
OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES AND ENGAGEMENT PORTFOLIO

Purpose of Report

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work under my Communities and Engagement Portfolio.

Community Engagement

2. In November, 185 people attended two public Talking Together events to talk about budget proposals with fellow members of the Cabinet, supported by senior officers. Added to these were well over 200 people who contacted us via phone, freepost, email, online forum, twitter, Facebook and in person to express their views and opinions on the Council's budget proposals. The proposals around culture were the biggest focus of debate across all communication channels. All the feedback received will be considered as part of Cabinet and Council's budget decision-making processes.

Impact Assessment

3. Complementing the wide public engagement on the budget proposals was specific engagement activity with target groups to understand more about the likely impact of the budget proposals. 28 older people and 59 disabled people worked with us to explore these impacts. There was much debate about the cumulative effects that some of the negative impacts may have on some people. Transport and adult social care emerged as key concerns for both of these groups. Further work to assess impact is needed in January/February to inform Cabinet and Council's budget decision-making processes. This will include one-to-one work with customers of adult social services, where appropriate.

Fair Share

4. The Fair share priorities document has been reviewed and priorities for the rest of the programme discussed. These priorities will then form the basis of the future work of the programme. A project relating to a prefabricated building erected by community representatives in Northgate is progressing and Groundwork have been supporting initial feasibility work.
5. Plans are being developed for community-based projects for the remaining funding to ensure that none of the funding is lost and that the priorities of local communities are met. Community workers are supporting the group to bring forward these projects to successful agreement at the Fairshare Panel and in line with Council priorities.

Community Partnerships

6. Community workers continue to support groups to meet existing grant requirements and ensure that they are not at risk of having funding withdrawn.
7. As part of our approach outcome-based accountability we are supporting tobacco control work which will involve Branksome Community Partnership as one of the key members of the stakeholder group. This is at an early stage at the moment but is looking at issues relating to the supply of tobacco not just the impact that smoking has on health.

Community Solutions

8. From the beginning of November Community Workers in the Connecting with Communities team have been working to provide capacity to develop social capital around the budget proposals. This work is being done in order to offer options for the future as a result of the coalition government's cuts to Council budgets. Work in recent weeks has included:
 - (a) researching income opportunities for new models for the provision of tourist information;
 - (b) planning and supporting the delivery of a library needs assessment using a variety of engagement channels;
 - (c) researching community enterprise in the field of community transport;
 - (d) helping to deliver an agreed action plan to support self-management of local authority allotment sites;
 - (e) supporting engagement and forward planning activities with bowling clubs;
 - (f) facilitating the development of new "friends" groups;
 - (g) working to identify options for securing various forms of support for arts centre user organisations;
 - (h) working with partners to develop events as part of the Heritage Lottery-funded bandstand project.
 - (i) engaging in equalities impact assessment work.

Welfare Rights

9. 44 new enquiries (including five anonymous ones) were opened during October and 40 closed. At the end of October the total caseload for the team was 176 cases. £71,912.48 in additional benefits was secured for clients. The total for the year to date is £478,558.92. The overall target is lower than expected performance. This is due to the way that changes in the benefits system mean that awards are now lower and cases tend to take longer.

Third Sector Development

10. A great deal of current work in this area relates to looking at the impact of budget proposals on the sector. In some cases this is making people aware of the potential loss of funding but in other cases it is in involving them in developing potential solutions and new ways of delivering.
11. An event was held with Chairs and Chief Officers of third sector organisations at eVOLution, which included over thirty representatives. At this meeting the group talked through the budget proposals as set out in the Town Crier and discussed how they could help and support future developments. They also raised a number of concerns including the risks

that TUPE poses to the transfer of contracts for delivery. This issue will be picked up as part of the Targeted Support Fund work taking place in July.

LINK

12. Discussion is taking place about the move from LINK to Healthwatch at a regional level. The local authority contract leads have met to discuss the risks of morphing the existing arrangements into a new Healthwatch with the additional responsibilities of advocacy and complaints. These challenges will happen in the context of a far-reaching change to the public health agenda as a result of the coalition government's White Paper.
13. LINK have been supporting work to review mental health day services and obtaining the views of service users and carers. This will support the move to a more personalised service in the longer term.

Community Advice Project (CAP)

14. The work of CAP is continuing and there is now a full staff team as the new partnership development and take-up officer is now in place. There is ongoing work to re-profile the budget as there was an under spend because of staff vacancies.
15. Work is developing to focus on the most vulnerable older people to meet one of the key outcomes. The partnership is currently involved in a take-up campaign with Anchor Trust focussing on over 75 year olds and will commence work in January with Lifeline to focus on the needs of their over 75 year-old customers. This work is being undertaken with Age UK and the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

Web Team

16. During the recent period of heavy snow the Web Team temporarily adjusted its working pattern to operate from 6:30am to 10pm so that it could update the Council's website and Social Network profiles (Facebook and Twitter) with information about school closures and disruptions to other Council services.
17. The immediate impact of this work was a four fold increase in the number of visitors to the Corporate Website between 28th November and 3rd December. The number of visits reached 103,914 and the number of page views exceeded 271,000.
18. The number of people who signed up to receive instant alerts through Facebook and Twitter grew from 1,308 to 3,634. This has led to the Council having one of the most popular local authority Facebook profiles in the country.
19. Feedback from the public through Facebook indicates that the provision of information online about schools closures and disruptions to Council services has helped to reduce the number of people who attempted to telephone the Council or schools for information.
20. There were a large number of positive comments received from the public about the provision of the extended online service during this period. As a result the Web Team aims to offer a similar service during future occurrences of bad weather.

Councillor Andy Scott
Cabinet Member with Communities and Engagement Portfolio