

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE GROUP DECEMBER 2007

A REVIEW OF TALKING TOGETHER

Purpose of Paper

1. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the effectiveness of the first round of Talking Together and make some recommendations about future improvements.

Background

2. The delivery of the first round of Talking Together was a key part of the Council's commitment to improving the way that it engages with the people it serves. It was one of three pieces of strategic engagement organised by the Council's new Connecting with Communities team in 2007. Delivery was supported by the involvement of Darlington PCT, Durham Constabulary, Darlington Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, Durham Police Authority, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service, Groundwork and Arriva.
3. Talking Together was, and remains, focused on reaching those who would not normally turn up for a formal meeting. There were no printed agendas and the atmosphere was informal and tried to "break the mould" of the way the Council has engaged with the public in the past. In summary, the aims of Talking Together were fourfold.
 - a) provide local opportunities for residents to raise concerns about service provision;
 - b) consult and involve residents in running services and help shape the service planning process;
 - c) inform residents about the quality of services in their area and consult on priorities for service improvements;
 - d) inform and consult residents on other developments, either specific to the locality or borough-wide.
4. The first round took the form of five community events at the following locations:
 - a) North West: Willow Road Community Centre, Saturday 27th October
 - b) South West: Hurworth Primary School, Wednesday 31st October
 - c) North East: Haughton Education Village, Saturday 3rd November
 - d) Central: Northlands Methodist Church Hall, Wednesday 7th November,
 - e) South East: Dodmire Junior School, Saturday 10th November
5. Promotional activity relating to the events was high profile. Media coverage was secured in the form of two pieces of Northern Echo editorial, repeated event promotion through Alpha Radio, two consecutive months of trailer announcements in the Town Crier and homepage-linked content on the Council's website. This was backed-up with an email communications announcement to staff at the Council, Cummins, Darlington Building Society, Orange and British Rail Pensions Office. 12,000 letters went home to the parents and guardians of children at all of Darlington's nursery, primary and secondary schools. A further 1,500 letters were sent to community activists through Community

Partnerships, GOLD and Sustainable Community Strategy consultation databases. To ensure penetration to households in the immediate vicinity of each event, leaflet drops were organised for the 200 or so properties nearest each venue.

6. This activity translated into attendance by 196 adult residents and 250 children at the five first round events; an average of around 40 adults and 50 children at each event.
7. The events shared a common format with the use of a large indoor space for informal interactions around individual information stands. Free children’s activities were provided in this room to facilitate attendance by parents and guardians. Another, usually adjacent and smaller, room was used for the discussion sessions, which were chaired by a different member of Cabinet at each event.
8. Attendance from members of the public at these discussion sessions varied from two to around 15. The timing of this event was quite flexible according to activity levels in the main hall. Discussion here covered a wide range of topics and extended beyond the “cleaner and greener” agenda that many expected to be the main areas of interest. Debate ranged around issues including, amongst others: play provision, traffic and congestion, litter and public health, youth provision, health, policing and community development.

Analysis

9. Views on how Talking Together fulfilled its aims and met people’s expectations were sought from members of the public, staff including CMT councillors and partner agencies.
10. 21 residents completed an evaluation questionnaire. 18 rated the event as “excellent” or “good” and one as “fair”. Two people did not answer that question. Residents made three main suggestions for improvements:

Suggestions for improvement	Comment on implementation
a) More crafts and children’s activities	This is part of the initiative and Officers will pursue options for round two.
b) Improve access for disabled people to the event	Implement for round two by rationalising the number of stalls where appropriate. Connecting with Communities continues to ensure that all venues used are accessible for disabled people.
c) Larger font on advertising posters.	Implement for round two.

11. Informal engagement with residents revealed that many thought the event worthwhile because they had the convenience of being able to speak to senior representatives of different agencies in one room at one time. One woman expressed her pleasant surprise at being able to put her questions to the Chief Executive of the Council in person and receive instant replies. Another commented, “Let’s meet more often. I think its brilliant. It’s an education for everyone.”
12. Detailed feedback from staff involved in the events raised a number of concrete suggestions for improvement. It was felt that comments could be made with more confidence because they were backed-up with evidence from the experience of running

five separate events in different locations. These are summarised in the table below. Overall, there was a feeling that the first round of events represented a strong and innovative start to the process.

Suggestion for improvement	Comment on implementation
a) Ensure more space for visitors in the main exhibition area.	Finding suitable venues in each ward is challenging. The number of stands could be rationalised at smaller venues.
b) Develop a themed approach to events so the people know the kinds of issues that will be focused on.	Incorporate these themes into publicity material where appropriate for round two.
c) Reduce the number of staff at events.	Implement for round two.
d) Introduce interactive “health check” sessions through the PCT.	PCT to organise for round two.
e) Develop follow-up case studies with those attending the event to see if they had their questions answered and any action needed was carried out.	Implementation possible through collaboration with Communications Unit. Test an approach for round two.
f) Develop a cross-partner communication plan	Implementation by Communication Unit, David Plews (Communities and Social Inclusion Manager) and Amanda Dexter (Partnerships, Public and Patients Engagement Manager), Darlington PCT.
g) Police to use Neighbourhood Watch network and Crime ring to publicise events	Inspector Brian Maudling to implement for round 2.
h) Examine feasibility of delivering publicity material to every home in the ward in which the event is being held rather than just adjacent housing.	David Plews to examine costs for round two.
i) Examine the feasibility of establishing sponsorship support for Talking Together	Michelle Parkes (Sponsorship Manager (Leisure and Arts)) to advise.
j) Involve the Voluntary and Community Sector where appropriate	CAB to be involved in round two.

13. Further to comments received by staff and members of the public, elected members have submitted their opinions either using a standard form submitted by email or at one of two elected member de-briefing sessions held at 3.30pm and 5.30pm on Thursday 6th December.

14. Not surprisingly, members felt that it was the views of members of the public rather than their own that should be used to decide the success of the events. They voiced some concerns about the precise location of some of the venues but the point was also made that it is the opportunity for people to engage and the quality of that engagement that may be more important than the actual number of people who attend a particular event. These and other observations have been translated into suggestions for improvement below.

Suggestions for improvement	Comment on implementation
a) Consider use of St Augustine’s Church and St Thomas Aquinas Church Hall as a venue for the future.	To be considered for subsequent rounds according to availability and having the appropriate access for disabled people.
b) Consider further venue options for Faverdale.	To be considered for subsequent rounds in the light of councillors’ suggestions
c) Ensure that discussion sessions continue to be co-ordinated rather than formally chaired.	This links to the staff suggestion about refining the way that the discussion session operates - see staff suggestion for improvement (e) above
d) Try to develop stronger support for the discussion session.	Examine feasibility of extending the direct mail campaign for round two
e) Examine the feasibility of using more public noticeboards.	This may not be necessary if the direct mail campaign can be extended.
f) Councillors encouraged to wear name badges so that they are clearly identifiable by members of the public	Implementation through liaison with Democratic Services for round two
g) Emphasise that action rather than just discussion can arise from residents’ involvement in Talking Together	This can be implemented through staff suggestion for improvement (f) above

15. Time pressures meant that evaluation work has mainly concentrated on areas for improvement, but a fuller analysis of the issues should bear in mind some of the strengths of Talking Together that were mentioned by various people who were involved with round one:

- a) residents have a chance to meet elected members and senior staff from local agencies in an informal environment to have their say;
- b) the events represent a chance for everyone to put faces to names;
- c) the Council is now beginning to have a tangible presence in all the wards it serves;
- d) independent witnesses described the events as having a “real buzz” – they generated a “feelgood” factor among those attending;
- e) 86% of those who responded were happy with the quality of the event;
- f) the children’s party bags and children’s activities were extremely popular;
- g) councillors and officers met some new people with whom they had not engaged before;
- h) attendees perceived the events to be “professional” and well-organised.

Conclusion

16. When making recommendations for the future it must also be borne in mind that the development of Talking Together may be limited by a number of constraints.

- a) time commitment from officers representing partner agencies;
- b) availability of venues;
- c) the weather on the day of the event;
- d) finite financial resources;
- e) external events that may affect the way that the public perceive and wish to engage with the Council and its partners;
- f) limited capacity for engagement amongst some communities.

17. It is clear that there are a number of tweaks to the way that Talking Together events are produced that should lead to improvements in subsequent rounds. Principally, these relate to improving the focus of events, using some different venues, encouraging stronger public support for the events and ensuring that Talking Together is perceived to be about getting answers which lead to action. The actions required to deliver these improvements are summarised in an action plan at the end of this report. For clarity, this identifies lead officers and deadlines.
18. The recruitment of a Community Engagement Co-ordinator and Facilitator will allow the organisation of the Talking Together programme to be fully mainstreamed into the work of Connecting with Communities and will ensure a consistency of approach.

Looking further ahead

19. The main challenge in the delivery of Talking Together in the future will be to keep the format fresh enough to continue to sustain interest from our partners and, more importantly, residents. This will necessitate exploration of other ways of facilitating interaction in localities at the programme matures. Future areas for consideration include:
 - a) using outdoor events (e.g. markets, summer fairs and family events);
 - b) live engagement through new media (e.g. live video vox pops)
 - c) the theming of events and the targeting of them at particular communities of interest and identity as well as geographical communities;
 - d) developing a capacity to engage amongst communities whose voices are rarely heard;
 - e) examining sponsorship opportunities.
20. It is right to reserve a fuller consideration of these issues until a body of evidence about the effectiveness of the current approach is given time to establish. Any new initiative needs time to fully prove its worth.

Recommendations

21. The need to deliver the recommended actions below is important to ensure that Talking Together continues to have the best chance of success in the short-term.

Issue	Action	Lead	Deadline
Improving focus	1. Rationalise number and size of stalls at smaller venues to improve public access	Sharon Brown	21/12/07
	2. Incorporate a themed approach into publicity material where appropriate for round two.	David Plews	21/12/07
	3. Reduce the number of staff at events.	David Plews	21/12/07
	4. Introduce interactive “health check” sessions through the PCT.	Ken Ross	21/12/07
	5. Provide chair’s briefing for the discussion session so that the content of discussion here can link back to the themes of the event stands. Members and CMT to comment on this option.	Sharon Brown/ David Plews	tbc
Encouraging stronger public support	6. Police to use Neighbourhood Watch network and Crime Ring to publicise events	Insp Brian Maudling	21/12/07
	7. Examine feasibility of extending the direct mail campaign for round two to develop more support for the discussion session	David Plews	21/12/07
	8. Examine feasibility of delivering publicity material to every home in the ward in which the event is being held rather than just adjacent housing.	Sue Davison	21/12/07
	9. Involve the Voluntary and Community Sector where appropriate	David Plews	21/12/07
	10. Examine the feasibility of establishing sponsorship support for Talking Together	Michelle Parkes (Leisure and Arts) to advise.	21/12/07
	11. Develop a cross-partner communication plan	Alison Lewis, David Plews and Amanda Dexter	Jan 08
	12. Develop follow-up case studies with those attending the event. Implementation through collaboration with Communications Unit. Test an approach for round two.	Steve Jones/ Alison Lewis	Jan 08
	13. Councillors to wear name badges so that they are clearly identifiable by members of the public	Linda Todd	15/1/08
	14. Consider use of St Augustine’s Church and St Thomas Aquinas Church Hall as a venue for the future.	Community Engage-ment Co-ordinator	April 08
	15. Consider further venue options for Faverdale.	Community Engagement Co-ordinator	April 08

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