

HEREFORDSHIRE PARTNERSHIP

Client interview with Martin Heuter, Senior Community Involvement Officer

Herefordshire Partnership is the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) for Herefordshire, bringing together the major statutory and voluntary service providers as well as the private sector. The Partnership is supported by a team covering policy, Local Area Agreement and Community Involvement.

Martin Heuter leads a small Community Involvement team whose remit covers advice and guidance for all agencies, mostly Herefordshire Council, around consultation and involvement activities.

In addition the team covers Parish and Community Planning activities, working with the Herefordshire Division of the West Mercia Constabulary on their Local Policing Initiative (the PACT approach) and advising, especially senior officers and elected members, on policy developments in the engagement field.

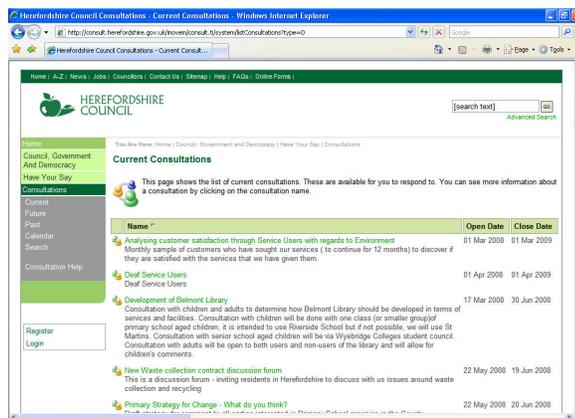
He has also recently taken over responsibility for the PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service) and Involving People team in the local PCT during the secondment of the substantive post holder.

THE CHALLENGE TO STREAMLINE AND CO-ORDINATE PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES

“After I took up my post in 2004, one of the first challenges was to streamline and coordinate Herefordshire Council’s consultation activities”, says Martin Heuter.

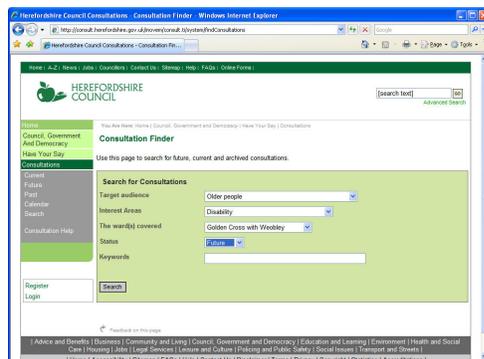
“This involved developing policies and guidelines to ensure that consultation was given the priority it needed within the Council, especially in the light of the growing emphasis by central Government and the Audit Commission on Customer Focus. This built on the work of my predecessor, who lacked the right technology to support the cultural change within the organisation.”

“The challenge was not only to implement corporate-led policies – as opposed to various colleagues attempting to create their involvement and consultation activities without necessarily having the relevant skills and expertise – but also to demonstrate that this corporate approach and a central, publicly visible, database of consultations had long term benefits for staff and for the authority as a whole, both financially and in reputation terms.



“Not surprisingly this is ongoing work, but recent legislation (Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill 2007 and the White Paper on Empowerment) creates an environment which makes it imperative to work in partnership with departments and other organisations, sharing resources and information wherever possible”, says Martin.

“Initially, we had the option to continue with a static database, keeping information and acting as a gateway for information. This was the tool inherited by my predecessor but the decision was taken in early 2005 to look into an online, interactive solution.



“This not only gave us the option to make the information gathered – such as what consultations took place, what were planned and details of such activities – available to staff, but also to market this to the general public and partners as a way of being more open and accountable about our activities”, Martin adds.

In addition to the consultation database, the team also wanted to explore interactive questionnaire design and, of course, discussion forums, as additional ways of engaging with stakeholders and the general public.

WHY HEREFORDSHIRE PARTNERSHIP CHOSE INOVEM

“We were looking for a solution that was expandable and simple to use, from a supplier which was open to customer feedback and which provided excellent customer service.

“INOVEM was one of three suppliers which tendered for the contract, during which they demonstrated not only ease of use of their product but also a flexible approach – implementing a number of suggestions we made for product improvement) – together with excellent end user support.

“Their staff are available online and over the phone to answer queries about their product and how to get the best out of it. This proved very helpful in a number of cases when we tried to adapt the product to specific projects.

“All in all an excellent choice, both for the reasons given above but also proven through a business case which I put together to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of eConsultation; return on investment in one year only, combining cash and non-cash cost savings.”

SUPPORTING BOTH COUNCIL AND PARTNERSHIP BRANDS

The system is currently dual-branded to support both council and partnership consultations and is accessible via their respective web sites. Herefordshire Partnership use the consultation database both publicly and also to generate reports for inspection purposes; an invaluable tool for this.

They have delivered a number of consultations using the electronic/ interactive questionnaire facility to complement standard methods and have run a discussion forum for waste management consultation.

“Our biggest challenge still is the internal marketing of the product and we are always looking for opportunities to demonstrate how the discussion forum, particularly, can be a useful tool in the consultation landscape”, says Martin.

“INOVEM not only provided us with the right product but also invaluable training and hints and tips for marketing the product.”

RESULTS ACHIEVED TO DATE

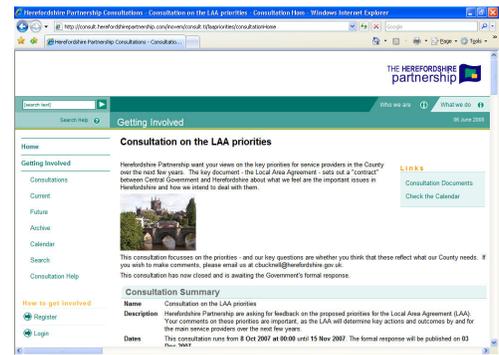
The initial challenge was to create a business case to justify the purchase of the licence. This was delivered successfully, showing a projected ROI within one year.

Awareness of the questionnaire and discussion forum facility has increased and the waste discussion forum has generated a lot of interest, hopefully resulting in enthusiasm within the authority to utilise this.

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WHERE NEXT?

“We will continue to increase our use of the INOVEM products – we intend to develop our online engagement, especially with disabled and business communities – whilst listening to suggestions for improved accessibility and navigability. Our involvement strategy is due to be refreshed later this year and eConsultation will play a more prominent role in this.



“In addition to supporting the Council and the Partnership, we are also currently evaluating extending the use of the service to our Primary Care Trust, in order that we can provide local residents, business and interest groups with a joined-up approach to consultation in Herefordshire.”

LET'S GET TOGETHER

To find out more about INOVEM eConsultation Systems, Stakeholder & Community and Project & Partnership Portals, call INOVEM today on +44 (0)1488 648 468 or email info@inovem.com

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