

LALC Community Collaboration Project

Local Council Clustering

Introduction:

A questionnaire and information sheet explaining the research behind cluster working amongst local councils and any perceived benefits and barriers to undertaking this work was developed and sent to all 320 Councils whom are members of the Lincolnshire Association of Local Councils.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to develop an understanding of which Councils currently work as part of a cluster; what each council as a collective perceives the benefits and barriers to clustering would be; if they would consider cluster working in the future; which councils have taken on devolved services; and the potential impact clustering may have in supporting devolved services, and in which way the Councils saw LALC supporting the proposed ways of working and what types of cluster group would be preferential.

The initial information sheet and questionnaire was sent out to all 320 member Councils, and a total response of 52 was received, giving a response rate of 16.25%. The responses received have been collated to identify the common themes, and where possible have been calculated to a percentage figure to provide an overview of the opinions.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the responses received, it is evident that currently only a small number of councils work within an existing cluster group, although a number have engaged with cluster working in the past with limited outcomes. Those existing cluster groups have provided feedback highlighting predominantly positive experiences and several benefits, with a small response rate highlighting that on occasion, larger Councils within Clusters can dominate the matters being discussed.

A vast number of benefits were highlighted by the respondents regarding the potential benefits when working within a cluster, with the most common themes being: sharing knowledge and information to promote best practice; cost reduction; joint ventures/projects; lobbying District and County Councils with a stronger collective voice and sharing geographically relevant information.

Whilst the majority of the Councils whom currently participate in clustering highlighted they had not experienced any barriers through this collaborative practice, a number of potential barriers and concerns were also shared by the other respondents, highlighting common themes, which LALC believe a number of could be rectified through undertaking the facilitation and administration of the clustering development. The most common responses included issues regarding the additional costs involved and how this would be shared fairly amongst the participants; finding suitable venues for all participants; time constraints for busy Clerks and Councillors who may not have the time or desire to attend further meetings; the experiences

gained through previous failed clusters and having newly elected members who need to 'settle in' to the role before considering developing this way of working.

The questionnaire invited Councils to inform us of any devolved services that have been taken on from the District or County Councils, with almost 65% highlighting that they have not taken on any devolved services. A number of responses highlighted the shared opinion that cluster working could be beneficial when taking on devolved services for a number of reasons including financial benefits (cost saving, shared resources, shared staff) and sharing knowledge and skills, however, one respondent returned with "in principle, yes. But again, the administration would be a nightmare. It would create another tier of organisation for parishes, basically duplicating what the district council does but on a mini scale and without the budget. Why are we reinventing the wheel?". Other respondents highlighted that they were either unsure of the potential benefits or that they still felt they would not have the time and one explaining that unless there is a financial benefit, they do not wish to take on any devolved services.

When asked to consider how they felt LALC could support Councils to work within Cluster groups, the most common responses highlighted the opinion that LALC could provide the following: identifying possible clusters; initiating first contacts; arranging first meetings; administration, facilitation and organisation; training; information sharing including common queries and responses; legal knowledge and background information.

When asked to suggest the most appropriate type of cluster group for the individual Councils requirements, the most common responses highlighted a need for clusters to be organised by:

- Geographical Area
- Council Size
- Geographical area **and** size

Next Steps:

LALC have applied to further funding from Lincolnshire County Council to further development of the Collaboration project, to enable us to support the development, facilitation and administration of cluster groups, but were unfortunately unsuccessful in the application. LCC did not feel that there was sufficient interest to fund the project.

However, LALC would still like to hear from those Councils that would be interested in (or would consider) working within a cluster of local councils or those that work within an existing cluster group and are looking at arranging a meeting to discuss the future of council clusters in Lincolnshire with the hope to still provide development, facilitation and administrative support to those interested.

If your council would like to express an interest in attending this day, please email amy.bestwick@lalc.co.uk