



Adur and Worthing: A Members' Perspective

Council members in Adur and Worthing join forces to deliver local government first in joint partnership working

Summary

Two district authorities in West Sussex have entered into a joint working partnership in response to the need to reconcile cuts in central government funding with the preservation of essential local services and to date have realised over £1.5 million in efficiencies.

Following some years of working together to develop shared services, in 2007, Adur District Council and Worthing Borough Council became the first two local councils in England to agree to deliver local services using a single workforce and senior officer structure.

Now having completed a series of high level business

cases, Adur and Worthing is now at the point – in January 2009 – when individual reviews of every council service are formally being undertaken to assess their viability for joint delivery. Scheduled for completion by March 2010, the reviews will mark the completion of a two-year services integration programme that is set to result in net savings of £4.4 million by 2013.

Project background

The protection of frontline services in both districts has been the prime driver towards joint partnership working.



Adur and Worthing are comparatively small in local government terms, which weakens their respective procurement capabilities.

As a result, both authorities found themselves under pressure to maintain existing services against the demands of the 2007 comprehensive spending review. For Worthing in particular, with its holiday and day-trip attractions, there has been the additional impact of its contribution to the Government's nation-wide concessionary bus fares scheme.

The first joint council service – for recycling and refuse collection – opened in September 2007. It heralded the appointment of one joint chief executive, three strategic directors and ten executive heads of services in a new single management team and the adoption of the business case for joint partnership working across all council services where viable.

April 2008 saw the start of a two-year services integration programme to present the high level business cases for each service review and, following members' approval of same, to undertake the actual service reviews themselves. These are due for completion by March 2010.

Throughout the entire process, dating back over five years, members of both councils have been working together with officers – first, to drive through the joint refuse and recycling project and then to pioneer the transfer of this experience into wider partnership working. Members from both Adur and Worthing sit on the Programme Board, which has been beneficial from both a communication and challenge perspective.

Here, in their own words, are members' experiences of the process, and the key advice they would offer other councillors considering a similar approach between their own local authorities.

The key challenges

1. Taking the decision

There was no other choice than partnership working. Worthing, for example, would have had to close a leisure facility or suffer equally painful cuts in other areas without it.

Ann Barlow (Worthing, Deputy Leader)

In Adur's case, small is definitely not beautiful. We are not economically viable on our own.

Liza McKinney (Adur, opposition)

We had to find ways of releasing more resources. This essentially boiled down to either making efficiencies through partnership, or cutting services.

Steven Waight (Worthing, Business Transformation)

2. Preparing the way forward

Trust and openness are essential. Don't be too defensive, or territorial.

Neil Parkin (Adur, Leader)

You need strong leadership, political sign-up and determination to succeed. Embrace the whole approach; being half-hearted won't do if you want to achieve gains. Think 'partnership' and you'll identify opportunities for joint working.

Ann Barlow (Worthing, Deputy Leader)

Take a lead from the private sector – there has to be a business case for partnership working. That will take the fear out of it and open the way for common sense working.

Paul Yallop (Worthing, Resources)

There may be a suspicion among some members that their authority could be swallowed up in the partnership process. Don't worry – sovereignty issues are more an issue for members than for the public who are looking for improved service provision.

Steven Waight (Worthing, Business Transformation)

It's essential to get the first shared service right in terms of defining its scope, delivery and job roles. The success of Adur and Worthing's joint refuse and recycling service was the catalyst for wider partnership.

Keith Mercer (Worthing, Leader)

You need a commitment to carry partnership working through as local authorities will continue to be hard pressed whichever party is running national government. Local government finance won't get any easier in the medium and long term and will be something authorities will have to deal with themselves.

Steven Waight (Worthing, Business Transformation)

The fact that Adur and Worthing are neighbours meant certain synergies were obvious possibilities. You need to identify those that will make your proposed partnership viable.

Liza McKinney (Adur, Opposition)

Be prepared for hard work – our number of meetings has effectively doubled.

Ann Barlow (Worthing, Deputy Leader)

A bottom-up approach to partnership rather than the top-down one applied through the senior officer structure might have been an alternative. Joint working with one council could limit the potential for other partnerships and synergies with other authorities in specific service areas.

James Doyle (Worthing, Opposition)

3. Maintaining good communications

Building working relationships with officers – on joint away days, for example, or getting together informally – really helps. We held joint risk management workshops for members, officers and the two cabinets to share the issues we each faced.

Neil Parkin (Adur, Leader)

Good communication has been the key. You can't communicate enough with staff, members or the public. The overview and scrutiny mechanism ensures members are up to speed although a supplementary programme of member seminars might also have been useful.

Steven Waight (Worthing, Business Transformation)

Bring your officers on board with regular monthly members and senior management get-togethers; encourage greater interaction between all council members through informal meetings.

Paul Yallop (Worthing, Resources)

4. Keeping staff informed

You have to take staff with you.

Liza McKinney (Adur, Opposition)

It's inevitable that head count will decrease but our approach has been to manage redundancies voluntarily rather than compulsorily and in line with natural wastage and early retirement programmes. Some staff may be aggrieved nevertheless and make their views public.

Steven Waight (Worthing, Business Transformation)

Morale can be fragile when jobs are perceived to be under threat and when change is on the way. It is important to gauge staff views on the proposed changes and its impact on the work they're doing, or how their department functions. The process has to be taken steadily and it's important to listen.

James Doyle (Worthing, Opposition)

Agreeing a single pay structure at the start of partnership working is ideal if it is straightforward. However, if it needs a fresh start then it needs to be taken slowly as it's likely to create different outcomes for each authority if their pay scales are different.

Julie Searle (Adur, Deputy Leader)

5. Managing the work

Expect officers to work harder and longer – be firm and assertive and keep them signed up to the vision. And members should not stand back from inputting into the high-level business cases. In Adur and Worthing members were often more radical than officers in demanding savings.

Keith Mercer (Worthing, Leader)

Having officers working on their business cases has diverted time away from other activities.

James Doyle (Worthing, Opposition)

The pace at which officers were expected to move was perhaps too fast, and the timetable for delivering their business cases too tight.

Liza McKinney (Adur, Opposition)

Reconciling ICT systems has proved to be a major problem. Not only do we have multiple platforms in Worthing, but this is further complicated as Adur was already part of CenSus, an existing partnership arrangement with Horsham and Mid-Sussex district councils for the delivery of ICT services.

Keith Mercer (Worthing, Leader)

Members can be stretched by the sheer number of issues. The high level service business cases were always presented within the letter of what was required (five working days before). Whereas this would normally be sufficient to digest a typical 12-page report, in reality it was a challenge to decide the merits of up to three substantial business cases in one sitting.

James Doyle (Worthing, Opposition)

6. Assessing the benefits

With joint working you tap into services that it's not possible to fund on your own. In Adur we can now call upon Worthing's engineering team, for example, and Worthing on Adur Watch, which polices the district's public spaces.

Julie Searle (Adur, Deputy Leader)

Partnership working keeps decision making local and improves services for less.

Paul Yallop (Worthing, Resources)

The Adur and Worthing experience has been very successful in producing efficiencies in cash terms, and in strengthening service provision generally. Just make sure you learn the lessons of any pilot scheme before rolling it out.

Steven Waight (Worthing, Business Transformation)

The process empowers members in their own authority and builds a better working environment. You become politically stronger together with a bigger profile and are better able to take advantage of networking and training opportunities, and for directly inputting into issues such as housing and planning at a higher level.

Ann Barlow (Worthing, Deputy Leader)

Role of Improvement and Efficiency South East

Improvement and Efficiency South East (IESE) has financially supported Adur and Worthing throughout its transition towards partnership working.

This took the form of an initial £300,000 in funding and the assignment of on-site partnership support manager to advise and challenge senior management as it moved the process along. Now that the project has reached the services integration phase, further financial support is being made available. This will provide additional ICT resources to help with the service reviews together with the implementation of any efficiencies they identify.

The shared learning from the project is being promoted through the development of a partnership information pack which brings together the documents used to progress the project including project plans, and deliverables such as the Business Cases for each service area and bespoke workshop events with the Chief Executive, Members and Senior Officers sharing their experience with authorities who are thinking of taking a similar path.

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