



Adur and Worthing councils moving into the next phase of their pioneering joint partnership

Summary

In 2007, two West Sussex district councils – Adur District Council and Worthing Borough Council – formally agreed to enter into a joint working partnership for the delivery of their local services using a single workforce and senior officer structure.

This is the first arrangement of its kind in local government in England and has been driven by the need to maintain and improve key local services at an acceptable level and cost to both local communities.

The key work towards services integration began in April 2008 with the implementation of the new single officer structure incorporating ten executive heads of service. Following approval of their respective business cases by members, the heads of service have now embarked on their individual service reviews which, by 2011/12, are set to achieve annual savings of £1.2 million.

Ian Lowrie, Joint Chief Executive, Adur District Council and Worthing Borough Council:

“When we embarked on our joint officer structure many commentators expressed doubt that it would work. The fact that it is in place at management level, and has delivered real savings and improvements, is why so many other councils are considering our lead.”

“In the difficult times ahead local government needs to demonstrate its worth and I know that in Adur and Worthing the single officer structure makes substantial savings in our overheads.”

“What’s more, it builds in an imperative to drive further savings in all service areas.”



Project background

The opening of a joint council service for recycling and refuse collection in September 2007 after a seven year gestation marked the first step in a joint partnership working programme between Adur District Council and Worthing Borough Council.

The overall initiative was driven by the need of two small councils to preserve essential local services in the face of reduced central government funding and the efficiency demands of the 2007 comprehensive spending review. Following the success of the joint recycling and refuse collection service, a partnership management board was set up to prepare the business case for a joint workforce and a new single officer structure.

The business case was recommended for adoption by simultaneous executive meetings of both councils in July 2007 paving the way for the appointment of the single officers (one joint chief executive, three strategic directors and ten executive heads of services).

Everything was now in place for the start of a two-year services integration programme which began on 1 April 2008. This embraces both the presentation and approval of the high level business cases for each service review and, from January 2009, the actual service reviews themselves.

Objectives

The key objective for 2008/09 has been the completion of high level business cases by the heads of services.

Scheduled for final completion by February 2009, these set out how services may be brought together over the next two years, and how shared services will be delivered in the future. They include clear indications of where savings can be made in joining teams together and how services can be improved by applying best practices that have been identified internally or at other councils.

The service reviews kicked off in January 2009 (with completion set for March 2010) and cover every council service. Integration of the corporate centre began earlier during the summer of 2008 as it was felt important to have one joined up corporate plan and performance management process in place across two councils as soon as possible.

“The aim is to review each service with the intention of delivering it jointly and presenting new structures for members’ approval over the next year or two,” explained Carol Stephenson, Adur and Worthing Partnership Programme Manager.

“The exceptions are Adur Homes (where only Adur has retained its housing stock), Worthing Leisure (which operates Adur’s leisure within a leisure trust) and Worthing Revenues and Benefits service (where

Adur is currently part of Census, an earlier partnership arrangement with Horsham and Mid-Sussex councils).

“However, these still remain part of the review process – to find additional efficiencies and savings internally, for example – but won’t be considered for joint delivery at least until their management contracts come up for review or renewal.”

Benefits

The high level business cases have estimated net savings (less redundancy and retirement costs) of over £860,000 for 2009/10 rising to more than £1.2 million in 2011/12. All in all, there will be a total net revenue saving of £4.4 million between 2007 and 2013.

These figures only include savings arising from partnership working. The reviews of those services whose delivery is set to remain the responsibility of one council or the other, such as Adur Homes, will generate even more.

Critical successes and lessons learned

At the outset, one of the anticipated difficulties facing the service heads was finding the capacity to meet the business case deadlines and to work on the service reviews. There was additional workload for members, too.

“We had to be flexible over the business case timetable due to the varying size and complexity of the services themselves,” went on Carol Stephenson. “Those that were designated to remain independent in the short-term only had to go before a single Adur or Worthing committee; some like financial services and legal were comparatively small and went to committee in one evening.

“Others, such as technical services, cover a huge range of operations and required multiple reports which couldn’t be managed in this way. It just wasn’t fair on members who needed time to read the reports and prepare their questions. So we arranged dedicated meetings for each service block to make the process more manageable.”

Regarding the reviews themselves, these will be conducted on a phased basis over the next two years to keep them in step with the teams’ capacity to deliver them. First up are cash receipting, development control and legal and democratic services.

In all cases managers are creating their own teams and preparing a programme of work which may be completed progressively over the allowed period or completed in one hit. The format for the reviews is being based, where appropriate, on the Maidstone business transformation project which applied activity-based costing to identify potential savings and service improvements.

Specific workload issues arising from the necessity of continuing to deliver services while the reviews are underway have been addressed with the new appointments of a business transformation manager and two business analysts. These are being seconded to the service review teams and will provide both support and challenge, especially in identifying better procedures and potential solutions from new technology.

Additionally, all services are being encouraged to have a member, or members, of staff centrally involved in the transformation process so that knowledge and experience can be retained within the team and potentially offered as a help to others. They will be known as 'change champions'.

"This continuity is important to staff buy-in," Carol went on. "Change is unlikely to go down well if it's perceived to have been implemented solely by an external team. This way, there will be a permanent point of contact that will give staff a say in their department's future and a route through which to feed into the new process."

There is also an expectation that relevant member portfolio holders will be engaged in the service review process.

However on the thorny issue of extra accounting costs arising from partnership working, there appears to be no way out. The Audit Commission's requirement for a third set of accounts to cover the joint services – an extra expense that will eat into savings earned elsewhere – remains a statutory necessity. This is because joint decisions are seen as impacting on each council's individual budgets and therefore have to be separately accounted for and audited.

Risks

Now that change is imminent, staff morale and confidence is a prime concern.

There has been a consistent programme of briefings and e-communications to broadcast the key principles and benefits of joint working.

"The new year is now our opportunity to ratchet up staff communications again and actually relaunch the programme in step with the service reviews," added Carol.

Role of the Improvement & Efficiency South East

Improvement and Efficiency South East (IESE) which, previously as the South East Centre of Excellence, has financially supported Adur and Worthing throughout its move towards partnership working, continues to back the programme with additional funding and personnel.

For example, monies have been made available for additional ICT resources. These will help and assist the heads of service not just with their service reviews, but also with the implementation of any new systems which the reviews identify as crucial to the achievement of efficiency targets.

Last but not least, an IESE support manager is on site two days a week to apply the benefits of IESE's wide regional experience to the project. This has the significant advantage of adding an objective point of view to the policy and decision-making process which is refreshingly free from the baggage of either council's history, or bias.

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