

STRATEGIC SENIOR OFFICERS GROUP

31 OCTOBER 2007

COMMUNITY FORUM UPDATE

REPORT FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TASK GROUP

Purpose of the report

1. To update the Group on the work of the Community Engagement Task Group and in particular to report on developing thinking on how to review Community Forums.

Background

2. At the last meeting, SSOG agreed a proposal by the Task Group to
 - review the first set of Community Forums to share learning experiences; and,
 - undertake a fuller review of the Community Forums and their added value after the first cycle of 3 meetings of the Forums in each district has been completed.

At its meeting on September 26th the Task Group considered how best to take this forward.

Learning from 1st round of meetings

3. Except for the existing forums in Oadby & Wigston and Harborough the initial round of Forum meetings will be for a Core Membership of elected representatives (Parish / District / County) only. In some Districts a small number of key community organisations and/or LSP Board members have also been invited to attend. The discussions with the core membership in Melton, Blaby, Charnwood, Northwest Leicestershire and Hinckley & Bosworth will inform the way their local forums develop. In particular, they will provide an opportunity for members to:
 - discuss future membership, in particular widening the membership to include non-elected community representatives;
 - agree the Terms of reference;
 - agree the frequency of meeting and pattern of meetings (ie rotation);
 - discuss structure of meetings, including handling public participation
 - agree principles for conduct at meetings;
 - (agree process to) elect a Chairperson for the Forum;
 - Discuss the key issues and priorities in the area.

4. Preceding these initial meetings, a series of induction sessions have been held for District & County Councillors and for Parish Councillors & Clerks.
Again, these sessions have been important in capturing issues and expectations that will help shape the operation of the Forums.
5. Feedback from the initial meetings and the induction sessions will be reported to District LSPs and the emerging Agenda Groups that are being established to co-ordinate the agenda setting and operation of Community Forums for each District.

Framework for assessing the impact of Community Forums

6. A review of community forums should aim to answer the questions
 - what value they are adding;
 - what improvements they are achieving;
 - how different practices are impacting on the above;
 - what practical steps partners and District LSPs can take to improve the effectiveness of their forums.
7. To be able to review Community Forums towards the end of 2008 / early 2009 there is a need for a framework to assess the impact of Community Forums. The Leicestershire Together Neighbourhood Engagement Policy identified 3 key reasons for building strong links with neighbourhoods. They:
 - (a) allow local people to shape and influence service delivery leading to more responsive services and greater public satisfaction in those services;
 - (b) are a strong thread running through the plans of the Government for achieving better service outcomes for the whole population; and,
 - (c) enable County and District Council Members to carry out their role as local champions more effectively.
8. From this it follows that the impact of Community Forums should be measured in terms of:
 - level of engagement and perceived quality of engagement, including with the public;
 - outcomes achieved with regards to issues raised / recommendations made by Community Forums;
 - Satisfaction levels among County and District Councillors.
9. Box 1 provides an overview of potential indicators to be used in the review of Community Forums. Most of the indicators can be collated through data that will be collated as a matter of course, but as much of the impact of Forums can only be measured in qualitative terms, there may be a need to use Surveys. In some cases it may also be useful to take a 'baseline' measure.

Box 1 – Key Indicators for measuring impact of Community Forums

Measuring engagement

- attendance levels
 - nr. of councillors in attendance (District, County, parish)
 - nr. of community representatives &
 - attendance by public
- use of the Community Forum websites
- measuring awareness of Community Forums

Measuring impact

- range of topics discussed and presentations given
- nr. of recommendations responded to within reasonable time
- overview of outcomes achieved as a result

Measuring satisfaction / quality of engagement

- public confidence
 - ie through the LAA target on % feel they can influence
- Forum member & public participant satisfaction
 - ie 'are meetings worth attending'
- County / District councillor satisfaction
 - extent to which it supports role of community champion
- community representative satisfaction
 - parish councillors
 - other reps
- Service Delivery Agencies satisfaction & engagement

Identifying areas for improvement & sharing good practice

10. It will be important to use the review to identify how Community Forums can be further improved and to drive the implementation of measures to achieve this. The review can also be used to share and implement good practice. District LSPs will play a key role in participating in the review and acting on its results & recommendations.
11. To assess the impact of different practices in the function, operation and support for forums, it will also be important to compare results regarding value added and impact across Community Forums and for different levels of Geography: Per District and for rural areas, towns and priority neighbourhoods

Next steps

12. The SSOG Community Engagement task group will:
 - analyse the feedback from the initial round of meetings and formulate recommendations to support the effective introduction and further development of Community Forums in 2008;
 - prepare a review of Community Forums along the lines set out above once each Forum has met 3 times (winter 08/09);

- develop a baseline survey for Parish, District and County Councillors to check their expectations towards Community Forums and to measure how they currently feel able to influence local service delivery for a range of services.

Recommendations

13. SSOG is recommended to note this report.

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