MINUTES OF SYSTEMS THINKING TASK GROUP

28 JULY 2015

PRESENT:

Councillors Buckley, Ellis, Mistry, Mrs Nash, Mrs Roberts, H Roberts and Mrs Simpson-Vince

Doug Jones (Head of Business Transformation), Catherine Orton (Change Officer), Paul Ansell (Scrutiny Officer) and Linn Ashmore (Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer)

Note – These minutes are a record of the task group’s discussion. Comments recorded do not necessarily represent the views of the task group or of the council.

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED THAT – Councillor Ellis be appointed Chairman of the task group for the 2015/16 municipal year.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillor Avis.

3. REVIEW OF THE ONE-PAGE STRATEGY

The task group reviewed the one-page strategy which had been circulated with the agenda.

It was noted that the review should not duplicate the work of the 2010 review of end-to-end service reviews and systems thinking. This was conducted at an emerging stage when systems thinking in Rugby was new and original. Copies of this review report were available in the committee papers section of the council website, and the scrutiny officer agreed to send members a link to it.

4. INTRODUCTORY PRESENTATION BY THE HEAD OF BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION AND THE CHANGE OFFICER

The task group received a presentation from the Head of Business Transformation and the Change Officer providing an introduction to systems thinking.

Further to the presentation the following points were made:

The systems thinking approach was introduced in the council in 2007 as a radically different thinking-based approach to change to replace the out-dated business process reengineering methodology.
The fundamental difference in systems thinking was that it is based on changing the underlying thinking of a system, then redesigning it starting from a blank sheet of paper. This ensures that only the value adding steps from the customers’ perspective are designed into the new way of working.

Since its introduction good results have been realised. This view has been reinforced by the feedback received through peer reviews.

Evidence gathered from staff during the impact of reduced capacity review found that staff were positive about this way of working. By releasing capacity through the removal of waste, staff could concentrate on the value work.

As an organisation the council was still at an early stage of development using systems thinking. The process has a proven track record over many years with Japanese manufacturing companies such as Toyota.

It is a continuous check-plan-do process that focuses on customer outcomes and not procedures.

It was important to continue reviewing as there were always further improvements to be made, so reviews could never actually be said to be complete.

All managers had received training on systems thinking through the ‘Way We Manage’ programme. Staff were offered training during Learning at Work Week in 2014 and also at corporate induction sessions. Training is delivered as requested, by individuals or teams.

The Change Officer circulated copies of reviews that were active, completed or inactive. The task group noted that some had stalled for a variety of reasons.

The task group was asked to consider the following suggestions for its next step:

- Pick up inactive reviews which had stalled
- How to encourage service areas that have carried out little or no systems thinking activity
- Examine data from customer services to determine where there is evidence of high levels of failure demand that could be explored further

To date the Change Officer has responded to calls for help from services rather than targeting service areas that had not engaged with the process.

The role of the task group was not to carry out a review of any particular service. Systems thinking reviews can only be carried out by those working in the service. Instead the task group would, among other things, seek out areas that would benefit from a systems thinking review. The group had no powers to force reviews to be carried out but could make recommendations to Cabinet on this and on developing an approach that would encourage the wider application of systems thinking and continuously improve performance.
Members commented that Housing Services had undertaken a number of reviews in response to issues identified in an external audit but it was important to identify where positive outcomes could be made.

Areas which might be looked at included:
- Environmental Services – possibly waste management
- Licensing – a review on taxi licensing had stalled
- Resources – council tax

Planning Services had already carried out a large scale review of development control but enforcement or appeals had not been covered.

Two fundamental questions facing the task group were:
- How do we know what matters most to the customer?
- How does the council know what it is doing matters to the customer and how well does it deliver?

Evidence would be required to check whether officers in reviewed services still:
- routinely use visible and appropriate performance measures
- recognise what cause variances and act on them
- act on information and not opinion.

Members commented that some managers who had not engaged with systems thinking were negative or fearful of the outcomes but they should be encouraged to embrace the process. The systems thinking approach was about the system and not the individual.

5. PROGRAMME OF WORK

The task group agreed its next step was to meet with managers and other officers who have embraced the systems thinking process and achieved positive results.

Officers would select a sample of managers and staff and task group members would discuss what worked well, evidence of continuing application of systems thinking principles and how systems thinking could be adopted in other service areas.

6. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

It was agreed the next meeting of the task group would be held at 5.30pm on Monday 7 September 2015.

CHAIRMAN