

What to focus on in the year ahead

The new year has brought a sense of foreboding as public spending cuts take hold. So, how can the industry cope? **John David** has some suggestions

The year 2010 has ended, and left us with many bruises – cutbacks, job losses, and trying to do more for less, combined with increasing customer expectations. It seems many of these bruises are likely to worsen during 2011. Therefore, it is essential that we quickly begin to manage our services, resources and expectations of the stakeholders better than ever before. This needs to be done with speed and purpose, to bring stakeholders on our side.

As part of Amnick and *Surveyor's National share and support campaign for transportation* going live in April this year (www.uktsc.co.uk), we have been conducting a series of meetings with the senior management from the transport industry, including local authorities, consultancy firms, contractors, universities, and central government. Through these meetings, we have now identified several key areas where we need to focus, to ensure we get the best out of what we have.

Naturally, the biggest challenge will be to try and do more for less. And the challenges here are wider than the obvious ones from the financial aspects. It seems we need to understand better the whole picture and impact in several key areas which must be managed carefully.

These include:

- the customer/refreshing expectations
- decision-making/problem solving
- partnerships
- appreciating your staff/staff motivation
- saving jobs/social enterprises
- financial re-engineering
- marketing.

The customer

With growing momentum of local area agreements, easier accessibility to services via new technologies – such as the web and mobile phones – more information is being made available to customers than ever before. However, today's service-users are much savvier than ever before. And with this comes a new set of challenges to manage and right size expectations better than ever before.

If this right sizing is not addressed correctly, it will lead to further complaints, inquiries and a poor reflection on the council delivering the service.

To correct this, councils should consider creating and publicising a service delivery charter that is based on given resources. Within this they need to highlight clearly that before the cuts, they could deliver a service which could operations from A-Z. However, now they will only be able to deliver A-S. And for the remainder, they will try and look at other ways of delivering T-Z, and this should be clearly emphasised as possibility and NOT an expectation.

By drawing the line clearly in the sand will, in turn, save councils money through less complaints, improved image and perception of



delivery as well as not damaging the staff morale which in the future will always need to be protected.

Decision-making/problem solving/prioritising

With less to go around, decision-making has to be done by staff at all levels, and not just left to the management team. We now need to ensure every staff member is empowered to challenge what they are doing. Staff at all levels need the ability and training to problem solve for themselves, in small teams and with other partners. They should be encouraged to make decisions appropriate to their level and avoid passing matters upwards.

Following a natural course of problem solving leads to better decisions being made, and this then leads to prioritising becoming clearer.

Empowering staff at all levels to problem solve by themselves and in teams is important, thus leading to better decision-making and prioritising.

Partnerships

We are now into a new era of working where there has never been a greater need to work together. This not only applies to local authorities, but everywhere. We need to bring together support, ideas, new thinking from a range of partners – including looking outside the transport

sector. With our share and support campaign meetings, we have included contractors, consultants, suppliers, government bodies, and universities. They all have valuable input and can sometimes see opportunities like we cannot.

The South East Seven (SE7), as it has been dubbed, was formed in March as a 'coalition of the willing', pooling expertise in a partnership designed to save money and improve services. The partnership of seven councils (Brighton & Hove City Council, East Sussex CC, Hampshire CC, Kent CC, Medway Council, Surrey CC and West Sussex CC), committed to buying shared services and using collective buying power to drive down costs. Highways is one of the key areas covered by the agreement, and nine months on, the coalition deal is starting to show results (*Surveyor*, 17 December 2010).

Staff motivation

Without the support of your staff, it is very difficult to make things happen. In a recent survey of organisations which were considered as best performing, they said a key factor to their success was they valued their staff tremendously which in turn led to a happier workforce.

As times get more difficult and more needs to be done with less, it is imperative that we ensure we shield our staff from continuously being

overloaded. If staff morale is destroyed, so are any chances of success in delivering the services in a positive way.

Saving jobs/social enterprises

From the average of 25% overall cut in expenditure will perhaps conversely lead to 25% cuts in services. These will hit communities hard in all sorts of ways. Transport activities – inspections, schemes, projects, management of highways, and quality checks, to name but a few, will all suffer.

The need to look at our own communities and consider setting up and developing social enterprises to help backfill the 25% is now crucial. We should be looking at engaging local people to help and work together through volunteering schemes and work experience opportunities. Through basic training, these groups can help with administration, project support, street inspections, surveys, environmental management and green activities.

By creating social enterprise organisations for transportation and highways departments, many can actually remodel services so the deliverables can be achieved through lower costs while retaining many more jobs. This is particularly important in our sector, as we have a shortage of skilled staff.

We are holding a free workshop in London on Friday 11 March at Brent LBC as part of our share and support campaign. The workshop will seek to establish a check list of opportunities available to local authorities which should be considered fully before considering job cuts. If you wish to attend, contact johndavid@amnick.com or call 07886837410.

Financial re-engineering

As part of our regular meetings for the share and support campaign, Duncan Fern from Mouchel has put together a presentation expressing why we need to be thinking about financial re-engineering for next year. At our next meeting – mentioned above – we will also be discussing these areas in more detail. Readers can request Mr Fern's presentation on financial re-engineering at infoamnick@amnick.com

Marketing

From my experience, local authorities do excellent work. I have seen, for example, that an average streetlighting department may conduct up to 2,000 activities of work each week. It only takes one or two complaints for the service to look poor – particularly if that complaint is addressed to the press.

To me, it is imperative that local authorities create and develop positive marketing strategies which build on the good work they are doing.

I believe, local authorities should start developing closer links with colleges and universities with a view of working with their students who are studying management and marketing. The local authority can provide a rich foundation for the students to base their project and dissertation work on, and within this can also try and solve problems and issues – which otherwise might have to be done via recruiting consultants.

Through our share and support campaign, we will be supporting local authorities with their marketing strategies – at no cost – in achieving this. If you wish your organisation to be considered, please let us know.

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