
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – PROGRESS UPDATE

Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor John Williams, Leader
Responsible Director – Lorraine O’Donnell, Assistant Chief Executive

Purpose of Report

1. To report progress on implementing the Community Engagement Strategy and make further recommendations on medium term actions to make Darlington Borough Council a more inclusive and engaging Council.

Summary

2. The authority signalled its intention to become a more inclusive and engaging authority by agreeing its first Community Engagement Strategy¹ on 17 April 2007. A report on progress was scheduled for the summer.
3. Although less than three months have passed, progress has already been made and is summarised in this report. This has primarily been achieved through the targeting of existing resource on community engagement through the establishment of the Connecting with Communities Unit and the inclusion of community engagement as a key strand of our organisational development strategy.
4. On these foundations, members of the Cabinet have asked officers to make initial recommendations on how to accelerate progress:
 - (a) to forge closer working relations with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and other stakeholders in the delivery of key strategies and policy documents;
 - (b) in relation to modernising communications;
 - (c) to develop arrangements at neighbourhood level.

Information and Analysis

5. The Community Engagement Strategy agreed six main recommendations:
 - (a) taking a planned approach to engagement, analysing future plans and deciding in advance what level and type of engagement activity is needed;
 - (b) linking the outcomes into the Council’s business planning processes so that we prove what difference engagement is making;

¹ A Bigger Say and a Better Deal for Communities

- (c) defining localities and engagement at area level; modernising communications;
 - (d) capacity building/training work with officers, elected members and stakeholders;
 - (e) developing a programme of medium-term actions, which will be put forward for Council approval in summer 2007.
6. The first recommendation to take a planned approach to engagement has already led to the prioritisation of the following activities over the summer/autumn months:
- (a) be Mayor Aware – consultation and awareness raising for the forthcoming referendum;
 - (b) the new community strategy – a companion report on this agenda introduces the requirement for a process to develop our community strategy which is built on sound consultation and engagement;
 - (c) Talking Together – the initiation of an ongoing process of area based engagement that is described in more detail below.
7. The report on developing the new community strategy makes clear the linkages we want to strengthen between the corporate plan i.e. what we are going to do in the future and the medium term financial plan (MTFP) i.e. how much will it cost and what choices have to be made. The report contains a commitment to robust engagement in this process which is evidence of progress on the second recommendation to link the outcomes of engagement activity directly into the Council’s business planning processes so that it is possible to prove what difference engagement is making to service provision.
8. The two remaining priorities relate to:
- (a) how we work with and serve the public at local level;
 - (b) how we improve two way communication with the public.
9. The remainder of this report sets out initial proposals for agreement and recommends a detailed review to identify further action. To give strategic member steer to this work, a further report on this agenda proposes that a Cabinet portfolio be assigned to oversee area development and engagement.

Closer working Relationships

10. The last Cabinet meeting saw wider participation with the chair of the LSP invited to attend and take part in addition to the leaders of the Conservative group, the Liberal Democrat group and the Independent member, and the chair of Monitoring and Co-ordinating Group. It is also proposed that:
- (a) Cabinet meet with LSP theme group chairs twice a year to review progress in delivering the community strategy and to consult on emerging council policy;

- (b) once a year the Council hold a conference to consult with the public, stakeholders and partners on the draft corporate plan and MTFP;
- (c) clearer and more consistent use is made of the various bodies we consult with, for example: GOLD, the Youth Parliament etc. with invitations to meet with Cabinet members to discuss service developments;
- (d) Cabinet members will undertake a clear programme of visits and engagements with relevant stakeholders, and will provide feedback from these through a range of communication vehicles;
- (e) The Council builds on and improves our work to involve BME communities and takes forward the youth engagement strategy

Modernising Communications

11. Darlington Borough Council has strong foundations to build on in terms of its communications resources, but it is timely to reflect on ways in which our communications promote a better two way dialogue between the Council and the resident. We also need to think about the interest and potential for making greater use of electronic communications such as the internet and mobile phone technologies.
12. The following proposals will, it is believed, create new opportunities for the public to understand how their Council works for them, and be able to participate in policy and decision making
 - (a) once a quarter we will hold a “How your Council Works for You” event, when we invite the public to the Town Hall to see the Chamber, learn the history of the Council, meet the Mayor, and learn how the decision making process works;
 - (b) this will form part of a package of measures to increase awareness and engagement in the democratic process. These will include ideas such as “Mayor for the Day” competition for schools, hosting school council meetings in the Town Hall, Council Question Time, and Cabinet in the Community (meetings in neighbourhood venues);
 - (c) the website to be updated and revised to make it more user friendly, and more engaging, with opportunities for resident consultation and engagement, etc. For example the website and Town Crier could advertise issues coming up at Cabinet meetings and on the forward plan, ask for resident input (perhaps via simple questionnaires or polls) and advise when they will be debated at Cabinet. We could publicise and extend the use of “topic alerts” where key words, e.g. housing/recycling, trigger email communication to residents who have logged an interest in that subject;
 - (d) greater publicity will be given to the existing right of the public to ask questions of a Cabinet member at Council;
 - (e) ensuring that revised communications encapsulates channels such as texting;
 - (f) the Town Crier will be reviewed and revamped to ensure that it offers more opportunities for public involvement, for news on local communities and community

groups, and for information on the outcomes and action taken following consultation. The Leader of the Council in his message in the July issue has invited the public to contribute their ideas to this.

Area Engagement – ‘Talking Together’

13. While Darlington has a compact geography nevertheless there are some differing issues and needs within the areas that make up the borough. In terms of engagement arrangements that have a geographical focus (as against themed groups like GOLD), at present there are twelve Parish Councils and within the Town, eleven Community Partnerships that drive the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy.
14. It is proposed that a framework be established that offers an opportunity for all residents to be involved in looking at the needs of their area. This would have three key functions:
 - (a) to inform the public about the standard of services being delivered in their area;
 - (b) to consult with them about priorities for service improvement, for example in the area of community safety, asking people which are the top three areas for improvement in policing;
 - (c) to inform and consult on other developments either specific to that locality or borough wide, for example new highways schemes or major planning applications.
15. To deliver this goal it is proposed to establish ‘Talking Together drop in sessions’ which could be held quarterly at a different venue in each of the five areas that have been designated for a number of existing services (Street Scene, the Youth Service, Area Policing and Schools Clusters are all working around the same definition of areas). These would be open, informal public events – not meetings that many members of the public find off-putting. They would be co-ordinated by the Connecting with Communities Unit.
16. Members would play a key role in the events, potentially chairing a “question time” type session, or holding a surgery, and being visible and available. The events would have as standard, exhibitions and information on service standards, with officers also available to discuss specific local issues or needs. Consultation material would relate to local or borough wide topics.
17. The value of these drop in sessions will be seen in the way that an ongoing dialogue opens up more opportunities for people to engage with us, without extensive bureaucracy and opening up to a wider body of people than those who wish to commit to participating in more formal arrangements. They will inform improvements in Council services and, more immediately can be used to inform the review of the sustainable Community Strategy. Lastly, shared issues arising from the “Talking Together” locality drop in sessions will inform the development of future engagement activity through focused, time-limited task groups.
18. Services across the local authority will be expected to attend to provide updates on service developments and provide opportunities for members of the community to raise any concerns about a particular aspect of service delivery. Other partners such as the PCT, Police and Fire Service would also be invited – all public services have increasing

expectations for better public involvement to address (the Police are very keen to join up opportunities for public engagement and may therefore assist with resourcing them).

19. Where Community Partnerships exist, or community groups such as Friends of Parks, then they could be invited to participate and support the development of agendas for the event.
20. It is envisaged that 'Talking Together' fun days will be the launch pad for the development of 'Talking Together' locality meetings. Residents attending will be asked if they would like to have their names added to the 'Talking Together' database, ensuring that they get specific invitations to future locality meetings (as well as general publicity through the Town Crier and Northern Echo).

Review of the way the Council works

21. All of the proposals referred to above do not require changes to the constitution and it is important that we continue to make good progress on implementing the community engagement strategy by ensuring that good ideas are implemented quickly. However the work conducted so far does not claim a monopoly on good ideas. It is vital that governance arrangements are fit for purpose, that they are inclusive, engaging and as unbureaucratic as possible, whilst still making accountable decisions in a reasonable time. It is proposed that a review is conducted over the coming months to ensure that our governance arrangements are leading edge.
22. It is proposed that an ad hoc grouping led by the Monitoring and Co-ordination Group be asked to lead a 'task and finish' style review. Given the strategic significance of this piece of work it is proposed that the membership for this topic should include the Leader of the Council, a further representative from the Cabinet, and a representative from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat groups, together with the Independent Councillor on the Council. In the interests of ensuring that the process is as broad and inclusive as possible it is proposed that it be established with scope for nominees in the event of apologies being tendered by the members.
23. This group would be asked to consider and make effective arrangements to ensure that all members, other stakeholders and the public have opportunities to be involved.
24. The review would need to examine opportunities to ensure that Darlington Borough Council functions in a way that is open and inclusive, with processes accessible to residents and stakeholders and with opportunities for wide involvement in its policy and decision making. The effective use of the Scrutiny function would form a part of the review scope.
25. It is hoped that the review could be in a position to make recommendations to Council by January 2008.
26. A separate report on this agenda proposes changes to Cabinet portfolios. These are proposed separately from the review of the constitution to ensure, alongside the review of management arrangements that the council is most effectively structured to deliver against its new direction.

Financial Implications

27. A focus for this work is being given with the establishment of a Connecting with Communities unit. This draws together staff within the Council in order to give a clearer direction to customer services and engagement.
28. Time limited external funding has been secured to help launch Talking Together events and support the consultation for the new Community Strategy.
29. However sustaining the proposals contained within this report will have financial implications. These have not yet been fully explored but will include costs of hiring venues, publicity, and potentially some additional staffing costs (it will be important that consultation takes place at times that suit the public, including weekends and evenings). A further report on this issue will be submitted later in the year as part of the budget process. On the basis that if agreed the Council will be holding around twenty area events each year, together with events to promote more democratic involvement then the costs may be in the region of £100,000 per annum.

Conclusion

30. Many of the proposals within the report can be implemented quickly, and indeed the report proposes that the Talking Together events should be launched this summer. An implementation timetable will be developed.

Outcome of Consultation

31. To date, there have been exploratory discussions with various themed groups of the Local Strategic Partnership as well as with representatives from the voluntary and community sector. Input from staff in a diagonal slice of the organisation has been secured through the Community Engagement Strategy Steering Group.

Legal Implications

32. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

33. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Recommendations

34. Council are requested to endorse the following:

(a) closer working relationships are fostered by:-

- (i) the Cabinet meeting with LSP theme group chairs twice a year to review progress in delivering the community strategy and to consult on emerging council policy;
- (ii) holding a conference once a year to consult with the public, stakeholders and partners on the draft corporate plan and MTFP;
- (iii) making more consistent use of the various bodies such as GOLD, the Youth Parliament etc. to consult different sections of the community on emerging Council policy;
- (iv) holding a quarterly ‘How your Council Works for You’ event, when we invite the public to the Town Hall to see the Chamber, learn the history of the Council, meet the Mayor, and learn how the decision making process works;
- (v) ensuring that the above forms part of a package of measures to increase awareness and engagement in the democratic process. These will include ideas such as “Mayor for the Day” competition for schools, hosting school council meetings in the Town Hall, Council Question Time, and Cabinet in the Community (meetings in neighbourhood venues); and
- (vi) recognising that it is vital to ensure that this work builds on and improves our work to involve BME communities and takes forward the youth engagement strategy;

(b) communications are modernised by:-

- (i) updating and revising the website to make it more user friendly and more engaging, with opportunities for resident consultation and engagement, etc.;
- (ii) giving greater prominence to the existing right of the public to ask questions of a Cabinet member at Council, and developing opportunities to extend this involvement into Cabinet meetings;
- (iii) reviewing and revamping the Town Crier to ensure that it offers more opportunities for public involvement, for news on local communities and community groups, and for information on the outcomes and action taken following consultation;

- (iv) ensuring that revised communications encapsulates channels such as texting;
 - (v) ensuring that the opportunity is taken to improve information flows between officers and ward members; and
 - (vi) establishing the 'Talking Together' roadshows, to be held quarterly at a different venue in the Streetscene areas, with widespread involvement from Members, Council and other public services as a key vehicle to engage with the public at area level;
- (c) it reviews the way in which it works by:-
- (i) inviting the Monitoring and Coordinating Group to establish an ad hoc group to undertake a 'task and finish' review of governance arrangements for the Council;
 - (ii) defining the membership of this group to include the Leader of the Council, a further representative from the Cabinet, and a representative from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat groups, together with the Independent Councillor on the Council;
 - (iii) agreeing that there should be scope for nominees in the event of apologies being tendered by the Members; and
 - (iv) ensuring that the review examines opportunities to ensure that Darlington Borough Council functions in a way that is open and inclusive, with processes accessible to residents and stakeholders and with opportunities for wide involvement in its policy and decision making. The effective use of the scrutiny function would form a part of the review scope; and
- (d) it be noted that the ongoing resource implications of the implementation of the Community Engagement Strategy will be examined within the 2008/09 MTFP development.

Reasons

35. The recommendations are supported by the following reason: to accelerate our progress on community engagement.

Lorraine O'Donnell
Assistant Chief Executive

Background Papers

No Background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

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