

Home Stretch

Heidi Wilson, Calderdale's lead officer for Supporting People, describes the tactical approach she took to getting a stretch target on reducing re-offending included in the Local Area Agreement

I was at an event recently where someone said: 'Local. Area. Agreement. The three most boring words on earth!' In some ways I'd agree. Have you ever read an 'interesting' Local Area Agreement (LAA)?! Indeed, have you ever read one? The other part of me – the part that's been through the trauma of being involved in developing an LAA – thinks that they are a real opportunity to raise the profile of our work in homelessness and make a difference to the lives of clients we work with.

In Calderdale our LAA was introduced in April 2007. My role at Calderdale gives me strategic responsibility for homelessness, temporary accommodation and Supporting People services, so when our LAA was being developed I didn't know which way to turn. There was so much I wanted to include!

The problem was two-fold. Firstly, the issues that I felt to be a priority weren't necessarily the same as the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) that led on the LAA work. Secondly, the LAA was split into six themed 'blocks' and some

blocks simply weren't interested in talking to me! So, instead of focussing on my priorities I identified what the LSP's priorities were and then considered how my services could assist in meeting those priorities. I also focussed on the blocks that were interested, which meant I didn't waste valuable time.

I quickly realised that I wasn't going to get lots of targets in the LAA, so I set my sights on making my target a stretch one.

For those not in the know (consider yourselves lucky!) – the LAA has a number of 'mandatory' targets alongside targets that meet local issues and priorities. There are also more challenging 'stretch targets', which offer pump-priming funding to help you meet the target and a reward if successful at the end of three years.

I quickly realised that I wasn't going to get lots of targets in the LAA, so I set my sights on

making my target a stretch one. I ensured that it met a number of principles: a high priority for the LSP; a high priority for my service; it would involve a wide range of partners; it was deliverable, and – most importantly – it would make a difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable clients we work with. After much negotiation, it was agreed that Calderdale would have a stretch target that met the LSP's priority of reducing re-offending and, for my service, meant that we would focus on providing suitable and settled accommodation for offenders.

Having this target has really increased the profile of my services – as a stretch target (one of only 14) the LSPs are focussed on ensuring it is met. The target – 'Reduce levels of re-offending by increasing the number of those involved in criminal justice interventions provided with suitable and settled accommodation' – cannot be met alone. We have set up a project group with representatives from Probation, the Youth Offending Team,

accommodation providers, support providers, the police, the benefits service, Housing Options Team, Supporting People team, Drug and Alcohol Action Team, Primary Care Trust and the Drug Intervention Programme team.

Upon release Sam had a housing association property to move into and was supported by a Housing Support Worker to help him manage his tenancy.

It is this group that monitors the work around achieving the target, including considering how to collect data, what services are needed for the client group and, most importantly, how to fund these services. We have established a virtual team (Firm Foundations), which works with both clients and accommodation providers (including private sector landlords) to find a property. Supporting People then funds a housing support service to ensure the tenancy is a success – ie a client remains in a tenancy for at least six months.

We are just over six months into the project, but the signs are good. Some of the most vulnerable (and least politically attractive) clients are being supported to find somewhere they can call home. One example of how effective this has been is with Calderdale's most prolific offender – let's call him Sam – who has been rehoused in private sector tenancies in the past, but failed in them all. Prior to Sam's release earlier this year, our Firm Foundations team worked with him to identify where he'd like to live (within reason!), what he felt the problems he would face might be. We outlined what assistance we



could provide. Upon release Sam had a housing association property to move into and was supported by a Housing Support Worker to help him manage his tenancy. A Progress2Worker Officer helped him secure work. Sam is now settled in his new home, with a job and even a girlfriend, and he hasn't offended since his release. This is what an LAA can achieve. It can make a real difference to individuals' lives.

What we're doing in Calderdale isn't particularly innovative, but we

are ensuring that we use the LAA to achieve what we want it to. It isn't just a 'local authority document' on a shelf. All our partners are involved and we work together to deliver it. Local. Area. Agreement. Yes, they may be boring words, but they can make a difference. Just ask Sam.

Sources

For the latest on LAAs go to www.homeless.org.uk/policandinfo/laacurrent