

# How to get the best from working with your strategic partners (Transformation masterclass) – 20 September 2023

## Spotlight presentation: Nina Coakley, Head of Change, Dorset Council

- Dorset is a rural and coastal area that became a unitary authority in 2019.
- It has a population of 380,000 with a higher-than-average older population
- Key issues faced by the area include lower than average earnings, higher than average house prices and a lack of large firms.
- The council is one of two authorities in Dorset and is made up of 4,500 employees and 82 councillors, with an annual budget of £350 million.
- Convergence work for teams, functions and systems took place from 2019 to the outbreak of Covid-19. This work included moving from six planning systems to one, bringing all employees onto one domain and a harmonisation of fees and charges.
- In November 2020 Dorset launched its first transformation plan, this saved over £13 million in its first two years, with a total convergence and transformation savings as a unitary of £96 million. This has been used to reinvest in frontline services and protect them from budget cuts.
- In 2022 Dorset refreshed its corporate strategy, with a key focus on becoming a more responsive and customer focused council. Dorset recognised it couldn't undertake this journey alone and thus made the decision to bring on a strategic partner.
- The expectation was that working with a strategic partner would have key benefits, such as bringing independence and challenge, additional capacity and industry experience and innovative approaches.
- The partner selected by Dorset was Local Partnerships, a joint venture between the LGA, Treasury and Welsh Government. Local Partnerships work to benefit the public sector, by bringing in public and private sector experience to provide confidence, capacity, and capability, helping councils to achieve financial resilience.
- Local Partnerships were a key partner in developing the business case for funding from the future councils programme, aiming at bring Dorset together, which was successful. This resulted in Dorset receiving funding and becoming one of eight 'Future Councils'
- Local Partnerships gave Dorset the ability to maintain their other transformation activities by providing an approach that worked within their context, instead of an off the shelf one. The also co-created and built on the approaches and plans Dorset already had, keeping the good work that Dorset had already delivered. There was also a financial incentive, saving the council money and showing responsible spending to residents.
- To ensure the programme was successful there were several things that needed to be achieved, including buy in from leadership, ensuring scope was agreed, consistent messaging, good relationship management, and relentless messaging.
- The advice and learning from Dorset's experience include staying on your toes, developing a trusted partner relationship, recognising that you're not going to win everyone over, and stability and consistency helping adjust from outset to delivery.

## Spotlight Q&A

Can you elaborate on the 'show and share' sessions?

The show and shares are open to all staff in the organisation, with around 100 people a month attending from across the organisation. The best responses have been when colleagues use the sessions as a listening opportunity. Slido has been helpful in facilitating this. The sessions have helped greatly in terms of buy in and with messaging from the organisation.

What has been the financial ask and commitment to support this work? How far has the transformation plan been service efficiency savings?

Current transformation has been an invest to save approach, which has had strong support from members. The transformation so far has been based on cashable savings for the organisation. Bigger shifts are not always about cashable savings but can be around increased efficiencies, 60% of activities have been invest to save, 20% are efficiency savings, and 20% are about changing how we do things. Investment in new change has been less than £1 million so far, which resulted in £700,000 year 1 savings, with further savings during the delivery of the programme.

How have you prevented change fatigue in the organisation?

Empowerment is key to preventing fatigue, with the transformative approach being about allowing people to innovate and get on with things, including giving managers the ability not to ask permission and the space to get into the gritty detail.

**Challenges Discussion**

- An initial challenge encountered by colleagues was resistance from internal colleagues, with many thinking nothing is wrong even in authorities with a lack of cohesion. Planning departments can be particularly resistant, with some authorities working inefficiently off multiple systems. Strategic partners can take on a role to absorb this resistance from the council transformation team.
- When there is significant delivery pressure it can be difficult to take a step back and introduce something new or procure partners into the organisation. Sometimes a service has to decline to encourage change.
- A lot of services have changed significantly over the past few years, so it's not easy to get people thinking about how they could innovate further. Change has been constant, and people are fatigued post COVID and in the context of the national cost of living crisis.
- Strategic partners can sometimes come into an organisation and not relieve any burdens from the business. There can also be hesitation within organisations to agreeing to work with an external partner, as this can feel like failure.
- Constant risk for strategic partnerships to be tempted to focus on quick wins for transformation and efficiency savings within financial pressures. We need to be brave enough to drive at deeper and more innovative areas for change.
- Partnership working requires leadership, with work sometimes becoming directionless if leadership is lost due to a lack of communication, scope, and effective management. Councils commented on senior officer churn and retention as a source of challenge to maintain momentum and direction for projects. Ensuring continuity within tumultuous contexts can lead to success in delivery.
- Who is considered a strategic partner? Does this scope need to be widened to include residents?

Somerset Council

When supporting covid recovery across a diverse set of business services a format of four Rs was developed, return, retain, resist and radical. Adopted by the Local Resilience Forum as a model to maintain focus and direction for emerging projects and tasks.

### Dorset Council

It is important for officers to understand their services better. Dorset leveraged the data from an integrated telephony tool that demonstrated to the transport service the number of calls received to illustrate demand and baselined measures within a transformation opportunity.

### **Opportunities Discussion**

- Some councils have been struggling with the lack of a concrete plan but taking advantage of the [LGA's transformation offers](#) has helped.
- Transformation does not have to be complex, a good starting point is building up relationships across the organisation and having open conversations. Transformation and change management boils down to working with people and getting this right is key to unblocking challenges early on.
- Patience and taking time to listen, not just within your department but across the council with regular communications and project governance arrangements critical to this approach. It's also important not to forget IT systems and back end infrastructure when planning delivery.
- Recruiting the right staff is very important, as is being open to doing things differently.
- Much of transformation is about common sense and good planning, so to not get overwhelmed.
- A 'salami slice' approach can be taken, to do things bit by bit and not all at once.
- When talking about partners and relationships it's important to review these regularly, to ensure they are effective and judge if they've been successful.
- Before finding a partner asking key questions such as 'how do we know who is suitable?' and 'what are we looking for?'. Timing is also key, as a partnership cannot be formed during the forming of a team or halfway through the delivery of a programme.
- Maintaining relationships and partnerships with service areas, partners or individuals after delivery strengthens buy in and trust in a project, creating advocates for the work your team delivers. It makes parties involved feel valued and supported and can allow the delivery team to monitor impact beyond the project lifecycle and measure outcomes and benefits.

### Ipswich Council:

Partnership flowchart:

