

Using design to transform local government

Southwark Council

Southwark Council's vision of a fairer future for their residents was challenged in 2010 by large scale budget cuts. Incremental efficiencies would not be enough this time – the council had to fundamentally rethink their delivery model.

The Policy Team at Southwark Council worked quickly to develop an approach that would enable the council to:

- Respond to the changing context in a timely way and quickly deliver a way forward, grounded in tangible and practical actions
- Create space for staff to be creative, considering the vast range of services and users, while being mindful of the tough realities caused by the scale of the cuts
- Be collaborative, bringing together over 35 Cabinet Members, Strategic Directors and Directors from different professional backgrounds, experiences and working styles to jointly create the way forward

The approach was based on design principles that would bring the residents' and service users' perspective and ensure that the council's response was appropriate and could be delivered successfully. More traditional approaches such as budget reviews were discounted because of their focus on the provider perspective, low level of co-production and collaboration, and limited involvement of senior leaders in designing the policy. The Council was clear that it needed to take a fresh look at its budget allocation, rather than simply taking the status quo as the starting point for incremental changes.

An 'open' approach to a traditional process

Southwark council's policy team carried out the work in three main stages.

1. **Exploration.** The team developed its understanding of the local residents through ethnographic research, customer feedback, staff feedback, socio economic data, and case reviews from social care services. The information helped to develop a picture of the residents' assets and needs, the impact of services on their lives, what works (and doesn't work) in achieving positive outcomes for them, and the experience of staff delivering council services.
2. **Idea generation.** This insight provided the basis for a senior leadership team away day. It helped the leaders immerse themselves in service users' experience, residents and staff with whom contact can be limited. The insight was presented in a variety of ways to bring it to life as much as possible. For example, the team heard quotes from staff and residents, they saw geographic maps and snapshots of people's lives, and they read a poem about the impact of social care services on people's lives, written by one of the residents.

Immersed in the reality of their residents' lives, the senior leaders broke into groups to think about what needed to change and how Southwark council was going to continue delivering its vision of a fairer future for their residents. They developed ideas about what the future operating model of the council could look like through a 'visioning the future' exercise. This involved personas that had been developed from ethnographic research, including a single parent and a business owner. They also developed ideas about the practical changes that were needed to deliver the vision of the future, covering all aspects of the council from HR and IT to its relationship with residents and the voluntary sector. These ideas were then shortlisted and fed back to the whole group.

Throughout the day, the team drew on different tools to support senior leaders' creativity and make the exercise engaging. For example, each group was asked to feed back in a different format, whether through a resident tweet or a newspaper article, prompting them to think about things from different perspectives and in different ways.

- 3. Plan development.** The team developed the blueprint for the transformation programme from the ideas generated during the away day. This helped the Cabinet and Strategic Directors quickly agree the blueprint. Careful planning of the away day – the idea generation phase – made this possible as it ensured that all necessary information was discussed, with many of the shortlisted ideas fleshed out.

Lessons learned

- The design approach helped Southwark make a big step forward in a relatively short space of time, by helping the senior leaders understand the reality of their residents' day-to-day lives and bringing in the perspectives of staff with different backgrounds and roles in the council.
- The 'user' perspective in particular unlocked new potential. For example it helped identify underused capacity and understand the extent to which independence helps residents lead happier and more fulfilled lives.
- People particularly enjoyed being creative, something that often gets squeezed out of traditional ways of working, and can explain why councils continue making incremental improvements when a step change is needed.
- Expert facilitation was essential to keep people focussed and on track, especially in a demanding one day event.

For more information

For more information please [contact](#) Claire Webb, Director of Cinnamon Bubble, previously Head of Policy at Southwark Council.