

## Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council and Hyndburn Borough Council demonstrate the benefits of collaborative partnership

### Summary

An initiative between Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council and Hyndburn Borough Council to share expertise in urban regeneration has been successful. The two authorities now share staff and collaborate in providing services, including housing, economic development and transport. Blackburn and Hyndburn are different in many ways. One is a unitary, the other a district. One is Labour controlled, the other Conservative. Nevertheless, the partnership has flourished because it helps each council address several key issues.

### Motivation

Blackburn and Hyndburn were driven to share people and services because they both had a need to:

- gain expertise and skills – these are scarce and expensive resources
- increase efficiency – the need to save money and do more with less
- become more effective – by sharing the councils can offer a better quality service
- Improve the employee experience by working together and sharing good practice – sharing has contributed to staff development

Efficiency – the need to do more with less is always a key driver. By joint working the two councils also found they could expand the quantity and quality of service provided.

Other issues that drove the collaboration were housing market renewal and the city region development programmes.

### Background

Hyndburn had problems recruiting senior managers. There were few applicants and the recruitment process could take six to nine months. Partnering with a neighbour helped Hyndburn address these recruitment challenges at relatively short notice.

In November 2004, the two councils agreed to partner on housing market renewal for a six-month period. Blackburn supplied Hyndburn with specialist advice to speed up Hyndburn's programme of work. This was an opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of partnering in a safe test-bed that was acceptable to members and staff.

Hyndburn got part-time access to three senior executives at Blackburn. This was cheaper than employing a director of regeneration. Blackburn's senior economic development, urban regeneration and housing market renewal officers gave Hyndburn specialist expertise. This would have been impossible to find in any individual recruit.

Following the success of this exchange, the councils expanded partnership working to other services. They take a pragmatic, gradual approach to collaboration, looking for opportunities as they arise. Then the executive management teams usually commissions a group of people from both councils and sometimes other public sector. They are asked to identify the opportunities and benefits of an initiative. The planning effort depends on the scale of the opportunity.

### **Partnership working**

Partnering and sharing has developed step by step in response to specific needs. The two councils now share resources across several services including:

- housing renewal
- economic development
- transport
- performance management
- legal services
- noise nuisance
- CCTV monitoring
- support to local businesses

Following the success of the housing renewal work, the councils decided to collocate their economic development teams at Blackburn's offices. Officers are viewing boundaries between the councils differently and losing some of the false distinctions. Blackburn is now working with Hyndburn on a new strategic employment site at Whiteburn. This is the area where the two authorities meet. The site is expected to provide up to 2,500 jobs.

The development recognises the fact that the two authorities share one economy. East Lancashire does not work according to administrative boundaries. They share the 'travel to work' area, flows of employment and housing aspirations.

Financially, the largest benefit from partnering is a successful joint bid for transport funding. Almost £20 million will fund improved links between them over the next five years. There will be a new bus interchange and rapid transit services between Accrington, Blackburn town centre and Darwen. This will offer access both to excluded communities and the new strategic employment areas.

The two councils also jointly fund a noise nuisance post. Neither requires a full-time noise nuisance officer. Neither would get an equivalent calibre of applicant for the post part-time. By sharing the post each council enhances the quantity and quality of service provided.

The councils were also successful in their joint bid for funding to improve their CCTV facilities. They won £60,000 for new digital systems that offer the improved images required for prosecutions. The councils now collocate their CCTV facilities at the police headquarters in Greenbank. This eases communication and coordination with the police.

Furthermore, the councils have implemented the same performance management system: 'Performance Plus'. By using one system, the councils can attract and manage the consulting support and expertise they require. This helps them avoid duplicating development and maintenance work.

Blackburn has also extended a database that serves information to local businesses to cover Hyndburn. The database is used to distribute information on issues like grant opportunities or available industrial units to local businesses. Since the service distributes information electronically, it can serve Hyndburn businesses at no extra cost.

Going forward, Hyndburn will undertake the legal work for one of Blackburn's housing market renewal areas. Blackburn is making a contribution to the cost of Hyndburn's legal services. The two councils are also planning to join up their community safety teams.

### **Benefits**

Hyndburn has gained:

- access to skills and expertise
- exposure to good practice
- development of staff
- reduced churn and recruitment costs
- business continuity
- improved funding
- improved strategic planning

Blackburn's experience in urban regeneration and economic development offers expertise Hyndburn could not otherwise afford.

In addition to expensive skills and expertise, Hyndburn have benefited from exposure to good practice. For example, Hyndburn have replicated Blackburn's structure by combining their planning and regeneration teams. Before the partnership, Hyndburn's staff in these fields worked separately. Senior officers from Blackburn facilitated seminars between planning and regeneration staff to support this transition. They also invited councillors, and other staff working in related fields, to participate.

Colocating officers has also helped Hyndburn's staff to develop professionally. Hyndburn's officers are now exposed to a wider range of issues. Hyndburn economic development officers are more rounded practitioners because of this exposure.

In addition Hyndburn are retaining staff more easily. Since regeneration officers are scarce, recruiting a replacement can take three to five months. Over and above these direct costs, a vacant post can lead to loss of momentum and progress. This can be detrimental for local people if outcomes are not delivered.

Blackburn has close links with the Government Office of the North West and the Regional Development Agency. These links have enhanced Hyndburn's ability to attract funding.

Blackburn has gained:

- improved strategic planning
- economies of scale and efficiencies
- improved funding

The shared arrangements have helped Blackburn plan strategically on issues like industrial development, transport, and employment. Administrative boundaries do not

always reflect demographic or economic boundaries. In these cases the councils recognise they need to plan together.

A small unitary with 140,000 residents, Blackburn appreciates sharing salary costs and gaining economies of scale. Although these are more significant to Hyndburn, Blackburn highlights these efficiencies as worthwhile.

Joint working has boosted each council's ability to win funding. Hyndburn benefited from winning one third of the £20 million rapid transit funding. Blackburn believe joint bidding raised their chances of winning the £12 million portion of the bid.

### **Lessons learnt**

If your authority is considering partnering, look at the lessons Hyndburn and Blackburn with Darwen have learnt.

#### **Focus on business issues**

The partnering projects above all addressed a particular business issue. As each project demonstrated value, trust has developed over time. This success prompted the councils to evaluate more partnering projects.

#### **Create a win-win situation**

Before partnering, the two councils thought that one's success was the other's loss. Hyndburn's Chief Executive, Dave Welsby says: "There is a much more mature view of our inter-relationship between areas now, rather than narrow territorialism. Blackburn's success is our success".

#### **Increasing quantity can improve quality**

Working collaboratively not only reduces costs, it raises the quantity and quality of services. For example, neither Blackburn nor Hyndburn could employ a full-time noise nuisance officer alone.

#### **Sharing can improve employee experience**

Hyndburn's economic development staff are now collocated with Blackburn's. This means that staff exchange good practice and professional development. Staff are also exposed to more challenges. This has been one of the most valuable outcomes.