

Case study

September 2016

West Sussex County Council

Building capability to engage communities across council services

West Sussex County Council has a long history of working with communities across the county to build stronger partnerships and improve outcomes for local people. This commitment is driven from a clear political vision and strategy that recognises the value to the council – primarily to prevent and reduce unnecessary demand on statutory services – and to local people, of working in collaboration with a wide range of residents and community groups. The council's approach is split into three key areas: start of life, economy, and later life. This approach drives investment priorities and helps to shape the management and governance arrangements within the council and with partners, to ensure the objectives and outcomes in each key area are met. Community engagement and involvement plays a crucial role in each one.

In order to support capability building within the council for engaging communities, the council has invested in a 'communities' function that cuts across all service areas. The team has four main areas of work:

1. Overseeing the governance of parish councils in the county.
2. Community safety and wellbeing.
3. Specific safety and prevention initiatives jointly with the West Sussex Fire and Rescue service.
4. Geographical groupings to build partnerships and identify opportunities for joint working with district and borough councils on local initiatives. The regional leads also work closely with the Sussex Association of Local Councils, a wider regional group that helps to facilitate joint working, sharing of learning, and to tackle local issues at that wider regional level.

This also provides a strong framework for making connections with members on local issues and providing support to tackle these at a district or county level and to learn from experiences elsewhere. The council's 'devolution deal' has also helped to build stronger relationships with district councils.

Alongside this, the council has pursued a number of specific community action projects that demonstrate some of the key benefits to working in this way, and which shape the areas that the council is likely to focus on in the future.

Bolney volunteers

Bolney is a small village in the heart of West Sussex. Volunteering is not new among the local community. However, in response to a growing need for more volunteers to help out with village life, and to build a stronger sense of community in the village, the Bolney Volunteers project was set up to provide a team that can undertake tasks which don't fall under the remit of other established community groups or local organisations in the area. The project is led by the chair of the parish council, and this strength of leadership has been critical to its success. This has also helped to gradually build stronger leadership on local issues among other residents, and there is clear evidence of community leadership now being much more widespread and embedded in that community as a result. People locally believe that the project has led to:

- a stronger and more resilient local community, with capacity to respond more quickly to weather events and other emergency situations
- greater capacity to provide informal support for residents who are less able to access services or take part in community life
- the opportunity to run more social activities for people in the village to improve village life.

The parish council provides infrastructure funding (for example maintaining the website and promoting the project) and the county council has worked closely with the parish council to help generate maximum benefit and learning from the Bolney Volunteer project.

Operation Watershed

Following on from the devastating floods across southern England, including parts of West Sussex in 2012/2013, the council used money from its Active Communities Fund to provide grant funding for local projects aimed at building greater flood resilience and capacity to respond. A total of 288 projects were funded right across the county, led by 143 community groups or parish councils. Allocation of funding was overseen by the cross-partner Strategic Flood Management Board (which included involvement from the private sector) and the county-wide Flood Action Group. The council provided support to promote the project, and to help community groups to write bids and engage with local people. A community event was also run to identify what had worked well in the past, in order to shape the priorities and plans for the future. This would help to decide which projects were most likely to benefit from council funding.

The learning from this work is now being used in other community engagement work, and in particular, how operation watershed helped to give people the confidence to get involved and take action on the things that were important to them, the need to enter into a two-way dialogue with local groups, and the importance of supporting community groups to build their credibility and reputation in the communities that they work.

Going local

Going local is a project being undertaken in partnership with Adur and Worthing District Councils and the NHS, to tackle and prevent health issues associated with poverty and deprivation in coastal communities. It has provided learning for new ways of working in other areas as well. The project involves social prescribing and engagement of local people through a community interest company to identify and find solutions for issues that lead to poor health.

Overall the council has learnt that for community action and engagement to be successful, and to lead to stronger, more self-sufficient communities, less demand on statutory services, and improved quality of life (whether that be through a greater ability to respond to sudden events and / or to help build social networks), you need to start small, learn as you go, share this learning with the people you are engaging with, and focus on sustainability. A key part of the business case is about preventing the need for statutory services, but also the confidence that working with communities will lead to greater resilience and improved quality of life.



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