

Connecting People, Connecting Places Initiative Swindon West Cluster



Objectives of Case Study

Five case studies have been commissioned by the SW Council to showcase effective community engagement at neighbourhood level. The objective of all five case studies is to highlight excellent partnership working with communities and other service providers, to identify common problems and find solutions through effective engagement and a commitment to resolve local issues.

To empower communities to develop and deliver change in their own neighbourhoods.

Background to Swindon Borough Council Area

Swindon's major asset is its location. It is set in an area of outstanding countryside and has excellent transport links. The M4 corridor is highly prosperous and more and more people and businesses are moving out of London into Swindon. These factors mean that Swindon is one of the best business locations in the South of England.

The Government has identified Swindon as a major growth area, and further major development in and around Swindon is on-going.



Population

Swindon Unitary Authority has the seventh largest Population of the 37 South West unitary authorities and Districts with 3.7% of the total population living in the area. In ten years to 2008 Swindon's population grew by 8.5%, a higher rate of growth than both the South West Region and England as a whole.

	Population 1000s	Population Change 1998-2008
Swindon Unitary Authority	192.9	8.5%
South West	5,209.2	7.4%
England	51,446.2	5.4%

ONS – Mid Year Estimates 2008/ONS Census 2001 Area data



About the project

In July 2008, Swindon Borough Council implemented its Connecting People, Connecting Places programme. This programme focuses on developing strong neighbourhoods that can influence local issues and help improve the quality of life of residents.

Connecting People, Connecting Places is built on three guiding principles:

- More meaningful engagement with people and communities – developing meaningful conversations.
- Delivering public services that are more locally sensitive – local communities become increasingly involved in setting and delivering priorities.
- Building on a 'sense of community' – supporting and helping communities help themselves.

Councilor Brian Mattock, Cabinet Member, Connecting People, Connecting Places spoke about strengthening the role of ward members and allocating resources to locality priorities:

“Some would say that for decades councils have been bureaucratic institutions taking broad-brush approaches to what they do; that the man or woman in the street cares very little about what councils do or which public service provides what. Lets be honest - why should they?”

What matters most for people varies greatly by neighbourhood, town, suburb, or village. But with public services working across a wide geographical area in Swindon Borough, there can be a tendency for us to think of all places as the same. It's not always easy for us to understand what really matters to people in their places.

Connecting People, Connecting Places sets about changing that.”

Councilor Mattock went on to explain that Connecting People, Connecting Places was about providing more locally attuned services, building a strong sense of community and engaging people so that everyone has a chance to be heard.

Cluster Areas

To implement Connecting People, Connect Places, Swindon Borough Council identified seven 'cluster' areas built around ward boundaries which helps support elected members in their role as a representatives of the community and as local leaders and decision makers.

Elected members convene cluster forums with community champions and local people to discuss local issues and develop local solutions.

Each cluster has a Cluster Lead. These are senior managers already working in Swindon Borough Council and include the Head of Libraries, the Director of Law and Governance, and the Housing Policy and Regeneration Manager. The cluster leads act as facilitators, listening to people, gathering information and brokering local solutions.

Without additional resources, Swindon Borough Council is changing the way it works with partners and community members to deliver local improvements. By sharing service expertise and developing local expertise within the Council it has enabled a more flexible, localised approach to delivering services.

This case study focuses one of the seven clusters – **West Cluster** – which covers Freshbrook and Grange Park, Shaw and Nine Elms and Toothill and Westlea wards.

Freshbrook and Grange Park Ward

The first task of the West Cluster Lead was to find a way to introduce this new initiative to residents in this Ward.

The West Swindon Forum, a residents panel already set up, were approached and were happy to provide help and advice in promoting Connecting People, Connecting Places throughout Freshbrook and Grange Park.

Initially a flyer was sent out around the area, in schools, the library, in shops and via the local Link Magazine asking residents to come along to the first meeting of the West Swindon cluster which was being held at a local leisure centre.

The challenge for the Cluster Lead at this meeting was to encourage residents to come up with their own concerns, not what the Council thought were 'local concerns'.

The focus on the first meeting was around 'what's good about West Swindon, what's bad about the area'? It was hoped that residents would start to explore what their real issues were.

30 people came to the first meeting, which was also attended by the Cluster Lead and Ward members. Residents raised local concerns and the Cluster Lead took ownership to ensure that these would be addressed and progress reported back to residents. Feedback would be to individuals, via the local Link Magazine and by other means deemed appropriate.

A second meeting was arranged a month later. This time 70 residents attended. The group discussed actions following the first meeting. Residents moved the meeting forward and began setting their own agenda ready for the next meeting. Momentum was building and residents were controlling the meeting and suggesting solutions to issues.

The residents set up their own website forum to add items for the next agenda, ask about the status of issues raised previously and generally discuss local concerns. The forum is growing in size as people become more aware of its existence.

Additional meetings are held to deal with specific issues. An example of this was residents concerns about a proposed development of housing adjacent to West Swindon with over 400 residents turning up to discuss what actions they could take to address their concerns.

Issues are being resolved and trust is building up between the residents and officials. Council departments were invited to attend the meeting if their input was needed to resolve a particular issue. Where issues raised could not be resolved residents were given the reasons for this and these were usually accepted.

Pam Pixton, a Community Engagement Officer said;

“This initiative is about giving residents the opportunity to make things happen. Our aim in the long-term is for residents to stop seeing Swindon Borough Council as a barrier and seeing us as helping residents to achieve.

Connecting Communities, Connecting Places gets people to think about their priorities, how they want these to be delivered and makes them realise that budgets are not a bottomless pit, so resources need to be within the budget”.

Other stakeholders became interested in the West Swindon Cluster Forum. The police wanted to understand local issues so used the Forum as a platform for ideas. The local Neighbourhood Policing Team are now an integral part of this forum and have since aligned their priorities to what the residents tell them their needs are.

Since the initial meeting, the forum has become too large to hold in the original meeting area. This meeting now takes place in the West Swindon Library, which has a large open space.

The Cluster Lead, Bernie Brannan commented that;

“The West Swindon Cluster Forum belongs to the local community and my role is now more to facilitate meetings and ensure that issues raised are passed to the correct department for resolution, and enable residents to resolve their own issues”.

Swindon Borough Council had to find a way of understanding residents’ needs, by talking and engaging with residents informally, it provided an excellent route in understanding issues and boundaries on both sides.

Connecting People, Connecting Places has begun to change our old ways of thinking and doing things and encourages the community to engage and regain a sense of community spirit.

The residents are beginning to engage with Connecting People, Connecting Places because they are beginning to feel they are being listened to and their priorities for a better place to live are being actioned to resolve issues at a local level.

Not long after The West Swindon Cluster Forum began, a major issue came to light that tested the newly formed relationship between the residents and Swindon Borough Council.

Closure of the Freshbrook Community Centre

Freshbrook Community Centre was built in 1984 and has been a focal point for community groups, social events, coffee mornings, playgroups etc ever since. It incorporated a café, licensed premises, community rooms.

It was run by a committee of residents and had charity status. In October last year it had its charitable status withdrawn as the committee running it at the time had failed to submit the required accounts. The centre was closed down straight away by the council as there was no legal body to run it. This dramatically affected many residents and local groups. The playgroup suddenly no longer had a place to call its own and was therefore threatened with closure. Other groups were put into similar positions overnight.

The residents were extremely upset as Freshbrook had lost its only central meeting place. Swindon Borough Council was accused of closing the community centre down and the residents were up in arms.

The community banded together to help out businesses that were affected by the sudden closure of the Centre. The local Church offered temporary use of their kitchen facilities and space for the Café to continue. The local school offered temporary space for the playgroups to continue because losing this service would have a dramatic effect on the local community. Other bookings for the social hall were housed in other premises or temporarily suspended.

Impact of Losing the Centre

Carol Gibbon who volunteers at the Community Café which was located in the Freshbrook Community Centre said:

“It was a complete shock to be told by a resident to ‘get down to the community centre quickly’ and when I arrived, the premises was being boarded up!

The Community Café is an essential part of community life and was set up by a group of residents who wanted to do something for the people of the area. It is open to everyone from homeless people, the Community Policing Team, young parents, older and vulnerable people to workers on their breaks. The Community Café is run by volunteers, some of whom are from the Independent Living project. So the Freshbrook Community Centre and the Community Café is very much a part of community living.

We have older residents that spend most of the day in the Café. They have little contact with other people so use the Café as a place to watch the comings and goings and chat to other customers. Young mums with babies and toddlers use the Café to chat over a cup of coffee. There's always a friendly atmosphere and a warm welcome for everyone".



Take Ethel for example, she is 90 years of age and has been living in Freshbrook for 25 years. Ethel walks over to the Community Café when it's open to sit and talk to others. She wouldn't be allowed to sit at a table until she is ready to leave with just one cup of coffee – she would have been asked to leave if this was not a community focused cafe.

The volunteers are given the opportunity to develop skills and gain work experience. Some have confidence issues and providing this service enables them to grow and to achieve. Some of the volunteers have gone on to paid employment, others have gone on to further training, so a facility like this can benefit so many people within our community.

There were also plans for the Centre to encourage younger people to use the facilities and final stages were in place for the provision of a 'youth café'.

Young volunteers were recruited to set up the 'youth café'. The volunteers had done their research and had even decided on the name of the Café. Equipment was about to be purchased from donations received and a small grant for the project. However, with the closure of the Community Centre, this was all put on hold.

"The young people have really felt let down and did not understand the 'politics' of why the Centre was shut" Carol stated. "They had gone to all this effort just to see the carpet pulled from under their feet and they now have nowhere to go!"

Tina Mackie, another volunteer helping to run the Community Café said;

"The community are all working together to support each other. If someone had contacted either Carol or myself right at the beginning when problems had arisen, then perhaps we could have done something to stop the wheels being put in motion to close the Freshbrook Community Centre.

We actually feel responsible! The community was angry and didn't understand why the Centre had suddenly closed and initially we were the front line for people to vent their anger.

One resident, Mr K Pardoe regularly used to have a drink or two in the Community Centre's licensed premises. Ken said;

"At least nine of my friends used to use the pub on a regular basis. The drinks were cheaper and it was a good place to meet and had loads of community spirit. With the loss of the pub, we don't go out as much as the drinks are too expensive in the other local pub."

Action Taken

Through the local media and flyers, an urgent public meeting was hastily arranged to try and find a resolution to this problem quickly.

Word and mouth soon spread of the public meeting and over 100 residents turned up to voice their anger and concerns.

At the meeting the Cluster Lead and Ward members explained what had happened and were there to help try and fix the problem and move forward. The residents came up with a solution - forming a new committee of volunteers and applying for new charitable status. With Swindon Borough Council's assistance and the community working together, a social enterprise was formed to re-open the Freshbrook Community Centre.

The residents took it upon themselves to seek help in putting together the enterprise, asking other well established community projects for good practice ideas to enable them to move forward with this project.

Challenges for the group included working with the new trustees of the Community Centre to negotiate a reasonable rent and considering how, with the closure of the licensed area within the Community Centre which used to subsidise the Community Café, the group can ensuring the centre's sustainability.

One volunteer of the social enterprise, Nicky Howard – Treasurer, spoke on behalf of the Steering Group which is made up of a number of residents who came to the initial meeting set up by the Council.

“There are a number of works which have to be done by the Committee and the Council to make the building fit for purpose before the scheduled re-opening in Mid-April. We are working closely together, however it can be frustrating getting answers to questions from the Council.

We are working with the Council to establish a core group of people that can be contacted who we can gain a good working relationship with. Relationships with the Council are gradually improving.”

Outcome

Just under eight months after it was shut down, the Freshbrook Community Centre is up and running again. The Centre again opened its doors to the community in April. The steering group of residents have taken on the responsibility for the sustainability of the community centre, bringing in activities they want, a café area suitable to their needs and the omission of the licensed bar was their decision.

Now with the new group of volunteers responsible for the Centre, working under a new constitution, the building is back at the centre of the community. Stephanie Bird, the Community Centre chairman said:

“It’s been a very steep learning curve for all the people who came forward to take on the Centre. It’s a very important facility for our area and we wanted to bring it back to life”.

She thanked local councillors and council officers for their assistance. “We’ve had some difficult moments over the last few months; only a few weeks ago we were wondering if the promised refurbishments would be finished. But we have a newly decorated building, with new carpets and kitchen, it’s up to us to make the Centre work again for the community.”

The centre was officially reopened by the Mayor on 31 July 2010 as part of a fun day which included a barbeque and activities for all the family.

There are events taking place at the centre throughout the week and the café is again open each week day.



It is clear that the Connecting People, Connecting Places initiative was instrumental in enabling residents to engage with the Councillors, local authority and service providers over this important community issue. It also supported residents to empower themselves to take on the running of the centre.

The study suggests that:

- The 'bottom up' approach of this initiative has been very effective and giving the residents the opportunity to set their own agendas has been key to its success.
- Providing various ways for residents to participate is also a key factor to success as is supporting two-way communications by developing excellent communication links.
- Participation in forums and community projects offers the opportunity for residents to gain self-confidence, develop skills to progress to paid employment, satisfaction in helping others and a feeling of being valued.
- By taking responsibility for their own environment, residents are willing to seek solutions to problems and act on these.
- Opening communication channels with residents, partners and all departments within the local authority is vital. Many blockages appear to be happening within the council. Time should be spent finding solutions to alleviating these blockages – encouraging officers from all areas to visit residents on an informal basis to really understand issues and what's important to them.

Conclusion

There is good reason why councils have to get better at engaging with their communities.

The Big Society

The new UK Government is placing considerable emphasis on “The Big Society” which aims to give communities more power and to encourage people to take an active role in their communities.

Proposals include introducing new powers to help communities save local facilities and services threatened with closure and encouraging volunteering and involvement in social action.

The government has also expressed support for the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprise.

In order to deliver “The Big Society” agenda, public services are going to have to develop effective ways of engaging with communities, such as Swindon Borough Council have done with Connecting People, Connecting Places. The key challenges to this are likely to be around getting people to engage and ensuring that the opportunity to engage is extended to all groups in the community.

Building Trust

A report by Communities and Local Government says that one of the reasons for residents’ lack of trust in their local authority was that many people feel that their council makes little effort to communicate with them.

In order to built trust and improving their reputation amongst residents, councils need to communicate clearly to demonstrate that they offer value for money and make sure they keep their residents well informed. The also need to listen to what local people tell them about their communities and their priorities for making them better places to live.

The Connecting People, Connecting Places programme highlights the results that can be achieved by building trust and listening to local needs.

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