

▶▶ SPECIALREPORT LEADERSHIP & SKILLS

Local authorities must get more than ever done for customers while simultaneously cutting costs, and transformational steering groups or boards can play a vital role in the re-engineering process. **Stephen Hewett** suggests how to make the best use of them

Not just change... but transformation with purpose

No local authority can hope to improve services and cut costs without effecting not just change but transformation. In response to this need, more local authorities are setting up transformational steering groups (TSG).

Some TSGs will cover the entire range of the local authority's transformational activities; others will specialise in specific areas. For councils keen not only to embrace the potential of transformation but to be front-runners, TSGs are simultaneously catalysts, powerhouses, think-tanks and centres of ambitious, blue-sky thinking.

There are opportunities for local authorities to re-engineer and even reinvent processes that may have seemed set in stone. Processes simply must be made to focus more decisively and less expensively on customers. An argument can be made that the entire rationale of the new strategies of comprehensive area assessment and Total Place involve making councils more customer-centric, ideally in a dramatic way.

So the challenge facing TSGs is tough, but exciting, as the catalyst of change as well as the dynamo, the mould-breaker as well as the artist who creates the new mould. Their formation is consequently a task of great importance, and giving careful thought to their membership is vital if local authorities are going to meet central government expectations.

There is a strong case for introducing diversity of interest into the TSG; such diversity can be a powerful way for the group to have checks and balances acting upon it.

Inevitably, there will be people on TSGs who will have a vested interest in the projects being considered and implemented, and indeed it is essential there are such people, as they will be especially committed to the projects reaching a successful conclusion. But TSGs also need people who will be able to bring distance and impartiality to the discussions. Union representatives will be important, and of course will have their own vested interests in relation to the workforce. People from the shop floor may also be considered for TSG membership as they will be in touch with matters that may even have eluded union reps.

TSGs will also benefit considerably from having people on board who are experts at cultural change. Indeed, why not consider appointing someone from another local authority who has already proved his

“
The challenge facing TSGs is tough, but exciting, as the catalyst of change as well as the dynamo, the mould-breaker as well as the artist who creates the new mould
”

or her worth in engineering transformation? After all, TSGs should be geared toward running hands-on projects.

There is a particularly strong case for the chairman to be someone who can bring experience of successful transformation at local authority level, plus a fairly impartial viewpoint to the task.

One of the chairman's jobs will be to ensure that the TSG's purpose remains ambitious yet pragmatic – that requires someone with a clear vision of what transformation means for the council, and with a sufficiently strong and decisive purpose not to be blown off course.

Of course there are pitfalls in running TSGs, as there are when any group of people work together. There seems to be something in the human psyche that makes it all too easy, when people are gathered together, for the gathering to deteriorate into less visionary matters and get bogged down in practical difficulties. These will need discussing, but it is all too easy for these nitty-gritty matters to dominate the discussion, especially if the people on the TSG are not used to working together and may even be starting out with some suspicion of each other's motives.

All the more reason, then, for a TSG to be able to make strong and firm decisions and never allow itself to become a talking shop. TSGs must become adept at addressing key questions such as: is this particular project really going to advance our objectives and is it the best use of the money we have available?

Other guidelines include:

- The TSG should formulate a statement of its purpose and objectives in clear, non-jargon language
- It must be run with focus and discipline and maintain a spotlight on the projects that will bring the most immediate benefit to customers. There are always likely to be interdependencies between projects, but the emphasis must be on clearing a way for the best ones to be pushed forward
- There should be a constant focus on ensuring that the local authority's overall culture is customer-focused
- The TSG should set clear design principles to apply to all its projects. By applying them from the beginning, the risk of wasting time pursuing projects that will not advance overall aims will be reduced
- Meetings should be arranged when needed rather than by a rigid timetable
- A clear record should be kept of the key outcomes and decisions, to be referred to in detail when monitoring progress
- The TSG needs to steer projects decisively and without flinching from implementing radical solutions where necessary. If a project isn't sufficiently on track, measures must be taken without delay to tackle the problem
- The TSG must decide early on how it will assess success.

Stephen Hewett is head of customer-centricity business change at business and information technology consultancy Charteris

TRICKY: no local authority can hope to improve services and cut costs without effecting not just change but transformation