

UNISON Barnet: Future Shape of the Council Programme

September 2008

Briefing No 1 Assessment of Strategic Hub proposals

Executive summary

The Briefing assesses the Strategic Hub proposals made by the Future Shape of the Council programme. The proposals are flawed because they are not based on the strategic functions of the Council and the skills required appear to be limited in scope. It recommends that the core functions of the Council should determine the responsibilities of the Strategic Hub and the skills required by its staff.

Recommendations

1. Further debate on the strategic functions is essential before decisions are made on the scope, organisation and staffing of the Strategic Hub. The functions/skills of the Strategic Hub will have a major role in determining the effectiveness and relevance of the Future Shape of the Council programme.
2. Joint employer/trade union forums should be established as a matter of urgency as an integral part of the Future Shape of the Council programme. The forum should commence in Planning, Building Control and Parking. The agenda should include the strategic functions of the council, in-house innovation and transformation and the development of options and their appraisal. They should cover the three workstreams – developing capacity, shrinking organisational scale; transformation of service delivery; and resourcing the future.
3. The Future Shape of the Council programme is unrealistic with an “enormous” communications challenge. The timetable should be extended to the Cabinet meeting planned for 20 January 2009 which would improve the quality of outcomes and engagement.

Introduction

The London Borough of Barnet commenced the *Future Shape of the Council* project in May 2008 to review the organisation of the Council, challenges and changing demands on the capacity of the Council. The European Services Strategy Unit (ESSU) has been commissioned by Barnet UNISON to provide research and critical analysis for the Branch in the consultation process. This is the first of a number of Briefings, which will be produced over the next few months.

Future Shape of the Council Strategic Hub proposal

A report ‘Proposed New Structure for Strategic Core of the Council’ from the Chief Executive is on the agenda for the General Functions Committee on the 11

September 2008. It is accompanied by a powerpoint presentation entitled 'Barnet's Strategic Hub'.

The report sets out five 'critical functions' of the Strategy Hub:

- strategic business intelligence
- policy analysis
- engagement of residents, businesses, staff and partners
- corporate communications and marketing
- facilitation of change and innovation

The report proceeds to establish a series of core skills – see below. The powerpoint presentation includes a proposed organisational structure with a Director of Strategy and three teams operating under three Assistant Directors of Policy, Intelligence and Analysis; Strategic Change; and Communication. It implies that the strategic functions and role of the council is limited to the five functions noted above.

Strategic functions of the Council

The Strategic Hub powerpoint presentation describes the Council's objectives as getting closer to and being more responsive to customers and citizens; helping people address the most intractable problems and deal with new challenges; freeing up space to innovate, to 'shape the place'; continuing to improve in an increasingly challenging financial environment; and creating a model that is sufficiently adaptable to cope with changing circumstances.

The Strategic Hub report (para 9.3) states that a strategic policy function should address the key challenges and proposals as set out in the 'Policy Development in a Place Shaping Council' and 'Communications and Engagement Strategy' reports. They are summarised as:

“the council’s strategic policy work should improve our use of data to develop a richer and more comprehensive understanding of place; we improve co-ordination and programme management of policy; the council’s strategic policy work should improve through more effective communication and engagement with the public, staff and partners; and one of the main objectives of strategic policy work should be to develop the strategic capacity of staff and partners to enable more effective decision making.”

Although, the documents set out objectives, processes and skill requirements they do not establish the strategic functions of the Council.

The Project Initiation Document of the Transformation of Service Delivery Workstream asks the question:

“What is the Council of the future – what should it seek to achieve and how should it do this?” Assuming this is a genuine question, then how can decisions be taken about the scope and skills required of a strategic hub when the review has only just started? There is a growing perception that the Council is moving to a US contract council model.

Clarity on the strategic functions of the council is essential.

1. The Future Shape of the Council video refers to the five post-war 'giant policy issues' of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness and more recent

challenges of community decline, selfishness and a decline in values. It identifies new 'giants' of pensions, personal debt, obesity, climate change and transport use. The ability of the Council to challenge, affect and change these 'giants' is limited, as the video makes clear. However, the range of functions and services provided by local government have an important role in combating and alleviating community needs arising from these wider issues. In addition to confronting these challenges, the Council has a key role in maximising achievement of economic, cultural, learning, sporting and other aspirations of residents, organisations and businesses in the Borough.

2. The video emphasises the delivery of Council services but it also carries out numerous functions and activities such as strategic planning and economic development, which are not, services as such. They are responsibilities of local government and statutory duties relating to physical, economic and social planning, it's responsibilities as a major employer in the local economy, managing public assets in the public interest, and addressing the strategic and longer-term needs of the community in the widest sense of the word.
3. Meaningful and effective consultation with trade unions and other organisations on the strategic hub proposals requires clarification of the strategic functions of the council.

Shortcomings of the strategic hub proposals

The use of certain terms such as 'customers', 'place shaping' and 'business intelligence' is unhelpful because they imply a narrow perspective and a commercial ideology. It is not surprising, as the video concluded, that there is a 'decline in values' if the language used erodes public service principles and values.

The core skills are defined in the Strategic Hub report as:

- Analysis and the ability to make sense of the information analysed
- Facilitation and engagement
- Network and relationship management
- Big picture thinking
- Project management
- Team building
- Ability to tackle unconventional problems
- Connection to the information, knowledge, tools and skills outside Barnet
- Knowledge management

However, a number of other skills should be considered for inclusion as core skills:

- Strategic thinking - this is more than 'big picture thinking' and 'analysis' – it should include the ability to think across services and understand how issues and public policies impact on different economic, social and political interests in Barnet.
- Economic and social research precedes analysis – the quality of the analysis is heavily dependent on setting the scope of the research agenda to ensure that it

examines economic, social, health and other aspects and asks the relevant questions.

- *Impact assessment* – the Council’s strategy must include the ability to instigate and carry out a comprehensive and rigorous impact of policies and projects. This must not be limited to the government’s superficial regulatory impact assessment methodology. The Strategic Hub will not necessarily carry out impact assessments but must be responsible for ensuring there is a comprehensive policy, that it is fully implemented and the findings (and any mitigating initiatives) are part of the strategic agenda.
- The Council’s commitment to *sustainable development* will require strategic cross-service, directorate and partner coordination for it to be effective. Whilst this could be mainstreamed in the other core skills described above, it also requires particular skills. The same principle applies to *social justice and equity*. The proposals assume that sustainability, social justice and equity are mainstreamed in all the strategic functions and core skills. In practice, this is rarely achieved and is, therefore, a high-risk strategy.

The report refers to “building strategic understanding and innovative capacity across the council.” Greater clarity is needed on how responsibility for strategy is shared or divided between the corporate centre and directorates and between ‘strategic leadership’, undertaking strategic analysis and facilitating others to do it. The Council has an important role in developing strategies ‘amongst partners’. However, partner organisations have responsibility for developing their own strategic capabilities.

Organisational issues

A commentary of the organisational aspects of the strategic hub is not within the scope of this Briefing. However, the proposed structure appears to be ‘communications’ heavy with 21 posts in contrast to 8 posts in the Policy, Intelligence and Analysis and Strategic Change sections. The problem is further complicated by the description of the five policy, intelligence and analysis manager/officers as “Business Intelligence Manager/Officer” which indicates a narrow scope - the emphasis on corporate strategy appears to have been diluted.

References

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