

Overview Scrutiny Committee topic review of Community Engagement April 2013

Introduction

The Local Government Act 2000 established scrutiny as a means of holding the Council's Cabinet and Executive to account. However, it also intended that scrutiny should be 'forward looking' and gather evidence to inform policy development on improving service delivery. This role is fulfilled by the Overview Scrutiny Committee by the conduct of topic reviews focused on specific areas of council business.

In July 2012 the Overview Scrutiny Committee selected the subject of Community Engagement for a topic review. The terms of reference of the review focused on considering how the council engages with its communities, with particular emphasis on the local role of councillors in community engagement.

I am grateful for the support and enthusiasm from members of the Overview Scrutiny Committee, as well as that from other Members of the council, from council officers and from other residents and council partner agencies who have been involved in the review. Without their input, challenge and ideas, this review would not have been possible and, perhaps more importantly, the recommendations coming from the review would not be as helpful in ensuring that the council is best placed to embrace the opportunities community engagement can bring.

Councillor Brian Sangha
Lead Member for the Review

1. Background

- 1.1. Local authorities are increasing working with reduced financial resources that will require close scrutiny and consideration of the type and level of services they provide in the future. The council itself has experienced total grant cuts since 2010-11 of £2.3m (£2.77m in real terms) and further cuts are forecast for future years.
- 1.2. Local authorities have a clear commitment to engage residents in decisions and promote community empowerment through the 'Big Society' agenda. The need and opportunity to engage with local residents to better understand local needs and to shape the delivery of services has been recognised by the council, which has made a commitment to put the community at the heart of decision-making.



2. What is Community Engagement?

- 2.1. A community is a group of people who have common characteristics. These characteristics may be defined by location (such as a street or a neighbourhood), race, ethnicity, age, occupation, a shared interest (such as local businesses or hobbies) or other common bonds such as religion, faith or belief.
- 2.2. Community engagement is a two-way process which ensures that communities can get involved in the planning, development and delivery of services. Community engagement should go further than just informing and consulting; it should enable local people to feel actively involved in shaping their local area.

3. Topic Review Terms of Reference

3.1. The terms of reference for the review were:

1. To examine Gravesham Council's new and existing community engagement initiatives and identify how the Council can be more effective in engaging with the community.
2. To focus on the Council's engagement with communities and particularly 'hard to reach' and 'new and emerging' groups.
3. To examine the role of Councillors in local community engagement activities and identify opportunities to strengthen and enhance this in the future.
4. To consider how well lessons learnt from consultations are shared across the organisation and with relevant partners.
5. To consider the effectiveness of current procedures to provide feedback to communities on the outcome of consultation and engagement activities.
6. To identify examples of 'good practice' and consider how these could be applied in other parts of the organisation.
7. To consider the scope for undertaking joint community consultation and engagement activities with partner organisations.
8. To recommend to the Cabinet measures for strengthening future community engagement practices.

4. Recommendations

- 4.1 Develop a corporate community engagement strategy to ensure consistency in future exercises and facilitation of Member engagement.
- 4.2 Review and strengthen the Member development programme to encourage a common awareness of the role and deliver training to support this.
- 4.3 Strengthen the local role of Members to facilitate local involvement, focusing on the identification of engagement opportunities and promotion of the Members role within the community.
- 4.4 Consider the ways in which officers communicate with Members to ensure that these mechanisms are 'fit for purpose'.
- 4.5 Develop a member enquiry system to enable officers to give appropriate priority to Member enquiries.

5. Topic Review Methodology

5.1. The review made use of a number of methods to gather evidence on which the review conclusions and recommendations are based:

- 5.1.1. Desk-based research and information gathering to identify best practice in relation to community engagement.
- 5.1.2. Liaison with the Community Cohesion Corporate Officer Working Group to develop a matrix of current engagement activity undertaken by the council.
- 5.1.3. The formation of two review panels involving members of the Overview Scrutiny Committee to:
 1. Enable more detailed analysis and challenge of existing engagement activity of the council, focusing on the outcomes of such activity from the point of view of council officers, Members and those engaged with.
 2. Engage with current Borough Councillors to understand and learn from their experiences of community engagement.

6. Topic Review Methodology

Best practice

6.1. A summary of the research conducted on behalf of Members by the Performance & Policy team is attached at appendix A to this report. Key learning points from this research were:

- Members provide the primary link between the council and the community.
- For Members to be effective in community engagement, it is vital that they hold a good knowledge and understanding of the communities within their Ward.
 - Elected Members should cultivate relationships and contacts with community groups and active people within their Ward.
 - Ward-specific data can be illuminating, particularly for newly elected Members.
- Elected Members will need a range of support from the council to develop their skills and knowledge and to provide them with the necessary tools and information to fulfil their role. Members can also provide support to each other through sharing of knowledge and experience and mentoring.
- Formulating a corporate strategy on community engagement can help to ensure that engagement activity is co-ordinated and carried out effectively, involving the right people.

Current Engagement Activity

6.2. With assistance from the Community Cohesion Corporate Officer Working Group, a matrix was developed capturing information on engagement activity undertaken by the council since 1 April 2011. This demonstrated that:

- Engagement activity tends to be undertaken to help identify or fill a gap in council knowledge, to better understand community issues, to inform specific projects or events or to access funding opportunities for the benefit of the borough.
- The council uses a wide spectrum of methods to engage with its community; the approach will vary depending upon whether the intention of the activity is to inform, consult or engage. Increasingly, engagement activity is taking place within communities.
- Increasingly, engagement activity is being undertaken in partnership with partners and other agencies.
- Member involvement in engagement activity tends to be at a senior level.

6.3. A copy of the engagement activity matrix can be found at appendix B to this report.

Member Review Panel 1

6.4. A Member review panel was convened on 22 January 2013 to consider the current engagement activity undertaken by the council, with a focus on the outcomes of the activity. The review panel consisted of:

Cllr David Turner (Chair)
Cllr Jane Cribbon
Cllr Brian Sangha
Cllr Makhan Singh

6.5. The review panel received information from council officers and representatives from Kent Fire & Rescue Services, the 50+ Forum and Urban Gravesham on the following engagement activities undertaken by the council:

Community Gateway
My Place Matters
50+ Forum
Gravesham Youth Council

6.6. Through discussion and questioning of attendees, the Member review panel concluded that:

- Local member involvement promotes a more positive response from the community.
 - Higher response rates have been experienced where Members have been involved in the physical distribution of questionnaires to residents
- Communities will engage better when approached within their own areas or through existing community groups.

- The timing of engagement events is important to secure a better response rate; people engage better in the warmer months
- The role of the Borough Councillor is not always understood and is often confused with that of County Councillors.
- Local engagement can inspire community actions, though the sustainability of actions after support/activity is withdrawn is not always clear.
- Have partner organisations involved in engagement activity can result in a more co-ordinated and better use of resource.
- It is important to ensure that feedback on any outcomes from community engagement activity is shared with the community.

Member Review Panel 2

6.7. A Member review panel was convened on 5 February 2013 to receive evidence from other elected Members of the council about their experiences of community engagement and to discuss the findings of the research by officers (as outlined at paragraph 6.1). The review panel consisted of:

Cllr Brian Sangha
 Cllr Makhan Singh
 Cllr John Caller
 Cllr Les Howes

6.8. The elected Members of the council attending to give evidence were:

Cllr Gurdip Bungar
 Cllr Colin Caller
 Cllr Brian Francis

6.9. The discussions at the review panel concluded that:

- A number of Councillors appear to be 'reactive' instead of 'proactive' within the community. Within some Wards, Councillors do not work together for the benefit of their local communities.
- Engagement is more effective when it is carried out within the community. To do this effectively, elected Members need to understand their Ward make-up (particularly where there are new and emerging communities), identify and work with active residents and community leaders and establish what engagement methods work best within their Ward.
- Officer support of Members is generally good but there are opportunities to enhance the support offered to better equip Members with the tools, knowledge and skills they are likely to need to be effective in their role.
- The Member Induction Programme should be reviewed to ensure it considers all aspects of the role of members.
- The Gravesham CAN Scheme should provide an effective tool to encourage Members to better understand and engage with their communities.

7. Summary Review Conclusions

- 7.1. Community engagement is and will be critical to ensuring that council resources are effectively used to deliver services to the local community.
- 7.2. The role of Members in local community engagement is pivotal – Members provide a key link to the communities they serve.
- 7.3. The role of Members in community engagement activities needs to be clarified and strengthened.
- 7.4. Members need to be equipped with the right skills and provided with support and assistance to be able to fully embrace this new role. Co-opted Member involvement in Cabinet Committees could also be improved by training and support.
- 7.5. More experienced Members should support the development of newer Members skills through coaching and mentoring.
- 7.6. Members need to be better informed and involved in community engagement activities undertaken by the council.
- 7.7. Members need to look for opportunities within their Ward to engage locally.
- 7.8. Members need to work together within their Wards to provide a more co-ordinated service.
- 7.9. Members receive a timely and effective response to enquiries at Head of Service level, though this is not always consistent at other levels.
- 7.10. The role of Members needs to be promoted to increase public awareness.

Overview Scrutiny Committee – Scrutiny Review of Community Engagement

This document provides the results of initial research carried out on behalf of the Overview Scrutiny Committee's review into community engagement.

The initial research has focused on four main areas:

- What statutory guidance exists in relation to Community Engagement
- What other reviews have been conducted into similar topics
- What Best Practice has been identified in relation to Member involvement in Community Engagement
- What examples of engagement already exist within the council

Community Engagement: Statutory Guidance

At a national level, the previous Labour Government introduced 'The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007' which established upon local government a 'Duty to Inform'. The aim of the duty was to ensure responsible local authorities "*inform, consult and involve citizens (or their representatives) in decision-making where appropriate*". It aimed to "*embed a culture of engagement and empowerment*".

Under the current Coalition Government, a new 'Best Value Duty'¹ was introduced in 2011 which formally repealed the previous Duty to Inform. The principle aim of the streamlined Best Value Duty is to focus on the inclusion of local stakeholders, primarily the voluntary and community sector, in regard to the commissioning or decommissioning of local authority services.

As part of the service evaluation process, this new Best Value Duty established a more 'light touch' framework to engagement and consultation for local authorities; the 'Duty to Consult', originally established via the Local Government Act 1999² (i.e. in regards to community engagement the Coalition Government have reverted back to previous Conservative Government statutory guidance).

The new approach to statutory engagement and consultation is set out below:

"Before deciding how to fulfil their Best Value duty, authorities are under a 'Duty to Consult' representatives of a wide range of local persons; this is not optional. Authorities must consult representatives of council tax payers, those who use or are likely to use services provided by the authority, and those appearing to the authority to have an interest in any area within which the authority carries out functions. Authorities should include local voluntary and community organisations and small businesses in such consultation."

Despite this change in statutory responsibilities via the repeal of the Duty to Involve, local authorities have a clear commitment to engage residents in decisions and promote community empowerment through the 'Big Society' agenda. Specifically for Gravesham, this responsibility has been adopted and enhanced through the Council's 'Community Pledge'.

¹ Best Value Duty: Statutory Guidance - <http://communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1976926.pdf>

² 'Duty to Consult': [Part 1, Section 3\(2\) of the Local Government Act 1999](#)

Overview Scrutiny Committee – Scrutiny Review of Community EngagementOther reviews conducted

Council	Title	Scope
Staffordshire CC	Community Engagement Framework	Workshop held with Members to consider the role of members in community engagement in development of a new engagement strategy for the council.
Buckinghamshire CC	Public Engagement and Corporate Consultation	The review set out to ensure that the County Council had a consistent approach to consultation and engagement, improve opportunities for residents to influence the Council's decision making process and ensure that the results from consultation and engagement exercises are reported consistently. Includes section on the role of councillors.
Rotherham MC	The Community Leadership Role of the Local Councillor	To identify the policies, practices and services which impact upon the Community Leadership role of councillors in order to improve systems of support, training and development for councillors and thus empower the communities in which the people of Rotherham live.
Tower Hamlets	Strengthening Local Community Leadership	To develop Member awareness of national drivers for strengthening the leadership role of Councillors; To develop proposals for strengthening local democracy and external scrutiny in the wider place shaping contest To identify support for Members in exercising their community leadership role and in implementing CCfA.

Overview Scrutiny Committee – Scrutiny Review of Community Engagement

Best Practice in relation to Member involvement in Community Engagement

IDEA – ‘Community Engagement and Empowerment – A Guide for Councillors’ (Best practice examples of knowledge for Members, engagement activity, a ‘how to’ on engagement activity).

Joseph Rowntree Foundation – ‘Ward Councillors and Community Leadership

