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OpenStrategy Monmouthshire County Council Case Study



Interview with Colin Berg, Chief Executive Monmouthshire

Monmouthshire's Chief Executive came across a SOLACE Enterprises' leaflet describing a new approach to partnership working in complex multi-stakeholder environments – OpenStrategy. He decided to investigate further as it seemed to address many of the concerns he had about partnerships running out of steam, before they actually achieved anything.

SOLACE Enterprises visited him to find out what had been achieved since he established the County's OpenStrategy eighteen months ago.

SOLACE Enterprises: tell us why you decided to adopt OpenStrategy to support your partnerships.

Colin Berg: Eighteen months ago Monmouthshire's Local Strategic Partnership was in crisis. The Community Strategy had been published but it was an imperfect expression of the aspirations of local people without any clear approach for implementing ideas and proposals.

Although partnerships appeared to start well, when it came to the important task of implementing strategies, energy levels dropped, attendance at partnership meetings became poor, and little work happened between meetings. There was common agreement that all of the partnerships in Monmouthshire needed to break out of the document production industry and find a way of getting into real implementation and change. OpenStrategy appeared to offer the solution and I was sufficiently concerned that I decided to give a personal lead to changing the way we worked together.

SOLACE Enterprises: what particularly attracted you to OpenStrategy?

Colin Berg: I have a community focus and believe in the 'co-production' model – where we try to solve problems with people. I don't believe councils have all the answers – they mostly exist outside the authority. OpenStrategy offered a genuine opportunity for people to make their voice heard and influence what happens. In traditional multi-agency working, one of the biggest turn-offs for community and neighbourhood groups is the power imbalance and the control that big organisations can wield. What we have found is that our local groups grabbed at the OpenStrategy approach – as they have a real passion about making things happen in their area.

SOLACE Enterprises: you have won a Wales Excellence Award for your approach to partnership working. Tell us about how you are using OpenStrategy.

Colin Berg: Our OpenStrategy can be described as a 'partnership of partnerships' – there are 16 partnerships whose work is now connected through the OpenStrategy. The partnerships are a mix of strategic and locality partnerships. Through the simple information structure that OpenStrategy provides, we have overcome all the complexity that overwhelms people – particularly local communities. We can all now see what is happening: a recent meeting of the Older People's Partnership looked at the OpenStrategy to identify all the items that related to older people. They were both surprised and encouraged to see that there are as many items entered by other



partnerships to do with older people as they had entered themselves. They see the value of firstly knowing that this information is readily available but also working out how they want to make links with these other initiatives.

SOLACE Enterprises: how did you go about setting up your OpenStrategy?

Colin Berg: As I said, I made partnership working a personal priority. I spent about 6 months talking to the partnerships about OpenStrategy, running our own workshops using the information system so that people could try it out for themselves, working with members and community groups, running training sessions for OpenStrategy facilitators and agreeing protocols about how we all use the tool.

We started running the OpenStrategy with 5 volunteer facilitators – most of whom had a community development brief. Now all our partnership co-ordinators have responsibility for OpenStrategy. In that way, ownership of the system is dispersed across the partnerships and is not dependent on one individual or organisation. We have agreed protocols about how we update the OpenStrategy. No one organisation controls our OpenStrategy, and every partnership has an equal right and power to contribute. Getting the 'buy-in' and understanding was time well spent - OpenStrategy now has roots all over the place. Whilst the different partnerships use it differently, it has been accepted as the way we work together.

SOLACE Enterprises: so what impact has OpenStrategy had?

Colin Berg: people now recognise that they don't have to go to each others' meetings. We now have fewer meetings – the strategic partnership I chair now meets quarterly instead of monthly.

We have moved away from a 'hierarchy' of partnerships to a network of partnerships, recognising that locality and community partnerships are vital.

We are now implementing projects! People are re-energised, as they see things happening. We have given an equal voice to partnership participants, although we recognise that our respective organisations have different stewardship responsibilities. In many ways it has exceeded our expectations – as it continues to open up new ideas which we hadn't even thought of.

SOLACE Enterprises: in terms of the efficiency agenda, can you say it has made a contribution?

Colin Berg: its too early to say. We have cut back on meeting time considerably – but that doesn't contribute to cashable gains. I am sure that the OpenStrategy process could have saved us from embarking on projects that proved to be unsuccessful. So in future, through the OpenStrategy process which forces us to think carefully about community use and community benefits – we will be much clearer about what we support and why.

SOLACE Enterprises: looking back, is there anything you would have done differently?



Colin Berg: we probably purchased the system too soon: I would recommend that people interested in OpenStrategy use the information system on paper, before taking the leap and setting up on the website. We really couldn't use the website until we had really practiced and were comfortable with the information structure.

SOLACE Enterprises: what happens next?

Colin Berg: My ambition is that we make our OpenStrategy public, so that all the community can see what is happening across all of the partnerships. Citizens will not be able to input directly, but we will give guidance about how they can engage with locality partnerships to put forward ideas to go onto the OpenStrategy. This would really mean we were completely visible and engaging citizens in what we do.

For further information about OpenStrategy please contact our Resource Centre on 0845 601 0649

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