

## **A brief Case Study of Recovery Planning– Steve Loraine, former interim Assistant Chief Executive and Recovery Programme corporate champion for Walsall MBC**

### **The Background**

The travails of Walsall Council have been well documented both nationally and locally and I don't intend to dwell on them in this paper. Suffice it to say, the council is now well advanced in its improvements under the leadership of Chief Executive Annie Shepperd, the new management team and leading politicians.

In looking back the threat of government intervention and the efforts of an interim corporate management team started the move towards recovery. The scope and depth of that initial recovery is briefly outlined below. I hope this is of interest to those councils navigating through their recovery or improvement processes.

The recovery process started with an understanding that things might get worse before they got better, i.e. whatever inspectors and auditors might find will be necessarily different from the issues those who directly manage and lead, even those in an interim capacity, might uncover. This was particularly the case when following the departure of a complete corporate management team. One would hope this cataclysmic change in leadership is not the predominant context for most recovery and improvement activity, although not to be discounted as a one-off as the pressure mounts on the public sector to reform and improve.

The recovery process was a dynamic one, but one nonetheless that can be at risk of being 'codified' into a procedure with a single output, i.e. the recovery plan. This was avoided by constantly working and reworking the plan itself and talking of the recovery 'process' as well, i.e. those things not in the plan but intrinsic to the turn around of a failing organisation at numerous levels within the organisation. For example identifying and nurturing 'islands' of service excellence, pro-active interim management team, modelling appropriate behaviours, challenging inappropriate behaviours, investing in change, broadening delegation to officers and so on.

We worked hard to generate the dynamism required to move this from an audit based, document-led process to an example of real-time strategic change, with each stage informing, albeit often informally and anecdotally, succeeding stages.

We also knew that we needed to keep reworking the alliances for change and the recovery plan process itself to keep recovery fresh and vibrant and not formulaic.

## **The Recovery Plan**

This was started after the first Governance Inspection report in January 2002 and well before the threat of the intervention following the Governance Inspection in May of 2002. For all practical purposes the plan was put together using all of the various inspection reports of the previous year or so at its base. It was led by an officer not on the Senior Executive Team (SET) and was not sufficiently rigorously monitored or managed corporately despite its importance.

The atmosphere around the plan changed significantly when the Interim Management Team arrived, a new Interim Board was created by ODPM and a director-level member of the team was given the prime role of leading the revised recovery plan's revision and delivery. The brand was established, i.e. 'Reinventing Walsall', as was the quality of monitoring, accompanied by a monthly project management reporting process to the Interim Board. Good practice in project management, data gathering, establishing meaningful project outcomes and managing performance were used.

## **The Content**

This was, initially at least, clearly related to the various inspection and governance enquiry reports and associated recommendations or demands. At times the project champion and leader had to keep at bay calls for the plan to be expanded to cover a host of other issues and projects, particularly as the fall-out from the departure of the SET led to the identification of a number of previously unknown problems.

It was felt that to expand the plan in an uncontrolled way would have diluted the focus and created confusion in reporting back to various bodies. With hindsight, this was the right way to go, although the remit was expanded as original projects were completed and 'space' created for additional projects. The Interim Board remained clear that only the issues previously identified for action and those others most vital to recovery should appear within the plan.

The project leaders all received appropriate project management training via an IDeA sourced consultancy and 'scope-creep' was avoided by making the interim corporate management team the Steering Group, ensuring it had the final say over any project changes or additions/deletions to be recommended to the Interim Board.

We designed a traffic light system to report project status to Cabinet and the Interim Board, based on the risk factors for each project, which were assessed using the Council's rapidly developing risk management methodology. We added in a 'Public Impact' section for each project to encourage project leaders to think more widely about the eventual impact of the projects beyond the largely internal focus of the original requirements.

## **Deliverability**

A significant degree of effort went into building ownership of the recovery plan and process. The Management Team as Steering Group was mentioned above, and we also created a project team chaired by the project leader and always attended by the CMT corporate champion. This team became less about management-by-committee, and more to do with mutual support, information sharing and corporate ownership of the plan.

We also gradually generated political ownership through the creation of a Recovery Plan Advisory Group (REPAG) of the three political group leaders who were eventually joined by their deputies as well. That group then encouraged the involvement of all Councillors in the recovery plan and process through the creation of some sub-groups of REPAG to engage with several of the Recovery Plan projects of particular interest to members, e.g. Community Involvement, Modernising Best Value, the Communications Strategy and so on. The groups were set up to encourage dialogue around each of the projects and traditional reports were 'banned' from those groups. In addition before every Full Council meeting a half hour briefing took place on the various aspects of the plan for all councillors to attend - which most did.

Resources of both people and funds were identified initially and going forward into the current financial year. Even when faced with a serious legislative curb on expenditure to balance that year's budget, i.e. potential section 114 notice, funds were identified and allocated for the recovery plan. We were not diverted from recovery by the search for cash.

The plan represented real-time strategic change, i.e. we changed as we went and gained the benefit from each project's outcomes as and when they were delivered. For instance the creation of an integrated performance planning system bringing together council priorities, service plans and budgets; a performance management framework; a reaccredited LSP; numerous successful social service process and output improvements and so on.

## **Inclusion and engagement**

Clearly, to achieve stabilisation and then turnaround goals, the planning process needed to be inclusive, but not in a way that stifled innovation, speed and focus. We achieved this through the engagement with a growing number of colleagues within the Council, regular briefings and offers of engagement with the LSP Board and its constituent parts, e.g. its themed groups, alongside information sharing with the trades unions and their specific involvement in a couple of the projects groups.

All employees received a plain English version of the recovery plan in newspaper format and the LSP's 2,000 partner agencies and groups also received a newspaper version. We also attended a major open-space event hosted by the LSP to promote the work of its themed groups. This put the recovery plan and process at the centre of the LSP.

## **Learning from this activity**

We made no secret that the boundaries of achievement and possibility were being pushed. The political group leaders and the officers we worked with most closely responded brilliantly to that challenge as the Council moved from denial to recovery. The partners provided practical and moral support. The government departments found ways, in the main, to encourage and guide.

In reality, the original Corporate Governance inspections had set the bar and the stakes high, so we were shooting for that level. The scale of the plan, with its 20 or so major projects, was daunting but it was part of proving that Walsall Council was shifting gear to re-enter mainstream local government life. We never backed-off from the challenges that this scale of change presented.

Getting and keeping vital people on board was important and the critical working and reworking of alliances within the Council, across the LSP and with the Interim Board, all bore fruit of actual recovery and provided much space and time to act.

Having a great team with a chief executive of integrity, experience and huge 'political' skill was crucial. Knowing your service brief helps, but it's amazing what one can achieve as part of a team with tenacity, focus, mutual support and a sense of humour.

The key question now is, "when does the Interim Board feel comfortable enough to release the Council from oversight?" That's clearly a question a number of Councils are wrestling with at the moment.

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