



Devon Building Control Partnership

Creating a joint Building Control Service

Summary

A partnership organisation which delivers a joint building control service across the districts of the Commissioning Councils in Devon has created a high performing and efficient service to the construction industry and the community.

- 80% of Building Regulations applications assessed within 10 working days
- 85% of Completion Certificates issued within 7 days
- 99% of application/building notices acknowledged within 2 days
- 80% of customers consider the service value for money

“The Partnership has generally been working in a positive and enthusiastic way to date. The governance arrangements appear to be working effectively. An agreement document formally codifies the partnership and identifies roles and responsibilities for the key officers. The key stakeholders understand their relative roles and work together effectively. The people interviewed during our work were extremely pleased with the progress made and were unanimous in their support for the partnership.

This initial success, however, owes much to the long-standing relationship between the two key officers (one from each council) who have driven this partnership to its current position. It is their relationship, built upon trust and mutual respect that has underpinned the joint working.”

[PriceWaterhouseCoopers review of the Partnership, August 2005](#)

Project Background

The Devon Building Control Partnership was set up on 1st April 2004. This amalgamated the building control services of West Devon Borough Council and Teignbridge District Council into a single Local Authority Strategic Partnership, the third partnership of its kind in England and Wales.

The Partnership covers a diverse area, including the busy south coast and the rural heartland of Devon. It was conceived in 2003 when partners found themselves with staff shortages and high workloads, and were keen to reorganise in order to provide a better service.

The Partnership consists of a Partnership Board, made up of two elected members from each Commissioning Council, a Strategic Management Team and teams of professional surveyors. The model evolved over time and through consultation to reflect the aims and objectives of the Commissioning Councils.

The Partnership's Management Structure is intended to break away from the more traditional local authority hierarchy structure to a flat structure. The strategy is to keep to the centre core only strategic functions and decisions, allowing services to be carried out by the local surveying teams.

The Partnership does not have a central administrative office; it operates from two district centres; Newton Abbot and Tavistock, and through a wide computer network. Initial investment in new computer hardware and software and licences amounted to £54k. This modular form gives the Partnership economic advantages and allows the Partnering Authorities to remain the focus of the service. It has also allowed for a third council to join the partnership.

In August 2006, South Hams District Council joined the Partnership, having been in negotiation with the original partners for two years. The whole process of integrating a third partner has been more efficient than the original process of setting up the Partnership, as lessons learned in the original project have been applied with the new partner.



Currently the Partnership is working to expand the computer system and integrate the team from South Hams District Council into a unified operational structure. It is anticipated that these processes will be completed in just four months, compared with the 12 month timescale taken to complete these tasks with the original partners.

In order to save on office space and unnecessary travelling the Partnership is investigating the use of remote computer technology to allow surveyors to work from home. However the service will still continue to have a presence at the offices of the Partnering Authorities to deliver its local building control service.

Objectives

The partnership aims to serve the construction industry across a mainly rural area with a personal service, while providing efficiencies and cost savings.

Benefits Achieved

When the Partnership was established it did not anticipate making significant savings in the first year of operation; however some savings were achieved in year one and these were used to offset costs associated with the new management structure and computer system.

Savings are being achieved by:

- Realising economies of scale by avoiding duplication of services, maintenance contracts and subscriptions
- Challenging Partnering Authorities support costs by using a host authority to supply services
- Streamlining the management structure so more resources are directed to the front line
- Removing barriers and bureaucracy to speed up decision making
- Increasing the income stream by offering new professional services
- Sharing workloads and assign specific tasks to surveying teams
- Joining the two accounts functions and moving to automatic billing, which is expected to save £10,000.

The Partnership is continuing to reduce management costs as the team from South Hams District Council is integrated.

Non cashable benefits include the introduction of remote access that will allow for more flexible working practices and the graduate training programme for 5 individuals, which the Partnership has introduced. While some of the authorities did not measure customer satisfaction prior to setting up the partnership, an 80% level of satisfaction from householders and similarly high rates from architects and builders show that the partnership is delivering a high quality service to its stakeholders.

Critical Success factors and lessons learned

Despite the full support of elected members and Chief Executives, initially not everyone bought into the concept. Partners worked to continually consult the staff and stakeholders.

A key success factor was the establishing correct governance and devolving power to a Partnership Board.

Every procedure, practice and document was reviewed and risk assessments, value for money assessments, service plans, action plans, business plans, performance plans, marketing plans and policies were all brought up to date.

The Partnership also felt that it was important to develop an identity at an early stage, including having a single contact point, separate bank account, website and email addresses.

Risks

Risks were considered throughout the preparation stages, with a comprehensive risk workshop undertaken involving both authorities. A further workshop was taken prior to integrating South Hams Council into the Partnership in 2006.

One of the risks identified at both workshops was the potential problem that would result from the failure to introduce the required new building control IT systems. The control measure was to introduce the new system using a formal project management process.

Further Information

If your authority is interested in learning more about this work, or is thinking about implementing partnership working arrangements in the near future, the South West Centre of Excellence can help – contact details below.

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