

How Kent County Council and district councils collaborate with data to tackle poverty

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I've been at Kent County Council for almost three years and I live in Kent so I know the area well. The overall population is about 1.6 million, about 1.3 of that is within the geographical boundary of Kent County Council because we do have a unitary, Medway, on our border. For some time there has been very good joint working between the county council, district councils and unitary colleagues as well.

We are the largest shire county and we have a mixture of urban and rural communities. Our geography is diverse, the land area is quite significant and in addition to that we have the longest coastline of any county. With that comes challenges around coastal community deprivation and employment opportunities. The average house price in Kent is higher than the national average although Kent still has relatively lower house prices than most of the southeast.

The challenge that people have locally is that if they work in London, for example, then those house prices are quite affordable but if you live and earn in Kent then the cost of living is very high. Income is above the national average but significantly below our southeast counterparts. Again, this is a challenge for us in Kent in terms of improving people's earning opportunities.

From a national perspective a number of Kent residents are facing significant financial challenges. The distinction in Kent is that there were people before Covid who experienced real challenges in terms of either earned income or overall income but the pandemic has also introduced us to people who've never had financial challenges previously. This has meant that they need more support from the public sector.

There are a number of very affluent areas where over the last 18 months we saw 400 case increases in Universal Credit applications. These were in areas where previously we had not seen levels of deprivation.

We do have a number of districts where the level of deprivation and the challenge for residents is significant. There is also a rural challenge in Kent. We do have to make sure, given the backdrop of limited resources, we can connect with everyone in need and provide them with the support they need.

In addition to that, we have experienced challenges in relation to Brexit (Operation Stack) and with the closure of the French border we have seen a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors over the last 12 to 18 months.

These challenges created a real need for a collaborative approach across the county.

We have positive established working relationships across the county so we were building on foundations that were already there. At the start of the pandemic there was a shared objective of supporting as many of our residents and businesses as we could.

Our services allowed us to think quite differently about how we do things. My role is the Corporate Director of Finance and making sure that we were using our funding wisely and making it go as far as possible meant that something like the [Low Income Family Tracker](#) was a no-brainer. We knew what we could do with it would be far longer term and sustainable than just something that was immediate and needed for the pandemic.

We knew there were other things we needed to do to support residents, particularly low-income households, more urgently. However, we were very keen and very clear that we needed to move to a situation where we were able to use the data to identify how we help people going forward and how we make that as sustainable as possible.

Knowing in particular that Covid grants were time limited, we could use them to shape our information and target that in a way that benefited housing services or adult social care or children's services. From that, we would have a business case that could demonstrate its worth and relatively speaking it is not a very high cost system.

We needed to understand what districts wanted from this and you can go back to what you signed up to at the start and make sure that you are all still clear that those objectives are what you're aiming for.

There's a lot of work to do in advance: roll out of a system like this across a number of organisations, with this level of complexity, does not happen quickly. We took our time and did it properly and we are now reaping the benefits. I would recommend that's the approach people take if they are in a two-tier area or a collection of unitaries.

Districts have the data, they have the knowledge and expertise, but the county has size and scale. To be entirely pragmatic, it was about how we combine the best of us to come up with something that's going to benefit all of us in a really positive way.

We really are starting to see the benefits of coming together and bringing all our data together. We are still only at the start of this journey.

So, lessons learned, when you're in a two-tier area you have to recognize and respect the knowledge and expertise of each of the parties and what you're bringing to the table

The second point for us was we were shameless about trying to find out who is already using this data. We contacted these teams about what they have already done. We found out from them what the bear traps are. This saves a huge amount of time and energy and people are always happy to share with each other things that they have already done.

We were very clear about the fact that we wanted to hear from other councils. We talked to organisations like Barking and Dagenham to find out what they were doing and what they had achieved because they were much further ahead of us. Also, how we could apply what they were doing in a two-tier context.

If you get your shared objectives right it makes it really clear that, even in a two-tier area, you are all trying to achieve the same thing. You might go about it a different way and you might have access to different things but without the engagement and support of our district colleagues we would not have been able to achieve as much as we have.

Ultimately, at the end of the day, that's been for the benefit of our residents across the board. I would thoroughly recommend taking this type of approach if you have people who are willing and able.

You can watch the full presentation [here](#)