

Case Study: Protecting Public Food Health in Lincoln

Delivering Transformational Change

Vanguard (Scotland) Ltd

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Delivering transformational change using the Vanguard Systems Thinking Method

Introduction

The city of Lincoln may only cover an area of just 13.78 square miles with 89,400 residents, but the city provides both employment and leisure for much of the larger population in this rural region. Only half the people that work (and eat) in Lincoln live within the city boundary, the rest regularly commute or visit from a two county radius. Lincoln's beautiful historic centre is also a growing tourist destination and hotels and restaurants have become one of the largest job sectors in the region, making significant contributions to the economy.

The City of Lincoln Council's small Food, Health & Safety Team is responsible for overseeing the safety of all food sold within its boundaries and monitors a growing base of over 1,000 food businesses.

Meet Sara



Sara Boothright is the Food, Health & Safety Manager in Lincoln. She knew there were issues in her department and wanted to do something about them but felt she worked with such a rigid regulatory framework that it might not be possible for her to do anything significant. She called on Vanguard Scotland for help. She and her team worked tirelessly with Vanguard Scotland's consultants to find the underlying issues within her department's systems and address them, with brilliant results. She tells us of her first encounter with Vanguard and her reactions.

"Right at the beginning of the lean systems transformational change review, I met Stuart Corrigan, the Managing Director of Vanguard Scotland, who told me that every single thing I was doing as a Service Manager was completely wrong.

I said I was setting smart goals, trying to get my people to work harder, drawing up service plans and setting performance targets and standards.

He pointed out all of that was driving the wrong behaviour and it turned out to be true. Year on year the service was not focused on delivering what the customer wanted and was not giving the degree of change that City of Lincoln Council needed at this particular time.

In essence what he said was if you get deep knowledge of the service and find out what the core problems are, you can fix them quickly, get massive service improvement, drive out waste, focus on the value work and staff will be happier. I thought fantastic; I'll have some of that!"

The Brief

The brief was to study the complete food safety and hygiene system including:

- Routine inspection activity
- Dealing with persistent offenders
- Reactive work – responding to complaints about food safety from the public and requests for guidance from food providers
- And Educational work with food premises and the public to raise awareness of food standards and compliance

Focusing on Purpose

As with all clients Vanguard's first questions were who are your customers and what is the purpose of this service from the perspective of those customers? They sound simple but often reveal profound flaws in the organisation's thinking that then generate poor work practices.

Sara later described the struggle to answer these questions as one of the most fundamentally enlightening moments of the process for the whole team.

"I think the problem that we and many other council food safety departments across the country have is that we often think of the food businesses we deal with every day as our customers but they're not, it's the food buying public who are our only customers and our purpose is to protect them. That clear perspective changed the way we approach everything we do, for the better."

The Method

Vanguard has a unique approach to consulting. The Vanguard Method transfers expertise to people (managers and staff) in the organisation who can then sustain and build upon the improvements made. Vanguard uses consultants who are experts in both intervention theory (how you make a change) and systems theory (how to analyse and design work). The move to a Systems design requires a fundamental shift in the underlying principles for the design and management of work in an organisation, with the intent to significantly improve service and morale and reduce costs.

The first stage in the process is to get knowledge about how the service works today and why. The team in Lincoln thought they already knew their system and had many statistics about the performance of the service. They were surprised when by looking at the service from the customers' perspective they found that their current measures did not help them understand the performance of the service or the reasons for variation in performance. The real eye opener came when they started to measure the time taken from carrying out an inspection to achieving business compliance and the level of variation in performance. This was a very different way of looking at performance.

The Issues Discovered

The existing method of performance management was to measure the percentage of inspections that the team had completed within 28 days of the date the premises were due for inspection. By this measure they were doing fine and there were no problems. However, the focus on working to the due date target was leading staff to organise their workload so that the most compliant premises (which they knew were going to be the fastest to inspect) were dealt with first. The worst premises would take the longest so were addressed last to minimise any negative effect on the target. Whilst this meant a high percentage of inspections were completed within 28 days of their due date, any remaining cases which overran the target were largely the premises which represented the highest risk to public health and these were now taking much longer to be addressed. Officers were being driven by their obligation to get the highest number of inspections done as quickly as possible, rather than by which sites were posing the highest risk to public health.

The focus on the inspection target also led to a lot of variance in how long it took to bring unsafe businesses to compliance. Whilst the average was 65 days, in some instances it could take up to 194 days to bring them up to code.

Multi-tasking was a big issue as well with overworked officers having up to 60 cases open on their desk at any one time. Whilst well intentioned this was actually slowing everything down and increasing the likelihood of errors.

There was also a lack of resilience in the team. Only one officer was fully competent to undertake all aspects of sampling. This left the work vulnerable to delays during holidays or illness.

Redesigning the System

Change is often more difficult for people than for systems. Imposed change is often resisted but using the Vanguard intervention method the team at Lincoln had been involved from the start in the process of discovering and understanding the issues. They understood the need for change, took ownership and worked together to build the solutions.

Work allocation and distribution were the first issues to be addressed. A first in first out policy was instituted with officers being limited to 6 open cases at a time. Those cases were then prioritised based on the risk to public health with those known to be of high risk dealt with first.

A throughput board was installed with an area for each officer and their cases which is updated by the officers daily. This shows the team and the manager the situation of each case at a glance and helps manage capacity and work flow. It also helps to reduce variation in all cases as problems are much more visible and can be addressed rapidly.

Staff training was carried out to ensure the whole team are able to carry out all aspects of sampling work to secure service resilience.

Measures were a crucial area. The existing measures had driven the wrong behaviour and masked the underlying issues. 5 new measures were trialled.

Measure 1 – Monthly trend in business compliance with food safety

Measure 2 – Quarterly overall trend in all establishments with food safety compliance

Measure 3 – Monthly time from actual date of inspection to compliance

Measure 4 – Monthly percentage of official controls that should have been completed and have been in that time period

Measure 5 – Monthly end to end time for advice and guidance (5a), complaints (5b) and for consultations (5c)

During the trial period that followed to test the effectiveness of the redesign it became clear that the monthly Measure 1 data was redundant, providing no useful additional information over that gained by the quarterly Measure 2. Measure 1 was abandoned and the 4 most useful measures retained.

Sara's daily managerial tasks altered in tune with the altered work approach. Reinforcement of the new way of working and problem solving as issues arose became her primary foci and have remained so. Vanguard have found that this is one of the secrets of successful change. If the manager reverts to their old ways of working the rest of the department inevitably follow. Sara is successfully avoiding that pitfall. She and her team have written a new operations manual and have stopped seeing it as a fixed document; now they come together to discuss and update it as the needs of the operation evolve.

Results

Before the process began Sara had initially had doubts that significant improvements could be gained when they still had to work within the tight regulatory framework of the Food Standards Agency and food law code of practice. She was stunned by the sheer scale of what was achieved.

The time taken from inspection of an unsafe food business to the business becoming safe dropped from an average of 65 days to just 7 days, an 89% improvement.

The time taken to respond to customer complaints about businesses with poor food practices, inspect and make them safe speeded up by 53%.

The department even managed to knock a day off its already good response time to requests for advice and guidance.

Variation in all timescales was greatly reduced.

Staff morale was utterly transformed. Comments were overwhelmingly positive but time to focus on the businesses that needed more attention and much increased job satisfaction were the two most commonly expressed sentiments. Here are just two staff reactions:

"For me, the greatest benefit of the way in which Systems Thinking has been adopted within the Food, Health and Safety team is that it has allowed me to prioritise the work activities that provide the highest level of service and protection of health to the Council's customer - the public."

"I can't believe something so simple could so radically change my thinking, my way of working and increase the feeling of YES I want to come to work today!"

Conclusion

Having undergone the analysis, process mapping and redesign of systems within the department the results speak for themselves. Within just 6 months there has been massive service improvement, end to end times in all aspects of case work have sped up dramatically and both the council and the people of Lincoln have benefited.

The City of Lincoln Council intends to share its full findings with other Lincolnshire authorities and with the Food Standards Agency.

Vanguard Scotland management consultants work with private and public sector managers across the UK, Europe and North America to improve service for the customer and results for the organisation. To talk to Vanguard about the needs of your area call us on 0131 440 2600 or email office@vanguardscotland.co.uk