

Case study on service delegations to local (parish and town) councils

SUTTON PARISH COUNCIL (CAMBRIDGESHIRE)

This example of service delegation is unusual in two respects. First, because it relates to youth services, a service area not often delivered by local councils, and second, because it has not taken place through a traditional transfer of responsibility via a funded delegation scheme. It is a very ambitious example, which is proving successful and is becoming a locally recognised model. It now has County Council approval and support from other local (parish and town) councils.

Context

The rural village of Sutton-in-the-Isle sits in the East Cambridgeshire fens, six miles from the Cathedral City of Ely. It was mentioned in the Domesday Book. Today it has a population of around 5,000. Packaging businesses provide some local employment, while many residents farm or commute to Ely or Cambridge.

The Parish Council was established in 1895 and employs 12 members of staff. The Clerk works 30 hours a week and is supported by an Assistant Clerk (also the Clerk to neighbouring Mepal Parish Council). Sutton, with a committee spearheaded by the Parish Council, has won East Cambridgeshire and Cambridgeshire Village of the Year, and was the 2002 National Calor Village of the Year. This motivated and well trained Parish Council achieved Quality Parish Status (QPS) five years ago and is currently in its second accreditation.

The main reasons for living in Sutton (given by residents in response to a survey by the Parish Council) were lower house prices than other local areas, the availability of housing and the local environment. However, the 2008 Parish Plan cites a shortage of affordable housing and one bedroom properties as reasons for young people leaving their community.

The main issue identified in the Parish Plan is 'rowdy behaviour and vandalism'. Against this background the Parish Council took over delivery of youth services in the area, under its Youth & Community Development Team. The wide ranging work they have undertaken has gone a long way towards easing tensions in this area.

How it began

Sutton Parish Council maintains a long tradition of successfully managing and delivering a range of services to its community; their approach was commended in the Calor Village of the Year awards. This includes grass and verge cutting services on behalf of the County Council (and until recently East Cambridgeshire

District Council as well). It also includes the P3 scheme (Parish, Path, Partnership), which is funded by the County and District, though the grants for this have recently reduced.

The benefits of local service delivery are clear to Sutton Parish Council and they have been resourceful in gaining funds from the District Council, Regional Development Agency, Sport England Lottery, the Countryside Agency, WREN (recycling) and other sources. This has allowed provision of the Community Room and the Pavilion, both of which are used by a range of village organisations and clubs, from yoga and needlework, to football and the scouts. New groups can hire a room for free six times to help kick start their venture. These facilities draw in citizens of all ages, supporting inter-generational understanding.

Perhaps the most exciting of the Parish owned and maintained buildings is the Glebe, renovated from the church hall and two cottages. This sympathetically restored building is home to the Parish Council and the Youth and Community Development Team, as well as hosting local groups and (on occasion) staff from the District and County Councils. The Clerk says that as sound opportunities arose to deliver services locally *“we’ve just taken it”*.

The County Council Youth Services team were working to grow the range of activities, clubs and opportunities for local young people in the area. There is a long tradition of Youth Groups and Active Clubs in the community, and over eight years (until 2009) some £80,000 was invested by the Parish Council to support the delivery of ‘Open Access’ Youth Services.

How it developed

When the County (faced with a decrease in available funds and redundancies) changed its ‘Open Access’ approach and established the Children & Young People’s Service, youth workers were increasingly thinly spread as far afield as Littleport and Ely. This led to them being overstretched and subsequently the wider services they had delivered to the whole community had to stop, with a remaining focus just on Youth Club work.

At this point Sutton Parish Council decided that as a partnership approach with the County Council didn’t appear to be an option, it would have a full (closed) meeting to consider an alternative. They did not want the local community to lose services they had come to value. The Head of the Council’s Youth Services Team was also frustrated at not being able to deliver the range of services previously delivered in and around Sutton, feeling that the *“community ethos”* was missing. Subsequently, he resigned from his post.

Sutton Parish Council had their meeting, reviewed the options and decided they had the capacity to take on delivery of local youth and community development services in a viable manner. They employed the Council’s previous Head of Youth Services to head up the new team.

“With budget pressures on youth services and staffing issues, Sutton decided to pick up the baton and pick up youth services. Such a large change was inevitably fraught – it was nothing personal – we just didn’t want to lose the service.”

Implementation

April 2009 saw the formation of the Youth & Community Development Team, employed by Sutton Parish Council and consisting of both paid staff and volunteers. The team's brief was:

- To rediscover the values and principles of community services, in response to needs identified by local residents;
- To establish sustainable community services, to support continued growth and community development; and
- To enable consultation and participation for all ages of the community regardless of perceived barriers.

Aims for the team

- Increase community consultation and information sharing
- Increase community participation and engagement
- Increase community resources and services
- Increase community volunteering opportunities and training

Their objectives

- Developing capacity of existing and new community resources and services
- Support the development of new groups and projects, and offer guidance or support for existing groups and projects

The team serves the parish of Sutton, and also neighbouring Mepal, Witcham, Little Downham and Wentworth. Staff employed by Sutton Parish Council are covered by its liability insurance; volunteers work directly with the clubs and groups, who have their own insurance.

The Youth & Community Development Team run the Sutton Youth Group (sponsored by the Parish Council) which regularly sees up to 100 young people attending the infant, junior and senior youth clubs. It holds events and works in the community, as well as working to build confidence/skills and ensure those involved have fun. The same team oversees the Witcham, Mepal and Little Downham Youth Clubs, each one paid for and sponsored by their local parish council.

In addition to managing the local Youth Groups, the team supports local young people to seek funding for new ventures. The Sutton Youth Group seniors were awarded £40,000 from First Light Film Studios and are now busy producing and showing their own films.

The Development Team receives a small amount of funding to run the East Cambridgeshire Youth Banks committee, one of five in the county under Cambridgeshire County Council. The committee receives applications from and allocates funding to young people and youth groups, including a recent application from the Garage project in Ely which received £130,000 to develop a new Youth Centre. The Youth Banks committee meets in Sutton's Community Centre every Monday, along with the Young Lives Initiative, to consider applications. Over 20 were approved in the first year, including a Boys Boxing Project trip to New York, a Sensory Garden for a special needs group and Fitness Dancing for Girls. Funded projects are then supported by the Youth & Community Development Team.

Other funding has been obtained from the Ely Lions, Sutton Royal British Legion, the Heritage Lottery Fund Young Roots, Awards for All and the Cambridge Community Foundation. The Youth & Community

Development Team works in partnership with various local organisations such as schools, parish councils, and the East Cambridgeshire Sports Development team.

One of the most successful initiatives has been the Travellers Youth Group, which piloted the WHAT Project (What Heritage Are Travellers). This has led to many young travellers getting involved with Sutton's community activities including its Song and Dance Show. Of equal note is the award winning BOSH school holiday programme, which saw 257 young people aged 5-19 attending summer activities.

The list of successfully delivered and ongoing projects is seemingly endless. You can watch the Head of the Youth and Community Development Team talking about the team and some of its projects here <https://qik.com/video/17469573>

Success factors

Key to the success of this project has been:

- The full support of Sutton Parish Council;
- The strong delivery network and working relationships across the Witchford patch, particularly with other parish councils and youth groups;
- The open and frank relationship between the Youth & Community Development Team manager and the Parish Clerk;
- The training programme for volunteers and youth workers;
- The informed approach to external funding sources. A funding officer is paid directly by the Parish Council for 10 hours a week, with the rest of her income coming through grant funding. She acts as a bridge between the Development Team and the Parish Council;
- The extent of local knowledge and the understanding of community needs;
- The degree to which they are always open to new opportunities;
- A sense of something not being 'done to' but 'done with' the local young people; and
- The fact that the focus has remained on building a stronger community.

Impact

The Youth Services Manager at Cambridgeshire County Council acknowledges that Sutton Parish Council and the Youth & Community Development Team are doing a "*wonderful job*" of delivering the services which they took over almost two years ago.

In the Parish Plan the number one issue to tackle for the community was the 'rowdy behaviour and vandalism', which was perceived as being caused by local youth who would gather in the recreation ground or by the bus shelter. This has all but disappeared in this low crime area, as have incidents of petty crime such as broken car windows. The cross-generational nature of many of the projects has increased understanding amongst the community and has improved trust and respect.

The Head of the Youth and Community Development Team describes the Witchford patch as, *“the smallest patch in the county with the biggest patch of youth work”*. The area has even attracted delegations from abroad to examine its approach – *“youth in the community, not youth in isolation.”*

Sustainability

There are several issues around the sustainability of this hugely successful strategy:

- Its dependence on the drive, passion and determination of experienced individuals;
- Its dependence on successful grant funding applications; and
- The reducing availability of funding sources as public sector budgets are cut.

However, the structure of the Youth & Community Development Team is such that it allows for ‘succession planning’. Young leaders are trained to take over areas of activity and the whole team is managed in an open and accountable manner, overseen by the Parish Council, who identify risks to allow for mitigation.

Funding is clearly an ongoing issue, but to date the Parish Council, Youth & Community Development Team and the Funding Officer have proven effective at drawing funds from a wide range of sources. Plus they are still supported by the County Council’s Young Lives joint initiative. As the Development Team broadens its range of services it is in increasing demand from as far afield as Ely. This will bring in its own financial rewards.

The Cambridgeshire County Council Youth Service Manager observes that the County are increasingly not in a position to deliver universal ‘Open Access’ services, so proactive and proven models like that established by Sutton Parish Council and their Development Team will have to evolve to ensure local services. The fact that Sutton supports not just its own but other community Youth Services, means that the County’s ever decreasing pot is available to target other places, particularly where there is no secondary school and the only way to reach out is via a Youth Group. He feels, *“content with the fact that Sutton wanted to go it alone, as at the end of the day the team on the ground there will continue and expand the local good practice.”*

The Clerk and Councillors recognise the importance of understanding the limitations and liabilities of the Parish Council in delivering the service, and it is this common sense approach that should continue to make it the success it has become.

Looking forward there is another positive development, prompted as a result of this research, in that further talks are beginning between the County Council and Parish Council. Sutton Parish Council say, *“We are looking to get to the stage where the County look after contracts and quality management, and Sutton Parish Council deliver the service, and we draw up a service level agreement. We need independent quality management.”* The hope is then that the ‘Sutton Model’ can be written up in greater detail and replicated by communities elsewhere, given the pressure on ‘Open Access’ services and funding.

The Chief Executive Officer of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Association of Local Councils sums up the Sutton model: *“Sutton Parish Council saw ‘the big society’ before the current Government saw it.”*

Web address for Sutton Parish Council: <http://www.suttonpc.org.uk/>

Video taken by researchers of the Head of the Youth and Community Development Team describing some of the team's ongoing work <https://qik.com/video/17469573>

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