

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

EASTLEIGH BOROUGH COUNCIL AND PARISHES (HAMPSHIRE)

This is an example of service delegation being undertaken across a whole Borough, namely Eastleigh in Hampshire and its ten local parish and town councils. Eastleigh Borough Council has been forward looking in its approach to delegations and it actively encourages local councils to explore the benefits of delivering services more locally to citizens.

Context

"The welfare of the people is the most important law" is the motto of Eastleigh Borough Council. The current Borough was formed in 1974, when the then Borough of Eastleigh was expanded to include part of Winchester Rural District. Since 1994 it has a policy of encouraging the formation of new parishes. The Borough now consists of ten parishes – the oldest set up in 1894 and the two newest, Chandler's Ford and Allbrook, created in April 2010 – plus the town of Eastleigh which remains unparished.

Eastleigh District Association of Local Councils (EDALC) has been established and it works with the Hampshire Association of Local Councils to support the parishes. The Chairman of EDALC, believes that *"The relationship between us [the parishes] and the Borough is much better in Eastleigh than other parts of Hampshire, and over the whole country."*

The Chief Executive of the Hampshire Association of Local Councils also believes Eastleigh has an excellent and collaborative approach to service delegation: *"This comes at a time when in other areas of the country relatively few local councils have taken on delivery of delegated services and a number of [principal] local authorities are cautious about delegating control down a tier"*.

The Government's vision for the 'Big Society' envisages increasingly local delivery of services and local engagement with citizens. The Eastleigh model demonstrates that involving and empowering local communities to take responsibility for local services in their area is not only possible but can lead to more engaged and cohesive communities.

How it developed

Eastleigh Borough Council's Leader believes that, *"Handing over services, land and buildings to parish councils helps to take decision-making closer to local people and provides them with more say in how local services and facilities are run"*.

Following a Council decision in 1994 to encourage the formation of new parishes, there was a growing awareness that they had an opportunity to support local service delivery by transferring assets and devolving services. The Leader moved a motion to Council to set up a 'special expenses' scheme, so that where a local council delivered delegated services or took on management or ownership of assets there would not be double taxation and residents would be treated fairly in their Council Tax bills. *"I said, let's engage in an 'open door' policy. If there are any services we run which you think you can run differently or better then come and talk to us"*, says the Leader of the transformative approach taken.

Parish councils were consulted by the Borough about what they were interested in managing and operating, with the aim of further improving service delivery. Facilities such as play areas, community buildings, open spaces, allotments and public toilets have all been successfully delegated to parishes across the Borough, starting with Service Level Agreements for fixed periods, leading to permanent asset transfer or management.

The Leader explains their straightforward way of breaking down 'special expenses':

1. Eastleigh separates out its core 'Borough-wide' expenditure from money it spends on services in the Borough that have been devolved and are 'special'.
2. The core expenditure is the Borough Council's 'own' council tax and appears similarly on tax bills across the Borough.
3. The special expenditure is broken down into 11 parts, for the 10 parished and 1 unparished area of the Borough, and appears as 'special' on council tax bills.
4. This 'special' amount differs in each area – from close to zero upwards, depending on the number of locally delivered services.
5. As parishes take on more services, the special amount goes down and the parish precept rises by the same amount.
6. Residents therefore pay exactly the same, but all decisions are taken by the parish not the Borough. *"In reality what tends to happen is the cost goes down, as parishes buy local contracts or absorb costs into their own structures, or use cheaper or volunteer labour. Simple!"*

The local councils work with the relevant Head of Service at the Borough Council and with Local Area Committees, each with a lead officer or a Local Area Co-ordinator. It is this person's responsibility to manage partnerships with communities. These are respected senior officers (five across the Borough) and their position enables both Borough Councillors and Parish or Town Council Clerks to know who is who and what the issues are for each area. Stakeholders have found that any previous lack of trust between the parties has been overcome by the Local Area Co-ordinators. *"These people are fixers"*, says the Leader.

For a local council taking on land or buildings it is crucial that they have an understanding of any covenants, structural issues and liabilities, so in the first instance Eastleigh Borough Council covers the necessary legal costs.

The Borough also allows local council clerks and councillors to attend free courses for their own officers and councillors. Examples include trading standards, licensing, planning and charring meetings. This builds a closer understanding between the tiers, raising mutual awareness of roles and working practices. It is seen as setting the tone for delegation – *"a team effort that can work both ways"*.

Interestingly, there is no formal service delegation 'process' in Eastleigh, in the sense that there is no written policy with application forms. The Leader says, *"We've very carefully and deliberately not set rules to this transfer, so that it is as open and unrestrictive as possible. In doing it this way, with nothing off the agenda, we've been able to encourage parishes to think laterally. We have designated our country parks and major car parks as being "strategic", so they fall outside the 'special expenses' rules ... but in theory if a parish was to request taking over a country park we'd have to look at it."*

The Chair of Botley Parish Council and Eastleigh District Association of Local Councils celebrates the fact that *"the current Eastleigh Borough Council strongly believe in localism"* and feels that it is a positive thing to *"retain assets for the community if further political changes should occur."*

Local examples of delegated services

Every local (parish and town) council in Eastleigh delivers at least one delegated service, which is extraordinary when compared to the national picture where it appears there are several counties with no local council delivering a delegated service. The following are a few examples from Eastleigh.

Hamble-le-Rice Parish Council

Hamble-le-Rice's (known as Hamble) Clerk (and Hampshire Clerk of the Year) recalls, *"We said, yes! We'll have everything,"* when Eastleigh offered asset transfers to local councils. They had managed the Donkey Derby Field since 1994, but seized the opportunity to take on the College Playing Fields, which will transfer to Hamble Parish Council in 2011. The playing fields had been originally given as a developer's contribution to Eastleigh Borough Council for a 99 year period and the Parish Council had always managed it, building a pavilion and more recently an all-weather sports facility. Hamble will now take over the 99 year lease. The Clerk says that their management of the all-weather courts, football pitches and cricket square has already benefited local young people and sports enthusiasts. Having the floodlights on in dark evenings has cut down on vandalism and graffiti (something identified as an issue in the 2007 Parish Plan).

In 2009-10 the precept in Hamble rose by some 29%, but there were no local objections to this due to the fact that the Parish Council, *"drip fed information on asset transfer"* out to the public via the village magazine. The Clerk explained the nature of the asset transfer in terms of special expenses and local people have been nothing but supportive. The Parish Council is likely to take the precept up for next year from £202,800 to £220,000 with additional asset transfers.

When the Borough Council stopped issuing travel tokens this caused disquiet in Hamble. After months of being lobbied by parishioners the Parish Council decided to start their own token concessionary scheme (researched online for best practice elsewhere). Setting up the scheme cost £2,600 in the first year. It has been supported throughout the community and the local authority is now reviewing the project, with other parishes expressing an interest.

Hamble Parish Council is pleased to work with and learn from the Borough Council. They have recently taken over management of Westfield Common and hire in help from Eastleigh, which enables their own grounds staff to learn more about tree husbandry and commons management. The Parish Council employs 6 members of staff including the Clerk, Assistant Clerk, Head Groundsman, two Groundsmen and a cleaner. They are a twice accredited Quality Parish Council.

Hedge End Town Council

It has a population of 23,000 and a precept of £618,000. According to its website, *“Hedge End Town Council is at the bottom rung of our system of government. Being on the bottom rung should make us more able to find out and to react to the wishes of our residents”*. Having said a resounding “yes” to asset transfers, Hedge End now has many buildings, car parks, play areas and more under its remit. This includes Greta Park, the Norman Rodaway Pavilion and Drummond Community Centre.

Many of these assets were initially on a peppercorn rent. This has now been dropped and they are managed for the benefit of the local community – the Drummond Community Centre alone turning over £3,000 per month. A 68 hectare are of land – a local nature reserve known as Dowd’s Farm – is now maintained under licence from the Borough under a Capital Agreement of £60,000. Tree maintenance is mainly undertaken locally, to keep costs to a minimum, but under a service level agreement the Town Council grounds staff can refer more major work up to Eastleigh Borough Council. The grounds staff also take responsibility for grass cutting, maintaining buildings and vehicle maintenance on behalf of the Town Council. They are well known in the local community and provide a helpful presence on the ground.

Chandler’s Ford Parish Council

This local council was created on 1st April 2010, following a public consultation where the local community voted in favour of a parish council. The Clerk has their office in the same building as the Hampshire Association of Local Councils, who he is able to draw upon for advice and guidance. They believe that communication is key in terms of building local relationships and they are keen to take on a variety of services from the Borough as the council grows in confidence. They are considering taking on the maintenance of their allotments and cemeteries, but recognise the importance of prioritising as the new parish council becomes established. A working group has been established to look into a Parish Plan and it will seek to understand the apportionment of allotment costs (cesspits, water, machine costs, etc), both for accounting purposes and to aid local understanding. There has been a considerable amount of local consultation via public meetings, community events, the internet and e-groups. The recurring issue raised by the public in discussions about local service delivery is “Will it cost us more?”. Other than that, public opinion supports the approach. The precept set by Eastleigh Borough Council for Chandler’s Ford’s first year stands at £138,000 (small for a parish population of 18,000), but this will grow as increasing numbers of services are delegated to the Parish Council.

Other local examples include:

- West End Parish Council, where a community centre is now under direct ownership and has been substantially improved for community use;
- Fair Oak Parish Council, which has recently been awarded over £9 million for a green open space project;
- Botley Parish Council, which works with the Borough on Youth Services. The Parish “donates” some free time each week when young people can use a multi-purpose games area; and
- Allbrook Parish Council, a new local council which has taken on the servicing of its allotments.

Issues and success factors

As a result of its ‘open door’ approach to service delegations Eastleigh Borough Council now manages no play areas. However, they feel that they have learnt more about the Borough by devolving costs and services down to local parish and town councils.

Not everything has been plain sailing. There have been issues with bus shelters, for example, because of previously negotiated advertising contracts. Allbrook, the smallest parish in the Borough, is currently more likely to contract services back to Eastleigh (despite taking on allotments).

The approach is also spreading beyond the Borough Council; for example, the local Police have launched a programme of Sport and Community Safety Officers. When the Borough was asked about its involvement its advice was to, *“Talk to the parishes”*. The parishes have since developed Service Level Agreements with Hampshire Constabulary, developed between Eastleigh District Association of Town and Parish Councils and Hampshire Constabulary, though working alongside the Borough.

There have been five critical success factors in the Eastleigh model:

1. The open door approach to the delegation of services by Eastleigh Borough Council;
2. The facilitation role of its Local Area Co-ordinators;
3. The ‘special expenses’ scheme to avoid double taxation;
4. The supportive effort of both Hampshire and Eastleigh District Associations of Local Councils; and
5. The mutual respect between all of the organisations involved in the process.

Looking forward

The work in Eastleigh seems to show that with trust and support, local (parish and town) councils can and will take on a greater role in local service delivery. With its flexible approach, the Borough has nurtured an environment where the main question is, *“What’s next?”*

A good example is Bishopstoke Parish Council, which was once less active in service delivery, but is now expanding its role. In 2011 it will add the maintenance of bus shelters to its portfolio and in 2012/13 it is considering taking on the maintenance of open spaces and play areas.

In Eastleigh, the Big Society and even the economic downturn are seen as offering opportunities for local (parish and town) councils. HALC’s Chief Executive believes that, *“the difficult economic situation is actually an opportunity for parish councils to come out of the shadows and deliver the priorities that their residents see as locally important, in partnership with their principal authorities.”*

As one person put it, in Eastleigh, as far as a local (parish or town) councils taking on the delegated delivery of services to their community is concerned, *“the answer is yes, now, what’s the question?”*

Web addresses for:

Eastleigh Borough Council: <http://www.eastleigh.gov.uk>

Eastleigh local (parish and town) councils:

<http://www.eastleigh.gov.uk/meetings/mgParishCouncilDetails.aspx?LS=15&SLS=2>

Hampshire Association of Local Councils: <http://www.hampshire-alc.gov.uk/>

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