

05 Exactly what is real transformation and how do you make it happen?

Think piece from the 2019 Public service: state of transformation report

Cultures not structures

How many pointless transformation strategy documents have you read in your working life? How many action plans? How many have you written or contributed to? As a former policy officer, I must have written hundreds! And the final question...how many of those expensively produced, weighty, sweated-over, consulted-on tomes have made a long-lasting and significant difference to people's lives, an organisation or a place?

The well-worn phrase 'culture eats strategy for breakfast' is so true. In our hearts we all know it. Yet many council chief executives, management teams and political leaders spend so little of their

own time on actively shaping and reshaping the culture of teams, of organisations and of partnerships.

People choose to work in public service for many different reasons. For most that I have spoken to over the years, I think it's a real personal passion and drive to help people in communities and to improve the place. Whether you are a bin loader on the wagon every day, processing housing benefit or planning applications, a hardworking children's social worker or an elected councillor, that is what motivates you. Yet we often ignore this primary motivation when we create management structures. We are really missing a trick.

The challenge in Wigan

The layers of management structure in Wigan eight years ago were remarkable and incredibly complex. There were seven or eight layers of incomprehensible management architecture.

The cost of this archaic yet fiercely defended construction was astronomical. Layer upon layer of management, sometimes a manager only managing one other person. But for me the cost wasn't the main issue. It was one of personal accountability. Where does the buck stop in seven layers of management for any one issue?

Slimming down the structure, reducing pointless layers of management and giving our amazing staff the freedom to innovate on the front line is so important in creating a positive and productive culture. It releases so much energy, creativity, built-up frustration from poor management decisions going back many years.

But what if they do the wrong things and make mistakes?

Developing a framework of management support with trust and empowered staff at its heart is the key. Making it safe to innovate is vital. Not everything we try will work but most of it will.

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The 'Be Wigan' experience

How can you give people a clear orientation so that you can entrust them to take the right decisions at the right level with a full understanding of the local ambitions?

In Wigan we have developed the 'Be Wigan' experience, an interactive, immersive half-day organisational development programme for all staff and managers to explore how we can shape and reshape cultures in teams, so we are all singing from the same cultural hymn sheet – but with the freedom and permission to innovate in local communities and work differently with local residents depending on the circumstances.

This approach gives us and key partners a common way of relating to residents. It has now expanded into the NHS with our integrated care organisation offering a Healthier Wigan experience in a shopping centre. Midwives, doctors, health visitors, hospital consultants, social workers, dentists all love it.

Be Wigan sets a cultural framework of how we build a relationship with a person. People are treated as people. They are not a statistic, a patient, a parent in trouble, a troubled family, a job seeker, a victim, a unit of need. They are people and should be treated as the uniquely skilled and talented individuals they are, with a focus on what makes them special and what they enjoy doing rather than just what's wrong with them.

Listening really hard to residents, to staff, to stakeholders is a crucial but undervalued part of the chief executive's and leader's skill set, and one that, being honest, I think most need to work a bit harder on. Equally important is changing stuff as a result and building trust at the heart of organisational culture.

The result for us has been low staff turnover in all areas, amazing staff engagement scores which just get better each year and the third most cut council in the UK becoming the third most productive (Impower Index 2018).

The Wigan Deal

The Be Wigan experience is a key element of the 'Wigan Deal' – an example of blending an overarching strategy with a single unifying philosophy that binds together every person who lives and works in the place, underpinned by a massive culture change programme.

I'll be honest I haven't ever seen anything that is so all-encompassing as this. Co-operative councils

do bits of it, but this is a long-term, cost- and community-driven, whole-person, whole-place, multi-agency belief system.

Keeping it simple, making sure it applies to everything and everyone

Keeping it simple, making sure it applies to everything and everyone sounds really easy, but it isn't. It requires tough, visceral leadership from officers and politicians.

The Deal Wigan Council

Our part

- Keep your Council Tax as one of the lowest
- Help communities to support each other
- Cut red tape and provide value for money
- Build services around you and your family
- Create opportunities for young people
- Support the local economy to grow
- Listen, be open, honest and friendly
- Believe in our borough

Signed: *[Signature]*
Councillor David Robinson, Leader of Wigan Council

Your part

- Recycle more, recycle right
- Get involved in your community
- Get online
- Be healthy and be active
- Help protect children and the vulnerable
- Support your local businesses
- Have your say and tell us if we get it wrong
- Believe in our borough

Signed:

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sounds really easy, but it isn't. It requires tough, visceral leadership from officers and politicians. It's amazing how everyone needs to have 'their own' brand, their initiative and we start to lose the intellectual coherence of the collective social endeavour.

The Deal is a child of austerity, created when a Financial Times journalist made the trek up north to tell us that Wigan was the third worst affected council by austerity in the UK.

We realised at that moment that salami-sliced cost cutting and slashing the same 10 per cent off every department's budget wasn't going to work on a long-term basis. We needed a plan, but a plan that was simple, clear and embraced not just by the council but by the people of the borough.

Structuring the deal

Eight years into this transformative programme, the results are astounding and attract visitors from all over the UK and overseas, especially Scandinavia, to learn from our experience. We are always happy to share the learning and hold regular 'Deal Days' to showcase the work and the lessons learned of which there have been many.

Municipal adult social care day centres and residential facilities have been replaced by vibrant community groups and supported accommodation providing independence and higher levels of client satisfaction.

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social care and NHS services. We completely reshaped our relationship with the community and voluntary sector from one of intense scrutiny and mistrust to one of mutual respect and massive trust.

Five hundred amazing projects support people to be mentally and physically happy and well and socially connected in their own local neighbourhoods. This is why just

cutting and stopping things isn't transformative.

Wigan has a balanced adult social care budget as well as balanced budgets across the board and we are working with our NHS partners locally to apply the same principles of strengths-based behaviour change, permission to innovate and place-based working to address the demand issues in health services.

This approach is showing genuinely incredible results. For very little investment we are seeing an enormous reduction in cost as we have realised that 80 per cent of our costs were spent on processing people and passing them around a fractured and incoherent system.

We have applied the principles of The Deal to children's social care again with amazing results as we focus not just on the child but on supporting the whole family to be the best they can be, using an asset-based approach. As a result, we are seeing numbers of looked-after children reduce against the growing trend nationally which is going in the opposite direction.

Seven fully integrated place-based teams – all of whose members have been through the Be Wigan experience – combine the expertise and knowledge of local GPs, practice managers, dentists, social workers, health visitors, drug and alcohol workers, housing officers, police officers, DWP staff from local job centres, community organisations and elected councillors.

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This unique, long-term transformation and culture change programme also makes the accountants happy as it takes money out of budgets by permanently reducing demand for expensive reactive services.

We have seen a 30 per cent reduction in unplanned hospital admission by adopting the approach of risk-stratifying the local population and proactively targeting early preventative support through GPs.

If you are serious about transformation my advice is to rip up all those wordy strategies that hardly anyone even reads. They just don't work. Get out there and start leading change with communities.

In the first three months of this year, working in partnership with North West Ambulance Service, we managed to divert over 2,000 individual ambulance trips away from our local Accident and Emergency Department by intervening with step-up and step-down beds in a local care home. This approach is much better for the patients and also significantly more cost-effective.

Despite the fact we have £160 million less money every year as a council, residents are happier with an overall 59 per cent increase in overall satisfaction with the council and how it does things while 82 per cent of residents support the principles of The Deal, which is remarkable.

Stop writing, start leading

So if you are serious about transformation my advice is to rip up all those wordy strategies that hardly anyone even reads. They just don't work. Get out there and start leading change with communities. It's what they want and it's what the public sector needs. Focus on creating an energetic, innovative trust-based model and spend years and years reinforcing it every single day. This has to be the best way we can spend our time as leaders.

Donna Hall CBE

Former Chief Executive, Wigan Council and Wigan Clinical Commissioning Group and Public Service Reform Lead for Greater Manchester.

Donna is also chair of the New Local Government Network (NLGN), which has recently launched 'The Community Paradigm' which advocates shifting power to communities as has happened in Wigan.

If you are interested in finding out more about The Deal, culture change, place-based working or would like to book on a Deal Day, please contact Alison Wright alison.wright@wigan.gov.uk.