

# Post Occupancy Evaluation for Secondary Schools

## Summary of the pilot study findings

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# Secondary Schools Post Occupancy Evaluation Pilots

## Introduction

Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE) is widely used in this country for commercial buildings to see whether they have meet their original brief. POE is also used for schools in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, but less so in the UK. With DfES support, School Works piloted a schools specific POE tool, designed especially for secondary schools. The tool was :

- flexible so that it could be applied to any type or size of school
- able to review both hard design issues (such as, is the building fit for purpose?) and softer issues (such as whether staff, pupils and the local community are satisfied with the facilities)
- relatively quick and easy to use so as not to place unnecessary burdens on the school or Local Education Authority
- seeking to identify major successes and failures in the building design while
  - o highlighting ways to immediately address any problem areas in that particular school;
  - o providing the Local Education Authorities with a set of key messages about what works well, and what needs to be considered further in other school capital projects; and
  - o feeding into a national evaluation database, so building core intelligence about the effectiveness of new projects and allowing value for money comparators to be developed.

## Summary of findings

### Briefing :

The briefing process and the involvement of school users in it is critical to the success of the building project. Where users felt they had been fully involved, they were happier with the finished building. That said, there is an ongoing role for users as the design takes place and they begin to understand the implications of the spaces and facilities they have asked for. The designers and contractors need to ensure there is enough flexibility in the process to make adjustments and fully consult staff as the designs emerge. There is also a strong case for independent professional assistance for school users, to facilitate them through the design process and help them to understand what will work best for them.

New schools are often very popular with parents and many of the pilot schools were already oversubscribed. Several were looking to expand and others were taking more pupils than they had been designed for. Those schools which had been designed with inbuilt flexibility to expand were at an advantage.

### Environmental issues :

Ventilation and temperature were raised as important issues in all of the pilot schools. Often users felt spaces were too hot or too cold and they could not always regulate their own environments. This may be because the ventilation systems do not provide controls around the school, or because they have not been trained in how to use the system. Generally, this issue impacted adversely on learning and users felt they did

not have enough information about the environmental systems to allow them to make informed choices at the design stage.

#### Lighting issues :

Users highlighted a wish for natural light, but this had not always been provided to the extent they would have liked. In some cases internal offices and teaching spaces had no natural light at all. There were also concerns about the lack of control in lighting (for example, dimmer switches are rare) and the appropriate placing of whiteboards to avoid blind spots.

#### Colours and finishes :

Adults and pupils often had conflicting views about what constituted appropriate colours in their school. Adults often opted for white walls which were generally unpopular with pupils. A variety of colours seemed to work best with colour being provided by wall displays, art, flooring and lockers. Unfinished or unplastered walls were unpopular with pupils who saw them as cold and institutional.

#### Corridors and circulation spaces :

Too often there were pinch points in circulation which caused problems for user flow around the building. These resulted from corridors which were too narrow, loss of area through cut outs in corridors and walkways, narrow stairways and inadequate signage. Circulation worked best where it was wide enough for the number of users to move comfortably around the school, well lit and ventilated, and was used for a variety of functions including breakout work spaces, ICT areas, social areas and eating.

#### Fixtures and fittings :

Too often floor finishes were not durable enough, chairs were uncomfortable and door furniture was not robust. Schools need to be provided with better information about what constitutes value for money in fixtures and fittings.

#### Security :

CCTV, both inside and outside the school, was often popular with pupils and adults. It was seen to promote a safe environment and reduce cases of crime and vandalism. Swipe cards had a mixed reception. Where the technology broke down frequently, they were seen as a distraction at best. Schools need to think carefully about how they wish to use swipe cards and whether this will place additional burdens on, for example, circulation within the school.

#### Entrances :

Most of the pilot schools were seen as welcoming to users. However, signage both to and around the school was highlighted as less satisfactory in a number of the pilots. Reception areas were important but often did too little to promote the school's identity. Disabled access could be a problem in some of the pilot schools and needed to be carefully planned. Pupils felt safest on their way to school where their access was not shared with cars and bicycles.

#### Social spaces :

Staffrooms were often badly located in the school, making them inaccessible to parts of the school community. There needs to be careful thought given to the location of staff social spaces and their purpose. Pupil social spaces worked well where they had

been planned into the design and allowed pupils to sit and relax with friends (often from different years). Availability of drinking water was often an issue, and it was not always located in the social spaces where it could be easily accessed throughout the day.

#### Dining areas :

Dining areas were often a problem in the pilot schools, either being too small or being difficult to manage. They often worked best where pupils could spill out and eat in more flexible areas either inside or outside the school.

#### External spaces :

These were generally poor in the pilot schools with little effective landscaping, little shelter for wet play and too little designated spaces for quiet and active breaks. Pupils prioritised external spaces highly and would welcome a more thoughtful approach to areas which are clearly important to them.

#### Learning spaces :

Generally learning spaces had a positive response. Problem areas were around provision of adequate storage, acoustics and environmental issues. The growing use of ICT was welcomed by pupils and staff, as were larger classroom spaces which allowed a range of teaching methods to be employed. School halls were often problem areas either being too small for their intended purpose or being too inflexible to be as multifunctioning as some school would have wished.

#### Libraries :

Seemed to work best where they were open access to both pupils and public. For pupils this provided a quiet space during the day to do homework and coursework, and for community users it drew them into the school to use the facilities.

#### Communication :

The pilot schools had taken different approaches to communications. Some had plasma screens, but unless these were kept up to date and provided interesting information, they were rarely looked at. Tannoys were seen as a distraction but Walkie talkies were more effective at allowing staff to stay in touch.

#### Storage :

Traditional size lockers were seen as too small for the variety of materials and equipment most pupils needed. Where they were placed was important as badly located lockers encouraged bullying, crowding in the corridors, or made them unusable (for example, if they were placed in a classroom which could only be accessed at break times). Staff often found that storage was inadequate for their personal belongings, in administrative offices, in teaching spaces, and for school wide resources such as ICT.

#### Changing rooms :

Pupils welcomed individual changing cubicles and this had a very positive impact on the way in which they viewed the school and the sports facilities.

#### Toilets :

Large toilets were seen to provide spaces for bullying. However, it was the management of toilets which seemed to be the most important aspect. If they were not clean, were vandalised or were dark and poorly ventilated, pupils would not use them. Several schools locked their toilets during lesson time (to prevent vandalism) and pupils are generally unhappy about this approach as the toilets were not always unlocked again during breaks.

Delight factor :

Several of the pilot schools had areas or facilities which everyone enjoyed. In Blyth Community College it was the street, at Chafford Hundred Campus it was the availability of ICT, at Royal Docks it was the use of glass bricks. Too often, however, staff, pupils and community users were simply pleased that the new building and facilities were better than what they had before. We suggest that this is not sufficiently aspirational for schools of the future.