

Notes of a visit to the East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Beverley, on 30 April 2008

Rural Unitary Task Force Visiting Group : Councillors Chris Caswill, Patrick Coleman and Ray Sanderson

We met :

Cllr Symon Fraser, Portfolio Holder for Environment, Street Scene and Development Control
Kate Bowden, O&S Team Leader ¹
Paul Drury, Principal Officer for Local Action Teams
Philip Parker, Head of Planning and Development Control
John Whiley , Senior Committee Officer

We heard presentations from Paul Drury and Philip Parker. We also visited the Beverley Customer Service Centre (see below).

East Riding : A unitary authority, which was created in 1997. It is a four star council. It covers the area between York and the east coast, excluding Hull. County Hall is in Beverley, where almost all the services and activities are centralised. Other towns include Bridlington, Goole, Great Driffield and Hornsea. There are 168 Town and Parish Councils. There is a majority Conservative administration, which had moved from a minority administration at the last election.

Devolved Governance: The Council is in the process of abandoning Area Forums and introducing 'Local Action Teams' (LATs). Area Forums had recently been reviewed and found not to be delivering. These Forums had in any case not included all councillors, but had consisted of smaller groups elected by the group of area councillors.

LATs were just about to go live at the time of our visit. They are the Council's response to 'place shaping' and the challenge of community leadership. ² A LAT will be made up of a unitary ward Councillor³, a police inspector, a non-exec member of the PCT, a representative of the voluntary sector and a 'community champion' (not clear how that person would be selected but maybe by the LSP. There will be six of them and were given a map of their areas. The LATs will at first be chaired by the ward councillor. Each LAT will essentially have a co-ordinating role, aiming to deliver the best service from the wide range of local community activities and initiatives ("everyone is trying to do engagement"). It will consult about local issues which need attention and seek to provide joined-up solutions from the various agencies. It will meet every 6 weeks and every other meeting will be held in public to encourage public engagement. The LAT chairs will also meet together monthly to provide coordination.

¹ Who had organised the meetings for us, in a very efficient way

² They are expected to hit 'community and empowerment' targets, and specifically the new targets N1,N2 and N4

³ Appointed by the Leader

LATs will pay particular attention to 'hard to hear groups', including isolated rural groups. Issues which are the direct responsibility of a particular agency (eg the Council or the police) will be directed to that agency. The Council has been encouraged to go down this route by the positive results of a consultation with town and parish councils, of which 80 responded positively to the question of how the Council could work with them and share information. There has also been early interest from other agencies – the police have asked that the LATs organise their engagement with town and parish councils.

LATs are being set up jointly by the Council and the East Riding LSP and will report to both. Half the LAT staffing of six is being funded by external partners. LATs will also work closely with the East Riding Neighbourhood Action Teams, which focus on crime reduction, and bring together the police and ASBO officers.⁴ Within the Council, the LATs staff are housed in the Communication Team, in the Corporate Policy and Strategy Directorate. They will be reviewed in 12 months time.

We established that there are no other devolved arrangements in East riding, beyond the DC and customer access arrangements described below. There are no area committees.

Customer Access : The Council's approach to customer access and service helps frame their LATs policy. There are Customer Service Centres in the main conurbations , provided as part of a package of activities outsourced to a company called Arvato.⁵ These centres are supplemented by an interesting system of 'Citizen Links', which are small enclosed spaces providing individual members of the public with electronic access to the Council and its services. There can be in existing locations (such as supermarkets or libraries) or in purpose built huts.⁶ Access to these spaces seems to be controlled in that you have to state the nature of your business before being allowed in, and is overseen by CCTV. Inside there is video access via a webcam and virtual face to face discussions can be held with council staff. Each also has a scanner so that documents can be transmitted to the council offices if needed. These facilities were funded by a Lord Chancellor's Office initiative, though its not clear if that is an ongoing option.

Other access points are mobile libraries and occasional outreach visits by the Leader and a group of officers.

As mentioned above, we visited the Beverley Customer Service Centre, which was just across the road from County Hall. It had a welcoming atmosphere and a number of open plan but sheltered locations where members of the public can talk to Service Centre staff. There were also closed meeting rooms, some of which had webcam video links, and a cashier's counter for

⁴ There was acknowledged to be some risk of confusion about the shortened titles.

⁵ Other outsourced services are financial services and IT.

⁶ We had a picture of one that looked much like a bus shelter

making payments , and racks for information leaflets, including bus timetables.⁷ The staff at the centre provide signposting for the public and are not specialists in any one area. They also alternate between meeting members of the public and answering the phones.

Development Control: DC has always met government targets, though the Audit Commission had expressed some concerns about the direction of travel. They have some difficulties with staff retention, attributed to the salaries emerging from the corporate job evaluation. After working with four Planning Committees which covered areas similar to the old District Boundaries, East Riding has moved to a system of two committees (East and West), working under a main strategic committee. 90% of applications are handled under officer delegation. Previously 30% went to committee. Applications can be called in by a single member, but this has to be on identifiable planning grounds. Decisions go up to the main committee if they have particular strategic importance or if they have differed 'significantly' from established policy.⁸ We were told that about 50% of recommendations referred upwards were supported . The public can address DC meetings but only one statement is heard on each side. Three minutes is allowed at the sub-committee meetings and three or five minutes at the main committee, depending on the circumstances.

For large scale applications 'pre-presentation' meetings are arranged, held in public, in the presence of the main committee present. These provide a chance for issues to be brought out and councillors and members of the public to air their concerns. They also help planning officers to develop their recommendations.

All meetings are held in Beverley. The sub-committees meet in the afternoon and the main committee in the morning.⁹ In an earlier consultation with town and parish councils, there had only been about half a dozen objections to meeting in Beverley.

Currently the system of public notification is under review. They send out about 82000 neighbour notifications each year and receive about 5000 responses, which they consider to be a small number. They are also reconsidering newspaper advertising. On the other hand, we were told that it was important that the public should get to know that the customers of the planning service 'are everybody', and not just the applicants. A lot of the problems arise because of public suspicion and lack of information.

The Council employs eight planning enforcement officers.

We were told that the main issue for DC is to get effective policies in place. This had taken them about five years. They had deliberately kicked off with the established policies, working

⁷ This facility seemed to have a lot in common with the facilities provided by Hereford Council (see the note of that visit).

⁸ This seemed to be a grey area, with the significance determined by planning officers

⁹ There are no formal committee meetings in the evening.

towards consistency, rather than starting from scratch. Apparently a neighbouring authority had gone down the more radical route and had many years of 'total chaos'.

General issues: There was a brief discussion of lessons for going unitary. IT was seen as critical. It had taken the East riding three years to 'plateau the IT base'. Starting with established polices and moving gradually to innovation was also seen as important, even if this means there are some different mechanisms in place for a while.

RAY SANDERSON.
NWDC.