

Herefordshire Visit

The visit took place on 29th February 2008 at Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford. The Task Group representatives were Councillor C.J. Caswill and J. Whittleton, who met with Mr M. Heuter (Senior Community Involvement Officer) and Ms L. Hack (Info Herefordshire Manager). After the Meeting, the Group were given a tour of the Info in Herefordshire Centre.

The two main areas of discussion and, indeed, the two main elements of area working in Herefordshire, were the Council's Info Centres (one stop shops) and Community Forums, run through the Herefordshire Partnership.

Herefordshire has a population of approximately 175,000. The principal urban area is Hereford City (67,000), with other significant populations at Kington (2,597), Leominster (11,000), Bromyard (4,000), Ross-on-Wye (8,000) and Ledbury (8,837).

Info In Herefordshire:

The Council has 6 Information Centres throughout the County at the following locations; Hereford City Centre, Kington, Leominster, Bromyard, Ross-on-Wye and Ledbury. Each of these centres is unique to its own area, for example in the Kington Centre staff also run the municipal library; In Leominster the premises are shared with the Citizens Advice Bureau and Age Concern; In Bromyard premises are shared (and staff administer some of the following services) with the library, youth centre, tourist information centre and leisure centre; and in both Ledbury and Ross-on-Wye a project is taking place to combine the information centres with libraries. Information Centres are known to the public as the Kington Centre, the Ledbury Centre etc.

Where libraries and Information Centres are run from the same premises, customer services staff are trained to carry out library duties. The administration of libraries is carried out by a different directorate, so a Service Level Agreement is drawn up to establish the service to be carried out by customer service staff.

Possible future developments include another Information Centre in the south of Hereford and a combined mobile information centre and library.

The information Centres are staffed with Customer Services Officers (Hereford 23, Kington 5, Leominster 6, Bromyard 11, Ross-on-Wye 6 and Ledbury 4). These staff are trained to deal with a variety of queries and the information centres are able to deal with the majority of queries/service requests. In total, the centres can administer over 700 services including those relating to planning, environmental health, trading standards, blue badges (disabled parking stickers), housing benefit, council tax payments and enquiries, pest control as well as general enquiries and help with filling in forms etc.

Customer Services staff undertake training supplied by Mary Gobar International, which the Council thoroughly recommends for this purpose.

The Centres open a dedicated planning desk for certain hours during the week, where planning applications and decision notices can be viewed, general enquiries can be made and planning officers undertake surgeries.

Many of the Council's operations based workers are issued with hand-held devices in which they can access their Outlook inbox. This enables staff at the information centres to arrange for services to be carried out when customers make requests e.g. pest control services.

The Council are running a project to bring elements of each of their services to the front line. In other words, they are looking to bring as many elements of service provision to the front line in order to allow professional officers to carry out their work with fewer distractions.

In addition to the Info in Herefordshire, the Council also runs the Info By Phone service; the Council's central call centre. This is managed as part of the same area as the Information Centres so the majority of customer contact takes place through the Corporate and Customer Services Directorate.

For all customer contact, Information in Herefordshire uses the SAP Customer Relationship Management system (which the Council are pleased with due to its knowledge management functions) and this is closely linked to the ICT department.

The Centres have become very much part of the community, and the inclusion of other services on the same premises increases awareness and importance in the locality.

The Information In Herefordshire project has been running since 1998 (starting with a pilot in Ross-on-Wye) and has received good support from Councillors. The Council undertakes a satisfaction survey twice a year and enjoys a good degree of customer satisfaction. It is rated 4th out of 17 in its group of benchmarking authorities.

Community Forums:

Herefordshire's Community Forums are based on 12 community areas. They came into being due to the Police starting to hold community meetings (without the Council present). It was felt that the image of the Council would suffer if the Council was not part of these meetings.

The Forums are now run by the Herefordshire Partnership; PACT (Partners and Communities Together). Responsibility was moved to the partnership as not all of the issues raised at the Forums are Council functions. The 12 Forums are held on a quarterly basis and have independent chairs drawn from the partnership. This arrangement is accepted by those in attendance, though there are a small number of councillors who are unhappy with this arrangement.

Initially, Forums were attended by the Council's Leader and Chief Executive. However, the focus quickly changed from local to strategic issues with this set-up.

The Forums are somewhat different to normal committee meetings; neither agendas nor reports are produced and it is rare to have any kind of presentation. Issues can be raised by anyone in attendance. There are no procedure rules, though guidelines are produced for the chair, in order to facilitate a useful and inclusive meeting; the main guideline being that everyone present should get the opportunity to speak.

The Forums are attended by a Community Forum Co-ordinator who sets up, supports and minutes the meeting, representatives from the Police (usually 2 reps – an Inspector and a PCSO) and a representative from the Council's Environment Directorate. Most questions usually relate to policing matters or matters which concern the Council's Environment Directorate (mainly street scene issues).

The Forums do not commit to providing answers to questions on the night, nor to finding solutions to the community's grievances, but will at all times seek to provide an explanation. Any questions or matters for further investigation are summarised on a feedback sheet, which is made available on the Partnerships website and at the next meeting. They are able to refer issues to the Council's Committees, if they so wish. If there is a particularly pressing issues of local interest, that does not fit in with the quarterly cycle of meetings, a special meeting can be called to discuss the issue.

The Forums are reasonably well publicised. The meeting dates are published in the Council's newsletter (Herefordshire Matters), 2,000 leaflets are produced, which are circulated to parish councils, GPs surgeries, Info Centres etc, the Council and Partnership website are also used to promote the meetings and a database of attendees is used to remind people of upcoming meetings. Publicity is carried out by both the Partnership and Police.

Initially, local radio was used to promote the meetings, but, it was felt that this did not have a significant impact on attendance.

The partnership do not use parish magazines to promote the meetings, though recognise the potential value of doing so and are considering using this method.

Attendance at the meetings averages about 25, but has shown a steady increase as the Forums have become better known. Turnout obviously increases when there is an issue of local significance; a recent meeting in Bromyard was attended by 150 people when a local school was threatened with closure. Forums are well attended by parish councils. The Forums use feedback sheets to review their usefulness. Approximately 90% of responses are positive.

It has been noted that attendance is mainly from people over 40 years of age.

Compared to other formats of community governance/engagement, the Herefordshire Forums are relatively inexpensive. The Partnership has an annual £20,000 budget for the running of the meetings, which includes hall bookings and officer support.

Some problems encountered include:

- Councillors not being supportive of the Police;
- Not being able to get the appropriate officers to attend; and
- Not being able to secure buy-in from partners, for example housing associations.

The Council and Partnership are looking at the possibility of carrying out the Councillor Call for Action function at the Forums. The recent consultation paper on Petitions, may also be handled through this channel.

The current format has only been in operation for a year and a half (6 cycles of meetings). Although the Forums are not responsible for specific service provision, they have begun to have an effect in bringing issues to the fore and in some instances dealing with local problems.