

Hidden Insights redraws relationships between the community and Gosport Borough Council, creating big wins from small beginnings

“Streetscene now approaches things differently. Unfortunately there were times when we could only say no to things, but we found another way. You can give the power for change to the local community, which in turn creates the right energy and momentum for further change, and all within budget constraints. Streetscene is there to help and guide, but the community owns the project”

These are the words of Stevyn Ricketts, Head of Streetscene, Gosport Borough Council, when discussing their recent approach to working with community groups. Streetscene is responsible for frontline services, from refuse collection to bus shelters to open spaces. Having worked in the department for 11 years, he’s seen a lot of change, but nothing more transformative than Hidden Insights® Community Coaching.

From litter picking to renovating a disused car park from wasteland to a haven for wild flowers and butterflies, Hidden Insights® has created the environment for listening to the community and has produced quick and low-budget wins against some of the problems the borough faces.

More work, less budget

Streetscene receives 400 calls a week from the local community asking for solutions to various problems, from fly tipping to graffiti, to litter on the streets. There was a time that Streetscene would take on the problem themselves, without engaging further the community member that made the call. The more calls they answered, the more they took on and then we entered the Age of Austerity. It was not a sustainable model.

When budget pressures began to significantly increase, the calls continued, but Streetscene felt they had to take a negative approach. A ‘Thank you for letting us know the problem, but there is nothing we can do’ approach.

Hidden Insights® creates community action

Hidden Insights® is different. It’s about harnessing the energy of the community, redrawing relationships and getting the council and community working together. It turns things on its head by looking at what is going right, not what is going wrong and asks why those things are working. It also looks to the ‘community’ for the answers and, in most cases, there is someone that has the knowledge and wisdom to resolve the problem.

It also encourages people to listen, and when the listening starts, answers are found. People see and hear with new eyes and ears and collaborate with the community, treating them with respect. This turns around relationships quickly.

People understand the needs of their area best, which is why transferring power so people can make more decisions locally and solve their own problems to create strong, attractive and thriving neighbourhoods is key to the future of local government.

Streetscene's new approach

Gosport Borough Council is improving services and future-proofing itself against budget cuts by working with community members to create momentum for positive change. It is focussing on ideas from the community that require limited budgets to make it work.

Now when Street Scene answers calls from the public it takes a different approach. It asks what that community member needs to sort out the issue. It focuses on the positive and empowers the community by facilitating, giving guidance and advice. The community member knows there's a problem, and working in a facilitation mode, Streetscene helps them try to find a workable answer to it and gives them the momentum to go out and make the change.

We're not just servicing the community, we're now part of it

Sian Jones, Parks and Landscape Contracts Officer, Streetscene says: "We still make the public aware that we don't have the budget or resource, but we ask how we can work together and support them to improve and take their ideas forward. We empower them and this doesn't require us or money to be thrown at it. It's a much more positive approach now.

Sian continues: "There's a lot of satisfaction in this approach; you've enthused that person and left them wanting to do something. You've created that energy by giving the power back to them. Hidden Insights® Community Coaching is a positive way to resolve a lot of problems. It's win-win."

The relationship has shifted. The council officers provide technical input but they now also feel part of the community too in each project.

Stevyn says: "Hidden Insights has taught us to look at things in a different way."

Conclusion

As the economy improves, councils will still be reducing and withdrawing services that underpin their citizens' daily lives. To counter this, it is important that there's a fundamental shift in the relationship between local authorities and their citizens.

Hidden Insights® finds practical solutions, possible with very limited budget. It shifts council-citizen relationships for the better, creating a sustainable approach to community problems.

Putting it into practice: butterflies and community spirit

Hidden Insights® Community Coaching has been used in a number of ways by Gosport Borough Council, mainly with working groups that wish to get involved and improve the local community.

The Streetscene team facilitate these local community groups, engaging the community and helping keep momentum year round.

Gosport In Bloom came to Streetscene to enquire about breathing fresh life into a disused car park. It was mainly used by joyriders, creating noise and causing a general nuisance to the local residents. A resident neighbouring the car park had suggested various options in the past – a tennis court or Bowling Green – but these were cost prohibitive.

She then bumped into a local butterfly expert who showed her that the car park – which had rare flowers poking through the cracks in the tarmac – was attracting some uncommon butterfly species and was the best site in Gosport for the insects. And so a group from Gosport In Bloom took an idea to the council. The idea: Turn the car park into a meadow and an area of natural interest with the wild flowers and insects.

Street Scene has supplied some chestnut fencing and the rest of the momentum has been powered by the community. The solution was there, possible within budget and the collaboration between the council and community has had a powerful positive impact on relationships.