Norwich City Council

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

BRIEFING PAPER for meeting to be held on 12 June 2008

Community Engagement Strategy – first principles

Background

1. On 6 February 2008 the Council's Executive approved a two stage approach to the implementation of the Council's Neighbourhood Strategy.

2. The first stage was to have an immediate focus on improving the quality and extent of dialogue with communities across the Council and building the capacity of communities to engage and develop local provision as well as tools such as neighbourhood or community plans.

3. This will support dialogue necessary as we move towards unitary status and will also begin to build communities capable to developing local provision as well as tools such as neighbourhood or community plans and potentially of considering other forms of governance such as community councils. Without such development, there is a risk of democratic deficit in the urban area when Parish Councils are absorbed into Norwich.

4. The First principles of the Community Engagement Strategy that the strategy should be shared with and owned by partners including the community and therefore it is important that this work is undertaken with communities.

5. Initial engagement on this initial phase has been undertaken with a number of Resident, Tenant and Community Groups who support this principle and who wish to be involved in shaping the approach and the resources that should be put in place to ensure it is extended across the Council. A summary of the feedback from an event held in February for all community residents groups can be found at appendix 1.

6. Further area based meetings with community and resident groups will be taking place during June and July to further develop the community

engagement tool kit and foster closer working between groups at the local level.

Community Engagement strategy – first principles

7.   A Council wide community engagement strategy is being developed to guide consultation and engagement and the sharing of intelligence which will improve how the Council engages. For it to be affective this strategy needs to be shared with and owned by the Council and communities. The strategy is still in early stages of development and needs to be worked up with communities before being approved by Executive as a consultation draft prior to consultation.

8. However, the guiding principles are that it recognises the need to provide appropriate opportunities for those involved in the life of the City to participate at whatever level they choose to influence policies, decisions and service delivery that impact on them. To achieve this, the Council will develop a position of shared ownership and responsibility with the community in responding to needs and issues identified by:

- Bringing people together to deal with common concerns
- Ensuring all sections of the community feel they have a right to be involved
- Only using community engagement methods when people have genuine opportunities to influence service delivery
- Targeted community capacity building and community engagement, with particular emphasis on promoting equality and diversity and involving communities in plans for their area.
- Making sure people know what they are agreeing to participate in and how information will be used
- Ensuring information is made available in an accessible format to enable people to make informed decisions
- Managing and coordinating community engagement activity to ensure consistency, quality and partner participation and avoiding duplication
- Utilising community engagement methods that provide variety and choice
- Ensuring that community engagement activities are realistic and that expectations are not raised unnecessarily
- Where possible, devolving decision making to local level
- Providing feedback to people about the results of their participation in community engagement activity

9. The new approach to community engagement will require all services to improve that way in which they work and engage with communities. Staff who work with communities/ community groups need to understand their role, and the impact they can have, both as:
- representative of the council: advising, explaining, listening; and

- tool for empowerment: listening, promoting discussion, encouraging people to participate

10. To promote better engagement with communities it is proposed to set up a council wide officer group of "neighbourhood champions" who will promote, drive and communicate the importance of engagement and other aspects of neighbourhood working across their service area. Staff training in core engagement skills will also need to be increased.

Community Engagement Strategy
Feedback from Community Group event
25th February 2008

1.0 Background
1.1 On the 25th February, a workshop was held at Blackfriars Hall for community groups which the Council works with to start to develop the Council's community engagement strategy.

1.2 Over 350 representatives from a variety of groups were invited and 55 people attended.

1.3 The workshop discussed a range of issues including the group's experiences of the Council's engagement with them to date; the mechanisms groups preferred to use e.g. face to face, questionnaires etc; whether groups felt they were able to influence Council decisions; and the support groups felt they required. Groups were asked for comments on the proposal to develop a single team to develop the Council's community engagement and participation work.

1.4 This is a summary of the comments received on the discussion topics before, during and after the event. Where statistics are given these are from questionnaire returns.

2.0 Consultation
2.1 A range of methods were used to collect views, including 25 completed questionnaires. Of these:

2.2 72% of respondents had previously been asked for their opinion by the Council
47% felt their opinion was important or very important to the council

2.3 Consultation was felt to be a positive experience when the purpose was clear and residents felt their views were considered, with concise feedback explaining the response to suggestions made, and resultant change.

2.4 When consultation needs to happen quickly the preferred methods suggested were:
- Visits to existing groups and forums
- Representative focus groups
- Questionnaires
- Suggestion boxes
- Press/radio
- Door knocking/road shows

3.0 Consultation Feedback
3.1 Experience of feedback received varied with similar numbers reporting good, poor and non-existent feedback.

3.2 The three preferred methods for receiving information for consultation, in order were:
Face to face questions
Short written summary with option to request more detailed document
Electronically e.g. website or email

4.0 Influencing Service delivery

4.1 25% contacted RST to find out which organisation was responsible for delivering a service. 90% did not know what standard of service they were entitled to expect from the Council.

4.2 The most popular way of being consulted about service delivery was face to face (27%). The second preference was through existing residents groups and meetings. 61% felt able to influence some council decisions about service delivery.

4.3 In descending order the main services that residents would like to be able to influence were housing and repairs, neighbourhood facilities, council policies & decisions, community engagement, environmental issues such as street cleaning and transport, Council finances

4.4 It was suggested that it would be easier for residents to challenge when service standards are not met if:

- Information was readily available about who delivers the various services and what the standard is
- Responsible officers were directly accountable
- Structures were in place to enable residents' to monitor progress with their issues and complaints
- Mechanisms were in place to enable effective information transfer
- Timescales for consultation and projects were realistic
- Evaluated information enabled a choice of options
- There was more clarity about the Council's decision making process

4.5 The consensus was that residents did want to and should be able to make decisions about how services were delivered in their area, though the majority were generally happy to let the Council manage services if the standard is acceptable. Resident involvement in decision making could be enabled by:

- Ongoing liaison with existing community groups and forums
- Having a named Council contact based in each area
- Establishing neighbourhood councils with participatory budgets
- Local councillors
- Improved ongoing communication within communities and with the Council
- Local access to ICT equipment and training
- Providing insurance cover for forum activities
- Consultative panels

5.0 Training Needs

5.1 Residents identified the following main training needs:

- Committee skills
- Conflict resolution
- ICT and web design
- Peer learning from the experiences of others
- Fund raising
- Roles of officers/Councillors through work shadowing and workplace tours etc.
- Council structures

6.0 Community Engagement
6.1 Other comments regarding proposed community engagement activity were:

- Must be adequately resourced
- Must be long term change
- Community engagement must make best use of limited time available
- Range of methods must be used

7.0 Resident and Community Group Support
7.1 Current levels of support needed by resident and community groups varied from none to ongoing maintenance support and it was recognised that groups became vulnerable when key members resigned. Groups could be more active in their community if supported by:

- More community based staff-requires continuity to build relationships
- Funding for group promotion
- Insurance cover for group activity
- ICT equipment
- Strengthening links between organisations active in the community
- Providing core funding for basic group maintenance
- Increased skills base
- Toolkits for new groups
- Coordinated neighbourhood management
- Direct contact with key council officers
- Legal and governance advice

8.0 Venues for Community Activity
8.1 Facilities for community activity were thought to be good value, though in short supply in city centre. A gap was identified when something slightly more upmarket was required

9.0 What should the Council do now?
1. Develop and provide a synopsis of the Council's decision making processes
2. List of "who does what" with contact details
3. Themed events e.g. green spaces, faith groups, voluntary sector, community groups, resident associations
4. Continue networking lunches
5. Regular visits to community groups by Council officers. These visits could ascertain:
   - Where each organisation sits on the pressure group/service group scale
   - The extent to which each organisation would like to be able to influence policy decisions
   - Topics for discussion/consultation
   - Suitability for involvement with consultative panels
6. Define community, neighbourhood etc.
7. Set and publicise service standards
8. Progress Talk Back pilot with tenants
9. Establish single comprehensive data base of consultees.
10. Coordinate community services
11. Increase levels of volunteering, particularly younger people

10. Next steps
10.1 Meetings to plan next step workshops are being planned which will be based on the proposed areas that the new single team will operate within, as well as for groups who operate on a city-wide basis.