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Progress on Evaluating School Buildings in Scotland

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PROGRESS ON EVALUATING SCHOOL BUILDINGS IN SCOTLAND

In June 2004, the Scottish Executive published guidance on evaluating completed school building projects, *Building Our Future: Scotland's School Estate*, as part of the School Estate Strategy; the guidance included a case study evaluation at an Edinburgh primary school (see *PEB Exchange*, no. 53, October 2004). The Executive is continuing to support evaluation work on the school estate by recently holding a post-occupancy evaluation (POE) workshop for local authorities and soon publishing a further demonstration case study, this time at secondary level, at Braes High School.

POE workshop

The aims of the one-day post-occupancy evaluation workshop, held in June 2005, were to restate the purpose and benefits of undertaking evaluation and to promote the sharing of good practice among local authorities.

It was found that most local authorities in Scotland have conducted some form of evaluation on completed school building projects, although few are conducting comprehensive POE exercises.

While the purposes and benefits of carrying out POEs are appreciated by authorities, delegates identified pressure of time and lack of expertise as constraining factors affecting the level of POE activity to date. In some cases, reluctance by administrations to undertake a process which, by its very nature, may highlight flaws and mistakes in relatively new projects was also seen as an issue.

Accordingly, when it came to considering how to make POE a successful and mainstream activity across the school estate, delegates emphasised the importance of securing support for the process from their local politicians and chief officers, and building commitment from all participants to an open and transparent process.

With a number of post-occupancy evaluations now completed, some interesting issues have emerged from practical experience concerning participation, the need for balance and managing expectations.

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Participation

There is widespread support for engaging school users and other stakeholders in evaluation exercises. This type of approach contributes to existing policies on consultation whereby, in the context of ongoing building programmes, feedback from a POE serves both as the completion of consultation on a particular project as well as the starting point for dialogue on subsequent projects.

Another advantage of a participative approach to POE – particularly one which is not simply questionnaire-based but which engages users in discussion – is that the process itself can support wider education policies such as citizenship, inclusion and improving school-community links.

Need for balance

With wider participation also comes the need to ensure a fair and balanced assessment of the school building. Such an assessment both establishes POE as a meaningful process for all participants and allows administrations to be comfortable in sharing the outcomes widely with others.

Interestingly, primary school evaluations often result in a positive bias and secondary schools suffer from a negative bias. This highlights the need for facilitators to anticipate such outcomes and develop techniques to address these tendencies.

For example, one authority at the workshop had found that many POE participants, particularly primary pupils and parents, were initially reluctant to criticise the school building. In some cases a degree of coaxing was required to make parents comfortable enough to give their opinion on good and bad points, and younger pupils often benefited from assistance in fully articulating their views. While it is important in general to ensure facilitators adopt a neutral role, this level of participation offered a flexibility which, on balance, was definitely beneficial.

Contrastingly, in the secondary sector it was reported that a surprisingly large number of the comments from building users was negative. The extent of this bias could perhaps have been limited by better briefing and preparation for participants prior to the fieldwork. This could have helped to set parameters, promote balanced feedback, and avoid inaccurate and



irrelevant comments. For example, asking participants to nominate their three best and three worst aspects as part of the exercise is a simple but effective mechanism to achieve balance.

Managing expectations

It is necessary to clarify at the outset of a post-occupancy evaluation what scope of action is likely to be available to address the issues raised. This can assist in managing the participants' expectations thereby building general confidence in the process. An action plan which is fully achievable and covers all points raised in the evaluation should be developed as an integrated part of the exercise and included in the reporting of outcomes.

Braes High School evaluation

The demonstration post-occupancy evaluation at Braes High School in Falkirk was carried out by Chris Watson, a POE expert, in June 2005. The exercise involved "walkthrough interviews" with 55 stakeholders including pupils, staff and other school users, as well as council officials and technical staff involved in the project.

The POE was conducted five years after the school had opened, making it more difficult for users to compare and contrast the present school environment with the previous one. Consequently, a number of good aspects and features were perhaps taken for granted. (This serves as a reminder that the optimum time to carry out a POE on a new building is between one and two years after opening.)

The participants on the Braes High School exercise gave positive feedback. Almost all said the process was clear and that they understood what was expected of them. Many appreciated being asked their opinions about the building, hearing other users' views and having the opportunity to contribute to improving the design of future schools.

Stakeholders commented positively about the provision of sports facilities, the good day-lighting throughout the school, and the spacious and well-equipped classrooms. Negative aspects included the design and size of the student social area, the dining facilities and playground, and the lack of access to the sports facilities out of school hours.

Perhaps the most resounding message from the POE was one of low user confidence and satisfaction with the heating and ventilating systems throughout the building. This tends to be a common complaint in recent school building design in Scotland, and the Scottish Executive will shortly commission environmental design guidance for schools which will focus on addressing specific areas of dissatisfaction.

The POE also included a specialist sustainability component in which a group of environmental sustainability designers were invited to comment on the effects of the building on the earth. Findings indicated how quickly expectations regarding sustainable development have increased over recent years, and how even relatively recent buildings may well need to be re-examined to improve their environmental credentials. The exercise also provided a reminder that longer-term flexibility can only be assessed through evaluation as an ongoing process, and not simply a one-off event.

Sharing results

The Scottish Executive aims to establish evaluation as a regular and continuous activity so that the outcomes can complement other forms of school evaluation and inform local authorities' school estate management plans. A key element in achieving this aim is to support the sharing of information and best practice more widely amongst stakeholders. To this end the executive is publishing a report of the June workshop and the outcomes of the Braes High School POE, both of which are available at www.scotland.gov.uk/schoolestate.

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