

East Sussex County Council's response to the Lyons Inquiry Interim Report and Consultation Document.

Question 1 What is the strategic role of local government? Is my description sufficient, or are there more elements you would add?

The 'place-shaping' definition represents a helpful overall view of the role of local government, though we would order the points differently. Local authorities, first and foremost are democratically elected bodies. As such their prime roles are to represent their residents, make decisions on their behalf and govern their locality. Everything they do – making sure the right services are provided to local people, representing the community, building and shaping local identity and improving the quality of life locally - stems from this. Local authorities balance the very complex inter-play between local and national priorities when delivering services. We would term this as the inherent "strategic efficiency" of local government.

We recommend that bullet point four also includes a reference to empowering communities.

With the increased emphasis on community leadership and partnership working local government could also develop its roles in future to encompass commissioning/scrutinising all publicly funded local services in its areas.

We emphasise that local government, even in its most efficient form, also needs to retain a role in the direct delivery of some services in order to be able to influence and manage the market.

Which elements of this role should extend to services other than those for which local government is directly responsible, and how?

All elements of this role are best achieved through partnership working with public, private, voluntary and community groups and with residents and services users. The Council already has strong partnerships and the Local Area Agreement (LAA) is developing these further through shared targets and outcomes. There does, however, need to be a clear vision for the area (which is set out in the Community Plan) and clear governance with defined roles and responsibilities.

There is a balance to be struck between customer focused services which remove the need for detailed understanding of roles (e.g. East Sussex Fault Reporting System, details of which are included in Appendix 1 – Case Study 2) and ensuring accountability is clear. Residents and services users also need to understand these roles and responsibilities which can be achieved through greater communication, consultation, participation and involvement.

How does the strategic role vary between different types of councils?

The strategic role will vary between different types of councils depending on the area they cover, their relative size, and the nature of services provided and the delivery partnerships involved. The County Council will, therefore, have the overall vision and capacity to lead on decision making on issues such as the Waste Local Plan, the South East Plan strategic regeneration issues, and balancing fairly the needs of different geographic communities and communities of interest across the area. It is important that local authorities are of a sufficient size to be able to take decisions that are in the wider public interest on behalf of the wider public that will be affected by that decision. All tiers, including District and Borough Councils and Town and Parish Councils, play a community leadership role.

Question 2 What tools do councils need to perform the strategic role more effectively?

Central government should be prepared to trust Local Government more because of its inherent and demonstrated strategic efficiency. National priorities, standards and targets, and the systems for inspecting them, should be kept to a minimum with councils being given more freedom to respond to local needs and priorities. A more proportionate system of inspection would release significant resources (time and money) to allow councils to focus more on providing services to meet the needs of their local communities.

By definition the geographic and/or population boundaries of the different tiers will impact on the extent of coherent service efficiency and planning that is achieved. Key services such as: education, social care, waste and transport – do not respect current district, parish or even county boundaries. Generally, a degree of scale is required to ensure a coherent approach across a wide area while responding locally (e.g. provision for Travellers). The ability to be strategic is also a function of effective alignment between key partners (e.g. Social Care).

Coterminous operational boundaries with other public bodies, closely involved in the commissioning or delivery supply chain, is vital, for example one PCT for East Sussex coterminous with the County Council.

What are the existing barriers to councils performing this role effectively?

The extent of financial ring-fencing of grants, coupled to the lack of transparency of the national funding framework, inevitably hinders sensible local choices and holds back effective community leadership. Coupled to this is the lack of mature agreement between central and local government on service expectations.

The disproportionate inspection burden on Councils, both in terms of prescriptive 'national' targets, and the diversion of resources from service delivery, diverts resources away from delivering services to meet local needs and priorities.

The capacity of communities to engage in planning and delivery is a significant issue. Indeed, there is an emerging risk of an over-optimistic assumption by government in this capacity that undermines the leadership role of local authorities.

The County Council's recent experience in setting up our Local Area Agreement (LAA) has been disappointing in that the rigid actuarial approach the Government has taken to reward targets has meant that we have not been able to include a number of local priorities in the Agreement.

The lack of 'joined up' Central Government, with often conflicting instructions from different Departments, remains a key barrier. Linked to this is the undermining, or at least confusing, role of the various government offices.

There is a widely recognised issue around the willingness and capacity of locally elected councillors, especially those with other jobs, being able to fulfil increasingly demanding and complex roles.

In what circumstances does it work well and less well?

Local authorities carry out their strategic role well when they have strong political and managerial leadership and the two work well together, a clear vision for the area,

agreed by partners and in consultation with residents, and a willingness to make transparent and coherent choices.

Case study 1, East Sussex Children's Index (see appendix A) illustrates how, when given the freedoms of a pathfinder, good local relationships and real leadership and develop. East Sussex County Council came up with solutions, based on real needs of the people of East Sussex, that worked and that cost half that of more bureaucratic solutions.

More joined up outcomes and targets across public bodies would make the strategic role more effective.

Are further improvements in performance, efficiency and accountability needed before local government can most effectively play this strategic role and be trusted to do so?

Local government has already come a long way in improving performance, efficiency and accountability and, whilst there is always room for further improvement, Councils are already addressing this and it is being measured by the Government through the Annual Efficiency Statement and through inspection, by both the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) and individual service inspections.

A key issue remains the transparency, predictability and causal links between national funding, service expectation, local choices and consequent council tax impact and service user experience. In particular, the transparency and predictability of national grant settlements as applied locally, is a key improvement requirement.

Public perception of the quality and delivery ability of local government may need to be addressed, but this reflects wider perception difficulties with the broader political process. Local Government can, and should, engage more proactively with the communities they serve to explain not just what and why but the nature of the complex choices that need to be made.

Public consultation, with residents and with partner organisations has worked successfully in East Sussex to increase understanding of the complex issues of the budget and how budgets are matched to priorities. As part of resident workshops, in January 2006, participants were asked to put themselves in the 'role of a Councillor' to review the discussion topics. The participants had taken part in a previous workshop in the Autumn and some had participated in the previous year's consultation. They took to the task with their usual energy and enthusiasm, revealing increasingly high levels of knowledge and understanding for the context within which councils operate.

Undoubtedly the public will (understandably) continue to struggle with aligning services with the relevant tier in shire areas. This can erode accountability.

What are the key signs of success and failure?

The key signs of success for a council are public satisfaction with council services, and the council overall, high staff morale and election results. Signs of failure would be measured through low public satisfaction and comparatively high levels of complaints (recognising that complaints in general can be seen as a form of involvement and lead to improved services, if used correctly) and lack of stability due to changing Councillors and key officers.

Electoral turnout is clearly not a measure of success or failure other than perhaps at the absolute extremes of events.

Question 3 How important is the fact that local government is elected in relation to its ability and legitimacy to perform this role?

At the heart of its 'strategic efficiency' is the electoral mandate to be able to defend complex service choices. For this reason it is vital that there is democratic legitimacy to underpin the difficult choices involved in delivery of effective local services e.g. waste disposal arrangements and new traveller sites. Local Government has a good track record on value for money and performance management, owing to the strong leadership and accountability provided by its elected members (it compares more than favourably with the NHS in this respect for example). It also needs to have the clout that democratic legitimacy, and being responsible for major services gives it, if it is to bring together partnerships to improve outcomes in the way the Government envisages.

Devolution and decentralisation

Question 4 Which services (or parts of services) should meet national standards in all areas of the country? Which should meet minimum standards? Which should be entirely down to local choice?

Services which provide for the public safety e.g. health, adult and child protection, roads, police and fire authorities should all be subject to minimum national standards. These standards should be outcome based rather than focussing on processes. There should still be sufficient capacity for Councils, once meeting these minimum standards, to set additional local standards, based on local needs and local choice. The link to funding is a crucial one. A transparent, explainable and 'fair' contribution from Government to the cost of minimum standards is crucial.

Services including local economic development, culture, libraries, leisure, sports and recreation and street cleaning should be entirely down to local choice.

Are there aspects (such as standards setting, funding or choice of delivery mechanisms) of individual services which should be nationally controlled or locally controlled?

As per the previous question, the issue of 'fair funding' for minimum standards is crucial (as is a transparent process for increased funding for new burdens). Crucially, minimum standard setting should be the result of a mature agreement between Central and Local Government on service expectations. Choice of delivery methods should be left to local choice other than for some test of efficiency and value for money. If the standards are outcome based, local authorities should be able to decide how these outcomes are met.

An example of how East Sussex County Council has worked in partnership to remove the barriers for services users can be found in case study 2, East Sussex Fault Reporting System (appendix 1). The East Sussex Fault Reporting System illustrates partnership working between the County Council and District and Borough Councils to provide a countywide single point of contact for customers across the County to report faults through the web.

Are there services where greater variation in standards would be acceptable if there was clearer accountability and consultation with local people?

Potentially in all cases (subject to the effective management, jointly, of minimum standards)

It is important for the Government to recognise that nationally administered services do not guarantee nationally consistent standards – the postcode lottery is greater in the NHS than in most ‘nationally important’ services delivered through local government.

Question 5 How has the Government's approach to devolution and decentralisation affected your area and your local services?

The Council perceives little substantive impact of the Government's approach to devolution and decentralisation. Indeed the opposite perception remains the case.

Which aspects of the current system are helpful and unhelpful, and why?

Conflicting priorities affect our ability to work with partners such as Health. Differing, mandatory central targets reduce our capacity to address local priorities.

Ring fenced grants have helped develop some services but, at the same time, this has reduced the capacity to focus on local priorities, or indeed meet core pressures elsewhere (e.g. education passporting and social care). Equally funding is not always available for areas that are national priorities (e.g. waste disposal, action against alcohol harm).

Have changes based on central government priorities differed from those that might have been driven by local pressure and opinion?

We would offer a major example. Interference at a national level in the Learning and Skills Council's proposal, in partnership with the County Council, for the reorganisation of post 16 provision in Hasting and Rother, which had been agreed locally with the majority of key stakeholders to secure improvement to locally identified issues has resulted in a significantly diluted outcome. The revisions to the initial proposal have reduced the potential impact and do not recognise either the local context and relationships, or the interests of the local community sufficiently well. Cast Study 3, Post 16 Review, provides further details (appendix 1).

Beyond that the reality of ‘forcing’ good funding for schools at the expense of poor core funding in other areas, such as social care, is a major point of tension.

Managing pressures on local services

Question 6. How can pressures on local services be managed more effectively?

What are the main types of pressures faced by local services and how are they currently managed?

Which are the most difficult to manage and why?

The main pressures on local services are:

- The key quantum pressures facing us, as a County Council, are adult social care and waste disposal. To an extent they are both a factor of demographic pressure and raising service expectation. In respect of the latter, the fuelling of higher service expectations without a transparent debate about cost and capacity has made managing those pressures, locally, extremely difficult.
- Demographic pressures are a particular problem for East Sussex County Council in terms of the ageing population and the increasing demand on adult social care. In East Sussex we have the second highest proportion of people over 65 years old and a higher proportion of people over 85 than all other

counties in England. Elderly people are more likely to need vital services which are expensive to provide but essential for a decent quality of life. Effective management can only come from managing expectations and, crucially, a mature view on the contribution the individual needs to make.

- Issues that are a function of demography (e.g. adult social care and waste) or heightened service risk (e.g. vulnerable children) are the most difficult to manage.

Careful planning, and the identification of £15m worth of savings, from efficiency and different ways of working over the last four years, has meant that the County Council has been able to continue to invest in our most pressurised services and seek to protect the most vulnerable in our community. In view of the high priority the County Council gives to Adult Social Care, additional ongoing funding has been provided for Adult Social Care. Despite this investment, Adult Social Care will still need to make significant savings in 2006/07 because of the huge demand that exists.

Would greater devolution of responsibility enable pressures to be managed more effectively?

Not in itself given the importance of the shared responsibility for managing service expectations, the requirement of fair funding for minimum standards and the need for a mature debate on the nature of risk and role and contribution of the individual. Greater devolution, however, would mean greater flexibility for councils to prioritise, if it allowed councils to focus on, and allocate, resources to local priorities and pressures rather than to Central Government targets. The Post 16 Review (appendix 1) is a good example of what can be achieved when things are pulled together at a local level.

Does confusion about responsibility and duplication of effort contribute to pressures?

The confusion about responsibility and duplication of effort is a particular problem for residents and services users, in two tier areas, who do not know who provides which services – but also who is driving the service expectations and actual council tax impact.

Would greater public understanding of the actual costs of public services help to manage expectations and pressures?

Absolutely, greater public understanding of the actual costs of public services and who pays for this (Government Grant or Council Tax) will be very helpful in managing expectations and pressures if people do not realise the cost of something they tend not to value it. It would not, however, be sufficient in itself.

How can we ensure that the system provides the proper incentives and rewards for using resources efficiently?

The Interim Report highlights several incentives that are already in place and are effective, in particular audit and elections. A locally produced statement (public) of comparative efficiencies, with an explanation/rationale for variations, would assist.

More emphasis on accurate, comparable information which Members and Chief Executives could use to challenge performance would be more useful than increased regulation and inspection.

Scope for a new agreement

Question 7. How could responsibility for local services be made clearer between local government, central government and other agencies?

The transparent setting (and fair funding) of minimum local service standards remains key. The role of other elected agencies – impacting on local government delivery (e.g. regional government offices) – lacks transparency and accountability.

The move towards single points of contact, information kiosks etc removes, to some extent, the need to know who is responsible. Users and residents need to know who to contact to receive a service and who to contact to make comments/complaints about a service. The Fault Reporting System (appendix 1) is a good example of a system developed in partnership to ensure a single point of contact for customers across the County to report faults.

One option would be for councils only to collect data on public satisfaction for the services for which they are responsible.

What might this mean for the current performance management framework?

The emphasis of the current performance framework is on national priorities and targets and on comparing councils across the country on a like for like basis. If the emphasis was to move away from national priorities to local priorities and achieving the local vision for an area the performance framework should reflect this. A framework based on annual assessment of local targets and peer review could achieve this, backed by a system of independent inspections on a risk basis.

Would a more contractual approach for a small number of central priorities help achieve this?

Potentially yes. This could be developed through the LAA process. It would, however, require genuine debate between central and local government and a reduction in the amount of the LAA targets that have to be agreed by Central Government. It runs the risk, however, of undermining the notion of minimum service standards.

Part 2 – Local Government Funding

The new system for 2006/07 onwards, replacing the 'new' system introduced in 2003/04, is almost completely impossible to audit, interpret or explain. This is a major impediment to improving accountability and understanding.

Even within the current system, there have been major shifts in funding between different parts of the Country. Indeed, since 2003/04, East Sussex County Council has been a floor authority receiving a minimum grant increase which for the most part merely covered schools passporting between 2003/04 and 2005/06. The support for non-school services is a little improved for 2006/07 but the Council is still a 'floor council'. This has produced an almost intolerable position where the Council has still had to respond to key service pressures (e.g. social care), with little government assistance, while trying to limit as far as possible the council tax impact. The delivery of efficiencies has been crucial but reduction in discretionary services and above inflation council tax rises have still been unavoidable.

For East Sussex, with our high population of older people on fixed retirement incomes and generally low wage working economy, the impact of council tax in the

circumstances of being a floor council is very difficult. The Government must address a greater ease for people accessing benefits and look at income tax thresholds for low income earners to help address ability to pay.

More substantially, fair funding in all regions is vital. Home prices growth and disposal income growth are not the same.

Transparency in all forms of government funding (i.e. formula and specific grants) is also vital to help allay fears of inherent unfairness in current arrangements. Coupled to this is the earlier point about transparent funding of minimum service standards. There is a growing perception of major service disparities – arising from government grant changes – across the Country.

The 'new' system contains even more scope for subjective ministerial judgements than ever before. A distinctive example for East Sussex is the use of formula changes to reflect 'resources equalisation'. This produces major shift in grant, often out of the whole South East, and consequent increases in council tax burden without any service changes. A national local government finance system should not be a primary tool of national regional economic policy.

Going forward the issue of revaluation should not be considered in isolation from the formula distribution method, particularly as regards "resource equalisation" impacts. Revaluation must also avoid making simple but incorrect assumptions about the correlation between home price growth and income (ability to pay) growth.

Also, going forward, the balance between funding stability and funding changes needs to be agreed. For East Sussex, we have at least been able to rely on a limited degree of 'stability' through the operation of the floor.

Council Tax Benefit

It is noted in the Inquiry that the take up of Council Tax Benefit (CTB) is low. East Sussex County Council has funded Age Concern and the Citizens Advice Bureau to promote the take up of benefits to help alleviate some of the problems faced by our pensioners, many of whom are on fixed, low incomes and for whom the Council Tax represents a large percentage of their income. We welcome the fact that the Department for Works and Pensions is taking steps to simplify the process of claiming CTB and would welcome the introduction of automated payment of CTB, but this is not enough.

A key problem with the take up of CTB is the savings cut off at £16,000. This has not changed for many years and excludes many pensioners who might otherwise qualify on the basis of income alone. Is it fair to penalise those who have saved up for their retirement? One solution would be to have a more effective CTB system based primarily on income rather than the savings an elderly person has (although the income calculation would also take into account income from interest on savings). If savings were not taken into account this might encourage elderly people to move to smaller, more suitable properties.

Business Rates

The current arrangements for the increase in business rates – currently limited to RPI by law – should have been more in line with the Government's own planned increases in council tax, thereby sharing the proceeds and burden of growth.

Given that Revenue Support Grant now finances the Dedicated Schools Grant, and business rates now effectively finances formula grant outside schools – it is difficult to see how the debate about ‘re-localising’ business rates can develop.

User Charges for Services

The Inquiry recognises that charging for services is a controversial issue with a number of potential advantages and risks and that research highlighted a general resistance to charging for key services. At the time the Inquiry recognises that this is a potentially interesting as a way of improving public understanding of the costs of services. East Sussex County Council would argue in favour of more flexibility for charging on key ‘strategic services’. Minimum standards would need to be set, in terms of free at the point of delivery for health and education, with the possibility of charging for add-ons. This would need to be subject to some form of means testing to protect the poor and vulnerable. ‘Add-ons’ would only be funded for those who cannot afford them and where professional opinion confirms that need for the additional service. There would also need to be the ability to buy the services that the professionals do not consider (against transparent criteria) that must be had. This would allow better planning for old age.

Case Study 1: East Sussex Children Index

East Sussex Children Index is an example of how, when given the freedoms of a pathfinder, good local relationships and real leadership, East Sussex County Council was able to come up with solutions that worked and that cost half that of more bureaucratic solutions.

The Children Index project demonstrates the ability of the Council to translate a broad national policy objective into a practical, workable scheme which responds to local needs. The approach taken by East Sussex influenced heavily the next stage of national policy development, with the creation of a national scheme on very similar lines.

The Children Index is a universal database of all children and young people 0-18 who live or receive services in East Sussex. It is available to authorised practitioners through a highly secure website. It holds basic contact details of the child or young person and of all services that are working with them. It acts as an electronic telephone directory, enabling practitioners to identify relevant colleagues in other agencies and make contact. The Index does not hold case data, and all information other than the contact details of the universal services is held with the consent of the families or young people. Attached to this response, in PDF format, is a copy of a simple leaflet about it which has been very widely distributed across the County.

In 2003 the Government funded a small number of “trailblazer” projects to improve the sharing of information between professionals working to support children and young people. One of the objectives was to pilot the creation of electronic databases bringing together information from different agencies. The trail blazer authorities, including East Sussex, were asked to come up with solutions within a broad framework. Many different approaches were discussed and there was no prescription about how the problems should be tackled. To develop a solution a range of different issues had to be addressed from legal questions around provision of data by agencies to system design, and, crucially, professional practice.

In East Sussex we were determined to avoid over complication. We wanted a system which addressed the real needs of professionals and families locally, was fully acceptable to families and the public generally and was very user friendly for hard pressed workers. We carried out very thorough consultation with families and with staff and came up with the simplest possible approach. Working in partnership with a software company using leading edge technology we were the first of the trailblazer authorities to have a working electronic database (by March 2004) despite (perhaps because of?) having only 50% of the funding given to projects elsewhere in the Country.

Our success can be attributed to a number of factors including:

- a strong focus on the real needs of people locally
- a very practical approach, with a determination to get something simple and useful done
- a small team with expertise across education, health and social care

- good existing partnerships within the county (in particular with the NHS, whose cooperation and good will was essential)
- freedom to assess the issues and problems and devise the best local response to them.

The last point here is critical. The Government (Department of Education and Skills - DfES) was very supportive, facilitating sharing of thinking across the trail blazers and acting as a critical friend, but – crucially – did not attempt to dictate the solution. DfES has in fact been very pleased with the progress in East Sussex. Our work generated much of the business case which DfES has developed for a national system and the Council has now been given central funding to continue our Index while work on a larger national system – based very much on the same lines as the East Sussex Index – is undertaken. The East Sussex Director of Children’s Services was invited to share a platform with Ministers at the recent launch of the National Index project.

Case Study 2: East Sussex Fault Reporting System

East Sussex Fault Reporting System is an illustration of how, working in partnership with District and Borough Councils, East Sussex County Council, through Access East Sussex have removed barriers for services users by providing a single point of contact for customers, across the County, to register faults.

The Fault Reporting System displays the ability of the County Council to work with District and Borough Councils through Access East Sussex, to provide a countywide system to enable the public to report faults through the web. It is distinctive from other systems used throughout the country, in that all councils in East Sussex have adopted the system thereby ensuring a single point of contact for customers across the County.

All councils receive reports from the public of faults or defects, typical examples are fly tipping, highway potholes, street lighting not working or street cleansing complaints. The public are not, however, always aware of the responsibilities of an individual council and, as such; they find it difficult to report faults. Individual councils have their own fault reporting systems and this further complicates the issue. This results in a poor customer focused service. This leads to inefficiencies and delay when faults are reported to the inappropriate council, as these faults then have to be forwarded to the appropriate council. A single point of contact for all councils is an effective way of promoting a more customer focused service, while also improving efficiency and reducing delay.

It was determined that this could be successfully developed by utilising a single web based system used by all councils. Each council was asked to identify their most common categories of fault and these were used to agree a standard format. The most appropriate method of recording faults was recognized as being a map based system as this allowed the location of the fault to be recorded and identified on site, while ensuring that the programmers could identify the responsible council.

Access to the system is gained through any of the Borough, District or County Council websites. Customers report faults through the system by choosing from the most common categories and types of fault. The location of the fault is recorded on a map and the customer can provide additional textual information. The system will determine from the category of fault and the map location the responsible council. It automatically emails the responsible council details of the fault and, if the customer has provided an email address, informs them of the action taken. Each fault is provided with a unique reference number, enabling customers to track the progress of their fault report by accessing the system at a future date.

A typical example of a response the fault reporting systems sends to the customer is attached along with the map location.

The fault reporting system was promoted through Access East Sussex which acts as a coordinating body for all local authorities in East Sussex. Funding was supported through the eBusiness initiative of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Development work was undertaken in 2003 with the system going live in early 2004.

TYPICAL EMAIL SENT BY FAULT REPORT SYSTEM

From: Access East Sussex Common Fault Reporting Website
Sent: 11 July 2005 03:59
To: TE Operations
Subject: Fault Report 2443 - Street lighting

This message has been generated by the Access East Sussex fault reporting system.
PLEASE DO NOT REPLY TO THIS EMAIL.

CUSTOMER DETAILS

title: Mr
firstName: Anon
lastName: Other
houseRef: 1
streetDescription: The Way
locality:
town:
County: East Sussex
postCode: Bn27
email: anonother@address
telephoneNumber:

FAULT DETAILS (Street lighting)

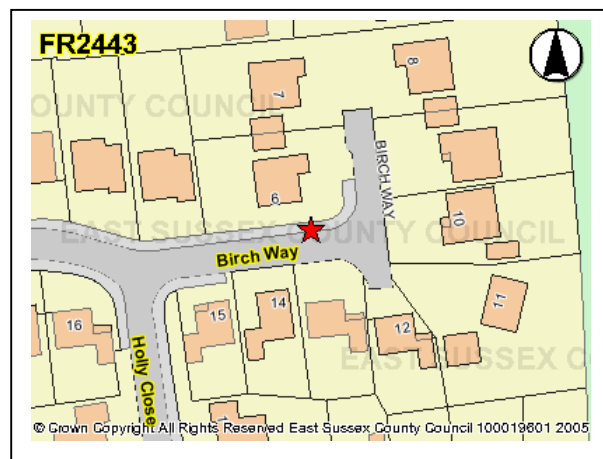
typeOfLight: Lamp post
conditionOfLight: Light out
dateObserved: 10/07/2005
faultDescription: Street light opposite number 13 Birch Way, Hailsham was out 2215 hrs

FAULT LOCATION:

Parish: Hailsham
District Ward: Hailsham south and west
Electoral Division: Hellingly
Grid Coordinates: 558989 108561
For detailed map and location plan please open the attachments to this email.

This email contains personal information which should only be used for the purpose of resolving this fault and not communicated to any third party. Personal information should be held in a secure manner and should not be retained longer than is necessary.

TYPICAL MAP LOCATION RECORDED BY FAULT REPORT SYSTEM



Case Study 3: Post 16 Review

East Sussex County Council's experience of the Post 16 Review illustrates where changes based on Central Government priorities differ from those that might have been driven by local pressure and opinion. Effective community leadership was demonstrated in the way that the Council worked together, with partners, to find a solution to local problems, clearly linking the Review to the whole regeneration programme for the area.

In February 2005, Sussex Learning and Skills Council in partnership with East Sussex County Council submitted a Proposal for the Reorganisation of Post 16 Provision in Hastings and Rother to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills. A very clear and strong case was presented in support of the proposals. The submission followed over three years of consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including SEEDA and the local Chamber of Commerce, who were fully in support of the proposals, and played a major role in formulating and promoting them.

The proposals, were very much in line with Government thinking and, we had been led to believe throughout a very lengthy process of development and at the time of submission, had support at national level. In addition, because of the links made with employers and the economic regeneration the area the County Council took this proposal forward as a very high corporate priority with a cross-party political support and integrated working between departments, linking themes of education, skills, employability and economic and social regeneration.

The overall thrust of the proposals was to radically re-organise post 16 provision in Hastings and Rother to address poor performance and opportunities for 14-19 year olds, particularly for vocational education, to enhance skills and to link that to the County Council's leadership of economic regeneration in Hastings and Rother. The need for this re-organisation was identified through a Strategic Area Review which had identified low levels of student performance post 16, limited vocational opportunities and employer engagement. The re-organisation involving ten secondary schools, a sixth form college and an FE college had the full support of nine of the institutions. Two schools with sixth forms and the sixth form college did not support the proposal; in each case the average attainment in the three institutions was low in comparison to national and Sussex averages. Fundamentally this was a local solution which was agreed by the vast majority of stakeholders and which had the potential to make the difference needed.

The proposals involved a high level of capital investment by the LSC to build new post 16 provision which would have significantly improved student opportunity, entitlement and provision, employer engagement and economic opportunities.

The two schools who were unhappy at losing sixth forms waged a long, hard fought and at times bitter lobbying and PR battle against the proposals. Their views received a disproportionate amount of coverage compared to the majority.

The proposal, having been submitted in February, was initially "sat on" by the DfES until after the general election in June, despite the urgent need for change.

The Minister did not respond to the proposal formally in anyway until the middle of August 2005, breaking numerous promised deadlines along the way. In that time

there was a new Secretary of State and following the election in June, a new ministerial team. These changes heralded a shift in policy, with greater emphasis on retaining School Sixth forms.

The Minister for 14-19 Learners finally wrote in August 2005, not with a formal decision (she only had the power to accept or reject proposals, not make them) but outlining what changes the LSC/ESCC would have to make in order for her to accept them, and giving us a month to consult stakeholders on what was, in effect, a complete rewriting of the proposal. On appeal the one month deadline was extended to two months.

The Minister said she was not convinced by the educational case put forward. Instead, she proposed modifications which maintained the status quo at the two schools and the sixth form college which had opposed the proposal of the County Council and the LSC.

Following the Minister's letter in August, the County Council and the LSC spent an intensive period working with the ten schools and two colleges to secure commitment to a modified proposal by the deadline. The change to keep sixth forms in two schools and remove them in four others in Hastings and Rye was particularly divisive and threatening to the four, and led to fears of a 'two tier' secondary provision in Hastings. Nevertheless we developed a model with a relaunched Hastings College, which, within the limits imposed by the Minister, all parties were prepared to accept by the deadline. Employers organisations and SEEDA give muted support to the modified proposal as the best available within the limits set by the Minister, whilst making plain their view that the original proposals would have achieved a substantially better outcome. Eventually, in late November 2005, the Minister accepted a modified proposal which was within parameters she set in August.

With the exception of the two schools who had wanted to keep their sixth forms and the sixth form college there is absolute consensus that the modified proposal does not offer anywhere near the same potential for securing the necessary improvements. It is highly likely, as a result, that at least one (and it could be as high as three) of the schools in Rother will now apply to open their own sixth forms. Should they be successful in their applications there will, again, be too many sixth forms in the area for each of them to be either financially or academically viable.

In conclusion, interference at a national level in a proposal which had been agreed locally with the majority of key stakeholders resulted in a significantly diluted outcome. In doing so the Secretary of State ignored the wishes of powerful coalition of employers, SEEDA, and the majority of schools and colleges. The original proposals were an excellent example of County Council community leadership in support of large scale and ambitious economic regeneration which commanded strong support from the majority of local population. By overriding and ignoring that local coalition, the Secretary of State ensured a major opportunity for transformational change was lost.