# Fixing Homelessness in Midlothian

Background

The Housing Manager at Midlothian Council was concerned by the increasing number of homeless enquires. His annual Bed and Breakfast spend alone was reaching levels of £1,000,000 and people were waiting longer and longer for permanent accommodation. He had some excellent ideas about how to improve the service and felt that a root cause of the problem was the failure of the area to investigate the reasons for homelessness for each individual and provide tailored advice and solutions.

He had tried many attempts to engage the Homelessness officers providing them with written guidance and packs but nothing seemed to change. The Business Transformation Manager had worked with Vanguard before and suggested that we get involved.

What we did

We started by getting the Housing Manager into the work so that he could see how difficult it was for the homelessness officers to find the time to do the necessary investigations. In addition it allowed the Homelessness Officers to understand the situation from the Manager's and the customer's perspective. We set up a Check team with the Housing Manager, Homelessness Officers and Administration staff. Working through the Vanguard model for 'Check' as detailed in the figure below, staff came to understand that the design of the work needed to change.
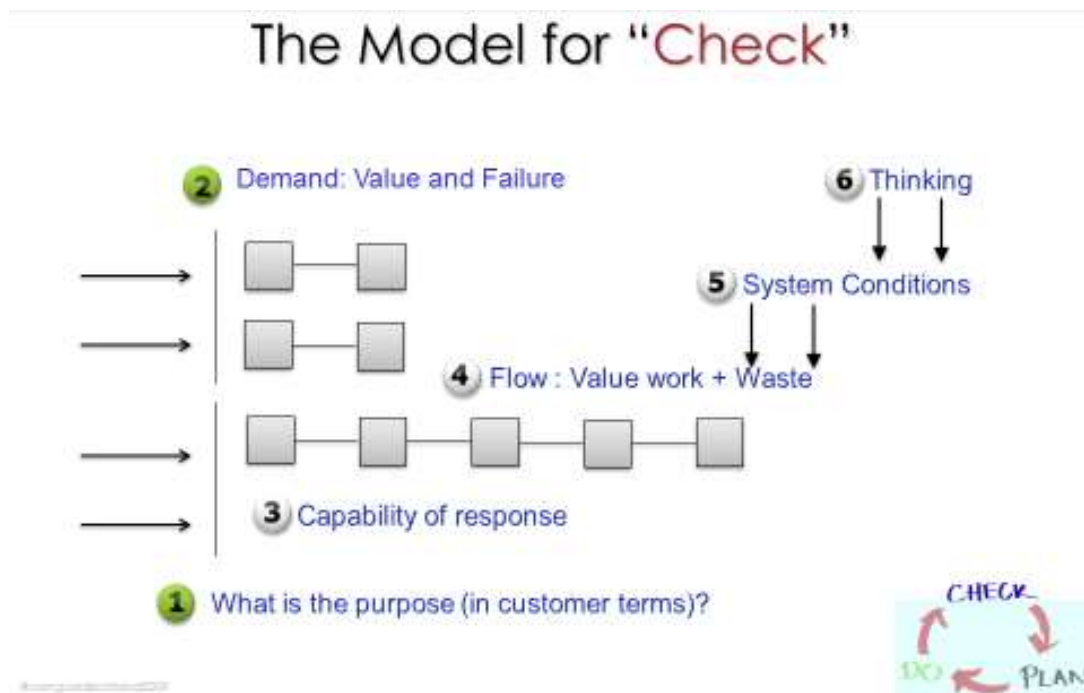
The team was then involved in understanding and categorising customer demand into 'value' demand, (demand we want for example, 'I am going to be made homeless tomorrow, what can I do?') or 'failure' demand (demand that happens due to a failure of the system to get it right or right first time for customers, for example, 'I am still in a B&B. When will I get a permanent house?').

An understanding of failure demand allowed the team to quickly identify what is going wrong from a customer's point of view. The team carried out process mapping to identify waste and its causes and they reviewed previous homeless assessments to understand the organisation's current capability to respond to different types of demand. At the end of 'Check' the team understood:

- The purpose of the homelessness process from the customer's point of view, that is; to prevent homelessness, give advice on how to get a home and provide permanent homes that are suitable for each individual customer's circumstances.

- The types of customer demand that enter the organisation for example, they discovered that 64% of incoming contacts were demand that happened due to a failure to get it right or right first time for the customer.

- The organisation's capability to deal with customer demand; by reviewing files they discovered that a 92% of people who came to the council looking for advice were assessed as homeless. On reviewing these files they felt that a percentage could have been helped to remain in their current homes perhaps through speaking to landlords or working with parents.

- The main things that waste time and resources. There was much duplication of paperwork, the processes were complex, and there were high levels of demand amplification. For example, in a sample of 27 households there were 1,114 demands placed on the system, 60% of temporary accommodation visits were unsuccessful and 47% of households assessed as homeless ended up in Bed and Breakfast.

- The root cause of the waste. The team identified the root causes of waste as; the current allocations policy encouraging people to declare themselves homeless, a focus on managing homelessness instead of prevention, a lack of affordable Housing options, a lack of guidance on Advice and Assistance and Housing options, functionalised working and the current measures and management of the work.

The second stage of the change process is 'Plan'. With the knowledge gained from 'Check' the team are in a unique position to understand what and how operational principles needed to change in order to gain the greatest leverage for improved performance. The system was redesigned and experiments were trialled to find out the best way of working. A new system was implemented.

The added value created by using the Vanguard Method

- Prior to using Vanguard Midlothian Council had studied volumes of demand and categorised them from an internal perspective e.g. homelessness assessment or homelessness query. Using the Vanguard method of Demand Analysis the Employees and Managers started to understand demand from the customers' perspective and also began to realise that a lot of demand was avoidable. Once they knew this they took action to eliminate it, improving customer service and releasing capacity.

- The Vanguard Method for Process Mapping allowed employees and managers to walk the work and identify not just unnecessary steps in flow but also steps that were predictably not working. This allowed the team to tackle the root cause of issues as opposed to fire-fighting.

- Using the Vanguard Method the Housing Manager was coached to let the front line staff make decisions about the work rather than provide standardised procedures. This allowed a more flexible approach to customer needs as employees started to use their own initiative. In one example they decided to use one house as a place for a number of younger homeless people and provided a life skill course on site.

- Using the Vanguard Method for managing the work the team were involved in weekly problem solving sessions to discuss the current issues and consider alternative solutions. This builds team spirit and helps to reinforce the customer focused behaviours. At these meetings data was provided on measures that mattered to customers so the team could see the difference they were making. The results were a fully empowered front line team able to problem solve and come up with individual solutions tailored to customer needs such as the use of private landlords, mediation, help with employment to name but a few solutions used.

The Results

The following benefits were realised:

- Homelessness Assessments reduced from 92% to 42% as individual solutions were sought for each customer. For example, homelessness officers worked with families to alleviate the challenges that can happen when young people are still living at home, they got customers on training courses, helped with employment issues, used private landlords to bridge the gap in the housing stock deficit and phoned landlords to ask for additional time to pay rent arrears to name but a few solutions

- Team working improved

- There was a switch to prevention of homelessness and providing advice and assistance rather than every client going through a homeless assessment

- Staff took accountability for decision making and gained the confidence to make decisions

- More positive challenges were made within the homelessness team regarding practice issues

- Working practices improved

- Staff gained respect for each other and for clients

- Better team spirit arose, along with improvements in morale

- Duplication of work was cut down

- The use of family mediation as prevention tool changed many lives

- The number of people going into Bed and Breakfasts reduced from around 50% to 15%, significantly reducing the council's budget spend

As the staff themselves commented, *"There has been a massive change brought about by the review - good to have the freedom to change things and come up with our own solutions"*.

If you would like help changing your service for the better get in touch.

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