple Cross home in September 2018, central to the catchment area that had suffered most from the selective school system. Ofsted has twice rated this new school 'Good'.

❯ Welcomed the Danes Educational Trust's decision to open its Croxley Danes Free School at its new, permanent home in Croxley Green in September 2020, moving from its currently temporary location in Watford.

❯ Lobbied the Local Education Authority such that it now offers every Hertfordshire child to list four school options when applying to a secondary school.

❯ Lobbied the Local Planning Authority such that it had allocated local land not only for the provision of the first two new local schools in 35 years, but also, for the first time in the district's history, built in a contingency of land provision in case of population growth (which means more demand for school places), further new schools are required.

All these outcomes mean that children and families in our local community are experiencing the following benefits:

❯ They can receive a local education.

❯ They can avoid spending money on expensive bus transport fares to and from distant schools; for some in the community this would represent a real economic hardship.

❯ They are walking to school rather than using pollution-generating transport systems.

❯ They are accessing jobs created at the new and expanded schools in the district.

❯ They have more choice when applying to schools now that the LEA prediction for its Rickmansworth district (which includes Maple Cross and Croxley Green) shows that our school district has surplus school places for its pupil population. As a result, local children will gain priority access to these places because a higher proportion of them are allocated based on proximity.

7. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARK SUTTON

Mark Sutton is a founding director of Reach Learning Ltd which set up and is running the new community secondary Reach Free School, of which he is also a community governor (see reachfreeschool.co.uk/).

He is also a director of Yireh limited, his own change management training and consultancy company.

Mark Sutton started his career working as a project team-member in the postal industry, and, as his experience grew, took on increasingly senior positions in complex and significant change initiatives at a time when that industry was introducing automation and therefore going through its greatest change in 300 years. He has been passing on his knowledge of how to apply best-practice change management thinking to his training and consulting clients for well over a decade.

DISCLAIMER