

South Somerset District Council case study

Chard is the second largest market town in South Somerset with a population of 12,000 – 4,497 living in two deprived wards (*Census 2001*). On the western edge of our district at the crossroads of the A30 and A358, the nearby but inaccessible South West rail link serves a rural hinterland with an additional population of 12,000. There is a long history in engineering and food manufacture but the area currently presents a mixture of a hard working community with low esteem and aspirations. South Somerset District Council's (SSDC) area office is in a restored lace mill in the town centre, offering access to a range of SSDC services.

This case study illustrates our holistic approach to delivering rural services in one geographical area by **Thinking Strategically and Acting Locally**. Our actions include:

- Action for Chard Town, the regeneration partnership for the town and hinterland, received £25,000 from the Market & Coastal Towns Initiative in 2003 to engage in a challenging community planning process. The community plan reflects a need to build the area's future on its strong entrepreneurial and working heritage (Chard is the home of John Stringfellow's model of the first powered flight). The parishes of Tatworth & Forton and Donyatt have published Parish Plans that link with Chard.
- In partnership with the Somerset PCT, a Healthy Living Centre was set up in 2003 in the heart of the town to develop a range of health related projects.
- The Area West Community Safety Action Panel (of the Mendip and South Somerset Community Safety Partnership) is an active action group in Chard that has effectively addressed a number of issues, including young drivers misusing car parks at night causing local distress and organising drug awareness events. This successful mechanism for delivering local community safety outcomes is matched in each of our 4 areas. The Chard and Ilminster Community Justice Panel of trained volunteers is a Home Office funded pilot project to deal with low level antisocial behaviour issues. SSDC played a key enabling role in this project.
- The Chard Employment Project through EU Objective 6 funding has enabled detailed research into the economic condition of the Chard area. An economic strategy based on this and a feasibility study for an enviro-technology business incubation centre (identified in the community planning process) is underway.
- SSDC is working in partnership with CRESTA, the local provider to improve the out-dated and inadequate swimming and sport facilities.
- SSDC accessed funding for 2 Multi Use Games Areas and partnered Chard Town Council in the provision of a skateboard park in deprived areas of the town.

- SSDC was instrumental in the creation of a Neighbourhood Nursery and community project to support children being educated at home through exclusion from school or parental choice.
- The Chard – Crewkerne - Ilminster *Links* service offers a dial-up transport service accessible to wheel chair users.
- The innovative district-wide Agricultural Development Officer post supported the diversification of a farm on the outskirts of Chard by developing a farm shop. This shop recently won Farm Shop of the Year.

Promoting equality issues is vital in our rural areas. The largest employer in Chard (1200 people) is a food producer that provides ready meals for a national supermarket.

In recent years a declining work force has encouraged an influx of immigrant workers, initially from Portugal, but now from a number of European countries via agency recruitment. Workers are housed in Chard and hinterland, raising issues around access to services, with issues for service providers in the area around spoken language. Negative press gave distorted figures on how many Portuguese were actually living in the area and the impact on local services led to a rise in racist incidents in the area and a general low level hostility towards the Portuguese community.

For SSDC there was a need to work with partners to accurately assess need and to diffuse the escalating situation. In addition, SSDC needed to provide advice on their own services such as housing & welfare benefit, waste collection, etc. Translation of leaflets, forms etc was possible but verbal communication was challenging. SSDC responded by successfully applying for funding to recruit and employ a Portuguese Link Worker for a limited period to liaise between residents and providers.

In addition to this SSDC facilitated the establishment of a forum of local service providers, employers and workers. This evolved into a Multi National Workers Forum in Chard that works as a model of good practice. The 300 Portuguese workers at the factory (of which 150 are now permanent residents) have formed the Somerset Portuguese Association based at the Chard Healthy Living Centre. Not only do they have social aims but they also monitor the practices of the European employment agency that recruits temporary workers from Portugal.

SSDC welfare benefits team also worked with the food company to help workers access benefits and adult courses in English language. Celebrations of enhanced multicultural awareness have taken place on a local level and are being planned on a wider scale through Somerset Racial Equality Council. Chard has now welcomed the opening of a Portuguese food store and restaurant in the primary shopping street.

The LSP has adopted “Addressing Diversity” as a core priority for the next year and is commissioning projects to strategically meet the needs of the migrant population and service providers across the district. The current development of South Somerset Market Town Vision is significant since similar situations have now arisen in Yeovil, Langport, Wincanton and Crewkerne where migrant workers are employed.

Building on what has been achieved in Chard, SSDC is responding by thinking strategically to maximise good practice and acting locally by building the key relationships necessary to deliver. SSDC is supporting the Langport Area Development Trust to appoint a Polish Link Worker in partnership with the main employer in the area and a Filipino Association has been formed in Yeovil in August 2005.

Key learning points from the process so far:

- Although the Chard Portuguese Link Worker helped on average 10 individuals or families a week to access the services they needed, evening working patterns would increase access by shift workers.
- The Multi National Workers Forum has become an e-forum, which any member can “activate” as and when a situation arises or significantly changes.

Negotiations have now been successfully completed with the food company for a financial contribution towards a new long term Link Worker.

SSDC looks forward to progressing the empowerment of the local community in order to sustain this continual improvement of the quality of life in the Chard area.