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HALTON OBSERVATORY PROJECT REVIEW

Final report prepared by

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Presented to

Halton Strategic Partnership

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery (SELD) project was a joint initiative between the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) Research and Development Division and NRU's Service Delivery Team. Recent findings had suggested that research evidence is currently under-utilised in neighbourhood renewal and that delivery could be improved significantly by strengthening capacity.

SELD was piloted in four regions: the North East, North West, South West and West Midlands. The Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) was selected to deliver the pilot programme for the North West during 2004/05 and provided a responsive, professional and customer focused advisory service for neighbourhood renewal practitioners in the region with a particular focus on Lancashire.

Following the North West Pilot programme for the NRU, CLES was commissioned by the Government Office North West to provide services to four North West local authorities, namely Knowsley, Halton, the Wirral and Wigan. The services offered varied in all authorities as it focused on what was most useful for them.

The following report is the result of the work carried out by CLES for the Halton Strategic Partnership. The report is split into the following sections:

- ❑ Outline of the brief;
- ❑ Methodology;
- ❑ Background to the Halton Observatory;
- ❑ Current Usage of the Observatory;
- ❑ Benefits to date of the Observatory;
- ❑ Recommendations for the further development of the Observatory;

2 OUTLINE OF THE BRIEF

Following two meetings between CLES and representatives of the Halton Strategic Partnership namely Ian Grady, Shelagh Semoff and John White, it was decided that the focus of the work should be on reviewing the progress made in developing the Halton Observatory.

The Halton Strategic Partnership is responsible for the development of the Halton Observatory. The Observatory is now established and the Halton Partnership is looking to continue the development of the Observatory over the coming months. Support from CLES was focused on reviewing the services provided by the Observatory to date and assessing its potential for future development.

3 METHODOLOGY

The approach chosen included four elements:

- 1) a number of interviews with key stakeholders including the staff who work on the Observatory and key partners;
- 2) a desk based review of the background material pertaining to the Observatory;
- 3) a review of best practice of observatory type developments in other areas;
- 4) a facilitated workshop where the findings of the research were be presented.

It should be noted that this review was relatively light and was completed within five days. Most of the people interviewed were involved in supplying some of the performance data which is on the Observatory. This includes uploads of performance data linked to the indicators within the LAA blocks.

4 THE HALTON DATA OBSERVATORY

In 2004 Halton Borough Council commissioned Local Futures to produce a State of the Borough Report that provided a detailed profile on the socio-economic characteristics of the borough. The report also provided the impetus for the Halton Data Observatory. Halton has always been characterised by a long history of partnership working and these partnerships are relatively strong. This was seen as a solid element on which to base a common system of data sharing. This is further demonstrated by the fact that the annual upkeep and maintenance costs of the Observatory are met by a number of organisations that are part of the Halton Strategic Partnership.

There is currently an informal system in place to share data and information with the Halton Strategic Partnership. There are plans to formalise this arrangement. Taking this into consideration, the development of the Observatory has been two fold:

- 1) Local Futures populated the baseline with the data pulled together by a variety of data sources. These are mainly government data sources, at local authority level.
- 2) Partners including Cheshire Constabulary, Halton and St. Helen's Primary Care Trust, Jobcentre Plus and Halton Borough Council provide local data. Protocols are in place with a range of individual partners governing data sharing. There are a number of different Geographical Information Systems (GIS) in place in addition to the Observatory but the links between these systems are not very strong. Work has begun to enhance GIS capability within the local authority and this will benefit the Observatory in time.

The first stage in the development of the Observatory has now been completed. The rest of this report focuses on reviewing the effectiveness of the Observatory and making recommendations regarding areas in which the Observatory could be improved. These include:

- ❑ clarification on the uses and benefits of the Observatory;
- ❑ linking the Observatory data sets to service provision;
- ❑ identifying and supporting both existing and potential users of the Observatory;
- ❑ development of a forward plan for the ongoing development of the Observatory;
- ❑ technical improvements to the Observatory.

The Observatory can be accessed at <http://halton.localknowledge.co.uk/>.

5 USE OF THE OBSERVATORY

One of the main aims of the review was to attempt to gain an understanding of who was using the Observatory and what they were using it for. The interviews showed that whilst the Observatory is not being used extensively it is proving very important in three areas:

Halton BC Research and Intelligence Unit

The Council's Research and Intelligence Unit uses the information which is collated for the Observatory to feed into a range of other reports including the Halton Economic Profile. It should be noted that the unit does not use the actual Observatory front-end software as it only provides relatively basic analysis. The unit uses the comprehensive data sets which underpin the Observatory. This enables the unit to produce in depth reports on a range of topics including the Halton Economic Profile which was last produced in October 2006.

Halton Strategic Partnership Performance Review

The Observatory has been used to support the production of the Halton Strategic Partnership Performance Review. This review is produced on an annual basis and provides an assessment of how the partnership has performed over the previous twelve months in five key policy areas. The review also includes a number of cross cutting issues. The indicators used for the review are contained within

the Observatory; therefore, the amount time spent producing the review has been reduced because the data is more readily accessible. To a lesser extent the Observatory also supports the Council's internal performance review processes in a similar way.

Ad Hoc Research Projects

The Observatory is used to deal with a range of individual ad hoc requests such as:

- ❑ analysis of key indicators with service provision by service managers. For example the Children and Young People directorate has used the Observatory to map GCSE results and the coverage of Children's Centres;
- ❑ briefing of elected members. The Observatory has been used by council officers to provide newly elected members with briefings on the key issues currently impacting on their wards.

The Observatory is used by staff that work directly on the development and maintenance of the Observatory. These staff act as gatekeepers to the Observatory in the way that they respond to requests for analysis of the data contained within the Observatory. Currently staff spend proportionally more time on administrative work related to the development and maintenance of the site. However, the aim in time is that the workload of these staff will move towards involvement in more complex research work once the Observatory is more established. There is currently no explicit time frame for this happening.

The other main group of staff who use the Observatory are the staff responsible for the inputting of data onto the Observatory. These are not "users" by definition as they are not using the data contained on the Observatory once they have uploaded their own data.

6 BENEFITS OF THE OBSERVATORY

Our consultation highlighted a number of benefits which can be attributed to the use of the Observatory to date. The benefits of the Observatory fall into four main categories:

- 1) access to data;
- 2) networking amongst research staff;
- 3) improved data collection processes;
- 4) transparent performance management framework.

Access to data

The Observatory is relatively user friendly now that there is now a single point of access through which a wide range of data sets is now available. The Observatory provides a number of different ways of analysing and displaying the data including borough wide and ward based mapping, comparison with national and regional data and comparisons across different data sets. The Observatory provides non-data specialists with access to data which would previously only have been available through contact with data and research specialist staff. The extent to which a large number of people are taking advantage of the Observatory is at this stage largely based upon anecdotal evidence and guesswork.

Networking amongst research staff

The process of developing the Observatory has led to the development of a network of research staff across the different agencies. The Observatory has been a catalyst for partners sharing data and becoming more aware of the issues involved in the process of pooling and sharing data from different sources, such as small area data, different time frames of data collection and technical issues about sharing between different systems.

All the stakeholders interviewed welcomed the informal nature of this networking. It is helping people to gain a better understanding of the issues relating to research and evidence within different organisations. It is also helping people get a better understanding of some of the issues which affect different organisations.

Improved data collection processes

The Observatory has improved some of the processes associated with data collection such as the provision of data for key indicators. The development of the Observatory has also provided an opportunity to “tidy up” internal processes, providing more focus and clarity on data availability and efficiency as well as developing more creativity in the way data can be used.

Transparent performance management framework

The Observatory provides the LSP and the individual partners with a transparent performance management tool. This enables both the partnership and the individual partners to be able to access a wide range of performance indicators. The stakeholders spoken to felt that this was creating an atmosphere of trust and understanding between partners.

7 FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF THE OBSERVATORY

It is recognised by the Halton Strategic Partnership that the Observatory is now moving into a new phase of development. The basic infrastructure is in place in terms of the Observatory software and the database has been populated with a significant amount of data. As is outlined in section 2 the Observatory is beginning to be used to support the production of a number of different reports and information queries.

The key point, which underpins this section, is about the level of partner involvement and commitment to the Observatory. A number of partners felt that the development of the Observatory has been slower than it potentially could have been. However, the Observatory is a system which could grow and develop exponentially if there was a more significant commitment from partners in terms of actually using the Observatory both for their own direct uses and also to contribute to the wider Halton Partnership agenda.

This section of this report is based upon the desk-based review of the Observatory undertaken by CLES staff and the stakeholder interviews. It should be noted, however, that the recommendations are intended to stimulate a discussion amongst the partners about the future direction of the Observatory and should not be taken as “must do” actions. They are based upon a fairly light review of the Observatory and are there to be challenged and questioned.

The findings and recommendations cover the following areas:

- clarification of the uses and benefits of the Observatory;
- linking the Observatory data sets to service provision;
- identifying and supporting existing and potential users of the Observatory;
- development of a forward plan for the ongoing development of the Observatory;
- technical improvements to the Observatory.

8 CLARIFICATION ON THE USES AND BENEFITS OF THE OBSERVATORY.

As discussed earlier the Observatory is proving to be a useful tool for a number of reasons. However, some of the partners that were interviewed conceded that they themselves did not use the Observatory even though they had been closely involved in the development of it. There were a numerous reasons for this and these are explained below:

Time lag

Many of the data sets used come from national data sets and there is an inevitable time delay between the period which the data set is relevant to and when the data can be accessed. This means that in some instances partners can access data through their own sources much sooner than they can access it through the Observatory.

Relevance

It emerged that there was a strong feeling that the Observatory was the LSP's performance tool and therefore wasn't that relevant to the work the partners were doing. There is a risk that this perception of the Observatory could generate some frustrations amongst partners who may see it as something which is an added burden to their existing workloads.

Lack of understanding

There was a general lack of understanding about what the Observatory could be used for. For example, some partners had not considered the functionality of the Observatory as a tool for performance management within their own organisations.

Varying expectations

It became apparent there was a range of differing expectations about what the benefits of the Observatory might be. It would be worth investing some time into restating these benefits and identifying the work that needs to be undertaken both centrally and with partners and council directorates to realise these benefits. Our consultation highlighted that some of the partners could see the use of the Observatory but explained that in a number of areas, for instance health, all of the data which was contained on the Observatory was already available within the relevant organisation.

Recommendations

There are several things which could be done in order to address these points:

- An audit of the current usage of the Observatory. This would include an audit of all the queries which come into the Council's Research and Intelligence Unit.
- Development of a set of standard queries which could be incorporated into the Observatory.
- Sharing of the results of the audit amongst the different partners with the aim of helping partners understand the potential uses of the Observatory
- An awareness raising programme which would highlight the ways in which the Observatory was being used.
- Mapping out the research and information requirements of each partner agency with a view to identifying areas in which the Observatory could be of use.
- There are also some specific projects which the Observatory could support. For example, the development of area based planning for children's service as they move to neighbourhood network model. As multi agency working increases in the children's services field then the use of the Observatory could be useful for sharing data across the partners.
- Partners need to consider their own information requirements and enter into a dialogue with the strategic partnership to identify ways in which the Observatory can meet these needs. One of the mechanisms for supporting this dialogue could be through the Information Partnership Group which is referred later in the report. One of the main functions of this group would be to provide an opportunity for people to discuss the individual information requirements of each of the partners.

9 LINKING THE OBSERVATORY DATE SETS TO SERVICE PROVISION

Currently the Observatory does not contain much information about service provision. Knowledge of service provision is useful because it enables analysis to take place which compares performance and statistical data and how these relate to service provision. For example, it would be possible to

map a range of geographically based service information such as GP surgeries, schools, police beats and regeneration programmes.

Recommendations

It is recommended that options be explored for either mapping service provision directly onto the Observatory or some way is found of linking the Observatory with other map based systems.

10 IDENTIFYING AND SUPPORTING EXISTING AND POTENTIAL USERS OF THE OBSERVATORY

Findings

There were differing opinions about whether or not the Observatory would be used by staff other than those who had some direct link to research within their current jobs or whether it would be used by a wider audience. The later option would in theory free up some of the resources currently dedicated to more basic and mundane research queries. This was one of the original aims of the Observatory. Currently the Observatory is primarily used by people who are research or data specialists.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- The partners agree who the audience for the Observatory is. This may differ from organisation to organisation. Some of the stakeholders who were interviewed felt that as the Observatory developed then it was important that the user base was widened.
- The partners agree a named contact within each organisation that would be responsible for raising the profile of the Observatory within their own organisation.

11 DEVELOPMENT OF A FORWARD PLAN FOR THE ON GOING PROGRESSION OF THE OBSERVATORY

There is no clear strategy for taking the Observatory forward into the next phase. Most of the partners seem to recognise that the Observatory has now reached a certain stage in its development but were not able to articulate how it will develop over the coming months and what benefits they are anticipating from using the Observatory. Each of the individual partners has taken a fairly passive role in terms of the development of the Observatory. The individual partners do not have a clear vision of what the Observatory can do for them and how they are going to realise these benefits.

Recommendations

It is recommended that a strategy be developed which will take the Observatory into its next phase. This strategy should outline clearly what the expectations are of each of the partners in terms of the benefits they are trying to get out of the Observatory, what they are able to commit to in terms of resources (on the assumption that this is primarily staff time) and the actions that will need to be undertaken to realise these benefits.

The responsibility for developing this strategy should lie with the Partnership Information Group.

12 TECHNICAL IMPROVEMENTS TO THE OBSERVATORY

There are a number of technical improvements which have been suggested and some of these are outlined below. It is understood that there is a contractual agreement with local futures that may limit any technical changes to the Observatory. The maintenance of the Observatory is currently carried out by Local Futures therefore there are cost implications to any technical amendments to the Observatory. For example, ward boundaries cannot be modified without incurring additional costs. Also, the colour scheme itself cannot be modified. Therefore, it maybe that any further technical amendments may not be practical until such a time as the contract with Local Futures is renewed.

The primary limitation that currently affects the Observatory is that it is populated by national data sets, which are supplied by national agencies. In many instances the data supplied by these agencies has been collected from partners in Halton. This means that by the time the data gets onto the Observatory it can be several months out of date.

Recommendations

It is recommended that more direct linkages between data suppliers in the borough and the Observatory are developed with a view to assessing mechanisms for getting the data put directly onto the Observatory.

13 CONCLUSIONS

There is general agreement amongst the partners that the Observatory is now at an important stage in its development. The basic infrastructure and data sets are now in place. Most of the focus to date has been on getting to this stage. The Observatory is now moving into a second phase which is focused on the actual use of the Observatory. However, there is no formal plan about how the Observatory might be developed in the future. The recommendations contained within this report represent the findings of work carried out by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies. The findings are primarily intended for the developers of the Observatory.

Partnership Information group

During the discussion at the workshop it was agreed that there was some merit in establishing a Partnership Information Group. This group would comprise of the staff from the partner agencies who had a responsibility for information and research. The group would meet on a quarterly basis. The group would be responsible for taking forward many of the recommendations of this report. It would have a particular focus on providing a forum for the partners to discuss their own information and research requirements. Establishing the group could be a first step towards developing a shared programme of research activities. The group would also be responsible for developing a forward strategy for the future development of the Observatory.