Focused local learning programme in Shropshire: brief summary

Background and purpose

Shropshire Council established this programme as a prototype in January 2011, involving councillors in eight divisions in the south east of the county. It was designed to help members to provide their communities with the support they need to do more for themselves, as increasingly they will need to in an era of reduced resources. The programme was based on the belief that Members:

- have the electoral legitimacy needed to provide effective leadership at a time of difficult choices;
- can provide communities with a link into the professional expertise of council officers;
- should be well-placed within their communities to facilitate conversations and help build networks, whilst not ‘taking on’ everything themselves.

We wanted to understand better how to translate this belief in the role of members into practical action. Working with OPM, the council established this programme so that communities could be supported to achieve some specific goals, whilst also seeking answers to the following questions:

- Who might councillors work with to improve outcomes for local people?
- How can community capacity be unlocked, developed and measured?
- What are the main skills and qualities that members and their supporting officers need to provide community leadership?
- What development do members and others need?
- What changes does the council need to make in how it organises itself?

What we did

- The programme was launched at a day-long workshop in January, which explained the aims and underlying principles of the work to elected members and community action officers in the area.
- With some facilitation by OPM staff, members and officers had conversations to decide what local projects they could take as their focus – ideally things they’d found tricky to address in the past, and where the community would be supportive.
- Some projects morphed over the following month or so, and ultimately included projects to redevelop or revive community halls, bring a vacant rural pub back into use, using social media to build better communication with and between local people in a small community; setting up a partnership to tackle ASB and related streetscape issues.
- This programme has not been about trying to impose a strict method on how councillors operate. OPM’s role has been to encourage members, community action officers and sometimes other community representatives such as Parish Councillors to reflect on how they approach an issue, to think about it differently or involve different people in finding a solution.
- This has involved staff from the core project team and other OPM colleagues sitting in on project-related meetings and giving feedback at the end; helping facilitate those meetings;
Focused local learning programme in Shropshire: brief summary

offering specific advice on techniques and approaches (e.g. around use of social media and impact assessment); and acting more widely in a ‘critical friend’ role.

Practical benefits of the programme

- Providing an opportunity for members / the council / other organisations and local people to focus their energy on a specific local issue
- Independent perspective and facilitation support from OPM
- A vehicle for increasing members’ familiarity with a place and its people / with council departments and other agencies / with their community action officers (a relatively new officer post attached to different areas)
- Focusing the council (including top team) on thinking about how it backs-up members to achieve things at a very local level, and whether it needs to rearrange people and behaviour in order to do that more effectively
- Increased opportunity for members to reflect on their role and how it makes things happen without them always a) just referring issues onto the relevant officer on the one hand, or b) having to ‘do everything’ themselves on the other hand. Members were instead encouraged to act as:
  - ‘mobiliser’ (enthusing, motivating, making the case);
  - ‘convenor and facilitator’ (understanding who to bring in and when, dispassionately holding the ring on conversations rather than always wading in with their view);
  - ‘broker’ (being diplomatic, sensitive, building useful networks and relationships between others);
  - ‘signpost’ to officers or other organisations who can help.
- Helping councillors get real challenges addressed in their areas, and giving them the confidence to take a similar approach in future

What’s happened as a result of the local projects

The programme has generated a huge amount of learning which is enabling councillors and officers to see what the main ingredients of a successful local project are likely to be, and what sort of role they can expect to play in the process. The projects that OPM observed and supported during this first phase of work in Shropshire have, to date, led to:

- The setting up of a hyper-local partnership which has created a new parking area and alleviated a host of related ASB issues, and has led to a new landscaped area being created, looked after by residents.
- The first big step towards re-opening a derelict pub in a small village, involving a housing association – ultimately this will be in community ownership and will include shop and meeting facilities
- The creation of a community-led web page where people are contacting elected members in a new way, and contacting each other about local events and activities

This learning – which we can share with you more fully in any future conversations – is informing the council’s future approach to community leadership and member development, and the programme is now being rolled out into other parts of the county.