



The Future Of **Change** In Local Government.

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Introduction

Disrupting Change

In the Public Sector, change is a constant necessity. Over the last 15 years, the sector has responded to austerity, changing community needs, climate change emergencies, health issues, demographic changes, and most recently, a global pandemic. The importance of adaptability has never been more prevalent.

Now is the perfect time to question traditional approaches to change management. The **COVID-19** pandemic forced organisations to adapt to new ways of working at a rapid pace. Governments had to mobilise resources to protect public health, support their economies, and to ensure welfare of their workforce and the public.

During this crisis, traditional approaches to project and change management took a back seat. So, we ask the question... **how do we need to disrupt the traditional ways of doing change?** Are the traditional ways right? Are they still relevant?

I am **Lucy Trueman**, Founder and Managing Director of **Trueman Change**, and I have been researching this very topic since the pandemic broke in 2020. I've hosted focus groups, interviews and panel discussions. In 2023, I conducted formal academic research as part of my MSc in Organisational Psychology, and am currently drafting a book on this very topic.



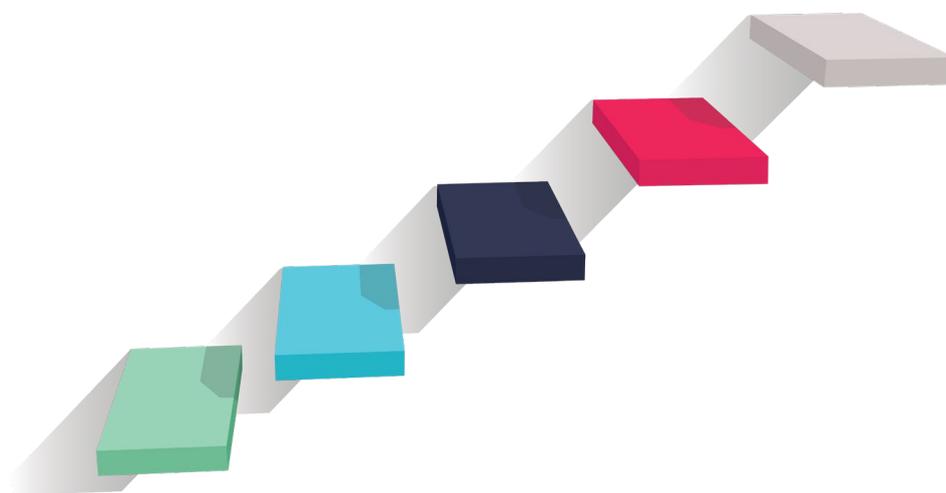
During the pandemic, when unprecedented change happened at pace, no one picked up a PRINCE2 manual. What does this tell us?

History of Change in the Public Sector

Before delving into what happened during the pandemic that drove change in a different way, it's worth reflecting on a little history of popular change management tools and methodology, that have taken hold in the public sector.

Project and Programme Management

Pre 2020, the world of change and transformation in the public sector was dominated by project and programme management techniques. These were initially developed within the engineering sector, and are built around the premise of effective management of resources and timescales in a controlled environment – perfect for if you are building a bridge, less perfect if you are looking to change the way people think/behave and work. That said, they did bring a lot of structure and discipline to change programmes. This is particularly effective where there are complex workstreams and the need to provide business cases to justify resources. A structured approach to managing investment and benefits is not a bad thing. The risk is that these sequential, step by step approaches rely on a fundamental assumption that the change is predictable and people will fall into line.



Change Management



The use of these methods soon began to **highlight** there was a gap around what was often described as 'the people side of change'. Turns out, people are not a particularly controlled environment, and even with following the steps methodically, if people haven't been engaged with well, change just doesn't land. Enter the discipline of change management, which is, in the main, considered a separate discipline from project management, and often attracts different people with different skill sets. Change managers sought to gain insight into the emotional impact of change (with tools such as the well-known change curve), the importance of stakeholder engagement and winning over 'hearts and minds'. This approach created a spike in change programmes, thus adding a change management resource into the team, but often late on in the project once difficulties were run into. Change management became a lucrative business, and as such a variety of consultants began to develop modular approaches, which simplified the process, and were suspiciously sequential in their approach: the 7 steps to change etc. Again, I would challenge these approaches play on assumptions around control and culture which are not necessarily true. In addition, they are often focussed on 'reducing resistance' which is an interesting starting point.

PMOs

The third piece of the puzzle is **PMOs** (Programme Management Offices). In large, complex organisations with competing priorities (Local Government is an excellent example of this), change began to feel out of control. PMOs were born from a much needed desire to oversee change and transformation, monitor results and tie programmes together into a bigger picture. It's important to justify spend in the public sector, and ensure value for money, and PMOs were set up to achieve this, standardise change processes and ensure programmes had the right capacity and support.

Whilst set up with the best intentions, it's common for PMOs to become gatekeepers for change (we even use terms such as gateway in the processes), and sometimes the drive for standardisation pollutes the natural process of change. I've seen a wide range of PMOs. Some are vital to the coordination and delivery of change, providing an important and highly skilled support function to leaders. Others can be policing process and little else, tying leaders up in knots of reporting on activity and delivering little by way of outcomes. Most are somewhere in between the two ends of that spectrum. Indeed, they are often built and established by people from a programme management discipline and not change management. Thinking critically about the functions of PMOs and what part they play in change is more important now than ever.



Change Leadership Skill

A topic I often discuss with organisations is middle management. We often train people to lead 'business as usual'. Management development programmes focus on managing budgets, resources and creating reliable processes. We celebrate stability and consistency. Whilst this is important when leading service delivery, we then wonder why those same people struggle with change, when it is the opposite of what we've taught them! Add to that the change and transformation functions and programmes which are often established corporately or separate from service delivery, all communicates to those BAU managers that change is 'not their job'. In fact, change is everyone's job! During the pandemic, everyone pitched in to make change happen, we didn't rely on change professionals to deliver it for us.



Austerity

It would be remiss not to reflect on the impact of **Austerity** and budget savings in the public sector over the last **10-15** years. This has had a huge impact on how change has been delivered. Firstly, it has driven significant change and transformation. There are no public sector organisations around who haven't changed anything in the last 10 years in a bid to reduce costs and improve efficiency! Unfortunately, it has driven change from a scarcity mindset, with the focus being on reducing costs and not always about improving service. This is a particularly brutal and controlled way of doing change, and one where it's difficult to engage people well. Put simply, nobody became a social worker to save money, for the workforce it is usually about outcomes and delivery not costs. Unfortunately, at the time of writing this, financial pressures continue to dominate many organisations. We must be mindful of how this impacts the way we do change.

Environmental Factors

Surrounding all these issues is a constant need for change and transformation. Despite the stereotypical view of the public sector being 'slow to change', it is constantly responding to change in demand and expectation from the communities it serves, and juggling needs and tensions around:

- Politics, both nationally and locally, regularly provide changes in direction at a local level.
- Change in society resulting in change in demand (a typical example of this is the pressures our aging population has on adult social care).
- Responding to crisis, COVID was a huge example of this, but the public sector often pick up the tab of delivery when it comes to crisis response. Whether it's local events such as flooding, or global events such as the Ukraine war requiring councils to help house refugees, being responsive is a core capability.
- Funding models also impact how services are delivered. Councils are often living budget to budget, with a lack of longer term security provided by the government. In recent years, we have seen an increase of one off or short to medium term funding programmes, which require councils to bid competitively for funding on specific issues. Whilst creating opportunity, this also create the need to quickly pivot resources and focus, on top of the 'day job'



Change is here to stay, and the ability to respond to changing need is a crucial skill set for public sector leaders.

Changing how? Hot Topics

With all these **factors driving change**, we're seeing a range of patterns in terms of what local authorities are currently working on. Here are our top ten hot topics for local government at the moment:

1 Relationships with communities

Local governments are increasingly recognising the importance of involving the community in decision-making and service design. This shift towards co-design reflects a more collaborative and community-centric approach to governance and change.



2 Service Redesign

After years of corporate transformation programmes, and new target operating models, many councils are looking at service redesign at a deeper, and more tailored, service by service level. Whether driven by budgetary pressures, a desire to improve customer experience or performance, a detailed, specialist look at services is now required.



3 Using remote/hybrid/technology to drive change

Technology is a big driver, for both customer and workforce experience. Most authorities have used technology to digitise and improve processes for customers. In addition, many are wrangling with the challenges presented around workforce culture with hybrid working. We're also seeing increased conversations about the next steps for technology in local government, for example using AI





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Commercialisation and changes in budgets

Budget constraints and the need to deliver savings remain significant drivers of change. Many authorities are building their commercial offer, looking at investments, and where they can generate income. In addition, we've seen a change in allocation of resources at a national level. Increases in short term grant funding, where councils are often pitched against each other bidding, presents both opportunities and challenges, requiring agility in financial planning and resource allocation.

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Responding to societal need

As described in the last section, local authorities are expected to respond to a wide array of societal needs. Current 'hot topics' include addressing climate change, cost-of-living crises, and other emergent issues. These evolving demands necessitate adaptable strategies and resource allocation.



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System wide change:

We are now seeing a lot of councils having to work on really big, complex, system wide change for their communities. This needs more people, more brain power, more creativity, and more innovation, but with different skills. System change is about influence, not control, which means the traditional ways of doing change are challenged. Yet, the COVID-19 response provided countless examples of success when partners came together and worked in a human (not process) centred way.

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Challenges in social care

For councils who deliver social care, it can be anywhere from 70-80% of their spend. Social care is a huge part of local government and ensuring it is cost effective whilst also delivering in a person centred and safe way is a huge challenge for many authorities. Demand is increasing in services for both children and adults, and budgets are not. This is not a new issue, but we are seeing increasing numbers of councils wanting to re-visit their target operating model and service delivery around social care.



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Workforce/culture issues

Recruitment and retention is a huge issue for the sector with national shortages around key roles such as planners and social care staff. This, combined with many authorities seeing an aging workforce, and different workplace expectations from younger people, is driving change. Many are giving serious consideration into how they become employers of choice and remain an attractive option for the best talent. In addition, many authorities are reflecting critically on their organisational culture, and the employee experience of their workplace. This is a crucial aspect of change which traditional project and change techniques often don't give due consideration to.



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Housing

Grenfell and high profile deaths of people in housing have raised this topic to the top of the agenda for many local authorities. New standards and regulations have been set, and organisations are under increasing pressure both statutorily and politically to get housing right. This is driving a range of different types of change, whether process, customer journey, culture or governance.



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Capacity and Capability around change

Lastly, we are seeing increasing conversations about how to do change in the new, post covid world. Some councils are stripping back their internal change resource due to budget pressures, but others are investing. Some favour a centralised PMO style model but others are looking to build 'Change Academies' to skill up a range of service based managers in change leadership. There is a recognition that change requires additional resource and specific skill, but exactly what this looks like is open to interpretation and should be tailored to each individual authority.



If the only constant is **change, then we must provide our leaders and managers with the skills to drive it, so that it's about outcomes and not just a change process**

Lessons from COVID

During the pandemic, a phenomenal amount of change happened extremely quickly. There were a number of contextual factors which should be taken into account when reflecting on this:

- Firstly, there was a clear “burning platform” which created urgency, a clear sense of purpose and ‘rallied the troops’ reducing resistance.
- Secondly, a number of structural and financial changes enabled fast decision making, for example emergency powers to officers and additional funding from the government.
- Thirdly, there was an ability to cease some services (for example Leisure Centres and Libraries were closed) which enabled councils to temporarily re-structure their resource and reallocate workforce in a different way. This ability to focus on a single issue is extremely rare in local government.

These specific factors aside, there is still an opportunity to reflect on what was different in terms of the approach to change during the pandemic. The traditional, sequential approaches described earlier went very much to the back seat, and instead a faster paced, and more dynamic approach (driven in a large part by emergency planning protocol) took over.

So, what does this look like **going forward**? It means we must critically think about our approach to change, and not become wedded to specific methodology. It is about skilling up our change professionals and service leaders to navigate tensions rather than follow process. That way, change leaders can develop an approach that is dynamic and contextual, designed to deliver the right change for that particular organisation at that particular point in time. We must constantly adapt our approach. This means we must become experts at reading culture and adjusting our approach accordingly.

My research talking with Chief Executives and Senior Officers during and post covid has identified five tensions that we need to consider when reflecting on how to drive a change forward:



Pace: revolution vs evolution

How fast do you want change to go? Is it a revolutionary change that happens quick, or an evolutionary change that happens slowly over time. You need to ask yourself how fast you want it to go, not just at the start, but throughout the change process as a whole. There are pros and cons to pace. Sometimes it's forced upon us and can be a good thing (change that takes too long easily loses momentum) but there are times when a more reflective evolutionary approach is more appropriate.



Planning: planned vs responsive

How much planning do you need to do before you start? Do you need to have it all planned out, Gantt charts in place? Or are you happy with a more agile approach. This isn't about specific methodologies (i.e., Waterfall vs Agile), but it's about a mindset. How much planning does this change need?



Governance: tight vs loose

Do you need to make sure that all your senior people know about every single decision that's been made and the governance is really tight? Or perhaps you don't need all of this, and you can let people figure it out themselves. During the pandemic there were significantly different approaches to governance due to the changes in law and emergency status. Now councils are back in a normal governance structure, but it's worth considering what's appropriate for this specific change you are working on.



Leadership: directive vs co-designed

During the pandemic, there were times where leadership was extremely directive, with emergency planning protocol in place. However, there were other aspects of the change which were co-designed at an unprecedented rate. This combination of a clear directive, but then a sense of “get our heads together and figure out how” was a winning combination. We know that when we engage people in co-producing a change, engagement increases, and it embeds quicker. Equally we’ve all been in change workshops that have felt a little lost and lacking in direction. My starting point is you need both, be **directive** over **what** needs to change, and **co-produce** the **how**.



Driver: people vs process

During COVID-19, we saw a real increase in more human approaches to change. People were using customer personas, they were engaging with staff more, and wellbeing was higher on the agenda than before. There was more of a focus on humans than job titles, as we recognised vulnerability, and need for support in others. By centering change around people, we become more outcome focussed. We do, of course, need a clear process on how to get there, hence the popularity of programme management methodology, but it’s worth reflecting on what’s really driving your change throughout the journey – are you following a process, or driving change which impacts people?



Communication

The final key finding from the research is the importance of communicating through change. Whilst this is old wisdom, and any good project or change manager will espouse its importance, it really came to life during the pandemic. In my research, discussion around communication has come up in nearly every conversation I have had. Speakers referenced the different ways they were communicating, through videos, blogs, and video calls from home. Some spoke of daily short meetings with partners to ensure that everyone was on the same page. Others spoke of online whole staff events. What was clear was that communication was flexible, responsive and not bureaucratic. Communication became more personal.

A common mistake a lot of people make is to wait until everything is certain before communicating. This wasn't the case during the pandemic, it was informal and by no means perfect, but fast and authentic. This is certainly a lesson to be taken forward in other types of change programmes.

Conclusion

Although many of the findings are not particularly new, the extreme nature of the pandemic really highlighted the importance of these things, and how the ability to navigate them superseded any particular change management methodology. My interviews with CEOs in 2023 and 2024 suggest strongly that they are learning from this and feel that while an element of structure and process is still required, it is this dynamic, responsive approach to change that is key to successful delivery of real outcomes.



What does this mean for organisations going forward?

As public sector organisations continue to deal with a wide range of challenges and pressures which require them to change the way they work, it's important to capture this learning and look forward. While many elements of the pandemic were unique, the above lessons are applicable to current day change programmes.

So, if you're driving change in your organisation, what tips do you need to consider?

Know your culture

Recognising that every organisation has its unique context and culture is crucial. What works in one organisation may not work in another, and it's essential to align strategies with the organisation's values, history and environment. Even in the same organisation, there can be multiple sub-cultures. Thinking carefully about your culture while going through change is crucial.

But what does culture mean? It's a buzz word that many use, but our favourite definition is that it's how messages are cascading around the organisation. Of particular value, is considering where there are contradictions in culture and messaging. For example, your organisational leaders may express a keen desire for a service to be integrated, so seek out specific examples where messages contradict this. These contradictions send strong messages to the workforce about what the organisation really values. Often these are overseen and unintentional, yet have a strong impact on the workforce and its ability to drive change.

Many change programmes implement a range of activity/process without giving culture due consideration. **Ask yourself the following questions:**

- How might this change impact the current culture? Is any work needed here?
- Where is the current culture contradictory to the change I want to see?
- What is the culture around change? Are people generally positive or is there a complex history?
- Do our managers understand culture and how to shape it?

Design and tailor your approach

Having an approach to 'doing change well' in place, which is tailorable and proportionate is the way forward. Rather dumping a specific methodology and hoping for the best, ensure your processes and approach can be tailored according to the scope and nature of the change. Not all projects require the same level of rigor, and being able to adapt the approach ensures that the resources are allocated effectively. Think critically about pace, governance, process. What really matters for this change at this point in time?



Resource the change

Change and **BAU** are different skill sets, and proactively making change happen requires work. After many years of austerity, many local authorities are cut to the bone in terms of resource. Unless you have people with spare capacity, you need to consider how the work will be delivered. This was a key success factor to the change that happened during the pandemic – organisations were able to reallocate resources in a way that is not usually possible.

Consider your options:

- Utilise existing staff but free up their capacity (may need to back fill)
- Utilise or build a centralised change/transformation function
- Commission additional support from consultants and/or interim managers
- A combination of all of the above

If not methodology, then skill

If we are moving away from prescriptive models of change, into a more dynamic responsive approach, we need our leaders to be comfortable with ambiguity and applying judgement. By leaders, I mean both change professionals and service managers. Change is a specialism but needs to not be a closely guarded resource. It is essential to build a culture of change competence throughout an organisation. This involves developing the skills of BAU leaders and creating the capacity to manage change effectively.

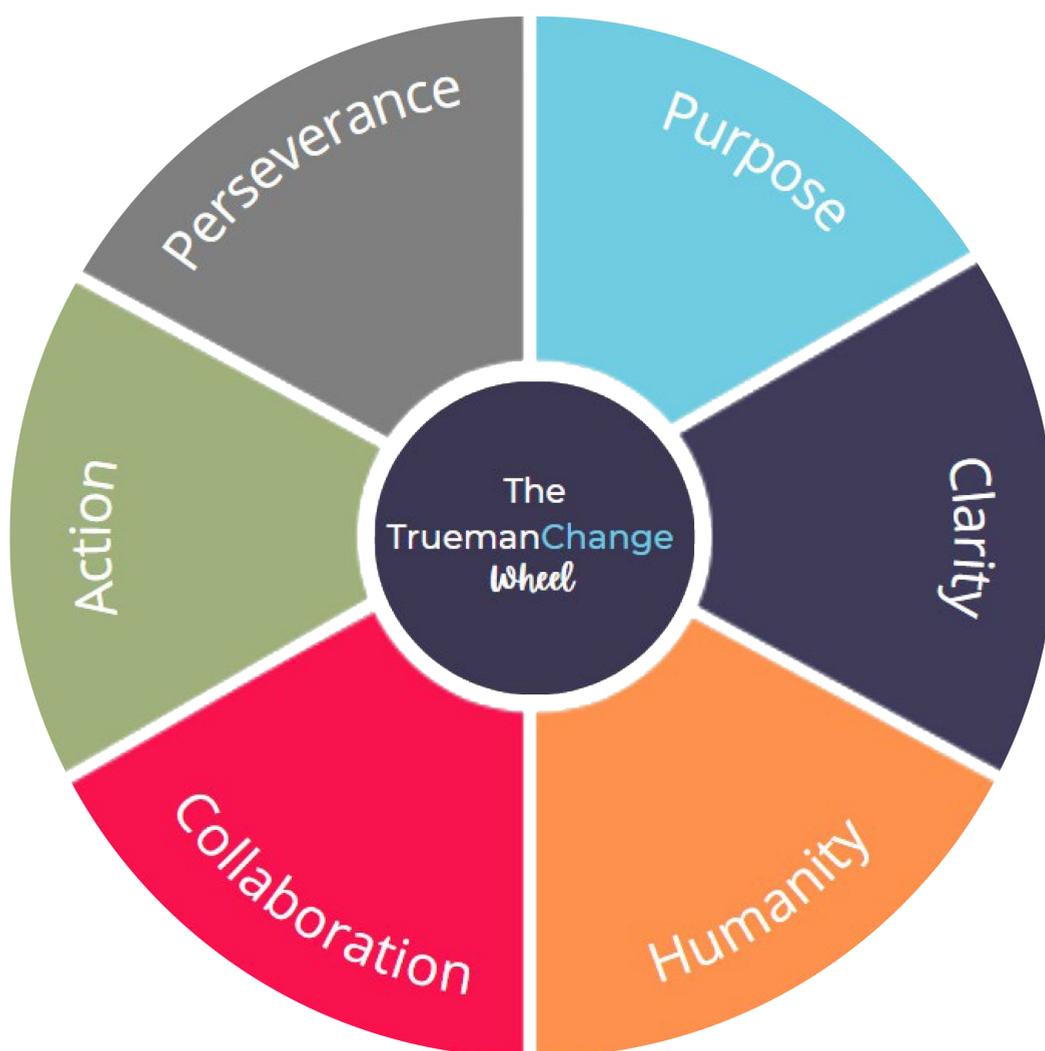
Leadership plays a critical role in driving change successfully. Leaders who are comfortable with ambiguity, capable of applying judgment, and skilled in managing change are essential assets. Organisations should invest in developing leadership capabilities related to change management. Leaders who struggle with change may limit the organisation's ability to adapt and innovate.



Key Ingredients for 'good change'

As a result of this research, we have developed the Trueman Change Wheel, which is designed to help public sector organisations adopt an approach to change that is right for them. We have the best learning from the pandemic and have distilled this into 6 key ingredients. When these are in place, you can ensure change delivers on time, to budget, with happy people working for a sustainable future. Our belief is that communities deserve change partners and training that not only delivers but are compassionate and people centered.

By outlining the six ingredients that necessitate effective change, our methodology ensures your objectives have a clear purpose with clarity to drive it forward effectively. Focusing on people power through enabling strong leadership, this approach inspires and motivates as our experts work with you, not for you.



How we can help

We can bring our expertise to help you rethink how you do change. Change needs to be done better, quicker, cheaper, kinder, focused on what will be different not just a process. Here are a number of ways we can support your organisation with this.



Change Accelerator Programme

Ideal for organisations who understand the importance of people-first approaches and the power of good cultures and unified purpose to make change happen. We are the delivery partner that coaches organisations to get better at doing change themselves. Firstly, we carry out a review of any existing change management set up. Then we share our methodology so that our clients can manage change successfully themselves. The Change Accelerator Programme is designed for organisations embarking on significant change, who want to adopt the principals in this paper. The programme takes 3-6 months and leaves you with a fully developed programme, change management framework, communications strategy and approach to change, tackling your priorities in a meaningful, outcome focused way. This includes training your managers and cultural assessments.

Help designing change functions (e.g., PMO)

We assist or support the process of planning and structuring teams or functions within organisations that are responsible for managing and implementing change initiatives. This support could involve providing expertise in change management methodologies, offering guidance on best practices, or helping to develop strategies for successful change implementation. This is ideal for organisations who have a centralised function but want to make sure it's delivering outcomes not just policing process.

Developing change management framework

We can create a structured and systematic approach to effectively plan and manage changes within your organisation. A well-developed change management framework provides a structured approach to navigating change, helps minimise resistance, and increases the likelihood of successful implementation. It also ensures that changes are aligned with the organisation's strategic goals and objectives. This is ideal for organisations that have the resource in place but lack clarity in terms of how change is best delivered.

Culture mapping

Culture mapping is a powerful tool we use to gain deep insight into your current workplace culture. Through a series of tailored workshops with your team, we delve beyond company policies to uncover what your people truly think. We provide a psychologically safe environment for self-reflection and challenge, enabling us to identify barriers and systemic issues while uncovering opportunities for improvement. Here we analyse the messaging in your organisation, and how this may help (or hinder!) the change you are trying to make. This is ideal for organisations whose change programmes don't seem to land or embed fully – we'll help you figure out why!

Training for staff

If you feel you are resourced well in terms of change, but would like your teams to benefit from this up to date knowledge and experience, we can provide training around:

- Utilise existing staff but free up their capacity (may need to back fill)
- Utilise or build a centralised change/transformation function
- Commission additional support from consultants and/or interim managers
- A combination of all of the above

Workforce strategies with change in mind

To help drive successful change, you need to have an effective workforce strategy. Through our unique approach, we are able to help you understand where you're going and how you're going to get there through a series of workshops, data review and culture mapping, culminating in a practical and detailed action plan.

Delivery partner

Maximise your programme/project successes by bringing in a delivery partner to get this job done for you and with you. We can partner with you to provide extra resource to ensure your project or programme is delivered effectively and on-time. This option is perfect for organisations who are struggling with capacity and skill in house.



TruemanChange

Thank you

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