

Sharing the debt

Four West Midlands councils have signed a joint contract with a bailiff in a bid to save money and offer a better service, writes Deniz Huseyin



Back left to right: Andy Rose of Bristow & Sutor, Wolverhampton's Tony Allen, and Dudley's Ian Wollaston. Front: Coventry's Jacinta Lewis, Wolverhampton's Malcolm Hayward and Sandwell's Andrew Aldritt

LOCAL authorities are increasingly taking a partnership approach to delivering their services. The shared procurement of goods and services from third parties is being held up as an effective way of cutting costs and improving quality. But how easy is it in practice to make such an arrangement work?

Four West Midlands authorities — Wolverhampton, Dudley, Coventry and Sandwell — are heralding their debt recovery agreement as an example of sound partnership working. In October the quartet, acting as the Midlands Bailiff Partnership, appointed enforcement agent Bristow & Sutor to chase unpaid council tax and non-domestic rates debt under a three-year contract.

Though they all used Bristow & Sutor, the four authorities previously pursued debts through individual contracts. "There were no major issues regarding this approach," says Ian Wollaston, revenues manager for Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council. "But it meant there was some duplication of effort in terms of the tender process, and individual sites had a weaker negotiating position regarding costs and value."

Working together gave the councils stronger negotiating clout while a streamlined tendering process helped reduce costs, Ian Wollaston explains.

Other benefits of the Midlands Bailiff Partnership include benchmarking and the sharing of good practice, he adds. But the contract also allows a certain degree of flexibility at site level in terms of administration processes. "The contract allows the participating authorities flexibility concerning day-to-day administration processes and liaison with the supplier rather than insisting on a rigid framework, which may not reflect individual site needs," Wollaston points out.

"Each of the four authorities had its own debt recovery priorities. This meant there was a need for some compromise in order for a truly unified contract to work. The main requirements of all the sites were brought to the table and negotiation took place where necessary."

He adds: "For example, compromise was needed in order to come up with a joint code of conduct, including a list of 'vulnerable cases' where the bailiff must use their discretion before undertaking enforcement action and first obtain the consent of the relevant authority before removing goods."

The three other Midlands metropolitan authorities — Birmingham, Solihull and Walsall — were invited to take part in the partnership talks, but decided not to sign up. "This was either because of their existing contractual

arrangements or their individual service requirements ultimately presented too much of an obstacle," says Wollaston. However several other local authorities in the region have now expressed interest in joining the contract in order to take advantage of the benefits it offers.

The contract with Bristow & Sutor forms part of a wider procurement drive in the region. The West Midlands Regional Centre of Excellence assists and co-ordinates a range of possible joint procurement initiatives across the West Midlands authorities in support of the government's national procurement strategy.

"Whilst this contract was not part of any formal plan it supports the overall aims of the regional centre to encourage and widen collaboration to obtain better value for all," says Wollaston.

Bristow & Sutor were selected after an evaluation panel, comprising officers from all four authorities, assessed the tenders received against a range of criteria concerning price, performance and quality.

Bristow & Sutor has worked for the four councils within the Midlands Bailiff Partnership for a cumulative total of over 70 years, points out managing director Andy Rose.

"Although Bristow & Sutor was an existing supplier, we had to prove our

ability and performance, beyond any doubt, to a meticulous evaluation panel, which all had to agree the final selection," he says.

Rose believes the initiative is a good example of councils embracing a partnership approach to local government. "The partnership seeks continuous improvement in collection results, a consistent approach to enforcement and shared innovative solutions," he says.

"Not only has this approach streamlined the procurement process, but the councils benefit through shared resources and consistency of enforcement methodology across the region. For example, the defaulters receive the same treatment, even if they move across council borders. This new service agreement will capitalise on best practice and a joint approach to the collection of council tax and business rates, which will improve performance across the board."

Rose says that the Midlands Bailiff Partnership initiated talks for a joint contract in early 2007. "We have since noticed that this approach is becoming an increasingly popular method of procurement," he says. "Over 60% of the formal tenders that we have responded to since then include some form of 'working in partnership'." www.wmcoe.gov.uk