

Partnership Works... A Case Study

County Connect

County Connect is a countywide service that has been developed in response to a target in the first Local Area Agreement 'to provide services which enable people to live at home independently'. County Connect coordinates referrals to different support services for vulnerable people in the county, meaning that all the organisations involved spend less time investigating the right services, and residents are able to access support quicker.



The Challenge

East Sussex has a high number of older people living in its communities. Supporting older people in their own home wherever possible is a commitment shared by the main service providers in the county and they recognised that services which promote independence and choice are the top priority for older people, as set out in the 'Independence, Well-Being and Choice' Green Paper. Therefore the main challenge for East Sussex was how to support people to live independent and fulfilling lives, regardless of their age. This needed careful planning, innovative new ways of providing services and a real commitment from different organisations to work closely together in order to make a difference.

The Action

Supporting people to live independently was such an important priority nationally and for East Sussex that it became part of the Local Area Agreement (LAA). The LAA is a three-year action plan agreed between Central Government and East Sussex, which sets out the priority areas that East Sussex has agreed to monitor and improve over the three-year period. Within the Healthier Communities and Older People's block of LAA1 (2006-2009), the target 'to increase the number of people receiving services which enable them to live at home independently' was developed.

This target was monitored across 6 separate services, which provided a variety of help to enable people to remain independent. These services were;

- Adult Social Care services
- Direct Payments recipients
- Extra Care Housing Schemes
- Telecare Services
- Age Concern Home from Hospital schemes
- East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (ESFRS) Home Safety Visits.

Early discussions around the target revealed that some organisations' visiting officers often found older people had other needs that were outside the scope of that organisation's ability to help. A lot of time and effort was being given by a number of organisations to identify the right places to refer individuals to, and in many cases, organisations would refer and receive little feedback and need to spend more time finding out what had happened. As a direct result of these initial discussions, funding was made available to develop a service that would not only help visiting officers in their day-to-day activities, but would also impact upon the target by helping more people access services to help keep them independent.

The County Connect pilot service was launched in July 2007, covering the whole of East Sussex. The service assists vulnerable people with low level needs to live independently at home, by referring them to appropriate

organisations as the result of a single visit. By coordinating referrals, County Connect ensures that vulnerable people can receive help such as benefit checks or home safety visits quickly, and are kept informed of progress at every step.

Visiting officers use a simple checklist, highlighting areas of need to quickly identify potential problems at the time of the visit. This also helps partner organisations obtain the right information for performance management requirements about the people they originally went to assist. As well as coordinating referrals, County Connect ensures that each referred need is tracked to its conclusion and the result is reported back to the original agency. This provides a planned approach to visits, in the case of multiple referral needs, with the resident knowing who will be coming and when. By eliminating the 'cold call' element of a visit, those staff carrying out the necessary tasks can be assured that the resident will be aware of their visit and avoid any potential confusion or delay at the time.



The County Connect service is designed to work alongside and complement organisations' existing referral processes and not to replace them, instead it helps to bring a number of services together for the benefit of individuals in need. County Connect is a service which operates on the principles of partnership and cooperation and the resource requirements, such as publicity, project leadership and funding, are shared between the partner organisations.

Leaflets have been produced explaining the role of County Connect to help residents understand the link between the service and the original organisation that visited them. With more funding secured, further promotional materials and event displays are being developed to ensure that the County Connect service can expand and involve more partners.

The Impact

In 2008/09, the final year of LAA1, 4,279 individuals above the original baseline were supported to live independently because of the work undertaken to deliver services that supported people with high and low levels of need. These figures show that 3209 people over the original target received help in the final year of the LAA. This fantastic result was achieved by all of the services involved performing above their agreed targets year on year, highlighting the countywide commitment to deliver top-quality services.

Reporting against the LAA target was always done so on time, accurately with information provided in the format agreed with each of the 6 partners at the outset of the LAA monitoring process. Data sharing between all the services involved is evidence of the close partnership working. Collating different organisations' data for the target meant valuable lessons were learnt about how information was shared and presented between organisations.

As a contribution to the overall increase in the numbers of people supported to live independently, County Connect helped refer 817 people with 1146 different requests for assistance. This coordinated approach for referrals has been shown to significantly reduce the number of hours spent by visiting officers seeking relevant services for their clients. Since the launch of County Connect, the views of the people who have used this service have been used to shape how the service operated.

The benefit of a service such as County Connect for the residents of East Sussex is access to a wider range of services as the result of a single visit from an organisation. This is particularly true of non-health services such as lunch clubs, for example, which can greatly increase a person's feeling of independence and well-being.

Benefits for the organisations involved are both tangible and timesaving. A single administrative centre that deals with referrals reduces the time that visiting officers spend trying to find the appropriate organisation to refer to, therefore enabling staff to carry out more visits. As part of the first year evaluation of the service, visiting officers said that organisations were referring individuals to each other with confidence and that County Connect had had a positive impact on their work.

Approaching the end of the LAA1 period, the County Connect steering group worked hard to explore various avenues of future funding and the service was eventually awarded over £90,000 from Invest to Save monies. This funding has allowed County Connect to become a much more stable service, and has enabled the Coordinator's post to be increased from part time to full time. It also facilitated the continued development of the promotions and materials that were started in the pilot period.

Lessons Learnt:

- Discuss early on how the target will be approached and monitored, particularly in terms of how information will be recorded, and in what format, to make sure that any issues are resolved
- Having open and honest discussions can create very positive working relationships between partners, particularly with each feeling that they have truly contributed to the target
- Set up rigorous scrutiny arrangements to make sure that individuals who received services from more than one of the partners are not counted twice
- One of the most significant challenges was the limited amount of funding available for the growth and development of the County Connect service outside of the partner organisations. A balance between promoting the service more widely and maintaining the performance levels within the funding was a challenge throughout the pilot period

Organisations Involved:

The Steering Group for County Connect includes:

- Anchor Staying Put
- East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service
- The Pension, Disability & Carers Service
- Sussex Police
- Care for the Carers
- Wealden District Benefits Office
- East Sussex County Council
- Care for the Carers
- Warm Front Grants (via local District and Borough Councils)

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Further Information:

Pride of Place is East Sussex's Sustainable Community Strategy for 2026. It sets out the long-term ambitions for the county which local organisations, from councils to community groups, are working towards for 2026.

Increasing the number of people receiving support services which enable them to live at home independently was a target from East Sussex Local Area Agreement 1 (2006 – 2009).

For more information on what issues are being prioritised in East Sussex, please visit the East Sussex Strategic Partnership at www.essp.org.uk

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