

Leamington Transformation Board – leading an executive search

Case Study





It takes a particular set of skills and experience to coordinate an all-encompassing programme designed to transform a town. With help from WME, Leamington Transformation Board found the ideal candidate to be its chair

When you have a 'once in a generation moment' to transform a town and fulfil its potential, it's crucial to have the right person at the helm.

That was the magnitude of the task facing Councillor Andrew Day and fellow members of the Leamington Transformation Board.

They needed to find an independent chair capable of leading an ambitious and wide-ranging programme of initiatives and galvanising public, private and VCS partners around a shared vision.

Royal Leamington Spa, to use its full title, is a place synonymous with fine architecture, wide boulevards and award-winning parks. And while it's certainly not a town in crisis, there has long been a feeling that Leamington could 'so much more' than it currently offers, explains Cllr Day, leader of Warwick District Council.

In recent years the historic town has gained greater diversity and a creative buzz, in part thanks to the 6,000 students from Warwick and Coventry universities who live there. With London just over an hour away, Cllr Day believes Leamington is ideally placed to capitalise on the rise of hybrid working – if it raises its game.

That's why all three tiers of local government – the district council together with Leamington Spa Town Council and Warwickshire County Council – came together in early 2022 to form a board and begin work on a transformation framework.

The idea is to bring greater coordination to efforts to revitalise the town with the board overseeing a variety of

projects and funding bids. At the same time, an advisory group including representatives from businesses, charities, transport, education and other backgrounds was launched to provide a platform for regular input to the board.

Cllr Day was well aware that finding someone with the right skill set and experience to be independent chair would be a challenge and therefore sought support from West Midlands Employers (WME).

'We have worked with WME over various appointments at the council so we were familiar with the team and knew we could trust their advice. It's a new post, therefore it was about defining the role, not just filling it, and it was really helpful having WME take us through that process.'

'It's a transformational role that's very challenging because it involves working across three levels of local government and with a broad range of stakeholders. So it's about being able to have both a strategic view and the capability to deal with projects on the ground.'



It was clear that the transformation board required much more than a traditional recruitment process and so WME cast the net wide and conducted an extensive executive search led by one of its associates, Anna Jay.

Having had 20 years' experience working on executive searches, Anna was able to tap into an extensive range of contacts within the region and beyond – vital for such an unusual role.

'Executive search was so important in this context,' she explains. 'It's a unique role in a complex setting so as well as leading a broad search, it required conversations with prospective candidates to ensure they fully understood what was required of the board's new chair. We needed to identify candidates that would be able to grasp and work within that context – leading a board rather than a separate entity – and have the experience of working with multiple stakeholders, communities and commercial partners in order to have credibility.'

WME supported the campaign from start to finish, creating the candidate pack, briefing the board, assisting with interviews and supporting candidates throughout the process.

'Anna asked some really good and searching questions that helped us to reflect before going through the recruitment process,' Cllr Day says. 'It brought a different set of candidates than we would otherwise expect to see.'

'WME bring that objectivity. They were able to listen and play back to you what they are hearing the interview panel say. It was important we reached unanimity and that was the skill that WME brought.'

He says the panel were presented with 'a tough but pleasant challenge' of choosing from a shortlist of four credible candidates. Indeed, Anna admits it's the first time she has had a situation where any of the final interviewees could have been appointed.

In the end a combination of a highly impressive track record and local knowledge saw Mark Lee appointed to the role. A resident of neighbouring Warwick and a director of Coventry & Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership, he's delivered a number of high-profile regeneration schemes in the West Midlands.

'We had a phenomenal response and so it was a wonderful search for me to lead,' says Anna. 'We had those with private sector backgrounds, quasi-public sector leads, regional development, housing – and people with significant portfolio careers. Everyone I spoke to could see the potential that the board can realise so were interested in hearing about Leamington's aspirations.'

Cllr Day says Mark has brought the blend of experience and skills the board was searching for.

'This is a once in a generation moment for Leamington and we have got alignment between the three levels of local government and between the political parties.'

'There's a real passion to do something remarkable rather than ordinary and we wanted the leadership to turn that ambition into action on the ground, which is what we now have through Mark.'

The verdict



'We had 38 applicants and got it down to a final shortlist of four – all were appointable. It was a question of who was the strongest. It was a tough but pleasant challenge to have.'

Cllr Andrew Day, leader of Warwick District Council

How WME helped

- ✔ Worked with the client to clearly understand the brief and the requirements of a unique role
- ✔ Created an engaging candidate pack to provide applicants with information about the role, the board and the area
- ✔ Conducted an extensive executive search
- ✔ Held regular updates with the leader of Warwick District Council to keep him informed of progress
- ✔ Devised a recruitment process, assisted with the longlisting and produced a report with recommendations which was presented to members of the interview panel
- ✔ Supported the interview process, e.g. by suggesting questions, and assisted the panel in making their decision
- ✔ Liaised with candidates throughout the process, keeping them informed about what was required and providing feedback at the end

About WME

West Midlands Employers is a not-for-profit, public sector organisation collectively owned by 32 councils in the West Midlands. We're one of 9 Regional Employers' Organisations in England. Our vision is to advocate, build and champion a resilient and diverse public sector workforce for an ambitious West Midlands region. Our wide range of services supports this vision.

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