

Top of the class

Supply Management Awards 2007 CATEGORY Best purchasing initiative by a smaller organisation
WINNER Wiltshire Schools Buying Community

Some time-pushed schools in Wiltshire have developed an online buying community to source the best deals.

Antony Barton reports

When a classroom heater stops working, or a sobbing child complains about a forgotten swimming kit, the procurement of children's atlases may suddenly become a low priority for a primary school's administration officer.

The admin function is often in such demand that procurement can account for as little as 5 per cent of an officer's time, says Simon Burke, schools procurement officer for Wiltshire County Council. Finance officers in charge of buying face similar constraints.

Burke says the buying approach in Wiltshire was, until recently, far from ideal. "Each school was completely autonomous. Procurement decisions - and consequently performance in terms of best value and following good practice - varied hugely from one school to another," he says. "The majority of officers weren't versed in effective procurement."

To improve the situation, the council gave 201 Wiltshire schools the opportunity to share purchasing experiences and combine buying power as the Wiltshire Schools Buying Community. Burke, seven of the officers and technology firm EQC worked together to develop the online Intelligent Buying Community (IBC). The council arranged a series of workshops to help buyers understand how to satisfy their own internal controls and regulations, while ensuring accountability and value for money.

"The training was great," says Michelle Philpott, admin and finance officer for Five Lanes Primary School. "We learnt about probity and transparency, and were taught what is legally required of us by the council and our governing bodies."

IBC's ability to request online quotations makes it quicker for suppliers to provide responses, and gives evidence of best practice with automated audit trails. The schools can combine buying power by requesting quotations as a community. Suppliers can also flag quotations as Community Quotes, which makes them available to other school IBC communities that have since been established.

Elaine Pearce, admin officer for St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, says her 40 per cent saving on photocopy paper was shared with all the schools on her IBC, and another school's supply cover insurance deal gave her a 41 per cent saving. Community members can also use the system to source, swap and borrow items from each other at no cost.

More than 500 more schools have since joined one of 18 school IBCs. The original community has made cashable savings in excess of £218,000 and time savings of over 1,200 hours via quotation requests alone.

The judges called this "a truly fascinating and humbling entry that shows a great way of using each other, extending the network".

'Taken from Supply Management magazine, archived article, Oct 2007'