

Belfast City Council

Belfast City Council is currently going through the most significant and far-reaching change programme it has ever seen. Councillors and senior managers identified DMA as a powerful management tool that could help them develop efficient and effective new organisational structures as part of this process.

Jill Minne, Belfast's Director of Organisational Development, explains: "We are changing in order to be in a position to deliver our new powers and functions, elected members' ambitions for the city and its neighbourhoods, and value for money customer-focused services... it is much more than simply restructuring the council."

Belfast has deliberately taken a phased approach to this complex, rolling programme of improvement. While much of the work has been completed (largely around local government reform and transferring functions and staff from central government and other councils, along with a significant capacity-building programme for members and staff), information gathered through the DMA process will underpin the development of the new organisational structure, and specifically a neighbourhood and city services department.

This new department is bringing together all the public-facing services to enhance the customer experience and create greater synergy and efficiency between these front-facing services. DMA has been used to identify and consider a range of options for the structure of this department, along with other parts of the council. Jill Minne says: "In using DMA our aim was to inform the development of fit-for-purpose organisational structures (removing duplication and dealing with any gaps) to deliver our elected members' ambitions and value-for-money services."

Senior managers and councillors were involved in the DMA approach from the outset. They found the information provided by the review valuable, not because it came up with absolute solutions but because it clearly highlighted structural weaknesses and enabled them to consider the options for improvement in a well-informed, evidence based manner.

Staff were happy to be interviewed as part of the process, and other employees wanted to be involved and asked to meet with the DMA interviewers. As with any change process, managers found it challenging at times but ultimately very useful. Jill Minne says it was well managed throughout, with excellent communications between the council's team and the LGA team delivering the review. It was delivered within the agreed timetable and budget. As the development programme is still underway it is too early to predict what level of cost savings will be realised as a result.

"The great strength of this process has been the partnership developed between the in-house team and the LGA consultants," says Jill Minne. "This has increased the capacity and competence of the city council team and given them the skills and confidence to manage future reviews independently."

The approach was flexible, enabling the process and outputs to be adapted to the council's specific needs as the project progressed, and Belfast is happy to recommend the DMA approach to other local authorities. "There was never a sense that the process was being done 'to' the council – it was a shared experience that fully engaged the in-house team."