

# *Making a Difference*

## *Northumberland County Council Community & Environmental Services*



### *From Possibility...*

The Community and Environmental Services Directorate of Northumberland County Council has an enviable performance record within local government. This case study describes some of the steps it has taken over the last decade to create an environment where continuous improvement is a way of life, focussing specifically on the impact of developing internal teams to manage their own improvement.

Northumberland County Council as the 6th largest geographical council, occupies the most north eastern tip of England. It covers a population of 308,000 people with 70% of residents living in the south east corner of the county, and employs 12,000 staff. It has 5000 kilometres of highways and provides services to 225 schools and 600 other premises in addition to direct services to all residents.

The Community and Environmental Services Directorate provides a wide range of services including:

- Highways
- Transport
- Planning and Conservation
- Facilities
- Property
- Waste management
- Trading Standards
- Libraries and Archives
- Customer Service

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At the start of the 1990s the Directorate had been a very different organisation. There was little understanding of customer service, no understanding of customer needs or expectations, a large amount of complacency and in many ways it represented a typical budget-driven public service. Compulsory Competitive Tendering was being introduced, benchmarking was becoming more common, and many of the services were ripe for external competition. The former DSO and DLO merged and developed a strategy for what was then 'Operational Services.'



## OUR APPROACH

Initial work undertaken by the Directorate itself included training 1500 staff in 'quality' and customer care and establishing a quality management system (BS5750); the journey had begun. As demands changed, the Directorate responded. Customer needs and expectations continued to develop and the desire to move from basic 'quality' to 'Excellence' grew.

It was at this point that Beverley MacIntyre, now a Director at Ad Esse, became involved with the organization.

*'My initial impression was of a very committed team of people who knew they could, and should, step up a gear. They were bursting with enthusiasm and determination to succeed, and what they needed was specialist advice on creating sustainable improvement.'*

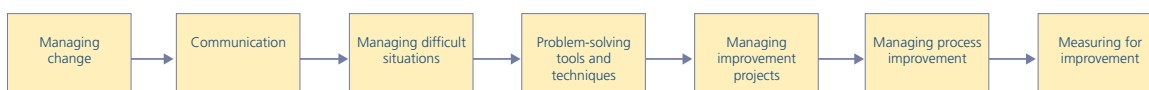
The senior team provided strong and visible leadership, there were numerous gifted individuals but what was missing was an overall framework and some of the disciplines required to become sustainably excellent. An assessment was undertaken using the Excellence Model and a programme of continuous improvement was developed with efforts increasingly focused. Key processes and sub-processes were identified, standards were achieved (BS 5750 turned into ISO 9001-2000 and was used along with other standards such as IIP, ISO 14001 and OHSAS 18001). One of the most significant strands of the improvement framework however was in developing internal people to create improvement.

## To Actuality...

There has been an unswerving belief in the need to create people within the Directorate who could bring about improvements. The first group of improvement facilitators were trained in 1998, and there have been three further groups trained. Even with natural turnover of staff this now means that there are a significant number of people able to facilitate others in improvement.

**Our approach in establishing this valuable resource has included the following steps:**

- Advice on selection of appropriate individuals
- **Provision of a six-day facilitator development programme:**



- Evaluation of individuals' progress
- Close work with the internal facilitation coordinator to enable her to take on an increasing role in the development programme.

All of this work has run parallel to continuing work with the senior team on business planning, leadership development, and management of key processes.

## MAKING IT REAL

You may be wondering at this stage just what is so different about this organisation when many others go down the road of facilitator development only to see their resource dissipated and decreasingly effective. There are two factors; firstly the level of commitment and belief within the organisation that this is the right thing to do, and secondly the highly developed input from Ad Esse that balances the need for generic skills with bespoke application and a deep understanding of the issues that affect the Directorate.

The internal person with responsibility for coordinating improvements, Liz Pringle, Quality Development Officer, felt it was essential to have a systematic approach to improvement projects, with each one having a trained facilitator. Whilst some excellent projects took place initially, there was a danger that impact would be lost. In 2002 therefore, an improvement team was set up to look at the improvement project process. As a result the process was mapped, with bespoke forms designed for project proposals, and clear role definitions for sponsors, team leaders, team members and facilitators involved with improvement teams.

**The number of teams has now risen to 28 since 2002, with examples of projects that include:**

- Benchmarking
- Performance Management
- Service Standards
- Stakeholder Consultation and Communication
- IIP, Training and Development
- Customer Perception

## THE BENEFITS

The projects undertaken and the outcomes achieved speak for themselves.

**They include:**

- Creating effective and efficient approaches to training and development
- Creating a systematic approach to managing performance
- Involving customers in the development of service standards
- Establishing effective mechanisms to manage consultation and communication with stakeholders
- Establishing effective benchmarking opportunities
- Establishing innovative methods to determine customer satisfaction

Community & Environmental Services have come a long way in their journey and the benefits they have realised are substantial. They believe that the skills they have developed have a positive impact not only on immediate projects, but the entire way in which the Directorate operates, the sense of self-worth engendered in individuals and beyond, into the community, with people using their skills in diverse community projects, for example one facilitator has become District Commissioner for Brownies.



# Making a Difference

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As Liz Pringle commented:

*'What this has done for over the years is to put us in a position whereby we can proactively manage and improve. It creates a real sense of being masters of our own destiny, giving us the ability to make a real difference'.*

John Nicholson, Executive Director for Community and Environmental Services, said:

*'Local Government needs to change radically, to satisfy the ever increasing expectations of citizens, customer and stakeholders and this will only be successfully achieved through the adoption of systems management and a continuous improvement process. The approach adopted by Community and Environmental Services, supported by Ad Esse, is seeking to ensure our organisation is best placed to respond to this challenge'.*

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