

East Ayrshire Vibrant Communities

'Vibrant Communities' began in 2013 as a council-led transformation service aiming to empower all community members in East Ayrshire to live happy, healthy, connected and fulfilling lives. It does this by including local people, residents and communities in development, decision-making and delivery of local services, such as sports facilities, youth programmes and supporting vulnerable people. The result has been greater efficiency and increased community engagement and resilience.

Who was involved?

Vibrant Communities is a service led by East Ayrshire Council. The Council brings together its teams and partners, along with all sectors of the community in East Ayrshire to develop and run services. This includes leaders, experts, community members and volunteers in health and wellbeing, social care, children and young people, housing, poverty, education, employment, businesses, physical activity, and food provision, among others. For example, community members have offered to help grit roads during winter or tend to the grass by roadsides and in cemeteries, with the Council arranging shovels, salt and lawnmowers for them to do so.

"The services now recognise the role that [community resilience] groups can play in communities and the delivery of services ... it works best when we think local. When you engage communities, there's less resistance, it has a better outcome and is more sustainable." – Kevin Wells, Strategic Lead for Communities, East Ayrshire Council

How were decisions made?

The Vibrant Communities Corporate Management Team has adopted asset-based management, where a team or community develops and organises itself using existing resources, skills and expertise. The team is led by the Deputy Chief Executive of East Ayrshire Council, and comprises various heads of council and partnership organisations. Decisions involve at least three stages:

- 1. Deep listening:** The Council, or dedicated working group, asks local people, communities and staff members what they care about, what they want, and what support they need to take action. For example, local people may want more support for housing, employment and finances, or more creatively minded staff members may want to work in less process-driven roles.
- 2. Action planning:** Leaders and working groups collate the findings from the deep listening stage, identifying priorities and overlap, and bringing the right people together to find solutions. The working groups present their action plans to the Corporate Management Team at the Council.
- 3. Decision-making:** The Corporate Management Team agrees which actions to take forward, defining which team is responsible for implementation, and making the relevant support available, such as releasing funds. Community members, experts or third sector parties are invited to co-lead an initiative to create a greater sense of ownership.

"It has culminated in a completely changed relationship between East Ayrshire as an authority and the people it serves." – Katie Kelly, Deputy Chief Executive, East Ayrshire Council

What has been the impact?

Communities have greater ownership of decisions and initiatives, which leaders feel helps to build sustainable long-term solutions.

“A photo arrived in my inbox. The outdoor squad had taken a selfie after cutting the grass beautifully, and they just wanted to share that with me. They felt trusted.” – Katie Kelly, Deputy Chief Executive, East Ayrshire Council

Greater self-management has meant Council teams feel trusted and this has encouraged more of the workforce to get involved in the initiative. Inspired by Wigan Council, East Ayrshire Council developed the **FACE values (Flexible, Approachable, Caring, Empowered)** to build a more collaborative organisational culture. Workshops and products (e.g. lanyards) helped to embed these values in the workforce. It is estimated around 4,000 people from across the local workforce have been through these workshops so far.

The FACE values have served to empower frontline teams and to change working practices. For example, in early consultations, residents reported difficulties contacting the right Council staff members. In line with FACE, the Council created ‘community worker’ roles with no job description other than to serve the needs of their community. As a named point of contact, community workers served as a source of information and a direct link between communities and the Council. This streamlined and flattened structure helped to address community needs and established greater trust. Increased trust between communities and the Council has also led some residents to take on responsibilities such as managing local sports facilities.

“55 of our community facilities are run by our communities ... It’s saved £1.5 million and they’re doing better and attracting more funding [than before] ... If there’s no ownership of the fix, the problem comes back again.” – Katie Kelly, Deputy Chief Executive, East Ayrshire Council

The existing culture and organisational structure of Vibrant Communities allowed East Ayrshire to adapt rapidly to the impact of COVID-19. East Ayrshire identified vulnerable groups and developed the **‘Kind, Caring and Connected campaign’** in March 2020 to encourage community resilience and prevent isolation. Volunteers had badges so police could see they were out during lockdown for essential reasons, such as delivering hampers to vulnerable and isolated residents. These hampers included contact details for support services and helplines, crosswords and simple recipes. Some further examples include:

- **Call to Action:** East Ayrshire Council asked for help responding to the pandemic and within 48 hours had over 100 community resilience groups. The aim was for the resilience groups to say what they needed to support their community, and for the Council to facilitate and direct resources. These groups helped to support activities such as food delivery, prescription pick-ups, befriending services and acted as a conduit between the community and the Council’s Management Team.
- **Dignified Food:** This initiative was established in anticipation of EU Exit but was rapidly adapted into a programme to stock 16 community larders from local suppliers, and to ensure regular supplies of food hampers to 5,000 families during lockdown.

Challenges for collaboration

Relationships

- **Building and maintaining relationships** was not always straightforward during the early stages of the Vibrant Communities service. Some staff members felt their existing roles were being micro-managed and some had difficulties adapting to more flexible and flatter organisational structures. The service also attracted a younger demographic from the wider community, which sometimes led to tensions with established networks.
- Managing the **increased workload** created by the COVID-19 pandemic alongside rapid and increasing collaboration with working groups was also a challenge. Leaders had to monitor staff wellbeing to **avoid staff burnout**, often relying on working groups to relay feedback from frontline teams to the Management Team.

Enablers of collaboration

Motivations

- The FACE values and the 'Kind, Caring and Connected' campaign provided all community members and Council staff with **a clear, shared purpose** and culture. This was made visible through consistent and transparent communications as well as branding (such as the badges and lanyards mentioned above).
- The deep listening exercise carried out by East Ayrshire Council over 18 months at the start of the Vibrant Communities service allowed them to identify issues and prioritise strategies according to the needs of the community, aligning goals with local needs. This also served to **facilitate buy-in** from the community and staff.

Structures

- By **flattening decision-making structures**, East Ayrshire Council was able to delegate tasks and responsibilities to the various working groups. This allowed more flexible decision-making and helped to increase ownership and participation among collaborators.
- The **scale of the region** given the small size of East Ayrshire was considered an advantage as physical distance between teams was less of an issue and teams had strong relationships and a good understanding of the skills others had to offer.

Relationships

- The relationship challenges mentioned above were overcome by leaders bringing people together through mediation and exercises designed to help find common ground and solutions. Leaders adopted a **facilitative style of leadership**, aimed at getting experts together and deferring to their expertise, to encourage greater participation and ownership of decisions and strategies.
- Council teams, wider public services and local communities already had **strong pre-existing relationships** built on trust. This helped people recognise and defer to others' expertise and made it easier to react to the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on a supportive work culture. For example, when the social care working group noted care workers struggling during the pandemic, the Council arranged care packages to show they were valued.

Table 1: Summary of challenges and enablers

Challenges for collaboration		Enablers of collaboration
Motivations		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clear and shared purpose ● Buy-in from the wider community built on listening to their needs
Structures		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Flattening decision-making structures ● Scale of the region
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Building and maintaining diverse relationships ● Balancing high workload against the additional activities required for collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pre-existing relationships ● Facilitative style of leadership

Lessons learned for collaborative leadership

Leaders should not expect, or be expected, to have all the answers. Successful collaboration involves recognising the resources, skills, knowledge and experience that others in the workplace and the community have. Bringing people together and facilitating access to resources will allow the team to carry out their action plans. It is key that the community plays a central role in the direction, design and implementation of initiatives to ensure it meets their needs in a sustainable way.

“I see my job as facilitating and creating an environment where people can get on with things. In collaborative working, everybody around the table is an expert in their own area ... The job is actually just pulling it together, it’s not about leading it per se.” – Pamela Milliken, Head of Wellbeing and Recovery, Health and Social Care Partnership