

# Report on Unite Survey of City of Edinburgh Council Schools' H&S Communications



## Executive Summary

Health and Safety (H&S) groups began to be established in City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) Schools and Early Years settings in June 2020. The accepted understanding was that these groups would be fully developed by the start of the school term in August and be the key conduit for Health and Safety communications and processes within each school. Despite a series of concerns around the composition, workings and communications of these groups raised by Unite the Union (as a direct consequence of member pleas) by the run-up to the mid-term break (16<sup>th</sup> October 2020) there remained no clear understanding around how and whether these groups operated. Consequently, Unite CEC branch decided to survey members working in schools to find out what they knew about the groups and how vital H&S information was being communicated.

The survey was conducted online, between 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020 and 6<sup>th</sup> November 2020, with the help of the Unite Organising Department who made direct individual contact with the 300 plus members being surveyed. The sample cut almost exactly across the boundaries between Facilities Management (49.5% of respondents) and Communities & Families (50.5% of respondents) and covered people working in all job types (except Teaching and Head Teacher roles) and venue types (Secondary, Primary, Special, Early Years).

The survey results exposed stark knowledge disparities between Facilities Management (FM) and Communities & Families (C&F) staff working in schools as well as serious information gaps experienced by some staff groups, particularly those who may be less fully conceived of as being part of the school learning community (e.g. Cleaners, Passenger Drivers and Escorts, Caterers, School Crossing Patrol). The results also demonstrated that, whilst communications with staff in High Schools and Early Years settings may be reasonably good (but with considerable room for improvement), communications in Primary and Special schools fell below standards that might be reasonably expected.

Survey questions focussed on:

- Staff knowledge of the school H&S group
- Communications processes between this group and those working in and around the school
- How H&S information is communicated with staff
- Knowledge of SORT (Schools Operational Risk Toolkit)

C&F staff were more able to declare knowledge of the H&S group, SORT and communications processes for H&S information than FM staff. Considering the whole school workforce, C&F staff (37.5%) were almost 3 times as likely to have awareness of the H&S group than FM staff (13%). C&F staff (38.5%) were 4 times more likely to have received H&S communications from the group than FM staff (8.5%). Knowledge of SORT was lower in both departments but more than 3 times higher in C&F (19.5%) than FM (6%).

More generally, H&S communications had better results and information was being received by 82% of the whole schools' workforce (C&F and FM) with just under two thirds of these communications being spoken (e.g. team meetings, toolbox talks, 1:1s). However, 28% of FM staff and 4% of C&F staff still indicated that they had received no Health and Safety information in the previous month.

The survey analysis focuses on an array of positive and negative outputs whereby the positive is considered as generally good H&S communications (although must still be improved and complacency avoided) and negative considered as poor, misunderstood or non-existent H&S communications that consequently increase H&S risk.

The positive outputs from the survey show that C&F staff are mostly receiving the H&S communications although there is room for improvement in the nature of the two-way communications that would be expected between schools' H&S groups and staff. Also shown is the reasonably good communications within Secondary Schools and Early Years settings, although this again has improvement potential. Additionally, the high number of total respondents and respondents by venue (except Special Schools) who received some form of H&S communication must be considered as positive but with work still to be done in those groups who receive none.

The most negative of the outputs is the disparity between FM and C&F staff. This is obvious when looking at all three analytical themes (Department, Job Type and Venue). Overall, the positivity rates in FM are the reverse of those in C&F strongly indicating that if C&F staff receive good communication FM staff do not. Whilst general H&S communication for FM staff is not quite so bad as that through H&S groups there is still considerable work to be done to achieve even statistical parity.

A further negative output from this survey is that there appear to be groups of staff working in and around schools that find themselves beyond all H&S communications processes. These staff are:

- Cleaners (though not all)
- Caterers (not all)
- Drivers and Passenger Escorts
- School Crossing Patrols

These were the staff groups, in the main, who indicated that they had not received any H&S communications. It is feasible that, in many cases, these groups are simply forgotten about in the communications process as they are often quite invisible within schools as the nature and scheduling of their work doesn't lend itself as well to greater participation in the life and culture of the school as may be the case for other groups.

## **Recommendations**

This survey was carried out by Unite the Union with the intention of providing understanding around issues raised in connection with H&S groups in schools, their composition and communications approaches. The results show that, whilst there may be a good deal of positive communications environments, that positivity does not extend to the whole estate and nor does it include the whole schools' workforce irrespective of job role and reporting department. Therefore, we make the following recommendations:

1. C&F undertake a survey of all schools' H&S groups to ascertain the composition (by department and Job) of these groups, how often and how they communicate to and from staff
2. C&F instruct all H&S groups to ensure communications include all staff of each department
3. C&F instruct all H&S groups to ensure that FM staff are included in the composition of groups
4. FM instruct key staff (e.g. FT's, Cleaning and Catering Supervisors) to request membership of these groups and report to FM on the outcome of the request
5. FM instruct all staff who obtain membership of their H&S group to ensure that communications are available to and invited from all FM staff linked to the school
6. FM and C&F to examine ways to ensure that no staff are marginalised or forgotten in the H&S communications processes going forward

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City of Edinburgh Council branch