

## In austerity, what is it about organisational culture that supports meaningful community engagement?

Local government has, for the last 8 years, been in austerity measures. This period has raised some unique challenges for the UK and specifically for local government as the central government's continued austerity drive creates a period of crippling financial pressure. This has resulted in unprecedented changes in the delivery of public services, which is almost totally dependent upon consulting with services users and achieving a real understanding of the diverse needs of citizens' needs and expectations (1).

The traditional local government model as the provider of public services has shifted radically over the last 8 years to one of enabler. In the West Midlands, official figures suggest the region's councils had lost 2.8 per cent of their funding for core services. This equated to £80.00 per household, however, according to the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities, (SIGOMA), the true figure is 7.1 per cent, because the Government includes in those figures, ring-fenced budgets and reserved funds, such as public health money, is static and cannot be used to compensate for deficits in other services. This equates to £162 per household and evidence suggests the hardest hit are to the most economically challenged and vulnerable members of society.

On the other side of the equation are not only ongoing reductions in staff head count, exploring innovative ways to deliver services, but also the extinction of whole services. This combination of fiscal and employee reductions has instigated massive transformation initiatives and cultural change. In their article, *The critical few: components of a truly effective culture*, Jon Katzenbach, Rutger von Post and James Thomas, state that organisational culture can be changed by working on a heart and mind philosophy, where emotion becomes the driving force for cultural change. Whilst top down communication has an understandable rationale, it can often feel unauthentic and uprooting and therefore, is not felt at an emotional level. In times when engaging the hearts and minds of citizens is crucial, it could be argued that buy in of cultural change of this order first has to be accepted by employees, modelled by leaders and joined up with everyone.

(1) *Innovating out of austerity in local government* Patrick Dunleavy, Paul Rainford and Jane Tinkler, London School of Economics and Political Science 2011

Engaging with individuals on an emotional level to facilitate behavioural change, involves 3 key elements: identification of the critical behaviours that can become habitual and to embed these across people management practices, a sense of organisational identity, driven by profound existing emotional elements of the current culture and the informal leaders: who are the individuals who have credibility and trust among others, even if they don't have formal authority through their role. Observation and duplication of key positive behaviours can create viral change that spreads through an organisation

This report considers a narrow and deep analysis of the elements of organisational culture, during austerity, that supports meaningful community engagement and how local government organisations can create a culture which engages with citizens and communities in a mutually beneficial way during this difficult time.

Local authorities are in simple terms, having to deliver more, or at a minimum the same, universal services with less resources whilst increasing overall customer satisfaction. This has given rise to the need to embrace the context of varied approaches such as multi agency partnerships, shared services, commissioning services, root and branch reviews of internal services, investment in technology and increased collaborative working. Maintaining staff morale and building for the future are also key business priorities.

In particular, our research, conducted by semi structured interviews across a range of professionals from both the public and third sector, sought to identify thematic behaviours that supported the participative democracy model where communities can meaningfully engage during austerity. Developing meaningful citizen engagement is now more important than ever as a major feature will be the growing need to understand the local demand for services and how residents wish their services to be delivered.

## Research Objectives

Our research objectives were multiple. We wanted to evaluate the primary research that we carried out to understand:

- What organisational cultures result in meaningful community engagement?
- Were the people in our case studies who demonstrated best practice approaches to community engagement one-off's? Would they operate in this way in any environment?
- What is the impact of austerity on all of the above?
- As our research was cross sector including a variety of local government settings as well as the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector we wanted to understand what differences are there between these organisational cultures? What can we learn from each other?

## Research Scope

The scope of this research is limited to organisations delivering services to communities in the West Midlands, and for non-local government organisations was limited to those where services are commissioned by the local authority. We included District, Borough, County and City Councils to ensure we cover the full range of local authority structures within the report and therefore the findings will have application across the full range of local government providers.

## Research Methodology

### **Data collection**

The Methodology consisted of a number of semi structured, qualitative interviews across a diverse range of roles and sectors. This included interviews with both senior managers from local government and the third sector, staff and citizens.

### **Literature survey**

Secondary data was referenced using a variety of information sources, including academic and commercial abstracts, and Internet search engines.

### **Data analysis**

When all interviews were complete, we undertook a detailed analysis of responses, in particular, identifying commonalities across the behavioural indicators that were identified.

## Findings across the Third Sector

### Overview of sample group

- Barnados – Emily Phelps (Regional Assistant Director)
- Resources for Autism – Liz Dresner (Assistant Director)
- French Squared – Mandatt Kaur (Midlands Operation Manager)

**Barnados** work with the most vulnerable children and families and are commissioned by the local authority to provide support services to troubled families. Regional Assistant Director, Emily Phelps describes the Barnados philosophy as 'working with the most vulnerable children and families, with the voice of the child' as the overriding factor.

We asked Emily, 'what is it about your organisational culture, as a third sector body, which, if at all, makes a difference to those public sector organisations delivering similar services to people and communities?' In response she stated that creativity and flexibility were key factors, 'we take a different approach, a different level of outreach.' Small caseloads allow more face to face, very solutions focused, nurturing, hand holding, befriending models. She cited tenacity as a key factor in successful engagement with service users.

The organisational goals of Barnados are measured using an outcomes framework. Families self-rate their own achievements supported by Barnados workers. When asked about what measures of success looks like from the client and wider service user / community perspective, Emily explained that service users have feedback models from which they rate the service provided. This means that they measure their progress against their outcomes. The leadership are afforded more creativity and the Board of Trustees have much more flexibility to deal with commissioned pieces of work. Emily continued, 'with lesser chains of command we can do research around what the area needs; negotiate with LA's on what funding should be put in to achieve outcomes. Whilst the staff are low earners financially, they share a real belief that the work they do makes a real difference'.

Each piece of work undertaken by Barnardos has a contract which is monitored and an open door policy around complaints. Visibility across all levels of the organisation is high and there are very few complaints.

*We have an outcomes framework; working with families who self-rate.*

**Emily Phelps, Regional Assistant Director, Barnardos**

*We are very close to our service users and parents set the outcomes for their children - we do our best to achieve them.*

**Mandatt Kaur, Midlands Operations Manager**

**French Squared** run a short breaks provision for Children and families this includes providing after school clubs, weekends and school holidays. The children supported are on the high end of the autistic spectrum and have varied mobility problems. The organisation adopts a multi-agency approach and directly employs a group of specialist therapists and teachers. Midlands Operations Manager, Mandatt Kaur describes her organisation as child focused and open to all children and families despite their background. The organisation is a social enterprise therefore all the income goes back into the service.

As with Barnardos, French Squared works within an outcome framework and measures the achievement of goals in this way.

'We are very child focused', stated Mandatt, 'and we support parents with other establishments such as schools as advocates.' One huge gap in Walsall was an understanding of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) in Walsall, which has been overlooked by many services. SPD is a condition that exists when sensory signals don't get organised into appropriate responses. A person with SPD finds it difficult to process and act upon information received through the senses, which creates challenges in performing countless everyday tasks. Motor clumsiness, behavioral problems, anxiety, depression, school failure, and other impacts may result if the disorder is not treated effectively.

As a family social enterprise that has the hearts and minds of their employees and volunteers, along with a shared belief of delivering outcomes for the benefit of the child, French Squared identified a gap in the market and started to fill it.

'We wanted to get an understanding of the leadership style that existed in a social enterprise and what the key drivers were', Mandatt explained, 'there is a very inspirational leadership who trust us to get the job done. They are down to earth and very humble. Our leader is a qualified physiotherapist, Jenny French, who pushed the sensory intervention and introduced it into the UK from the USA. .

Mandatt expanded; 'We have always been close to our service users and our leaders encourage and empower us to make our own decisions. There is limited bureaucracy so things can happen faster. The budget cuts have had limited impact we are happy that it is a cut and not a complete removal from the service. We use volunteers predominantly. We work with a number of local organisations and charities and enjoy a strong relationship with these organisations as well as our volunteers'.

Reflecting the significance of tenacity, Mandatt added 'we are willing to adapt services in relation to budget cuts and undertake partnership work with Local Authorities and other local organisations. We network with other organisations for the good of the child. We do not see them as competition'. Clearly, the focus is on the child and the organisation is happy to share information that may hold in the name of improving the quality of a child's life.

*We remain fun loving, creative and go over and beyond duty; we go the extra mile. Decisions are at a low level passed through the chairman we have no complaints from our employees the number of grievances and disciplinary are none existing.*

**Mandatt Kaur, Midlands Operations Manager**

Despite fiscal challenges, French Squared is determined to help distressed families. They are looking at other funding streams and bidding for grants. They acknowledge the valuable contribution made by their loyal volunteers without whom they wouldn't be able to provide a service. They have built strong links with the University of Wolverhampton through Jenny French and have taken staff on through internships. Recruitment for volunteers is ongoing and a very accessible training programme is provided.

Mandatt concluded 'We are determined not to give up on our families and will continue to strive to enable progress within the family. More support for the child and scope for the family. Our OFSTED inspection resulted in 'Outstanding' service which is a great outcome'.

**Resources for Autism** aim to provide practical services for those with a diagnosis of autism. It is a high quality, inclusive and responsive provision both in community settings and at home. They try to provide high quality, inclusive and responsive provision both in community settings and at home. Their strap line is 'little and local' as they know people struggle to travel far and they believe individuals are best served within the community where they live. They hope to enable individuals with autism to lead fulfilling and fun lives whilst providing useful strategies for families and carers so that home life can be as positive as possible and they aim to help their service users become as independent as possible.

With expertise available to respond to the most challenging situations, the organisation's goal is that 'no one is refused our service'. Support is also provided to other organisations such as schools to work effectively with service users and to implement positive strategies around behaviour, which some may find challenging. The charity is funded by various funding streams, including trusts and foundations, community fundraising and commissioning work.

Liza Dresner (Resources for Autism) stated that 'we are a very flat organisation. Almost no hierarchy so families and individuals can talk to decision makers directly and quickly'.

The organisation has a real feel of a 'positive can- do approach' which is not only child centre focussed but also on improving family life so as to enable parents with responsibility for children to make the right decisions.

When describing the nature and key features of the organisation's relationship with its service users, Liza added 'We use a key worker system so that anyone on service with us has one person who they relate to as much as possible. We believe that positive relationships are at the core of best practice and to that end try to be as consistent and reliable as possible. We try to be as flexible as we can, offering support at a range of times and a range of venues although this is inevitably limited by lack of money. We are a relatively small organisation and try to be as accessible as we can. All service users and families can and do influence the way we work and the services we offer.'

## Learning from the third sector

The third sector organisations are not only non-hierarchical and streamlined when it comes to decision making but very heavily reliant on volunteers to deliver the majority of the services on offer to service users.

A delegated model of decision making is in existence, giving managers the autonomy to make changes and decisions without having to seek approval from more senior people in the hierarchy.

In a local authority, the burden of being holders of the public purse and being accountable to politicians, with the layers of governance wrapped around this, provide a limiting constraint to the extent such can be transferred. . Whilst it can be argued that bureaucracy is inhibitive, there is an element of public accountability that must be considered in order to comply with statutory duties.

Multi-disciplinary teams have been in place within third sector organisations for a number of years now and as the organisation is smaller there is a greater understanding of what each of the disciplines do and a much greater will to work together for better outcomes for children and their families.

The culture within the third sector is very much driven by achieving outcomes innovatively and creatively. A flexible approach is a must for the third sector with no silo working. The services are 'user centred' i.e. if a service user cannot access a service, they change the service not the service user. There is limited bureaucracy and rules, staff believe in what they do and despite being paid at the lower end of the market, they are really committed to achieving better outcomes for children and families.

When staff believe in what they are employed to do there is already an increased positive motivation and passion for the work they undertake. People who volunteer genuinely want to help causes. This may be the most difficult of values to transfer to local government as there have been a number of staff employed over many years who have been subjected to a number of restructures which may have affected their outlook on their role and the organisation as a whole.

However, the 'hearts and minds work' can influence how staff are working and remains a critical focus for organisations in order to ensure that in achieving meaningful community engagement, the workforce is fit for purpose going forward.

The budget pressures and cuts determined by local authorities have encouraged the third sector to change the way in which they deliver services within the means they have been allocated. Third sector leaders consulted as part of this project state that when commissioning services the local authority focus more on numbers of children and families rather than the outcomes required and question whether the commissioners truly realise the benefits to the families receiving a service from the third sector.

## Birmingham City Council

### Interviewees

- Karen Cheney – Integrated Services Head, Place Directorate, Selly Oak Constituency
- Nadeen Justice – Tenant Participation Officer, Place Directorate, Northfield

In 2014, the Integrated Services Head of the Selly Oak Constituency in Birmingham, Karen Cheney's 'community scaffolding project', was a runner up in Birmingham's prestigious Chamberlain Awards, for her enormous contribution to enabling citizens to deliver services the council could no longer resource in her constituency. The term "community scaffolding" was coined by an active local resident, Leanne Youngson, at the Selly Oak District Convention 2012 and whilst it is referring to a project, Karen told us that in essence, it is a whole ethos, a way of working.

The Selly Oak district office recognised that it had to work in a different way so that it could support groups to undertake some of the work themselves, recognising that the community was somewhat de-skilled by a culture of reliance upon the City Council as a provider of services.

Karen stated that by focusing on the important role of enabling, rather than delivering, the district office began to work closely with local voluntary and community organisations.

In responding to the skills gaps that existed within the community, Karen arranged for residents to receive training. 'The first three sessions of the project – running community events, community asset transfer and fundraising – were open to all groups in the Selly Oak District and embodied the ethos of Standing Up for Birmingham'.

Karen believed that using residents to co facilitate some of the training sessions was a powerful way of making the training successful. "the words of the residents were taken on board much more than ours" she said. This example shows Karen's commitment to moving away from paternalistic intervention and her belief of an asset based approach as opposed to a deficit one. Using scarce funds wisely, local groups across wards collaborated to decide upon priority projects themselves, voting with 'time dollars'.

The term Scaffolding "perfectly encapsulated the supportive role the district should be prioritising.

*Karen Cheney*

Even when huge financial cuts took place in 2014/15, with the loss of the community chest budget, the community, under Karen's leadership continued to strive forward, with residents being trained in the skill of governance to take responsibility for asset transfer themselves.

As lead for 'Standing up for Birmingham', Karen told us that representative and participative democracy complement each other. The City Council owns the buildings and the community organisations manage them

So, in a constituency where skills are shared, time banks are in operation and with their own Twitter feed with political commitment given to support for all of their initiatives, we sought Karen's reflections on how she had engaged not just a small element of the community, but a whole constituency.

"Austerity is irrelevant; we should be doing this anyway, building up resilient, strong, inclusive communities."

*Karen Cheney*

In response, she emphasised that communication in the form of continuous conversations, within a framework of openness and honesty was vital. A high level of visibility was also apparent. 'We all get involved', said Karen. 'If gazebos need to be put up, we (the officers), get out there and help to put them up. We go as volunteers, not dignitaries'

She believes that the process by which her teams do things is much more important than what is being done. "We create the conditions", she said.

At the start of the project, Karen ran an 'un-conference', a free for all, with no agenda, hierarchical seating or top table, it was just an opportunity for honest and 'human' dialogue'. 'The City Council is a cooperative, not a business', she told us. 'The residents pay taxes. There needs to be an exchange of social value, people have worth so it is vital that this is recognised. We have our own awards for residents and, with local ward members getting involved in the nomination process'.

The constituency works with credible partners, such as Birmingham University, who have run workshops for the community. They have even worked with Microsoft, who developed an app for the large student community that lives 'on the patch'.

At a recent community conversation event, one citizen stated that 'the emphasis is upon the style of working and shared values, not structures and strategies, relationships rather than procedure.' Another added 'this type of work does not replace Birmingham City Council responsibility to provide essential services, it complements it'.

Karen is in agreement, 'the intervention/prevention model stops expensive reactionary responses.' She told us 'this project perfectly illustrates the future priorities and areas of work the council need to be focusing on – less on service delivery and more of a supporting, collaborative and enabling role working with local people and neighbourhood's'.

In 2013, a local authority tenant in Birmingham won the Midland Network Resident Involvement Tenant of the Year, for his work and commitment to his local community. Arron Stuart Blake, a neighbourhood champion, has helped to turn around a deprived estate in Birmingham, in what began as adverse circumstances.

In 2009, Arron was subject to neighbour complaints due to an Aviary he had erected at his home. From what was an initial negative engagement with a tenant, the officers within the team identified an opportunity to build a mutually positive and wider response. It transpired that Arron was passionate about community spirit and when recognising and rectifying the issue with the Aviary, the support, motivation and opportunity provided by the Councils' housing officers enabled and empowered him to turn his attentions to helping the community take pride in their estate.

There is an element of  
bravery and the  
willingness to take risks

*Nadeen Justice*

Working alongside those and other officers, he now walks the estate regularly, supports a gardening club for senior citizens and attends a variety of meetings with credible partners such as the local Police and elected members. In May 2013, Arron developed a social media profile for the local community, setting up Twitter accounts and Facebook pages as medium to report activities on the estate. He is now involved with local businesses, schools and residents, helping to resolve issues for the community and keeps the estate clean and tidy by arranging regular litter picks.

The tenant participation officer, Nadeen Justice, is incredibly proud of Aaron's efforts and shares his values. In analysing what really makes a difference in releasing the potential such as that offered by Arron, she summarised; 'there is an element of bravery and the willingness to take risks involved in perma austerity community engagement. We have a tower block on the estate that was in desperate need of a makeover. We had no budget available to put as much as a lick of paint on the railings around the block, we did, however, have the determination and the tenacity to do it ourselves.' So, in conjunction with the whole community, a task group was formed of supervised local children, who spent a day painting the railings as a fun activity. The local children now challenge each other if any one of them drops litter and they are very proud of their estate and their community.

Nadeen arranged an end of year gathering for tenants, stakeholders, partners and elected members. She walked the length and breadth of the local shopping area, in her own time, to ask for donations for the event. Remarkably, she managed to obtain champagne, food hampers, bouquets, Christmas cards, restaurant vouchers, wine, Christmas cake and a professional photographer, all free of charge. When I asked her why she had gone to the lengths she had for the community, she summed it up by saying, "it was an absolute pleasure, I did it and would do it all again because I genuinely care, I love the people."

## Warwickshire Council

Warwickshire County Council has afforded an increased emphasis on community engagement as a result of austerity, recognising that maximising community capacity is seen as crucial to achieving the levels of savings required, leading to the current position where community groups now directly manage and deliver services such as libraries and youth centres.

In Warwickshire, the approach to community engagement is delivered through a set of community forums which meet with communities quarterly to discuss issues. It was acknowledged that whilst effective, this approach could still be considered as 'safe' and approaches still need to be explored which meet with the citizen on their own terms and flexibility about approach was crucial to extend the of such activity all parts of the community.

Recognising the focus on value for money, Dan Green, Localities and Partnership Manager in Warwickshire, highlighted that it was sometimes very difficult to predict and/or measure value for money or tangible financial outcomes derived from investment in community engagement. In the age of austerity where there is an ever increasing need to engage and unlock community capacity, being unable to demonstrate efficient use of tax payers' money in investing in such remains an ongoing challenge.

In the debate around shaping of future services and determining local priorities, the risks and benefits from shifting from a 'top down' to a 'bottom up' approach remains live. A 'top down' approach is often seen as less organic, and potentially the service users feeling 'done to' as opposed to 'done with'. The alternative, more organic model, of facilitating and enabling 'bottom up' model is an attractive one, ensuring that services are created and designed to meet demand and need with the caveat that they are not restricted to the views of a self-selecting vocal community group, which may not reflect a wider community need, leading to a risk to value for money outcomes and impact.

A positive attitude toward risk taking came through as a very strong feature for Warwickshire's culture in the approach to community engagement. Offering a positive and enabling leadership style, the Chief Executive has encouraged and supported a less risk averse approach to the way of working, with a key message that 'it is okay to fail one third of the time'..

Another perspective on risk is that deriving from potential organisational impact and consequence. The way Councils are structured can mean that investment in one community initiative, by one service or from one budget may result in consequences upon other service areas within the Council or its partners. A failure to recognise these wider consequences, or tackle the complexity of such, together with a lack of corporate perspective can both be barriers to investment, as can individual and collective concern over the impact on continued employment within the existing provider organisation.

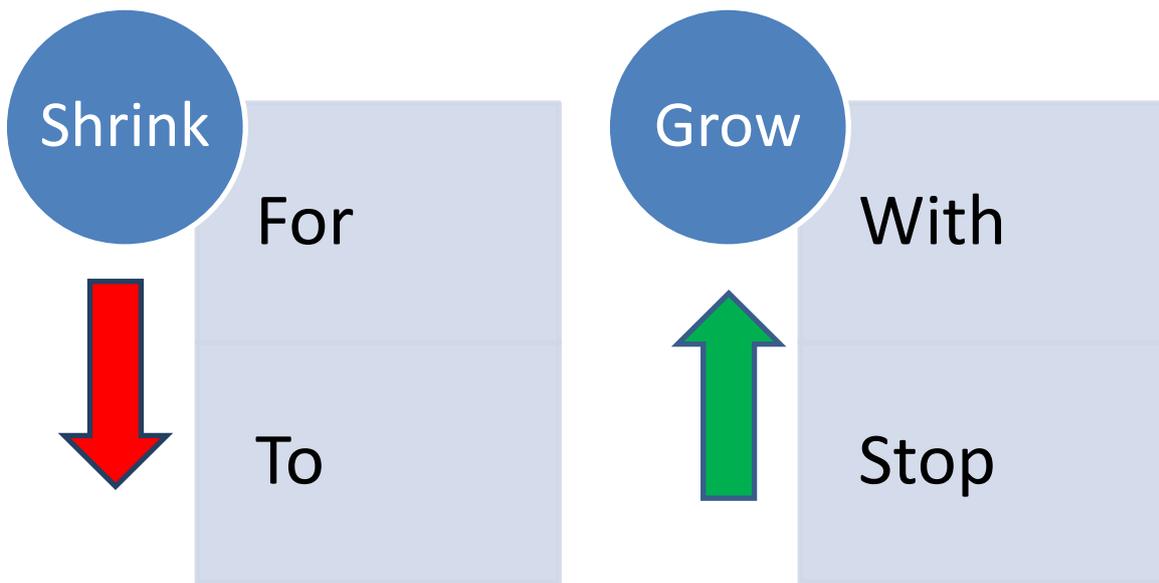
Dan Green argues that flexibility and willingness to accept and shape new responses is a key requirement for an organisation wishing to improve its community engagement. This requires 'staff to look at things in a non-traditional way'. Inevitably, large multi-functional organisation with high degrees of public accountability and scrutiny can become procedural and rule bound, within which a developing culture can prevail which leads to a defensive and negative approach i.e. looking for reasons not to do things or why they can't be done. In Dan's view, this dynamic was shifting as new and younger entrants to the sector reflected changing social norms, with less focus and sometimes respect, for undue bureaucracy, leading to an approach based on solutions and cutting through of the 'way things are done round here'.

“Communities are hard-wired to support each other”.

*Dan Green*

The other prevailing characteristics according to Dan Green are initiative and creativity. 'In some areas of community work we are breaking new ground so there is no process or rule book to be followed. What is needed is an attitude for looking for reasons to say yes rather than reasons to say no'.

Trust is a crucial element in this approach. In summary the diagram below demonstrates in simple form the shift occurring in public services. Traditionally local government organisations have delivered services to communities for communities. The new paradigm for the future in these days of austerity is to shrink in those areas, and achieve growth in the areas of delivering services with communities or indeed to stop delivering them altogether.



To achieve this requires a three way relationship based on trust. Council employees need to trust communities to deliver services without over regulating that activity in a way that stifles creativity. A belief that communities will respond to support services which they are interested in. Dan Green's belief is that communities are hard-wired to support each other so the real challenge is how Councils encourage this without over regulating.

The other key aspect around trust which underpins the ability for an organisation to unlock the above behaviours around creativity, initiative and flexibility is the degree of trust that employees have in their leaders. Although the Chief Executive has promoted and empowered staff to see failure as evidence that the organisation is willing to trying new approaches and be creative, the extent to which this has permeated the organisational culture and whether the day to day experience of staff reinforces this is a different question? According to Dan Green this is still a work in progress.

## Walsall Council

Our research suggested there are pockets of best practice across Walsall Council where community engagement is excellent, this being very much dependent on the nature of the function and role and the motivation and demeanour of individual members of staff. For example a frontline waste operative, working very much in the community, will have opportunity to engage with individuals as representative voices within the community and gain both messages and insight on how services can be delivered differently and better. However, this requires a personal recognition and willingness to see such as part of their role, in order to deem it appropriate for them to engage in that way. In contrast, a Social Worker working in the Child Protection service may be constrained from effectively engaging as the service and the functions it performs may be deemed as a 'threat' to families whose children may have to be removed as a result of the professional engagement and responsibilities.

Jamie Morris (Executive Director – Neighbourhoods) stated that, *"My services are mainly frontline which enables an automatic dialogue. There is the area partnership working to give their views and identify much better with them. There are some skilled staff who are known in their localities who customers can converse with."*

The Council is increasingly moving towards engaging with communities on a much more regular basis and do see this as a very important part of shaping the services in the future.

According to Michael Hicklin (Service Manager – Employment and Day Opportunity), *"There are a range of ways to engage, we give the heads up to the carers of our older service users, we send out questionnaires, we received feedback from organised public events with politicians. Leadership has been engaged as well as the politicians which is good for the service users to see and ask questions. The portfolio holder was influential that we engaged with 50% plus of carers involved and consulted appropriately. The communications team were really good at documenting and publishing in the press effectively."*

The main measure of success for managers at Walsall Council are positive outcomes for the citizens of Walsall as well as a steady decline in the number of complaints.

Resilience, empowerment, innovative, patient, flexible, responsive to change, adaptable are some of the words that were referred to none of which should come as a surprise. The Chief Executive stated that managers need to be as open, transparent and honest as possible, if they can have information which can be shared then there should be no reason why this is not shared and if they don't then they need to say just that.

Those interviewed offered the views that staff have dealt well with the changes since 2010 and are managing their own feelings and difficulties, which was seen as a positive measure of resilience and focus by the organisation. The Chief Executive recognises that managers at all levels should be caring and understanding of their staff needs and has encouraged managers to 'hug their staff', in the metaphorical sense.

The changes required within the council do not differ within the different levels of the organisation. However, it is recognised that there will be higher expectations from managers to stimulate and manage change.

Whilst pockets of good culture exist within the Council Alan Michell (Head of Service – Youth Support Service) highlighted; *“Culture and structural change need to go hand in glove. You will not get cultural change from structure changes but if both support each other it can be successful. It is a symbiotic relationship...You have to empower at all levels, a way of doing that is leading by example where you show staff to be open, share in challenging, share you have made a mistake this can give staff more confidence.”*

Whilst all managers recognised about a positive culture, there was no common or shared expression of how this was presently defined. However, respondents demonstrated a strong and shared belief of the characteristics of a positive culture which could make a difference when engaging with the community.

Frequent changes in political leadership and direction were cited as having a huge impact on proposals driven by officers. For example there was large scale engagement with the communities around closing a number of services across the Walsall borough. Some of the savings proposal were withdrawn by politicians which may have left officers with two immediate problems, one of which was that staff were ready to leave on redundancy, some had made serious decisions regarding their futures and had received their redundancy figures to move on. A sudden change in direction can leave staff feeling low in morale and de-motivated and can have very serious repercussions for services. Perhaps more importantly for our research, discussions had been held with the communities to enable them to run some of the services and take full responsibility for them. Clearly again relationships with the communities could be damaged, although if politicians were making decisions in line with community engagement this could also improve relationships and trust with the council as a whole.

Ineffective technology can also hinder projects and timelines with a lack of preparedness or willingness to adopt an 'invest to save' approach and according to the Chief Executive, further obstacles may be fear of change and a deficit in levels of emotional intelligence and how this can inform service development and decision making. Most all respondents referenced the value and quality of the often undefined (if not 'mysterious') local authority public service ethic which it was

considered binds everyone within the organisation together, despite the increasing emphasis on business based and commercial approaches .

A lack of collaboration within services can be a hindrance; Executive Director of Resources, Rory Borealis has been the ambassador of driving systems thinking through Walsall Council and believes that developing a new mindset in Walsall is harder to move away from the norms. Andrea Potts – (Assistant Director Early Help) stated that, *“Silo working either at directorate or service levels is not beneficial... budget pressures, time constraints. Sometimes we don't get it right for our own staff from their perspectives.”*

Senior Managers in Walsall Council see the need to work more effectively across the organisation in collaboration, which requires investment of time to really understand what services offer and are capable of delivering this should then inform the rationale behind the proposed changes. Andrea Potts, highlighted the differences encountered when working closely in wider partnership arrangements and the contrast in organisational cultures. Schools for example need to be much more involved in Early Help to improve the learning outcomes of the children. You have to convince partners by establishing common ground in relation to outcomes for children and families. The common ground will then drive partnership working.

Some managers felt that cultural change on its own may not be enough. Few resources means continuously re-prioritising and looking at ways to work more innovatively and creatively, a question though is, are our staff who may have been in place for years able and competent to work in a different way?

Engagement with staff also is required earlier now to ensure that they do not feel left out. The Chief Executive reflected that; *“A psychologically well-adjusted workforce with people who acknowledge that change will bring psychological adjustments and can handle the fact that it will be difficult...there is an element of survivor syndrome. People who stay also need attention. We are always in the process of reviewing posts. We shouldn't expect them to be grateful for their jobs.”*

Respondents emphasised the need for more lateral, rather than vertical, thinking, together with a more entrepreneurial culture in order to identify smarter ways of working with and for communities. Building flexibility into organisational structures was also seen as crucial, 'staff need to stop looking at their job descriptions, they need to be adaptable and pick up short term projects at the appropriate levels.

In concluding, the Chief Executive shared a quote to which he has referred to in the past;

*“It is not enough to say that public managers create results that are valued; they must be able to show that the results obtained are worth the cost of private consumption and unrestrained liberty forgone in producing the desirable results. Only then can we be sure that some public value has been created.”*

## Wychavon District Council

Within Wychavon, the definition of meaningful consultation goes beyond asking communities what they think; it is about 'really listening to communities'. Specific consultations, for example on the recent budgets, are important to help prioritise spend, but engagement needs to be more about developing ongoing relationships, working informally and innovatively to get communities to share their views. The Council operates from a basis that they do not have all the answers, and seeks to work with communities to find the best solutions. This approach lies at the heart of the organisational culture – operating with an openness that seeks to engage communities to help develop strategy.

They are positively embracing new ways to connect and engage with communities which go beyond community forums, connecting through Facebook and other social media and community visits in more unusual locations including village shops, local fetes, pubs and businesses. However the emerging (and attractively cost effective) trend that local authorities should only connect with communities digitally is one that Wychavon rejects. They still retain a walk-in service as there is an ongoing need to continue to connect with people who cannot engage digitally, emphasising all parts of the community must continue to have a voice and that personal contact and relationships offer different and sometimes greater value and reward.

The organisation demonstrates a cultural belief about the need to communicate effectively and regularly with communities, through documents such as the recent 'You Told Us' (feedback on how the council has listened and translated such into action) through to local community magazines and parish level newsletters. This enables communities to connect at levels relevant to themselves and ensures that information is pushed into communities on an ongoing basis. The attitudes of leaders are seen as fundamental to the sense of openness. The atmosphere in the organisation is relaxed and informal, and the Chief Executive makes an effort to know everyone by their first names. There is a genuine sense of team between senior officers and staff and internal staff communications is regular and open, focusing on what do staff want and need to know about.

When asked what impact austerity has had on their approach to community engagement, there was concern that in some local authorities this had become an opportunity to retrench and carry out less consultation. The sense of backing away from engaging with communities to make these difficult decisions about where spending cuts should be made is one that is opposed strongly by Wychavon. They see the austerity measures as an opportunity to do something different and innovative.

## Findings

The primary objective of our research was to identify the primary characteristics of organisational culture and approach that were achieving meaningful community engagement?

Through our research, we were able to identify some features that were common both within the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector and local government which were important in this respect. In conclusion we have identified 4 key characteristics

- Bravery
- Trust
- Flexibility, and
- Passion

**Bravery** is about the willingness to challenge the traditional risk adverse approach and respect of bureaucracy. In essence, be prepared to challenge the norm and do things that haven't been done before to connect with communities, such as the recent Facebook campaigns in Wychavon or just freeing up staff to adapt services to meet service user and community need. This requires bravery at every level and of those whose role it is to empower and enable, whilst ensuring that the financial and demand pressures and matters of individual and group self interest are not allowed to feed a blame culture and resistance to stimulate or embrace change.

Critical to this is **trust** which was also a key theme from each of the organisations we spoke to. There needs to be trust from leaders that officers will do the right thing at the right time, but officers must trust leaders that when taking risks and finding innovative solutions, there needs to be recognition that sometimes mistakes will happen. This appears to have been recognised in Warwickshire with the Chief Executive expressly promoting and authorising a less risk averse culture. There also needs to be trust placed in communities by local authorities that they will engage, that they will become more autonomous and less dependent upon services being delivered to them.

Linked to the key feature of trust is the need for **flexibility**. This emerged strongly as a key need in organisations wanting to achieve meaningful engagement. As we saw in our 3<sup>rd</sup> sector research, local authorities need to create environments where staff can show initiative, adapt solutions to each scenario, and have enough creativity to co-design services with communities. A rigid, procedural, rule bound approach will

not be good enough when trying to achieve genuine engagement. Building 'flatter hierarchies and devolving decision making will enable a cascading of authority and 'managed freedom' for those at the front line (at every level) to focus on outcomes, whilst balancing this with corporate and cross service awareness and understanding of consequence and impact of their decisions.

Lastly, with regard to securing meaningful community engagement, we concluded that **passion** emerged as the key to enabling and nurturing real community capacity. Passion to listen, respond and achieve genuine change through the services we deliver is fundamental. We heard a number of individual examples where staff were willing to go the extra mile, volunteer in their own time, take pride in their locality and the services which they deliver. This willingness to go the extra mile, unlocking the workforce's discretionary effort was described as sitting at the heart of achieving meaningful engagement. As one Birmingham citizen described it 'it is about relationships not procedures'. The individual case studies to which we have referred have been achieved through individuals operating with passion and belief in the way these relationships can change lives.

**Were the people in our case studies who demonstrated best practice approaches to community engagement one-off's? Would they operate in this way in any environment?**

Reflecting on our case studies, we were curious to understand whether the inspiring individuals were helped or hindered by the organisations in which they were employed. Were they being celebrated as exemplars of best practice or was their approach and success happening outside of the organisational norms of behaviour, or 'under the radar'?

Having considered this against our research, our conclusion is that some individuals will always operate in a way that meaningfully connects and engages with communities. It is a matter of personal values, a sense of passion for the community and for the services they can support and deliver which make a difference. In our view, these individuals should be celebrated and valued for their contributions and achievement, being held up as exemplars for all workers to aspire to. Where this occurs, we are confident that these organisations will be more able to achieve the required features identified above.

The characteristics of local authority employees in our case studies which exemplify such an approach most closely resemble the individuals and cultures identified in the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations. The passion for the fundamental purpose of their role, their organisation, and the impact this would have on individuals and communities were features identifiable in these individuals across all the sectors.

## **What is the impact of austerity on all of the above?**

On the question around how austerity had impacted upon an organisations approach to meaningful engagement we heard a range of views.

This ranged from seeing austerity as an opportunity to retrench, or revert to type, with authorities citing lack of resources or time as barriers to achieving meaningful engagement, and rarely going beyond the statutory minimum. The alternative view that we heard for example from Warwickshire is that this is an opportunity to do things differently, and austerity creates an environment where this is crucial not desirable. As budgets reduce and there is a greater need for communities to come forward to support and in some cases run services, having the right community relationships will help to achieve this.

The third view we heard in relation to austerity and its impact on meaningful engagement is that it is irrelevant. They believe that organisations should be operating in this manner irrespective of the financial climate.

As one employee in Birmingham stated 'The City Council is a cooperative not a business. It is owned by the residents through the payment of their taxes'. This was very much the prevailing attitudes emerging from the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations we interviewed.

Our conclusions around this are that the attitude toward the impact of austerity on meaningful engagement is largely influenced by where the organisation is starting from in the first instance. If the beliefs of leaders and prevailing organisational culture operates on the basis that local authorities and political leaders know best, then this will impact upon the response arising from austerity. However, if the prevailing culture is that the organisation belongs to the people who use it, then this will override any impact that austerity might have on engagement.

## **What can we learn from each other?**

As our research was cross sector including a variety of local government settings as well as the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector we wanted to understand what differences there are between these organisational cultures and what can local government adapt and learn from the third sector.

We concluded that there are some structural issues which challenge local government in being able to achieve the organisational cultures identified in the third sector. These structural issues include some issues around scale of the organisation which results in rigid structures and generates risk of silo working.

The political processes within local government also go some way to limit the freedoms achieved in the third sector, giving rise to many layers of decision making. We also identified the delivery of statutory services and the prescriptive nature of some of these may inhibit some of the freedoms to adapt how services are delivered to each and every service user. Having identified these potential barriers, these are not issues that local government can sit behind, but need to be tackled and minimised wherever possible.

We did identify two aspects from the third sector which local government, can, and must adopt if we wish to achieve genuine and meaningful community engagement. Our cultures must operate to engage with the hearts and minds of our workforces, unlocking discretionary effort, and also unlocking the hearts and minds of communities. It is about celebrating passion in our services and pride in our communities.

The second aspect which can be adopted further in local government is leadership. Leaders in the third sector organisations and in some areas of the local government organisations we researched were accessible, open, and empowering. There was a clear commitment to individual service users and the desire to let the needs of the service user set the agenda for the organisation.

Empowerment from leaders gives staff and communities the bravery to make service user led decisions and really challenge approaches and strategies which have not added value to the outcomes for citizens and visitors.

## Summary of Conclusions

Through our research we have been able to identify the 4 key features of an organisational culture that will achieve meaningful engagement. These are **bravery, trust, flexibility and passion**.

We recognised that individuals whose personal values drive them to operate in this way, either within the third sector or within local government are those that flourish through their engagement with communities. In our view, some people are simply 'hard-wired' in this way, and will continue to operate in such a way either within a supportive culture, or despite one which does not encourage such. These people can either be celebrated and used as beacons of the behaviours which the organisation seeks to promote or, alternatively ignored or merely tolerated.

We have examined some of the structural difference between local authorities and the third sector, some of which may be barriers to the achievement of meaningful engagement, but we have also identified features which are transferable and critical to the achievement of this type of organisational culture.

For an organisation wishing to achieve genuine and meaningful engagement, our findings provide guidance on the characteristics of organisational culture required. However, any organisation wishing to move towards the achievement of such must first have a clear self evaluation of its current position and establish a clear vision. What does meaningful engagement mean for this organisation, and how do all who can contribute need to act to reinforce this vision? Unless there is congruence between the stated vision, and actions thereafter, the achievement of the desired change in organisational culture will not be successful. However, an organisation which sets a clear vision and establishes clear activity to achieve the desired attributes and behaviours will be on the journey towards more meaningful engagement.

## Literature Review

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