

Suffolk County Council PRINCE2®:2009 Pilot Case Study

By Kevin Ling, Project Lead

Executive Summary

- In 2007 Suffolk County Council started a major transformation programme called 'Securing the Future' to tackle significant budget challenges
- As part of this programme a number of specialist support functions were established in April 2008, including a central Programme and Project Management (PPM) team.
- During 2008 the PPM team developed a tailored approach to project management called 'PRINCESS' (PRINCE2 'Suffolk Style').
- In September 2008 the first version of PRINCESS was launched and at the same time the PPM team joined the pilot for PRINCE2:2009.
- The PRINCE2:2009 draft has helped to provide reassurance that our approach to tailoring PRINCE2 for our organisation is sound.
- The new version will be applied to live projects and will improve the training and support we provide to board members, project teams and senior managers.

Background

Context and background of organisation

Suffolk County Council is a four star local authority, judged to be 'improving well' by the Audit Commission.

The council recognises the importance of good project management and strong communication in order to deliver better services at better value, especially in the current challenging economic climate. We are keen to create an environment where individual Project Managers can grow and develop their skills and capabilities, and where the organisation as a whole can mature in its approach to managing change.

Specific situation – details of the specific environment using PRINCE2

In 2007, Suffolk County Council started a major transformation programme to improve public services for the people of Suffolk and to tackle significant budget challenges by releasing cash into supporting front-line services.

The first step was to create a 'strategic centre' with a matrix of service offices and specialist support functions. One of these support functions was a corporate Programme and Project Management (PPM) team which includes a central pool of experienced programme and project managers and a central programme office.

One significant target for the PPM team was to help the organisation mature in its capability for managing significant transformational change, by embedding best practice in project management across the organisation.

We knew PRINCE2 would provide the fundamental tools and techniques, but were aware that in the past it has been regarded as significantly theoretical and bureaucratic. We needed to tailor PRINCE2 in a way that people running projects would find it easier to use and apply. We had to recognise that not everyone running projects had experience in managing projects, and even fewer had PRINCE2 qualifications.

Why and how PRINCE2 is used; what it is good for; what its limitations are

Across the county council we have many staff involved in managing and working on projects of all sizes and complexities. PRINCE2 Foundation and Practitioner training courses are available to everyone across the organisation.

However, we found that although most full time project managers were gaining PRINCE2 qualifications, they often found difficulty applying the methodology on a day-to-day basis on their own projects. One thing that made this difficult was that only the project manager was trained in PRINCE2, meaning that that project boards and project team members were not able to engage with the PRINCE2 approach themselves. As a consequence, PRINCE2 was generally perceived to be over prescriptive, too process-based and very bureaucratic, which discouraged many people from trying to apply the methodology or from getting the best out of using it.

Another difficulty is that many projects are managed on a part time basis by staff whose main focus is an operational role in the business. This means they are unlikely to have completed formal PRINCE2 training.

The council had tried to implement PRINCE2 in the past by scaling it down to something more practical. However, in hindsight it was cut down far too much and most of the methodology was removed, leaving behind only a few basic document templates.

What we really wanted to do was provide something that was accessible to everyone in the organisation that people could understand, engage with, and apply without spending weeks studying complex methodologies. At the same time we needed to ensure projects were still compliant with PRINCE2 from a best practice point of view, and that full time, professional project managers could still find of value.

For this reason we developed a simple framework for project management called 'PRINCESS' (PRINCE2 'Suffolk Style'). This presents the basics of PRINCE2 with a mechanism for us to demonstrate how we run projects within our organisation.

Impressions of New Version

Key areas have been improved

We were very pleased to be invited to review and case study the draft version of the PRINCE2:2009 material.

We focused on considering how the improved guidance would make it easier to adopt PRINCE2 within a large, complex organisation (rather than applying to a single project as a case study).

A number of programme and project managers from the PPM team participated in reviewing the PRINCE2:2009 material. Most of these people had also been involved in the development and testing of PRINCESS. Our key observations about PRINCE2:2009 are:

- It seems to be much less process-based. This means it should be far more accessible to a wider audience, especially to colleagues who are not from a technical discipline. In a large complex organisation, such as a local authority, it is common to have staff from many different professional backgrounds. This simpler approach will make communication between departments much easier.
- It seems to be more flexible and less prescriptive than the old version. This means it will be more representative of how projects actually run in the real world.
- It provides much better insight into how the methodology sits alongside other methodologies and corporate systems. This will be a significant benefit in helping to embed best practice across an organisation.
- It provides much better guidance for project board members and senior stakeholders (in particular the 'Directing Projects' publication and the associated pocket book). This will make the delivery of training for senior managers much easier, and help to engage senior managers more effectively on project boards. Ultimately this means that overall project board performance will be enhanced, making better decisions, with clearer understanding of about individual and collective roles and responsibilities.

If we had the 2009 version before we started tailoring our own approach, it would have made the process much quicker. Since launching PRINCESS we have received very positive feedback from many people across the organisation. It has particularly helped to guide staff coming in new to the organisation, and those who are new to project management. We have also produced guidance material on project board roles and responsibilities, and this could have been delivered much quicker using the 2009 version of PRINCE2.

Going Forward

How the organisation will benefit from PRINCE2 in the future

We are currently exploring how we will take our current approach for project management and expand it to include programme management, integrating key aspects of Managing Successful Programmes (MSP™). We imagine the 2009 version of PRINCE2 will be helpful in this process. Our vision is to provide clear guidance for staff on how to focus even more on achieving the real benefits from a project, rather than simply delivering the outputs on time and within budget.

This will involve producing and delivering new overview training appropriate for all staff working on programmes and projects, including senior managers serving on programme or project boards. It is timely that PRINCE2 'Directing a Project' has recognised there is value in presenting an abridged version for senior managers. This new version will help to underpin our internal workshops and provide greater clarity about the roles and responsibilities of individuals.

We will also be updating the current PRINCESS framework to illustrate how the improved PRINCE2 methodology should be implemented within our organisation. This will include more specific advice on how to engage our specialist support functions and external partners on a project as this will ultimately help to improve consistency in the way resources are used. It will also enable interim/contract project managers and partner organisations to work with us more effectively, by reducing the lead in time on new projects.

About the author

Kevin Ling is the project lead for Suffolk County Council's Programme and Project Management (PPM) team. He joined the team in May 2008, taking an active role in development of the new PPM team and in working to embed best practice across the organisation. He has helped to build up the community of people involved in programmes and projects across the council, establishing networking and forum events.

Kevin took the initiative to tailor the council's own approach to managing projects (based on PRINCE2), ensuring it is simpler, and easier to apply for staff across the whole organisation. In September 2008 the council launched its in-house version of PRINCE2 called 'PRINCESS' (which stands for PRINCE2 'Suffolk Style'). Being involved with the PRINCE2 2009 pilot has affirmed this approach and has provided the reassurance that the council is working in tandem with the new guidance.

Kevin Ling

Kevin.ling@suffolk.gov.uk

[More information on PRINCE2:2009 at www.best-management-practice.com](http://www.best-management-practice.com)