

Workshop 3 - The challenge of delivering rural services

This workshop is based on the joint research between Action for Market Towns and the Rural Services Network into the problems of delivering quality services across broad geographical areas and how these can be overcome.

The workshop session was introduced by Tracey Turner of Place Shaping Solutions, who is currently undertaking a piece of work on the subject of rural services on behalf of Action for Market Towns and the Rural Services Network. She introduced two speakers – Cllr Jo Beavis of Braintree, Essex, and Darren Cole, Customer Services Manager, West Devon. Both shared their experiences of delivering services to rural communities.

Cllr Jo Beavis outlined the council's approach to partnership working, stating that the key had been to devolve power from the centre, in an effort to increase efficiency and bring service planning closer to the end-user. She described how the three centrally-based planning committees that had existed had been merged into just one central one, and 3 local ones, which in turn received funding to allocate monies closer to the grassroots level. This enabled more focussed spending on those areas most requiring support. She also explained that a successful People's Panel had been established, with over 500 participants, as a way to determine the views of the local community in terms of service need. Finally she talked about the way in which meetings of clusters of parishes had been held to enable greater efficiency in hearing the views of all representatives in those locations, with cluster meetings taking place four times per year. Despite the success of this approach, Cllr Beavis spoke about the need to evolve further, and outlined the creation of 'Parish Chairs and Clerks Forums' as a way of ensuring close working between key personnel.

For more information visit: <http://www.braintree.gov.uk/Braintree/default.htm>

Darren Cole talked about service delivery in West Devon, which, with 50,000 residents scattered across a rural area the size of Greater London, has obvious challenges for this agenda. He explained how the key to success had been found by 'taking services to the people, to where they are already', as opposed to expecting people to come to them. West Devon Connect was established as a partnership between 28 organisations, who share responsibility for taking services to the end-user. Partners include the Fire Services, NHS and Citizen Advice Bureau, and locations visited range from local markets to libraries to schools, and sometimes to an individual's house. The council found that this provided a cost-effective, efficient way to provide services to those who might not otherwise access them, or indeed know that the service existed.

For more information visit: <http://www.westdevon.gov.uk/doc.asp?doc=14683&CAT=2905>