

Case Study 2: Supporting Hampshire's Rural Communities: Developing a Rural Delivery Strategy for Hampshire.

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Nature and location of the initiative

Hampshire County Council (HCC) is currently developing a Rural Delivery Strategy to help meet the needs of rural areas now, and in the future, and to better co-ordinate into seamless delivery the various services already provided separately by departments within HCC.

Hampshire is situated mid way along the south coast of England. Hampshire is one of the largest non-metropolitan or “shire” counties in England. It has a population of over 1,240,000 (2001 census) and covers an area of almost 368,000 hectares (excluding Southampton and Portsmouth), It contains the world famous New Forest and South Downs¹ National Parks, and a stunning range of rural landscapes, which inspired Jane Austen. The famous cathedral town of Winchester serves a large rural hinterland, together with other market towns. The cities of Southampton and Portsmouth are growth areas situated along the south coast, as are the towns in the north east of the county which are closer to the London conurbation.

HCC is one of the three levels of local government operating in Hampshire. The County Council delivers services across the whole county (with the exception of Southampton and Portsmouth, which have different local arrangements). HCC is responsible for strategic services such as education, caring for vulnerable people, road maintenance, access to the countryside, and strategic planning. District councils cover smaller areas and are responsible for services such as waste collection, leisure centres and approving individual planning applications. Parish councils operate at a community or village level. Residents are often confused about which council delivers which service: therefore it is essential for all tiers of local government to work closely together so that residents perceive service delivery as ‘seamless’. Further improving this is a central thread of this Rural Delivery Strategy.

Why this initiative was introduced

Why was this initiative introduced? (e.g. what were the factors that made this initiative necessary)

With over 85% of Hampshire's land area and 23% of the population defined as rural, it is crucial for Hampshire County Council to consider how it can best support its rural communities. The development of Hampshire's Rural Delivery Strategy is founded in the desire to take effective action on issues of rural deprivation, isolation, poor accessibility, higher costs in service delivery, demographic trends and other key parameters. Village sustainability is critical. The county council's elected Cabinet identified a focus on these issues as a key priority.

Objectives

What was the objective of the initiative? (e.g. was it a pilot programme with the potential for scale-up?)

The objective was to identify ways of improving the quality of delivery of Hampshire County Council's services to better meet the needs of rural areas and to better achieve ‘rural proofing’. Rural

¹ “Downs” = chalk hills. The South Downs National Park is in the process of being designated.

proofing is the process whereby services are examined and modified to ensure that they will not unfairly disadvantage rural areas.

Factors influencing design

Why was it designed in this manner? (What were the design constraints e.g. Regulations, administrative barriers)

- *What actors were involved? (e.g. role of public-private partnerships)*
- *Was the public consulted?*
- *Describe/outline the process from start to finish, length of time?*

The process was led by the newly created Hampshire County Council Cabinet post of Executive Member for Rural Affairs, held by elected county councillor Dr Ray Ellis, and shaped by the county council's Cabinet (senior councillors from the political group elected by Hampshire's residents to run Hampshire County Council). All key decisions were submitted to Cabinet for approval.

Starting in April 2008, senior staff from each of the council's area of activities identified what they considered to be the key issues for rural Hampshire. The key issues and questions identified were drawn together in a single consultation document www.hants.gov.uk/rh/rural/rural-consultation.pdf.

Consultation with stakeholder organisations and the public was held September-November 2008, and responses were received from nearly 60 organisation and individuals. As part of the consultation process, Hampshire also held a consultation seminar in October 2008, which provided people with an opportunity to discuss key issues around rural service delivery in the county. The responses to the consultation are summarised at www.hants.gov.uk/rural/consultation-responses.htm.

We supported this through the development of a quantitative socio-economic data set for rural Hampshire www.hants.gov.uk/rh/rural/rural-profile.pdf. Combining both, and linking with regional and national priorities, the following emerging **priorities for rural Hampshire** have been identified:

- Supporting sustainable rural communities; including affordable housing, rural broadband, access to services, supporting volunteering, and community engagement.
- Providing effective rural transport
- Farming, food and access
- Economic development
- Climate change, including renewable energy, and making better use of the county's wood-fuel resource.

The consultation responses and socio-economic data were used as the basis of action plans for improved rural service delivery. These were developed during March 2009, approved by Cabinet in April 2009, and are detailed at www.hants.gov.uk/decisions/decisions-index/index-docs-7042.html. We will be developing these action plans and projects further over the next months. Additionally, we had previously identified improvements in service delivery that could be implemented immediately within existing resources www.hants.gov.uk/decisions/decisions-docs/090330-cabine-R0323153247.html

Delivery constraints

What were the delivery constraints?

- *What resources were made available (physical and financial) at different levels of implementation?*
- *What were the technical limitations to delivery?*

Local government is required by central government to make 5% annual cost savings. Therefore, any improved delivery must arise from improved performance rather than increased spending. This makes improved delivery more difficult to achieve.

In a large organisation such as HCC (39,000 employees), departments work relatively independently. However, this project required close joint working between departments. As a result it was decided that the action plans produced should be formed around themes rather than the traditional convenience of departmental boundaries; this challenged normal ways of working. Due to its success, this approach will be used in future corporate projects.

All work to Jan 2009 was achieved with no extra resources, resulting in workload pressures on the councillors and staff members taking on substantial responsibilities additional to their existing workload. The work was co-ordinated by the Director and Assistant Director from a HCC department which volunteered to take on this corporate role. From Jan 2009, a staff member was seconded from another role within HCC to assist both the Cabinet member and corporate leads on the paid staff.

In order to embed long term changes, HCC has approved £200,000 of 'start-up' funding, for projects which test new and innovative ways of working. A maximum of 50% of project costs will be paid, with the remainder levered in from external sources. The project team is currently developing criteria for short listing funding bids. HCC will also seek the views of the Hampshire Rural Forum, an independent stakeholders' organisation with an overview of rural affairs that aims to help Hampshire's rural communities become more sustainable. It is envisaged that the projects will start by September 2009. Some of the money will be used as a Community Challenge Fund, enabling Hampshire residents to put forward innovative 'grass roots' projects that benefit their own communities.

Results and lessons learned

What were the lessons learned? Results? (e.g. Positive, negative etc.....)

Successful delivery so far has largely been due to the strong leadership and commitment shown to the project, together with the corporate lead taken by a HCC departmental Director, and the willingness of colleagues to work corporately and collaboratively. This set a clear direction for the county council's departments, which identified the capacity necessary to achieve the objectives set for the project.

The relatively 'easy' part has been to write the strategy and action plan: the challenge will be in improving delivery of services in rural areas, and quantifying the outcomes. HCC's aspirations go far beyond 'rural proofing' service delivery – the process whereby services are examined and modified to ensure that they will not unfairly disadvantage rural areas. Its commitment is to delivering improved services in rural areas that better meet the needs of a dispersed population with a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds.

A challenge is to implement changes without substantial funding. Although significant improvements in service delivery have been achieved, much of the focus by corporate colleagues so far has been around the 'rural proofing' of existing service plans rather than in the development of innovative services. A greater challenge will be in developing the partnership arrangements necessary to ensure that service delivery in rural areas appears more 'seamless' than present.

HCC already works closely with other public, private and voluntary sector organisations, but there are real opportunities to develop these relationships further. To a large organisation such as HCC one of

the benefits of partnership working at a more local level is that it enables us to improve outcomes at a community level. For that reason, relationships with parish councils² are key. Similarly, working with community co-operatives is another important way of meeting communities' needs. We will be developing these partnerships with the public, voluntary and private sectors over the next few months.

A further challenge will be in quantifying improvements in service delivery. We would like to measure whether or not residents feel services have improved, though it is rarely easy to measure opinions that are, by definition, largely subjective. It is even more difficult to quantify just those elements of a resident's perceptions that relate only to those services delivered by Hampshire County Council. We are currently evaluating whether we can do this through using the 'place survey' data collected by Government from 16,000 addresses in Hampshire, combined with the Mosaic socio-economic classification.

² Parish councils operate at a community (e.g. village) scale. They have statutory powers. Councillors are invariably volunteers from the community.