



By Stephen Hewett,
Head of Customer-Centric
Business Change, Charteris

Steering change

Engineering the right kind of change with transformational steering groups is essential in achieving efficiency savings.

During these difficult and challenging times, when central government policy requires local authorities to do more than ever for their customers while simultaneously achieving significant cost cuts, transformational steering groups or boards are playing a vital role in the crucial re-engineering process.

No local authority can hope to comply with central government requirements for improved service to customers and cost cuts without effecting not just change, but transformation. In response to this pressing and urgent need, more and more local authorities have set up, or are in the process of setting up, transformational steering groups (TSGs).

The challenge is clear: the way ahead may be uncertain, but TSGs will play a vital role in revealing it

Some TSGs will cover the entire range of a local authority's transformational activities; others will specialise in specific areas. For local authorities keen not only to embrace the potential of transformation but also to be front-runners in flexing their transformational muscles, TSGs are simultaneously catalysts, powerhouses, think-tanks and centres of ambitious, blue-sky thinking. The challenge is clear: the way ahead may be uncertain, but TSGs will play a vital role in revealing it.

There are vital opportunities right now for local authorities to re-engineer and even reinvent processes that may before

have seemed carved in stone. The twin needs of greater efficiency and reduced costs are unlikely to be met without such re-engineering and reinvention. The processes simply must be made to focus more decisively and less expensively on customers; the processes must be made more customer-centric. A powerful argument could be made that the entire rationale behind the new strategies of Common Area Assessment (CAA) and Total Place involve boosting a local authority's level of customer-centricity, ideally in a dramatic way.

So the challenge facing transformational steering groups is tough, but exciting. TSGs have the opportunity to put into action an entire spectrum of change, including all projects that have the core objective of becoming more customer-centric.

In this scenario, the TSG is the catalyst of change as well as the dynamo; the mould-breaker as well as the artist who creates the new mould. The formation of TSGs is consequently a task of great importance for any local authority, and giving careful thought to their formation is vital if local authorities are to meet central government requirements and expectations.

Essential decisions, including, of course, who exactly is going to be on the TSG, need to be made at the very earliest stage. There is a strong case for introducing diversity of interest into the TSG; such diversity can itself be a powerful way for the group to develop internal checks and balances.

Inevitably, there will be people on TSGs who will have a vested interest in the projects being considered and implemented; 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 to have people on them who will be able to bring distance and impartiality to the discussions. Union representatives will be important TSG members, and of course they 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 the union representatives.

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 or her worth in engineering transformation at local authority level? After all, TSGs should be geared towards running hands-on projects.

There is a particularly strong case for the chair of any given TSG to be someone who can bring extensive experience of successful transformation at local authority level, plus an impartial overall viewpoint, to the task.

One of the chair's jobs will be to ensure that the TSG's purpose remains visionary yet pragmatic, ambitious yet realistic, inspired and also inspiring. The chair must be someone who has a clear vision of what transformation means for the council, while also being someone with a sufficiently strong and decisive purpose not to be blown off course.

TSGs have to focus on high-level issues such as the need to maximise customer-centricity while reducing costs, yet they must also maintain constant vigilance to ensure that their initiatives are feasible and practical. TSGs must in



essence be the guardian of the local authority's vision of transforming itself into a different kind of entity. That new entity will be one that meets central government's objectives while remaining true to its own potential for being all it can be to the people who use its services.

Of course, there are pitfalls in running TSGs, just as there are when any group of people work together. There seems to be something in the human psyche that makes it inevitable, when people are gathered together, that they gravitate towards less visionary matters, such as practical concerns. Such concerns of course need to be addressed, but it is all too easy for these nitty-gritty matters to dominate the entire discussion, especially if those on the TSG are not used to working together and may even be starting out with some suspicion of one another's motivations. All the more reason for the TSG to develop a pride in being able to make firm decisions about matters central to its remit.

TSGs must in particular become quickly adept at addressing key questions, such as 'is this particular project really going to advance our objectives?' and 'is this particular project the best use of the money we have available?'

Other vital guidelines for the operation of successful TSGs are:

- The TSG should at an early stage formulate a statement of its own purpose and objectives. This should be stated in clear, jargon-free language, and as concisely as possible.
- The TSG needs to be run with focus and discipline in order to maintain a spotlight on the projects that will

bring the most immediate benefit to customers. It is vital to avoid the danger of becoming bogged down in details and letting key projects lose momentum. There are always likely to be interdependencies between some projects, so an emphasis must be placed on clearing a way for those projects which most benefit customers to be pushed forward.

- There needs to be a constant focus within meetings on ensuring that the local authority's overall culture remains a customer-centric one.
- One of the TSG's first tasks should be to identify and document five or six clear design principles that can be applied to all projects with which the TSG concerns itself. These design principles should include all the specific requirements that each project will need to meet. By applying them from the beginning, the danger of wasting time pursuing projects that will not advance the overall direction of the TSG will be considerably reduced, if not avoided altogether. Time requirements are especially important when the design principles are being formulated, as projects need to be bringing benefits within, at most, six months.
- Meetings of the TSG should be arranged when the need for guidance is most acute, rather than a specific timetable being slavishly adhered to.
- A clear record should be kept of the key decisions and outcomes of meetings, and these should be referred to in detail when monitoring progress with implementations.

- The TSG needs to steer projects decisively, and without flinching from implementing radical solutions where necessary. If a project is not sufficiently on track, measures must be taken without delay to get it back to being so.

An emphasis must be placed on clearing a way for those projects which most benefit customers

- The TSG must decide early on how it will assess success. In particular, where customer-centricity is the goal, the TSG needs a workable methodology to allow it to assess the overall progress of its projects towards the twin goals of greater customer-centricity and reduced costs. ☞

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