

WEST SWINDON CLUSTER STORY

In West Swindon, many of the aims of CPCP have already been seen in action, and momentum is gathering. A clear example came from the unexpected closure of the Freshbrook Community Centre following the removal of the charitable status of its managing trust by the Charity Commission. Local groups were left without a place to meet and residents were concerned at the impact of the closure, and were pressing local members to solve the problem.

The cluster lead was able to cut through council procedures to rapidly re-open the centre to hold a meeting with residents to discuss the way forward. More than one hundred people turned up to the meeting. The community pulled together and formed a steering group to get the centre reopened. They have identified what they want in future from the Centre and have produced a business plan, set up a new committee and are in the process of gaining charitable status. They have been supported by Ward Members and officers, but they have driven the changes and response themselves.

The meeting also allowed members and officers to explain the position quickly to the community, turning a negative situation into something positive and preventing misplaced dissatisfaction with the council – which was not responsible for the situation – from taking hold.

As part of CPCP there have been regular meetings in West Swindon, advertised mainly through flyers delivered door-to-door by members. The attendance at all has been very encouraging, with many new faces, varying with the issues under discussion. There have been some notable achievements where residents have sorted out the issues for themselves (such as parking, clearing brambles, school patrols). They have also created their own very effective web forum, to support the meetings. The clear success of the forums in West Swindon encouraged the police to amalgamate their tasking meeting with the forum for the first time in January, when a lively and constructive discussion with residents led the police to change their policing priorities in direct response to local residents' concerns. Police engagement in the process brings obvious benefits.

It is fair to say that West Swindon has had a head start in some respects compared to other cluster areas. The long-running West Swindon Community Forums run by local members were a well-understood concept so 'bolting' CPCP to this did not need a huge leap in understanding. West Swindon is also a clear geographic area and community in its own right, which is mirrored by the CPCP cluster boundary. Nevertheless, the CPCP initiative has re-energised the local process and brought a clearer focus. Residents feel more informed and involved, and CPCP has proved that local people are willing to help sort out local issues themselves if they are encouraged and supported.

Even when progress on an issue is slower than they would like, such as removing the speed humps on Freshbrook Way, they are now far more likely to appreciate and understand why this is the case.