

# Better Mid Sussex – why small is beautiful

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Over the past two years or so Mid Sussex District Council has totally transformed itself from a complacent and barely 'fair' authority to one breaking new ground and delivering excellent services that its customers value – without replacing its top and middle management teams.

It has done much that others could learn from - and is still improving.

**THE MJ**

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BETTER MID SUSSEX

# Better Mid Sussex ...and still improving

Mid Sussex's Council Leader, **Patrick Shanahan** and Chief Executive, **John Jory** set out how the council is really going places

**M**id Sussex District Council makes a virtue out of being a small, rural authority, while at the same time maximising its effectiveness through the energetic use of partnerships.

'We have a very strong message that small is beautiful' said Council Leader, Patrick Shanahan. 'We are of a size that brings us closer to our customers and which allows us flexibility.'

Localism and choice were embedded in

the Mid Sussex way of working long before they became a national flavour. And, being small, powerful partnerships are an essential ingredient, not an added extra.

**"It all comes down to vision, values, leadership and management"**



The top team who manages the Better Mid Sussex town centre revitalisation project



Chief Executive John Jory

Chief Executive, John Jory, explains: 'When I joined MSDC the many good staff here had lost their sense of purpose and direction. But all that has changed and now we can demonstrate measurable improvements right across the board, without restructuring or significantly changing our people. It all comes down to vision, values, leadership and management.'

'What makes our story special is that we have achieved demonstrable improvements, in just over two years, with almost entirely the same staff team. We take talent management very seriously indeed – and are now seeing the results.'

### Better value for money

The management team's approach is certainly paying dividends with the authority able to demonstrate Gershon

savings times two. That adds up to five percent efficiency savings per year with no cuts to front line services. But, says Councillor Shanahan, 'Cutting internal costs is all very well but we remain hobbled by central government imposing extra responsibilities without the additional funds to meet them.'

### Better partnerships

Partnership working has certainly become a pivotal feature of the way Mid Sussex DC operates. Working with neighbouring Horsham and Adur Councils (the Central Sussex or CENSUS Partnership) the authority jointly operates its ICT, council tax and revenues and benefits services. And it

### Better talent management

'It's been a tough year. We now have a new boss who is driving us forward, challenging and enthusing. The staff want to do things better and there is a great deal of buy-in for the future'

#### Gill Lake, Events Manager - Leisure Operations

'We've been losing business in recent years so I've contacted various law firms to agree how we can win it back – and we have been extremely successful, increasing our business by 8%'

#### Jacqui Steele, Land Charges and Searches

Mid Sussex District Council

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does not end there. 'We have close relationships with all seven councils in the county,' says Cllr Shanahan. Co-operation also crosses county boundaries where three Surrey districts are partners in the so-called Gatwick Diamond.

'We have an important role to play in facilitating and managing the growth associated with the airport and the area,' said John Jory. 'Value jobs are what we look for and we now have an embryonic high tech business sector here'. Mid Sussex describes this approach as a 'smart growth agenda.'

#### Better investment

'We see property development with the private sector as pivotal in achieving our goals,' says John Jory. 'We will retain the freehold of land we already own in the town centres and buy more where appropriate, creating a valuable rental stream whilst growing our property business, with the whole community benefiting from the major uplift.'

'Our bit of the council tax is already very low,' said Council Leader, Patrick Shanahan 'and this initiative will help us to keep it that way in the future.'

#### Better direction

Both men are adamant that local government in the county does not need further re-organisation. 'We have more quality councils here than in the rest of the UK,' says Cllr Shanahan. One local town council was voted Town Council of the Year in 2006 and a second was runner-up. 'Co-operation and flexibility is the name of the game, working in a multi-tier environment covering town, district and county authorities,' says Cllr Shanahan. 'We believe this will deliver much greater value for money as there will be no costs associated with a restructuring and no reduction in democratic representation.'

#### Better planning for the future

The area offers a superb natural environment, the quality of which is underscored by the fact that it contains an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. At the same time there is pressure for housing to be built – potentially increasing the number of homes in the district from 55,000 at present to 70,000. Already there is an infrastructure deficit, mainly in roads and water supply, worth £1 billion, to make up, so as



**Women in IT day: a day in college using expertise of the Council's IT team**

always there are fine balances to be struck.

'We already make use of 75% of our brownfield land, well ahead of the government's target' said Mr Jory. 'And, we have been commended by the Audit Commission for our project in East Grinstead that led to the house builders making a contribution of £50,000 per house towards infrastructure improvements.'

#### Better performance

The Audit Commission rates the council as 3 stars for direction of travel and use of resources. However, in 2003, it was very different story. In its CPA, the council was only just rated as 'fair'.

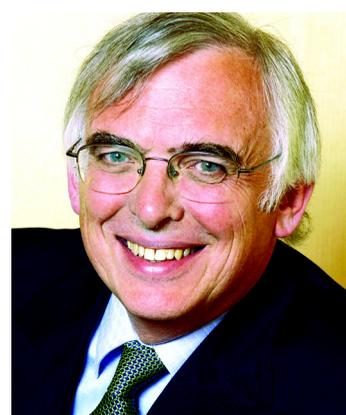
When John Jory was appointed in April 2004, the council's journey of improvement began. A fact not gone unnoticed at the Audit Commission. The recent audit letter stated: 'The council is performing consistently well and is a more confident organisation with an enhanced capacity to deliver its priorities and service improvements.'

No surprise then that Mid Sussex has recently been rated as a good 2-star authority with promising prospects in the fields of leisure and housing. Add to this, Investors in People highlighting it has a 'can-do culture', and being named runner-up in the Effective Top Team Leadership Achievement category in last year's MJ

Awards, and the authority has clearly quickened its pace on the road to excellence.

Although the council has come a long way, John Jory recognises they have still have a lot to learn. 'We have an innovative management team that has a wealth of ideas and experience to share with others, whilst looking to continue to learn and hone our skills.'

'If there are other likeminded councils who want to share and join us in this journey, we would very much like to hear from them'.



**Council Leader Patrick Shanahan**



## Performance at a glance

- ✓ **Audit Commission 2 Star Rating, with direction of travel rated as 3 star**
- ✓ **Use of resources rated as 3 stars**
- ✓ **Savings are running at twice the Gershon level**
- ✓ **Services are improving above the national average in all key areas**
- ✓ **Some services are already achieving national recognition for excellence including Chartermark, IIP, disability two ticks and Lexcel Accreditation**
- ✓ **Staff sickness is consistently below the national average**
- ✓ **MJ Awards - Effective Top Team Leadership - Runner up 2006**

## Better results

"I am delighted to be working with Mid Sussex District Council to reduce crime and disorder in the district. Our relationship is one of mutual trust and respect, and its success can be measured by the fact that levels of crime are reducing, making Mid Sussex one of the safest places to live, work and to enjoy."

**Chief Inspector Chris Ball, Sussex Police Area Commander for Mid Sussex**

## BETTER MID SUSSEX

### Better places to live

Nowhere will partnership working make a greater impression on the environment and quality of life in Mid Sussex than in the three major centres that make up the district. An innovative joint venture with Thornfield Properties is set to transform the key towns of Haywards Heath, East Grinstead and Burgess Hill for decades to come.

East Grinstead and Burgess Hill already have master plans in place and it will be the turn of the strategically important Haywards Heath in the spring.

The reshaping of these towns will result in dramatic improvements to the area, says Tim Barkley, the council's Planning Leader for the project. 'Not only will this mean better places to shop and enormous improvements to the environment but these in turn will assist major social improvements.

The preparation of master plans to steer development of the District's main towns over the next 20-25 years provides an enviable opportunity to plan and develop new public spaces, support transport infrastructure and attract private sector investment. The reshaping of these three towns will provide enormous improvements to the environment and ensure they have been designed with due regard for modern day needs and modern day challenges.

### Better procurement

'Serco found the competitive dialogue phase of the bid programme an extremely useful process, and one that should be encouraged. In particular, from our point of view, it allowed us to engage with the customer at a much earlier stage, and to a greater degree, than would have happened without this opportunity.

**Stewart Davies, Managing Director of SERCO (Local Government).**

### Better environment

"Being 'clean and green' is a major goal for the Council over the next two decades and Mid Sussex is leading the way in delivering a new environmental partnership", says Ian Burton, Head of Outdoor Business.

A contract worth £3.5million per year over the next 21 years has just been awarded to SERCO for waste handling, recycling and highway cleansing. This company has a recognised track record in providing high quality and responsive street scene and waste services.

The contract was let using a 'Competitive Dialogue Process' which provides

the opportunity for both client and contractor to discuss opportunities and ideas so as to refine the service specification before the final bidding process starts.

Mid Sussex is one of the first UK authorities to use the process following its introduction by the European Union in January 2006. It was used in conjunction with E-procurement techniques streamlining the Council's approach to purchasing and contract letting.

The council is also 'leading the field' by exploring a ban in the use of herbicides in the management of its green spaces, as such chemicals from the

### Performance at a glance

- ✓ **Ground breaking partnerships are transforming the physical environment**
- ✓ **Over the next 20 years millions of pounds of investment will reshape major towns, leading to further significant investment from business and partners**
- ✓ **Crime has reduced by 3% in the last year**
- ✓ **Nearly 2,600 new homes were built in last 5 years**
- ✓ **EU pilot authority for tackling pollution**

Amenity sector are believed to account for up to 50 percent of pollution in ground water. Mid Sussex is just one of two UK authorities involved in a pan European study looking at this problem.

'Much of what we do is about getting the right balance between encouraging investment, innovation and progress, whilst ensuring the impact this has on the lives of local people is positive and as sustainable as possible', says Ian Burton, the Council's Head of Outdoor Business (Environment).

'We believe we are doing just that in Mid Sussex', added Ian.

### Better lives

'Our mission is to improve the lifestyle of local people, investing our resources and commitment in the community, and focussing on three outcomes - satisfaction, participation and volunteering'. That is how Head of Leisure and Wellbeing, Paul Squires is getting Mid Sussex's residents 'fit for purpose'.

Paul has only been in the job for a



**Young Citizen's Day - the annual young people's debate that takes place in the Council chamber**

year, but the results of this focussed approach speak for themselves.

A national MORI survey commissioned by Sport England and released in December has shown Mid Sussex DC to be in the top quartile of UK leisure authorities. One in four people take regular exercise, compared with one in five for the rest of the country.

One in 15 get involved as volunteers, against one in 22 nationally - giving Mid Sussex the top volunteering rate in the UK.

76 percent of residents are fairly or very satisfied with the district's sports facilities, topping the national average of 69 percent.

The authority operates three leisure centres and two entertainment venues and a year ago embarked on a major programme to breathe new life into the leisure service. 'Things were stale and not progressing financially so we concentrated on five main areas; a full operational review, a strategic review of capacity, a survey of the state of our facilities, a structural review of staffing, and a study of how we were integrating with the community', said Paul Squires.

This led to the re-branding of the leisure centres as Olympos and customer care training for all staff. A new outreach programme is being introduced targeting the voluntary and corporate sectors and schools with fitness, personal training, arts and culture. The council is also to champion a campaign 'Every Child Swims' which speaks for itself.

The response has seen the customer base for the leisure facilities growing by nearly 9 percent (600 new members) in just three months and fees paid through direct debit increasing by £15,000 per month to give an annual revenue increase of £180,000. Ticket sales for entertainment events were also up by 3,000 by the end of last October.

Paul summed up 'We have a strong new business approach to the whole

leisure service which reduces reliance on council tax through innovation, a wide range of programmes, greater levels of participation and increased efficiency.'

### Performance at a glance

- ✓ **Top volunteering rate in the UK**
- ✓ **Top quartile of UK leisure authorities**
- ✓ **One in four takes regular exercise - compared to one in five nationally**
- ✓ **76% of residents are satisfied with leisure provision - topping the national average**



**Disability Youth Games**

