

Graham Baxter

Mark Smulian meets Graham Baxter, leader of North East Derbyshire – and winner of the ‘leader of the year’ award in the LGiU’s c’llr awards.

There could scarcely have been more difficult circumstances in which to become a council leader than those that confronted Graham Baxter.

He took over at North East Derbyshire District Council in 2004 after a sulphurous dispute between his predecessor and the then chief executive Carol Gilby had seen both depart, and the Standards Board for England and the Audit Commission take a close interest in the council’s affairs.

It had been rated ‘weak’ in its comprehensive performance assessment and “was at rock bottom, I don’t think much could have got any worse”, Councillor Baxter recalls.

North East Derbyshire, though, then leapt three categories to ‘excellent’ CPA status, the first council to perform this feat, one of the factors that has led to him taking the C’llr Leader of the Year award.

The council covers around 100 square miles and is home to almost 100,000 people, in a mix of Peak District fringe, former coal and steel areas and small towns.

Cllr Baxter, a former steelworks engineer, had been a Labour councillor for Dronfield North since 1983 and had risen to deputy leader before taking the helm.

Things had to change, and council staff and the public needed to be convinced this was both happening and was necessary.

He decided quickly that although he did not accept that the council was ‘weak’ there would be little purpose in trying to challenge the Audit Commission’s verdict.

“We could have done that, or we could pick ourselves up and get on with the job with our staff, so we set about lifting staff and member morale,” he says.

“The main thing we decided to do was improve our communications, both internally and externally, so we held staff roadshows which meant going to depots at 6am sometimes to meet the workforce.

“We tried to get everyone to see themselves as

part of ‘Team NED’, as we called it, that we were all in it together.”

Training for elected members was introduced alongside this, to ensure they were part of the process and to turn round a situation in which mistrust between some senior officers and councillors had been rife.

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Cllr Baxter set up a leadership team of senior councillors and officers to set the council’s strategic direction and they began to work closely with a ‘Respect Charter’ signed by both sides to regulate their relationships.

North East Derbyshire was under the watchful eye of the Government Office for the East Midlands, and turned initially to an interim chief executive, Tony McArdle, to steer it out of trouble.

“Tony gave us belief in ourselves again and energised things and made us see we were not

as bad as we’d been painted,” Cllr Baxter says.

Mr McArdle, now chief executive at Lincolnshire County Council, recalls: “Graham found himself in the glare of the spotlight that was shining on the council for all of the wrong reasons.

“His response was down to earth and characteristic of him. He came in every day with a smile, a joke, and a determination. No matter what difficulties emerged – and quite a few did – he was patient, listened to advice, made a decision and stuck to it.

“He really was very stubborn about the things he believed in most – which were all about getting the best for the people who’d sent him there. That meant the council had to perform, and, that that was his job to do so, he set at it.”

North East Derbyshire used advisors from the Improvement and Development Agency, but not those from the private sector “who can cost you a lot of money”, Cllr Baxter says.

He wanted to restore morale rather than create further upheavals and so while some organisational changes were made, reforms were “more a matter of encouraging change in the way the council saw itself.

“We altered our external communications too, so the public could see what we were doing, using our newspaper NED News, which we changed to make it more readable, as our shop window to get our message across,” Councillor Baxter says.

“And we set up a one-stop shop in the contact centre so if the public ring up they get dealt with there by the person answering, so the back offices are at the front.”

This commitment to team building and communication was one of the points singled out by council chief executive Mike Goodwin on Councillor Baxter’s nomination form for the C’llr award.

He wrote: “Councillor Baxter is a visionary leader. The spirit of Team North East Derbyshire – in which members play a challenging but supportive role – underpinned our achievements.

“During his six years as leader our transformation is one of the most dramatic in local government history.

“Before he became leader we experienced difficult officer/ member relationships and morale was poor.

“From one of the worst districts before Councillor Baxter became leader we are now one of the very best.”

Mr McArdle recalls a similar collaborative approach to leadership: “I liked that I always knew where I was with him. He didn’t have an agenda you didn’t know about, and he always acknowledged the efforts that everyone made to support him.

“People did support him, too, quite regardless of politics in many instances, because they could see he meant well and meant to succeed. It’s a real pleasure – and no surprise – to find that he has done.”

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One aspect of this has been his introduction of ‘spotlight reviews’ to help managers focus



on better services, and a determination to use evidence-based policy, assisted by a report that provided in-depth data on the local community and a large-scale consultation with the public to agree council priorities.

This has paid off as the council responds to the government’s spending review, which has seen efficiency measures found that will generate savings equivalent to 20% of the budget.

He says: “The cuts will be about 26% over two years, which is about £1m a year for us, but we want to protect the front line services – the street cleansing, parks, leisure.

“Most job losses should be through natural wastage, rather than redundancy.”

Indeed, staff surveys show that the council is a consistently popular employer.

There will though be seven or eight senior job losses through a drive into shared services, which culminated in the signing in March of an agreement with neighbouring Bolsover District Council.

This will see them appoint a joint chief executive and senior managers this spring, saving some £1.5m a year each.

Both councils will look at further shared services opportunities, building on existing

shared procurement and IT, the latter of which also involves Derbyshire Dales District Council.

“I’m not sure how far that will go yet, but it will not be a merger,” Councillor Baxter says.

Striving to avoid job losses is an important factor in an area that still has some high levels of deprivation.

“Regeneration is a major thing here as the area has suffered a triple whammy of the coalfield closing, the loss of steelworks and loss of Biwater, a major employer at Clay Cross that shifted its work to France,” he says.

“The council has invested nearly £2m to attract £13m of inward investment into two business parks with different sizes of units for small businesses. We can look after post and admin so firms with only a few staff can be out selling or working.

“This is an attractive place to live and near to large cities, and you get employers relocating here.”

Part of the attraction is the proximity of the Peak District National Park, where Councillor Baxter can be found walking in his rare time off from the council, “but I find the council takes over my life”, he says. 