

## **More fences mean fewer ambulances - how your communities are the answer to your budget problem**

### **Overview**

The West Suffolk councils (Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council) understand that the role of local government is changing in response to reduced funding. New approaches to working and new models of how to maximise our councils' effectiveness are needed. A key part of this change is the role of local government within the community.

Although West Suffolk is a prosperous and attractive place in which to live, work and visit, there are pockets where some individuals and families are experiencing deprivation and social upheaval. This can result in feelings of isolation, lack of confidence and family breakdown. Catching problems early before they escalate can lead to benefits for the people involved, as well as savings to the public purse, whether through cutting demand for services (for example through fewer crisis interventions) or overall improvements in health and wellbeing.

Our approach to supporting families and communities has put residents and elected councillors at the heart of making positive change. Rather than focusing on the gaps or problems in communities, the focus is on strengths and how these can be increased.

We play an empowering role by enabling community production so that communities work together and lead on building "fences" at the tops of cliffs, to prevent the need to access the "ambulances" at the bottom. In practical terms, this has meant taking a range of actions to empower and enable people to spot, prevent and address emerging problems, rather than waiting until they become serious and manifest as worklessness, anti-social behaviour or poor health.

This has meant changing the way we work, namely:

- a different kind of work: prevention is different to crisis response;
- different ways of working across organisations: conventional silo working approaches are unsuited to preventative approaches;
- different skill sets for officers and councillors; and
- a different workplace – broadly speaking, putting ourselves in the places where people are, and not being confined to public sector offices.

The approach to this work has been based on identifying local connectors - people who are well connected and already active in their communities, whether in formal roles or just by contributing to local events and activities. By us linking with them and

linking them together means they are a real strength, or asset, which the community already has, and can contribute local solutions to issues that impact on the community.

The role of a ward councillor is also central to the approach and they are equipped by the councils with an outline plan to apply in their wards. In addition to this they are supported by a Families and Communities officer for their area, locality funding and data.

The councillor, supported by their locality officer from the Families and Communities team, engages with the community and the connectors, hearing the issues that are of concern locally, questioning what they care enough about to take some local action and then using their influence to help the community provide a local solution.

### **So how have we got here and what have we learnt in the past four years....**

Our success has been down to four factors:

Success factor 1: Transformation

Success factor 2: Political leadership

Success factor 3: Staffing

Success factor 4: Evaluating, reviewing and starting again

### **Who we are**

**Councillor Robin Millar, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Families and Communities, Forest Heath District Council:** Robin has been instrumental in the creation of West Suffolk's Families and Communities approach. He identified the resources needed to support Ward Councillors in their role as community champions and supported a team of officers through a substantial period of change. Over the past four years, Robin has gained invaluable experience in the pitfalls, and pleasures, of reshaping the role of a district council. Both a district and county councillor in Newmarket, he has hands on experience of working alongside his communities.

**Davina Howes, Head of Families and Communities, West Suffolk councils:** With responsibility for Corporate Policy, Communications, Customer Service and Families and Communities, Davina has experience of managing teams through significant change. Steering staff from two different organisations into one cohesive team as well as supporting two Cabinets and Councillors from two councils. Davina is also a Director of Barley Homes (Group) Ltd, the councils' new housing company

## **Success factor 1: Transformation**

Easy word to say, used all too freely but really hard to achieve. But you can't accomplish what we have without a clear vision and sustained focus on transformation. That's not just a one off speech or a few changes in management. It's a fully fledged, shoulder to the ground, hard and continuous slog. Not to mention hundreds of conversations repeating the same messages over and over again. And it never ends because we are always evolving and always looking to do better....

### **Shared services**

Seems like a distant memory now because we've done so much in the past four years. After a few years of tinkering round the edges of shared services, in 2012 we got on with it and in a few months we were two councils – working together with one staff and one West Suffolk focus. The £3.5 million savings were great but more importantly shared services has enabled us to build something new.

### **Shared priorities**

Political and managerial leadership quickly set about agreeing and articulating a shared vision for West Suffolk's future. Our focus on three areas – economic growth, housing and families and communities – meant that we had a common purpose and one that resonated with our residents and business.

Of the three, the families and communities priority was the most ambitious and different to what is usually expected of a district council.

Working on the basis of 'more fences, fewer ambulances' the aim of our Families and Communities approach is to reshape the relationship with the councils. Our purpose is to foster greater resilience and self-support in communities, reversing the dependency culture so councils are seen as the last, not first, port of call. Our strategy focusses on supporting families and communities, to help prevent crises which create demand on public services, and other agencies, such as Suffolk County Council, as the traditional provider of social care, is actively working with us.

### **A mature and honest relationship with others**

Perhaps we are lucky, or perhaps it's because we've all worked at it....but our relationships with other organisations is incredibly positive. That doesn't mean to say that we always agree and sometimes at both a political and officer level we have disagreements and difficult conversations. But this mature relationship was evidenced by the award of £3.5 million to the Suffolk public sector as part of the Transformation

Challenge Award. Money isn't everything but it has helped provide some resources for us to focus on delivering a number of programmes to support public sector transformation. One of the programmes focusses on 'community resilience' which is the essence of our families and communities approach. An example is the recruitment of a co-ordinator post to support the public sector across Suffolk to tackle the issue of poverty. It's through the many conversations and focus we've had at these meetings and other partnership bodies, such as the Health and Wellbeing Board, that the wider Suffolk system can now understand the importance of our families and communities approach to prevention. For example, Suffolk's Health Prevention Strategy has a strategic priority to 'build community and individual resilience' which is being led by West Suffolk councils.

### **What's next.....Devolution**

We have a proposed deal for Suffolk and Norfolk and we still have a long way to go. But we will make sure that families and communities are considered at the heart of the deal. We can't just build homes, we have to build communities.

## **Success factor 2: Political leadership**

Reams have been written about political leadership but here are a few of the pointers from our own experience. In effect political leaders carry the vision for what is being sought, the culture that is needed to achieve it – and the risk so that officers are free to explore and experiment.

### **The right ideas**

Someone, somewhere has to hold the ideas. There must be integrity of thought, word and action for those ideas to be clear and consistent. There must be a spark to set a fire. That lies within political vision.

### **Spreading the message**

The old teaching adage on the perspective of a student is: tell me, show me, watch me. This staged process was intentional, deliberate and occurred over months. The ideas were presented formally and “handled” by officers in workshops (see next point). Examples of the thinking were found from elsewhere, from within aspects of their current workload – and also modelled by political leaders in the community (previous point). When the work started, it was watched closely and discussed together to tease out lessons and learning points.

This was repeated with Members also and in joint officer/member sessions. Setting out the vision and task was made easier with compelling examples and opportunities for them to try out themselves in their wards.

### **Working with staff**

None of these ideas stick if staff are not involved. They bring a perspective on delivery and the “doing” which politicians may have a sense of but are unlikely to understand or appreciate fully: it really isn’t the politicians’ job. This step is crucial and the approach only gains from officers’ own thoughts on shaping the delivery. It also increases their ownership of the new direction. Any nervousness about officers blocking or not understanding were quickly dispelled – and they are now openly regarded as the “delivery experts”.

### **Providing the tools**

Another key leadership role has been to equip and resource staff and members for the task ahead. Families and Communities officers were appointed to clusters of wards to support members (“localities”). Members were also given “locality budgets” of £2500 pa to effectively micro-commission, quickly and simply, community building projects (within clear and simple parameters).

### **Who moved the cheese?**

This kind of culture change – at its heart, this is what it has been – is not quick or easy or undertaken lightly. Working with members, cross Party, has been particularly challenging as it seeks to challenge and change expectations and habits of a lifetime in politics. The prize however is worth it – as one (opposition) Member said “I get it. The light bulb has gone on. This is amazing – why we never did this before I will never understand!”

### **What next?**

Firmly embedded in culture and the corporate psyche now, the current work is sharing this approach with other service areas (housing and planning first) where the response has been enthusiastic.

Beyond our own borders, work with other public sector bodies – the County Council, health and social services – is also developing.

Accountability also requires we are looking at the evaluation of impact. Popularity with the public has been tested (elections) and it is wildly popular with members.

## **Success factor 3: Staffing**

### **When two becomes one**

'Just get on with it' was the clear message from staff when we began sharing services and they've been at the forefront of pushing the councils' to achieve more ever since.

Whilst not painless, a focussed effort on getting all the necessary systems, processes and culture in place to enable staff to deliver for both councils, has enabled us to deliver on our vision.

### **Investing in a new Families and Communities Team**

Yes, we've invested; a rarity at a time of financial difficulty. But we are so committed to prevention and building community capacity and resilience that we invested in the team.

We appointed a team of seven families and communities officers led by a Service Manager. Each member of staff has responsibility for a geographical area and between 10 to 12 Ward Councillors. Their role is to working alongside Ward Councillors, community leaders, residents and community connectors. They understand their localities – who people are, the challenges faced by the community, the opportunities available. This invaluable local knowledge sits alongside data about the area and can be used to steer priorities and commission activities.

### **Spreading the word**

It's not just about the Families and Communities Team, we are spreading the gospel of the families and communities approach to all council staff. Starting with the planning team who have a crucial role in shaping the environment and quality of life across the area. Already we've seen benefits of this where planners liaise with families and communities staff about potentially controversial issues; this provides a community focussed approach, and not just engagement from the perspective of statutory regulation.

### **Not without its challenges**

Getting (and retaining) the right staff to deliver the families and communities approach has not been without its challenges. In four years we've had two different Service Managers and two different Heads of Service. Others have left us along the way too. The managerial changes undoubtedly slowed progress but through perseverance, determination and the resolution shown by the team, we are now in a positive place.

Staff have had to learn new skills and to approach issues in a different way. This has been hard for some staff. For years the community development role was to help, nearly always say yes, and support with 'nice things' such as community events. But now it's about supporting and guiding and sometimes sitting back to enable others to help themselves. This approach takes more time and patience, but the long term payoff is that communities have more confidence and resilience. It can also mean having more challenging conversations with communities. It can be difficult to explain to a community that there is no money to pay for the thing they really need. Suggesting that if they are that passionate about something that they should take responsibility and raise funds themselves is not always a comfortable conversation. But we need to have them.

### **What's next....working with communities, not for an organisation**

Collaborative working with a wide range of organisations is not new to us. There are many examples of our staff working alongside the voluntary sector, adult services, children and young people and police, to support communities.

We're ready to take this to the next step. Our families and communities approach is seen as a core component in the delivery of Connect (integrating health and social care) as we can provide the much needed community support for individuals. We are creating a Multi-Agency Team of community staff from across both the districts and the county council (ACS, CYP and Public Health) to further build community resilience.

### **A quick word about member and officer relations... from the officer perspective**

With the caveat that I don't want this to be career ending, I would say that the relationship between the Portfolio Holder (Cabinet member) and the Head of Service is crucial. It sets the tone for the rest of the team. Staff need confidence that the lead councillors and senior managers have a constructive and positive relationship, otherwise it sows the seeds of doubt. And of course, working for two councils, I have two Portfolio Holders who need to be briefed and reassured; thankfully they have a shared vision.

We've had some challenging times and difficult conversations. This is inevitable when you are pushing the boundaries and establishing a new role for a district council. When a strategic vision meets an operational reality, there is bound to be a clash. But with open, honest and constructive dialogue, we can get through this. The end result is always better for it.



## **Success factor 4: Evaluating, reviewing and starting again**

### **How do we know its working?**

So we're committed to our families and communities approach, we've invested in it both financially and emotionally, we're extolling its virtues and others are taking notice and joining in. As much as we'd like to, we can't escape the harsh reality of budget pressures and the need to *prove* that this is the right approach.

It's fair to say that finding a mechanism to prove our concept and measure success has been taxing our minds. Because we are working with communities, not individuals, it makes the whole process of evaluation more complex.

### **Qualitative evidence**

This is probably the easiest thing to collate and measure. Feedback from communities and from individual Ward Members has been overwhelmingly positive. Community representatives and connectors appreciate having a contact within an area so they don't have to spend hours navigating our structure.

Most councillors appreciate the benefits of the Families and Communities approach. It's not just about the tangible things such as a locality budgets and a dedicated member of staff, but they understand how it helps in their role as a 21st century councillor. Whilst a small minority of councillors will always have their 'pet project' and continue to act as they have always done, the vast majority appreciate the benefits of this approach. Even suggesting that we might move round the Families and Communities staff to different localities is met with protest! A testament to the relationships that staff and councillors have built whilst working alongside their communities.

### **Theory of change**

Whilst the qualitative evidence is nice, it's not enough and we recognise that we need to put some academic rigour to the work we are doing. This is necessary in order to justify our approach, evidence the potential savings it can make and provide the proof to other agencies who may benefit from this preventative action.

We have adopted a Theory of Change (ToC) to support our evaluation methodology. Put simply, our Theory of Change is 'more fences, fewer ambulances'. And there are five elements:

1. A safe place
2. Recognising individuals
3. Understanding relationships
4. Encouraging agency
5. Developing vision

In West Suffolk, we are using the ToC to filter, adopt and adapt all of the “big ideas” we have used in the implementation of our Families and Communities approach. For example:

- The title “Families and Communities” itself is a statement of the importance of understanding the impact and role of day to day relationships
- Asset Based Community Development was adopted and adapted as an approach for Members because it reflects the importance we place on letting people do what they can, without assuming that public services know best or must act first
- Performance Based Results and Outcome Based Commissioning (through the Community Chest idea) has been adopted because it focuses on the future and the intended impact of actions.

It has also been used in practical ways, for example:

- To collate feedback from a Mental Health Roundtable and tease out a constructive role for West Suffolk in supporting people.
- To develop understanding of approaches to Community and Personal Resilience (a strand within the Health and Wellbeing Board Prevention Strategy)
- To frame a simple narrative for the Suffolk Devolution bid (September 2015)

The immediate challenge is to develop and commission a programme for evaluating the use of this Theory of Change in West Suffolk. This then might be applied to specific policy areas or broad targets such as poverty, health, housing etc.

Establishing an evaluation framework is the key priority area for us in 2016.

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