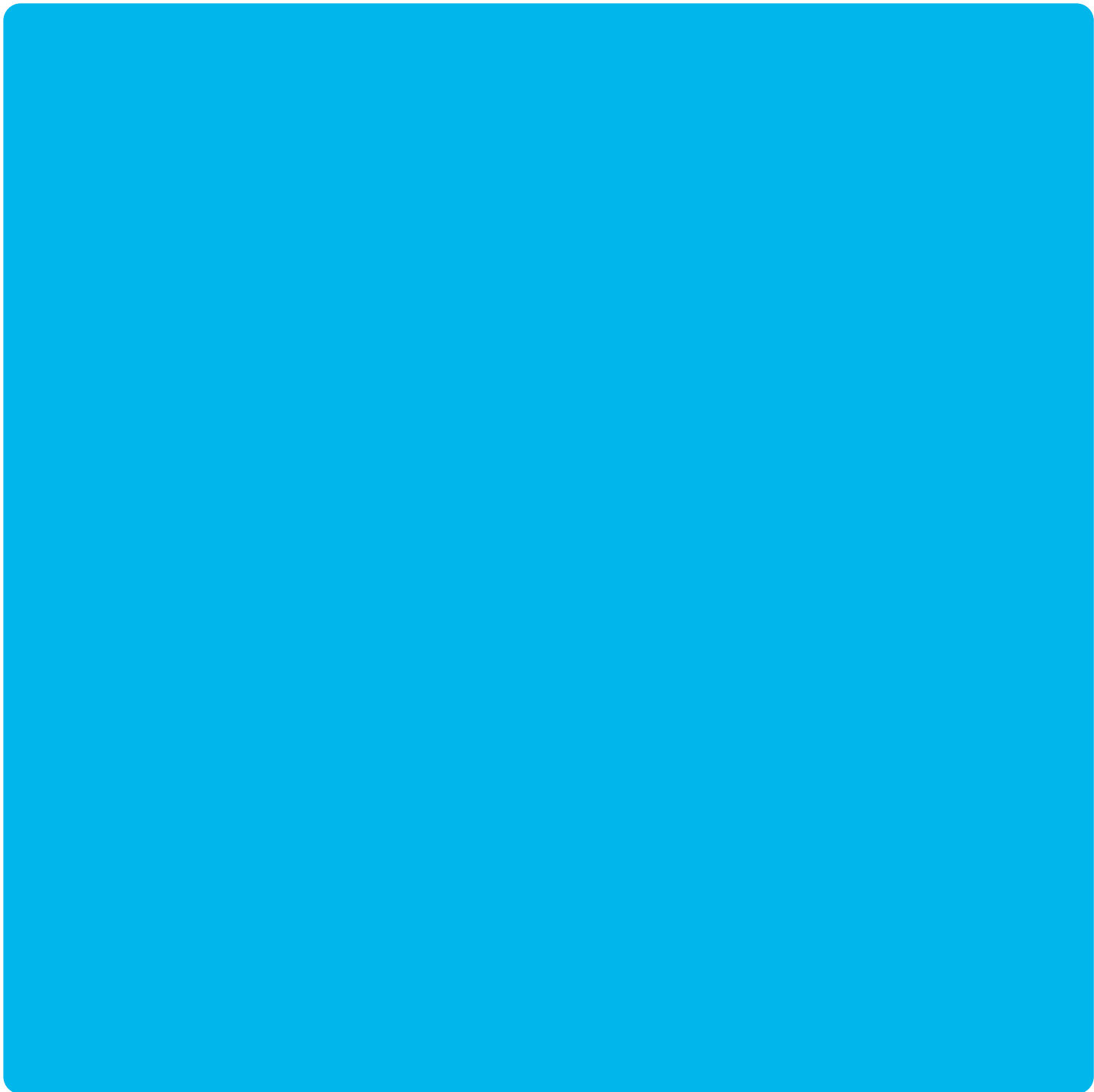




DEVELOPING BY DOING

SWINDON'S LEADERSHIP JOURNEY





The debate about how to achieve lasting improvement in local government performance is in full flow - is it about structure? Inspection? Political arrangements?

The jury is still out on all of these, but one thing is at last being understood and widely recognised, and that is that the quality of leadership has a measurable effect on the success or otherwise of local authorities.

At the Leadership Centre we believe that if you can get the people at the top of local government working well together,

then improvement will inevitably follow. The lesson we have drawn from the examples of excellent-rated councils around the country is that where the leader and chief executive are united in their vision and how to implement it, when they each understand their particular roles and strengths and when their teams share in this clarity, the authority goes from strength to strength.

Unfortunately the opposite – dysfunction at the top leading to failure throughout the organisation - also holds true.

'Dysfunction at the top leads to failure throughout the organisation.'



That is why we are putting the main thrust of the resources available to us towards helping authorities at the top team level. We have devised a process which allows each individual council, working alongside one of our expert leadership advisers, to design and fund a leadership development plan which identifies the weaknesses in that authority, and helps build the leadership capacity appropriate for the challenges that authority faces.

These will, of course, vary for each authority – the kind of leadership issues that a county has to deal with will be totally different from those of a metropolitan borough. Equally the leadership aspirations of an excellent council will far outstrip those of a poor authority where members and officers have never sat down in a room together.

The Leadership Centre's individual, tailored approach and our expertise in and understanding of the market in leadership development means that wherever on the leadership spectrum an authority lies, we will help it create a programme that will result in robust leadership that can meet its community's needs.

What does this mean in practice? Swindon was one of the first authorities we worked with, and over the next few pages you can read how the Leadership Centre and Sue Goss of the Office of Public Management worked with chief executive Mike Pitt and leader Mike Bawden over a period of three months to diagnose Swindon's leadership issues and draw up a three-year leadership

strategy that will not only change the way the top teams work together, but is intended to cascade through the organisation to create the kind of culture change necessary for Swindon to achieve its many ambitions. We are very grateful to Mike Bawden and to Mike Pitt for their openness about the way this process has worked.

On the road with Swindon

In May 2005, when Mike Pitt arrived as new chief executive of Swindon borough council, and invited the Leadership Centre in to help him build a strategy to develop the leadership capacity of the top management teams of the authority, the last thing he wanted, or Swindon needed, was to put the authority through yet another diagnostic process.

'Since its poor CPA report in December 2002, it had been diagnosed up to the eyeballs,' he says. 'What we needed from the Leadership Centre was something much more practical, which would immediately increase our ability to start making the changes Swindon needs, rather than giving us a load of theory.'

Leader Mike Bawden agrees. 'Swindon was punch drunk. We needed time to sit and think about where we were and what we wanted to achieve. We also needed to create the kind of effective integrated relationship between officers and members that would enable Swindon to move forward.'

At Mike Pitt's request the Leadership Centre asked Sue Goss of the Office of Public Management to be Swindon's leadership adviser. 'I could see at once that Swindon is in a hurry,' says Sue. 'It was recovering from a long period of underperformance and adverse inspections, and was putting in place an

accelerated programme of organisational change: making sweeping changes to its structure, systems and culture.

'It had a relatively new administration – the Conservatives, led by Mike Bawden, had taken control in May 2004 – a new chief executive and a new corporate management team. If we were to be of value to the organisation we had to help them embed all the changes that were taking place, while making sure not to slow down the process of change.'

One of Sue's first tasks was to gain the trust of the key people in the organisation – the senior members and the corporate management team – that this process was going to be constructive. Previous away days had not been a success and had left members – who felt they were distractions from the very real problems they were dealing with – annoyed and frustrated. By talking to members as part of her preliminary work with the authority, Sue got their commitment at a very early stage – something that Mike Pitt believes was critical to success.

'There was a lack of confidence between the officers and members which meant that taking decisions, actually achieving anything, was very difficult.'



'It needed someone of Sue's talent and experience who could come in and read the complexities of Swindon's situation at high speed,' says Mike Pitt. 'She understands the subtleties, and knows that there isn't a standard answer that always works. My members liked that, they felt confident right from the beginning that the process could succeed.'

The approach Sue and her OPM colleagues decided on was what can be described as 'development by doing'. It consisted of a series of three away days, in which the corporate management team and the cabinet worked together on real Swindon problems, and in so doing could reflect on their current behaviour and what they needed to do to work together more effectively.

'There was a lack of confidence between the officers and members which meant that taking decisions, actually achieving anything, was very difficult,' says Sue. 'On the away days I aimed to create the conditions where trust could grow by constructing a team-working environment that was different from the way they had worked together before. It was designed

to enable councillors and chief officers draw their own conclusions about the future development needs for themselves and the organisation and design a plan that we would all enjoy and welcome.'

The away days

Day 1

1

The first away day looked at three unsolved Swindon problems and got the relevant chief officer and portfolio-holder to work side by side to explain the problem to the rest of the group and they then all worked on it together. As they worked on a problem Sue helped them draw out what the experience told them about the way they acted as a team and what behaviours they needed to change to work together better. The kind of issues that came up were the lack of well-designed decision-making processes, weak evidence base for decisions and poor prioritisation of resources and staff.

Day 2

2

On the second away day, by looking at the problems that Swindon faces over issues – such as its town centre, environment and transport, and members working relations with officers from other directorates – members were able to look at the changing demands on the council and how to win the support of key stakeholders – or community leadership by another name. ‘Through this discussion community leadership became a very real concept to members,’ says Sue.

Day 3

3

On the final away day in the diagnostic phase the two teams thought about how the lessons they had learned could be adapted to create a can-do culture in the whole authority, and what development systems need to be in place to do this.

As a result of the discussion and activity over three days, Sue Goss was able to design a proposal for development that was based on proposals from members and officers themselves. The framework was based on the following collectively agreed principles, that leadership development in Swindon should:

- relate clearly to outcomes needed for Swindon
- be designed to reinforce a cultural change and the empowerment of other managers and staff
- be realistic and practical

More precisely this meant helping Swindon be more outward focused - giving both politicians and managers opportunities to see how other successful authorities work, and demonstrating an all-round can-do culture within the authority. It also meant working within Swindon's means - ie not bringing in expensive management consultants but using some of the impressive in-house resources that were already in place.

Putting the head of HR in charge of the Leadership Development Strategy and integrating it with current initiatives already underway was not only a way of making it practicable and

affordable, but would lead to greater self-confidence – that in fact Swindon did have the resources and know-how to improve.

Development proposals included making sure each cabinet member and chief officer had a personal development plan with opportunities for networking and learning from outside the authority; officers and members should actively facilitate the learning of other members of their teams; facilitated away days of senior members and officers should continue to be held; cross boundary projects should be commissioned to encourage staff to get experience beyond their own silo; the active development of partnership skills by both councillors and key members of local partnerships.

'It was a very positive – and sometimes provocative – process,' says Mike Bawden. 'Members had considerable reservations, but they began to understand that they had to put their personal agendas aside and listen to the point of view of the wider group. They learned that they could challenge officers and each other with confidence – if they had a good relationship in the first place.'



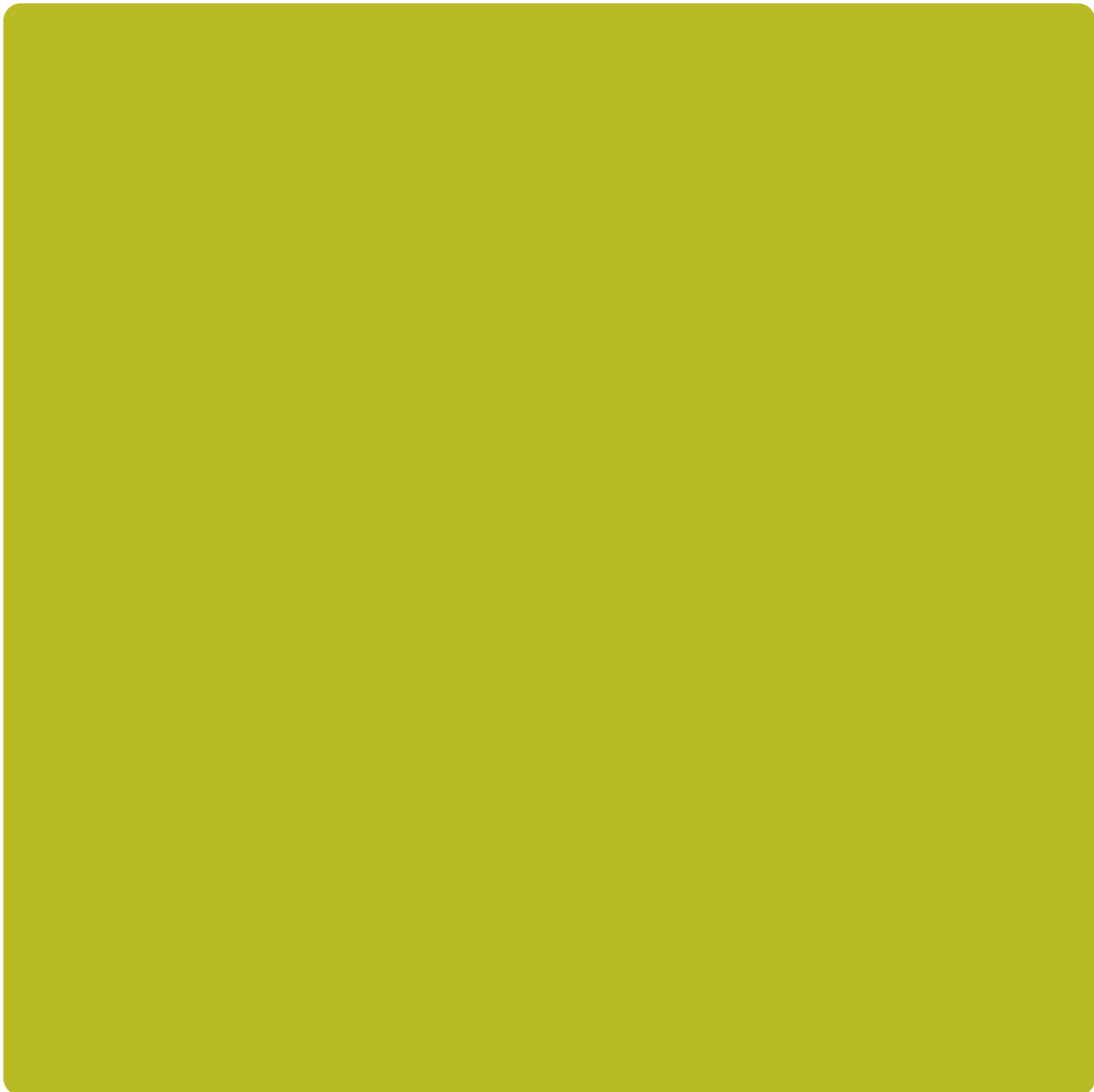


Reflecting on the design of the diagnostic process as an action-learning mechanism in Swindon, Sue believes it had two distinct and valuable outcomes. 'The first is that previously disillusioned members and a group of newly appointed chief officers were able to analyse Swindon's leadership deficiencies for themselves and so fully understand what it was that they needed to do to change things. The second is the sense of extra power and energy they experienced by working together instead of separately. It was a very tangible illustration of the Leadership Centre's thesis, that when the political and managerial leadership is working in harmony, so much more can be achieved.'

For David Bolger, interim director of leadership at the Leadership Centre, the experience of working with Swindon has helped to shape the way the centre will work with other authorities. 'It has helped us test – and prove – the logic of our approach, that intervention right at the top, and particularly at the crucial interface between political and managerial leaders, is the only way to make deep and lasting change in an authority.'

'We started from the basis, what is Swindon trying to do and how can we help? With the two Mikes at the helm, Swindon wanted to do something immediate, new and challenging for members and the new management team. Those conditions meant that Swindon was committed to the process, and quick to put things into action. That commitment is the only way to make real change.'

'Swindon is on a vertical learning curve,' believes Mike Pitt. 'Members and officers are incredibly stretched putting in place the improvements demanded of us both by the government and the local community. Too much energy has been wasted in indecision and churn. Working with Sue Goss and the Leadership Centre has shown us how we can change our behaviours and work together more effectively. We're only at the beginning but we now have a game plan for development – one we all agree on and one we can afford. Things, as they say, can only get better.'





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