



Achieve Breakthrough

Case Study

Bath and North East Somerset Council – Revenue and Benefit Service

Process and Cultural Transformation culminating in a projected bottom-line revenue gain of over £210,000 in a single financial year, finalists for a National Culture Change Award with The Municipal Journal, and an exemplary re-assessment for Investors in People certification and re-accreditation for Charter Mark.

Background

The Revenue & Benefits Service of Bath and North East Somerset Council were suffering significant challenges over a 5 year period: -

- The integration of 2 services - Revenues and Benefits.
- Development of 3 Customer service points.
- Pilot for 'Flexible Working Policy' implementation i.e. hot desking and home working
- Electronic Data Management system implementation for front line Customer services and back office efficiencies
- Subject of a full BFI inspection adding additional pressures
- Customers demanding a more personalised and flexible service
- Overpayment errors amounting to £460,000 in lost subsidy in one year.

At the heart of which was a sizeable backlog in both revenue and benefit document processing that had been building up for 4 years. This backlog was masking a variety of inefficiencies in associated processes and systems and was exacerbated with low moral, a feeling of frustration and, in some cases, resignation that “things would never get better”.

The Compounding effect of these challenges on performance and customer satisfaction was detrimental and resulted in silo working, lethargy, stress and reactive-crisis-management.

The Challenge

Performance had begun to improve; however the Service was choked by the processing backlog. The initial challenge for Achieve Breakthrough was to re-ignite the ambition and alignment within the Service, develop trust and confidence with staff in a matter of weeks followed by the creation of a Change Programme to address the inefficiencies across the service.

The Solution

Re-launch of the Service – Five clear and specific goals

- Achieve Breakthrough lead a three day workshop with Senior Managers and Team Leaders, supported by Executive Directors and Members and re-launched the Service – with a new common Vision and priority initiatives that everyone could align behind.
- Five specific Service 'Quests' were born - Inherent in this was the acknowledgement from Managers that their thinking and ways of operating as Leaders required transforming.

Staff Engagement

- Staff workshops to re-ignite people's hearts and minds, raise ambition, involve and evolve the Vision. Staff at all levels set to work immediately tackling the Backlog Quest.
- Staff introduced to 'Breakthrough Thinking' - a way of working that allows for extraordinary results – giving staff tools to 'take responsibility to deliver Quests', build team relationships, raise concerns, make requests, bring their ideas and solutions forwards.

Leadership Coaching and Development

- Achieve Breakthrough set up 1:1 coaching relationships with Senior Managers focussing on active sponsorship and cultivating a high performance team environment.
- Training/coaching of an internal 'Breakthrough Change Coach' to design, champion and sustain the programme with Managers – coaching and facilitating meetings and workshops.
- Management Development Coaching Program to develop skills and generate a coaching culture that fosters trust, commitment and empowers Team Leaders to take responsibility and accountability for their service areas.
- Redesign of Management Meetings to provide an accountability structure and supportive environment for the Quests and Vision to be achieved.

The Results

Initial Building Block for Results – 'Clear the Backlog'

- The Backlog of 6000 documents cleared within 5 weeks and sustained.
– This backlog had been substantial for the previous 4 years - this achievement provided the platform to launch the full Change Programme, reinvigorating the staff and a new sense of belief that they could make a difference.

"Having a large backlog was demoralising, so clearing this was fantastic and really improved staff morale, as well as reducing our workload as we have significantly fewer complaint and chaser letters." **Heather Paget, Council Tax Processor**

Process Transformation Results

- Processing of all 'change in circumstances' in 12 days within 3 months, reducing process time 70% (39 days to 12 days) and 'new claims' process reduced by 24%.
 - Document types processed within target timeframes, monitored daily with accurate workflow measurement and reported weekly ensuring immediate communications
 - Efficient prioritisation and workload allocation, benefits calculations and fraud referrals
- An increase of 47% in successful Sanctions for Fraudulent Claims within a year
 - Leading to improved CPA rating for security and performance in procedures for referring claims for Investigation and efficient use of Investigators time
- Communication and co-operation processes between Revenue & Benefit Service and Customer Services re-invented impacting accuracy and speed of processing directly
- Introduction of same claim numbers for benefit cases - idea debated for several years, was introduced within 2 months
- Recovery process transformed through
 - Daily issue of reminders to ease peaks and troughs versus monthly
 - New methods of recovery introduced such as Bankruptcy and charging orders
 - Pro-active recovery introduced by visiting debtors and cold calling
 - Added direct debit mandates to reminder notices
- Implementation of new IT systems such as VICTER for rent referrals
- Implemented monthly monitoring to allow for rapid action and decision making, including:
 - Collection fund in order to understand the impact of changes on the bottom line
 - Housing Benefit Funding to assess the gaps impact on performance, subsidy and overpayment recovery

Key Performance Indicator Improvements

Performance Measure	Previous Year	Year following Programme
Time taken to process change of circumstances	39 days	12 days
Time taken to process new claims	42 days	32 days
Percentage of Council tax collected within the year	96.7%	99%
Percentage of Non Domestic rates collected within the year	96.7%	99%

Financial Results

- Service delivered within budget and achieved the efficiency targets and cost savings as set out in the service plan for the year.
- Cash savings for the year:
 - £165,330 - subsidy gained through reducing LA error below threshold - achieved from position of £460,000 in lost subsidy within the previous year.
 - £21,000- Cash flow savings due to prompt recovery of council tax debts.
 - £16,500 – Cash flow savings due to prompt recovery of NNDR debts
 - £13,500 – estimated efficiency savings due to increased level of direct debits.
- Non cashable savings
 - Council Tax & NNDR debt reduced by £2 million, making efficient use of resources possible in future years and an eventual reduction in bad debt provisions, having a positive impact on the collection fund. In turn enabling more funds available to meet future efficiency savings without reducing service levels or standards.

Specific Financial Project Results

- Reduced LA error overpayments to within minimum threshold within a year. Leading to a reduction in claimant error and number/ value of overpayments created, which in turn allows the service to concentrate on improving recovery against existing debts.
- The collection of 99% of debt through Council Tax and Non Domestic rates within a year – an increase from 96.7% on previous year. Arrears outstanding on Council tax at year end reduced by nearly £1.2 million compared to the previous year and by over £800,000 on Non Domestic rates. An additional 2,709 people choose to pay by direct debit equating to a saving of £13,500. All these achievements have improved cash flow and made recovery of future debts easier.

Customer Service and Reputation

Process and performance improvements have enabled a marked transformation in customer service. An internal customer survey comparison saw customer satisfaction increase from 71% to 81.7% in 5 months. This is demonstrated through written acknowledgement from stakeholders.

"I want to tell you how much I felt the Revenue and Benefit Service had improved recently. It is great, brilliant and made a real difference. Whatever you are doing it is working!"

Customer – Partnership Agency

"I would like to thank your team for an excellent and considerate service this year"

Benefit Claimant

"You are correct to say that the process of rate relief is very complicated. It is, however, much clearer now in my eyes following your response. Thank you for responding so quickly and efficiently"

Business Rate Payer

"I would like to thank the recovery department who have been extremely helpful with regards my council tax recently. It makes a change that there are people who listen and understand that not everyone is born with money and can afford the extra charges for council tax nowadays"

Struggling Council Tax Payer

Fundamentally, Achieve Breakthrough helped us to develop the drive and enthusiasm to refocus the service. Improved customer service has been the beneficiary and the work carries on!"

Helen Lossl, Strategic Manager

High Performance Culture

The Culture has significantly transformed, building confidence through tackling each challenge.

- Culture of Empowerment and Coaching is felt at all levels of the Service
- Flexibility, Willingness and Commitment to provide what is needed – 5 project teams established from Staff workshops and sustain the programme
- Customer Service and Process Orientation resulting in cross team working and sharing of resources
- Proactive Management of Set Backs with enthusiasm and commitment to resolve has meant problems can be identified and dealt with early rather than focussing on the affects and upset of a problem.
- Outcome and Action focus attained through implementing a system for monitoring the effectiveness of actions towards producing the outcomes for the service.
- Accountability and Responsibility - Awareness of the broader picture and team members knowing their responsibility within the whole system resulting in Team Leaders defining and implementing their own team plans.
- Productive Straight Communications - Conversations based on facts, addressing problems early, managing concerns, promises and requests for actions and listening to one another
- Challenging and Creativity – from all levels in relation to achieving Service goals and commitments
- Maintaining Momentum – A Staff group established to support and develop the growing culture

This culture transformation is supported through **Investors in People** service inspection conducted (Investors in People and Quality South West) post the change Programme where the following observations were made: -

Exert from the IIP review report from Richard Sloane, IIP Assessor: “The Corporate Change programme, partly managed by Achieve Breakthrough, has been of immense benefit to the whole Service and provides evidence of compliance with nearly all the Investor in People indicators as follows:

- *All staff are involved in the planning at Team Leader level*
- *The Training Plan reflects the skills needed to power those plans and support the challenge groups that have been created.*
- *All staff are involved including part time and home working personnel*
- *The new Competencies Framework has been modelled on the need to be more ‘customer focused’. Management behaviours are included and understood by all staff.*
- *The top management in the Council has been made aware of the successes of the challenges and has acknowledged the effort made by staff to meet self imposed targets*
- *Everyone involved in the challenges groups feels valued, inspired and contributing to the success of the Service*
- *Llearning & development is delivered to ensure staff are fit for purpose in meeting targets*
- *Individual challenge groups are now evaluating their successes over the first several months and agreeing targets for the new financial year*
- *Many areas of business are being improved through the change to processes and better understanding by staff of the workings of each team. They also have an improved vision of how the whole Service can work as a single team and share best practice*

It was a privilege to review this Service in terms of its culture and commitment to investing in people. Most employees interviewed were extremely positive about top and senior management and their ability to focus on staff development needs and create the right culture in which to operate.”

Richard Sloane, IIP Assessor

The Future

Staff trust, confidence and enthusiasm has now meant the Service is in a position to deliver a further step change with all Core performance indicators and to fully participate in corporate strategic agendas. In short, there is a new sense of belief, pride and commitment, built on fantastic performance, to what is possible for this flagship service to deliver and enable wider Council priorities.

"From being a service with significant pressures and backlogs, we now have a service transformed, fit for purpose, with staff proud of their success and working together as a team delivering service improvements for our customers"

**Malcolm Hanney (Cllr.) Executive Member for Resources, Bath & NE Somerset
Council**

"This has been an incredible year, which has seen us nominated for awards, achieve Charter Mark status, gain commendation from our IIP assessment and generally improve against all of our key performance indicators, but the biggest change for me is the attitude of the staff, the language we all use is much more pro-active and there is a feel of ownership and determination to sustain and improve the service further, we know there is still a lot to do, but we are now much clearer on what we need to do."

Ian Savigar – Head of Revenue & Benefit Service

Compared with when I first started working here 2 years ago there is a massive difference in attitudes and in the way that we work together. People are more willing to get involved and to help.

Marie Bruton, Administration Team Leader

"It has made a difference to a lot of people that Management were really on board with us, and appreciated what was being done in each and every challenge and achievement. Committed management of promises and requests by all were also a good idea, as it gave ownership to many things, and meant that things would be followed up"

Elaine Riddle, Benefit Processor