

## Shropshire County Council case study

Achieving improvements to rural service delivery is about working with and responding to the needs of our individual rural communities.

Ditton Priors and Stottesdon and Chorley are neighbouring parishes. Both lie within an ancient landscape with the 'Brown Clee' – Shropshire's highest hill – as their most dominant feature. Both parishes have a pub and a village hall, and are situated approximately six to eight miles southwest of the nearest market town, Bridgnorth. The two parishes have a similar number of residents – approximately 700. Although they are only being six miles apart, the communities that inhabit these parishes are very different.

Ditton Priors has a more elderly population with over 31 per cent of its residents over the age of 60. Stottesdon and Chorley has a much younger population with only 18.3 per cent over 60.

It is Shropshire County Council's role to work with these communities to help them achieve their aspirations while improving the range of services available. In both these examples, the process of engagement and development has been as valuable as achieving an eventual outcome.

The community of Ditton Priors expressed an aspiration to explore their cultural heritage, develop rights of way, improve the range of local food provision and develop tourism. Shropshire County Council worked with both the local community and a range of funding and delivery partners to deliver these aspirations while achieving corporate and partner strategic priorities.

Oak Farm is a smallholding situated in Ditton Priors village centre. It is home to a vibrant and successful day service, providing essential vocational training and work-related experience for adults with learning disabilities throughout South Shropshire. It was established in 1990 by Shropshire County Council to provide these services for rural residents.

The venue is now a valuable part of the parish's financial and social economy and helps to deliver community aspirations. Adults with learning disabilities who attend the farm, are integrated into village life and make a genuine and valued contribution.

Over the last three years, Shropshire County Council has provided leadership by working on an ambitious social enterprise project with the local community. The project has been developed with a high degree of community involvement including the creation of a 'stakeholder group'. This has been intimately involved in the development of the project to ensure that their needs have been addressed.

This group has also provided a valuable forum for the dissemination of information about the scheme. Early market research identified their needs and social events have provided residents with opportunities to comment on and influence the scheme.

Plans comprise the conversion of a number of buildings on the farm site into a tea room; relocation and expansion of the existing farm shop to sell a much wider range of locally produced foodstuffs in response to community demand; creation of an all-ability trail at Oak Farm; and the creation of a village museum.

The chance discovery of a very large eighteenth century map, which accurately shows the parish in 1768, led the local history group to seek support from the Shropshire County Council's Archives Team. Together they developed and delivered a complex project of research and conservation over a three-year period. The material collected during this project, depicting the cultural heritage of the parish, will be displayed in the village museum.

Shropshire County Council is working in partnership with Pathways-Shropshire Ltd, a social firm development agency. The property to be converted is being transferred to them, enabling external funding to be brought in. The scheme will go on site in the first quarter of 2006.

Oak Farm is an excellent example of how Shropshire County Council is working in partnership with the local community, the parish council and a range of funding and delivery partners. Together they are not only delivering a strategic mainstream service, but also providing added value for the community in which they are located.

Stottesdon and Chorley has an enthusiastic community, keen to embrace broadband technology to bring benefits to the people who live in or visit the parish. This in contrast to Ditton Priors, which is content with having broadband access in most homes.

The community has worked in partnership with Switch on Shropshire (SoS), a county council managed project, to establish a dual site community Broadplace. This is helping to integrate the Stottesdon and Chorley communities, who, while within the same parish, are two miles apart.

The first venue is Chorley Village Hall, which is well used and supported by the community. The second is the Fighting Cocks Inn, Stottesdon – a busy pub right in the centre of the village, used by both local people and visitors to the area. The landlady's interest in her community led her to install a computer with a telephone internet connection. This helped to confirm the need for a better facility.

SoS provided leadership to help this community achieve their ambition and provided a wireless connection in both venues. The six laptops, printer, scanner and digital camera are held at the Fighting Cocks Inn because it has longer hours of access. However the laptops and other equipment can easily be moved to the village hall where there is a projector and screen for use during more formal training sessions or for specific community events. The SoS Technical Team have installed the equipment and are available to offer technical support to the community to ensure that they reach their potential.

The community is brimming with ideas for extending the use of broadband technology, in particular to make best use of the high-speed wireless connection operating in addition to broadband internet. Ideas include using broadband for video conferencing; video streaming; and broadcasting events into the homes of those not physically able to access the village hall or pub.

The group is also investigating the opportunity to train a local person as community technical support through the Circuit Rider programme. SoS is actively helping them explore these options, to share their ideas and learn from others within the expanding network of Broadplaces throughout rural Shropshire.