

‘Achieving Success Together’ – the Essex Authorities

This case study outlines the development and growth of the Essex Strategic Human Resource Partnership and its specific procurement activity with the Essex Procurement Agency.

What are the business drivers for the project at your council?

The Councils in Essex had some clear drivers both nationally and locally for this partnership activity:

- Efficiency and value for money
- Capacity Building across Essex
- Comprehensive Performance Assessment themes across Essex
- Providing quality services for the Essex Community
- Becoming an ‘Employer of Choice’ in Essex
- Working towards the National Pay & Workforce Strategy themes i.e. Leadership capacity
- Image and reputation of Essex.

Our CPA results cover the widest range of scores in Essex – 1 county council, 2 unitary councils and 12 district and borough councils.

How did the partnership come about?

In 2003 a group called the Essex Personnel Officers Forum existed and met regularly to share practice and meet with local agencies – the forum was seen as useful for sharing information and networking but didn’t have a strong focus. It was felt by the participants (the Heads of HR across the councils in Essex & Regional colleagues) that in order to meet with local and national drivers that there were opportunities for joint working and joint outcomes.

We agreed to consider the themes of the National Pay & Workforce Strategy as a way of prioritising what we could work together on. A workshop identified Leadership, Recruitment and Development as the initial priorities and a colleague from the ODPM Capacity Building team attended to help us understand what would make a good bid. We were congratulated for the enthusiasm and ‘buzz’ in the partnership.

We reconsidered the terms of reference of the forum and rebranded the group - the Essex HR Strategic Partnership – recognising that to add value our objectives would need to benefit all or many of the councils strategically. From day one we acknowledged that all councils had their own identity and any work would be collaborative and set in a framework which each council could choose to be involved in.

The structure of the group changed to a more business like agenda; inviting agencies or providers where they had a proposition for the partnership to consider – i.e. Jobcentreplus have attended to discuss how they can assist

with jobseekers across Essex and have linked to our recruitment portal 'www.careersinessex.co.uk'.

We considered how to engage our stakeholders and in November 2004 two of us attended Essex Chief Executives Association to present our progress under the themes of the National Pay & Workforce Strategy – ECEA was really pleased with the positive progress and nominated a Chief Executive (Paul Warren at Rochford District Council) to work with us to ensure the workforce agenda was linked to the Chief Executives debate. We have also provided Chief Executives with two newsletters outlining our progress. Our links with the East of England Regional Assembly are strong and colleagues have been supportive of our activity.

What did you wish to take from the process and were you satisfied with the outcomes? Did you achieve your goals?

We knew there was so much potential for joint working – but acknowledged that we needed to look forward rather than back – what has on the horizon and how could we work on our key objectives highlighted at the workshop.

- **Developing Leadership Capacity** - one of our first interventions was to put together an ODPM Capacity Building bid for a leadership centre across Essex. We were successful and nine months on we have the 'Essex Leadership Centre of Excellence' with over 25 participants/future leaders involved in personal development, organisational development and action learning projects against the key improvement themes in the Essex Comprehensive Performance Assessments. The centre will run for 12 months and due to its success the Local Government Leadership Centre and ODPM have already agreed to help with funding in 2006. 14 of the 15 councils in Essex are involved and the evaluation is really good for a first year. We aim to run the second centre from April 2006. A Project Management Group is the key decision maker, evaluator and developer for the Centre and updates the Partnership and the ECEA. Three consultants (two internal and one external) manage the day-to-day operation of the centre and modules from the County Councils Staff Development Programme have been included where they meet the personal development needs of the participants. A really good example of achieving success together.
- **Resourcing local government** – in 2003 the West Essex Area Forum had recruitment and retention of key workers on their agenda – Epping Forest, Uttlesford and the County Council agreed to work together on a recruitment portal to engage jobseekers in careers in local government in Essex. In 2004, 14 councils are involved in the portal and in January 2006 our next campaign will target Essex radio, railway stations on the line to London as well as bus backs and e-sites. This work adds value to the traditional local press advertising we all carry out. Over Jobseekers have accessed 'careersinessex.co.uk' – one of the first

collaborative recruitment portals – the fourteen recruitment websites across Essex can be accessed from the portal.

- **Recruitment contract framework** – in 2004 we acknowledged that jointing working with the Essex Procurement Agency would produce good value for money results as well as focusing our procurement activity on risk, key performance indicators and quality. After a large contractual award process, the Partnership appointed TMP as a framework recruitment advertising contractor; Reed, Adecco as a framework contractor for admin and clerical temporary agency staff and Manpower for operative staff. We also appointed Capita to work on recruitment response handling and a number of contractors to sit on a framework for Search and Selection and Interim Managers. As well as substantial savings from direct supply for a number of councils (£.....), we also agreed a contract rebate which to date has accumulated (£.....) to be used to support the partnership activity.

To date, 8 councils are working with the recruitment advertising contractor,.....on temporary agency and On recruitment response handling. Essex Councils are using the search & selection and interim framework on a need to use basis.

- **County of Essex Workforce Plan** – the partnership also has developed the first county-wide workforce plan for local authorities. It was helpful to have a couple of our councils actively involved in the pilots for regional workforce planning.

The Workforce Plan gives us a focus for future activity over the next 2 years.

- **Essex Competency Framework** – In 2004/5 the region funded activity on competencies for Epping Forest, Uttlesford, Castle Point and Rochford – this has worked well and five more councils are interested in working on the competencies. Interest is regional and national on the competency work.

Why did you use the process you did?

The partnership approach has proved a forum where we are all on an equal footing – sometimes the County Council can be seen as large and an unequal partner. In Essex, it has been important that we have an open debate, work together where we can, acknowledge our differences and find a way on building the partnership. There are clear differences in the way we all operate, we need to understand who has the skills and expertise to undertake the activity. In some cases, external expertise is engaged. For example, we want to look at how human resources works strategically with change and we have engaged an external facilitator to support this process.

Meetings of the partnership take place across the county, the venue reflects the chair of the meeting, colleagues from the east of England assist us with regional and national links.

The partnership has grown in strength over time and the forming and storming needs to be part of our progression. Partnership meetings are focused and business like with task groups looking at policy development, a secondments e-facility linked to regional work, and ensuring we get value for money where we are working with contractors.

In January 2006 we will formally evaluate the partnership – already we are establishing links with health and other pan-Essex organisations to make the partnership fully inclusive across Essex.

How were communications managed?

Janet Cox, from the HR Strategy team at the County Council has been the 'lynch-pin of the partnership' – she follows up actions, draws up base documents for us to consider. We have action notes from each meeting that the chair of the meeting organises.

Regionally and nationally our colleagues have helped promote our activity to other councils; we have produced press articles for the national journals – people management, MJ and personnel today have carried articles about our work so far.

Locally we have developed the Members Briefing notes; we update the Essex Chief Executives Association at each meeting – last meeting we updated on successes, barriers and future developments.

The County of Essex Workforce Plan is our key document – it gives us a focus against the national themes.

Interventions like our leadership centre are also publicised in our internal newsletters so our workforce understands what we are doing and how they can get involved – our IT colleagues want to make links to the Essex On-line partnership.

We are also in discussions with our unions locally and regionally in Essex to learn more about workforce planning.

The success of our partnership has also involved us in presentations to other councils to help them work collaboratively.

What risks were taken by you in terms of going forward with the project?

All of our activity has had an element of risk – nothing can be taken for granted when working with such a large partnership. We have had to trust each other; maintain our individual identities; be honest; work with other professions in a collaborative way; find our ways through long decision-making processes; make decisions within time frames and acknowledge that not all councils want to be involved in everything.

‘I have had the full backing from my director and chief executive to work on the partnership activity – having this freedom has enabled me to work with colleagues in a creative and innovative way’ says Yvonne Skingle, Strategic HR Manager Essex County Council.

The skills and expertise in the group are broad and this means we need to ensure we have the right players on particular activity.

What are the key success stories?

- The Partnership is on the map and evolving so that’s excellent news for Essex. We have a three-year plan and good progress has been made at the end of year one.
- Links to other councils where they are looking at future collaborative working.
- A leadership centre that is seen as national good practice and sustainable.
- Support from the ODPM Capacity Bid for the leadership centre and we are currently in the process of getting approval for a bid to recruit young, disabled and BME groups to Essex.
- Working together on the Essex Competency Framework and developing (using Regional ODPM funding) a regional competency toolkit which is gaining national recognition.
- Good savings and improved management information from the contracts, helping us to focus our resources and ensure we get value for money from future interventions.
- The first phases on a recruitment portal which has great potential.
- Good access to key stakeholders.
- Commitment from the top – our Chief Executive link is very supportive and encourages and supports our work in the Essex Chief executive Association.
- A virtual and informal network where we can talk to each other – engage peripatetic HR staff where we need capacity, develop competencies across Essex.
- We are going from strength to strength.....

What productivity savings or cost savings have been made?

There have been direct and indirect savings that can be clearly identified now – its taken a little while to get to this stage. Setting up the contract framework across Essex has ensured we have one contract; the Procurement Agency and the County Council work closely with the contractors at a strategic level to ensure we get the management information we need to influence future business development. Together we also have more influence in the market; are taken more seriously and are able to encourage good economies of scale.

How is the project being monitored or evaluated?

Each major intervention is monitored as part of its development – for example the Project Management Group for the leadership centre has developed a learning log to help inform future centres.

We are developing our approach to evaluation of recruitment activity with the help of our recruitment advertising contractor TMP.

The County Workforce Plan is a good way of evidencing what we are doing and ensuring that we are meeting our objectives.

What measures have been used and what has the been the change?

Did the exercise succeed or fail? Why?

The partnership focuses its activity on successes and developments – we have not had a failure. There are always stages where we have to focus on the right road, ensure relevant players are involved but there have not been major barriers to date – decision making has been the most difficult issue – when working on the recruitment contract there were so many players involved within each council and across professional groups that we must learn from this for the future.

In what ways could the process have been improved for you?

Next steps?

The Partnership has an away day in late November to work on the 2006 activity which will include Phase 3 of the recruitment portal; working together on recruitment generally and skills development; understanding change management; linking with other strategic partners and aligning workforce activity to the Local Area Agreement activity.

Possible attachments:

- People management article on competencies and workforce planning

- Outline of the leadership centre
- IRS article on recruitment
- Graphics from the portal
- Capacity bid outline
- Outline of the recruitment framework
- Links to the regional site
- Regional Competency toolkit

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