

CASE STUDY

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Oxfordshire is home to an estimated 682,400 residents, including students and armed forces (ONS, mid-year population estimate 2017). It has a highways capital budget of £32m, with a highways maintenance revenue budget of £17m (excluding staff costs).

Oxfordshire County Council has worked with Proving Services since 2014, when it became a founder member of the Future Highways Research Club. Owen Jenkins talks about how the partnership has led to a different way of thinking and significant culture change.

“Having been a member of the Future Highways Research Club for a few years, we collaborated with Proving Services in March 2017 to undertake an initial, high-level assessment that looked at all five Future Highways strategic elements – value for money, community engagement, improving communications, mutuality and commercialisation.

“We knew it was quite ambitious to tackle all five work streams together, but it also made a lot of sense as it allowed us to look at interdependencies and reduce duplication. Our newly created Service Improvement Team has been overseeing the whole programme with five project groups – each with an operational head and a project manager – taking the work streams forward. This has allowed us to be rigorous in overseeing delivery to timescales and to be consistent in our approach.

“Proving did their assessment against national best practice and were able to quickly identify what was going well and where the gaps were. We had some early wins, such as the opportunity to identify several new income streams, which delivered, amongst other benefits, an improved draw down process for commuted sums worth more than £1m to the service.

“Another early success has been developing a clear road map for community engagement. In April 2019 we undertook a survey of town and parish councils (T&PCs) in Oxfordshire, to determine what services they are currently providing and what they would be interested in delivering in the future.

“The survey results identified that for those parishes and town councils who responded, 85% are currently undertaking work on the public highways with 56% of the work carried out by

volunteers – including vegetation clearing, clearing snow and gritting footways, sign cleaning and public rights of way maintenance & inspection. The top activity they would like to pursue in the future is the highways ‘super user’ initiative, which provides a trained volunteer who can inspect potholes and order works directly from Oxfordshire County Council’s highways contractor.

“One of our immediate responses to the survey has been to further our support for existing programmes through our community-led highways services initiative, Oxfordshire Together. As well, we are progressing the highways ‘super user’ initiative with further information and training options. We are also developing a pilot scheme for T&PCs to commission minor improvement works providing service specifications, pricing lists and agency agreements.

“Whilst we are yet to see the results, we have recognised the opportunities associated with our mutuality programme between commissioner and provider. It has given us the chance to jointly challenge and assess ourselves on current working relationships and delivery. We have, as a consequence, refreshed our business case and governance arrangements, and commenced an OD programme to engage with staff at all levels to better understand and value the roles and responsibilities across the two organisations. Our ambition is to move to an “open book” approach to contract management.

“Finally, our partnership with Proving Services has also facilitated the development of a culture of continuous improvement, which is evolving through various initiatives such as regular ‘lunch and learn’ sessions, encouraging award applications across the directorate and adopting a bottom up approach to create functional service specifications and KPIs, and the development of performance dashboards. Staff are being equipped not only with a better understanding of corporate objectives and how their team’s roles and responsibilities are aligned, but also with the opportunity to participate in service planning and development creating a sense of value and ownership.

“While we can already see progress in a number of areas, our schemes are still at an early stage of delivery and our next step is to establish how we will measure improvement in customer experience. We expect to report at the end of September.

“We would strongly recommend the new partnership between Proving Services and ADEPT to other local authorities. At Oxfordshire we have seen a real cultural shift, embedding commercial thinking into our standard practice. Having access to national best practice, and learning from others going through the same process, has been invaluable. We have been able to future proof and come away with something completely different.”