

MINUTES of a meeting of the COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY TASK AND FINISH GROUP held in the Board Room, Council Offices, Coalville on WEDNESDAY, 22 OCTOBER 2014

Present: Councillors V Richichi, S Sheahan and M Specht

In Attendance: Councillor J G Coxon

Officers: Mrs M Meredith and Ms K Talbot

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

As all Members of the Task and Finish Group were not present, it was agreed that a Chairman be elected for this meeting only and that the election of Chairman be reconsidered at the next meeting.

It was moved by Councillor V Richichi, seconded by Councillor S Sheahan and

RESOLVED THAT:

Councillor M Specht be elected Chairman of the Task and Finish Group for the remainder of the meeting.

2. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Noted.

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence received.

4. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no interests declared.

5. CONFIRMATION OF TASK AND FINISH GROUP REMIT

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager referred Members to section 1.2 of the report considered by Policy Development Group which set out the remit of the Task and Finish Group as follows:

“To create a working party to investigate the effectiveness of current methods of consultation measured against the aims of the Community Engagement Strategy and to suggest any improvements as required and to highlight areas where consultation works well”.

6. PAST CONSULTATION ACTIVITY

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager gave an overview and explanation of the different levels of community engagement which were outlined in the Community Engagement Strategy. She highlighted examples of effective consultation under each level as follows:

Empowering

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager stated that this was the highest level of engagement. She advised that the Council had developed its community rights processes and already had areas engaged in neighbourhood planning and nominating assets of

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community value, as had happened with the Storey Arms in Osgathorpe, for example. She explained that this legal process gave the community the opportunity to purchase assets of community value if they were put up for sale.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that this process was currently underway regarding the car park in Donisthorpe.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager advised that 5 sites had already been listed as assets of community value. She highlighted that the Community Focus Team had offered support to community groups for some years and had supported small and large scale projects, such as Whitwick Coffee Shop which had since gone on to deliver Talent Match support and training as part of a wider consortium to young people in North West Leicestershire who are not in education, employment or training.

Participating

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager stated that this level was about mobilising the community to help the Council decide what to do, for example, the tenant forums had helped to influence the way in which the Housing service was run. She added that the Council also delivered the Supporting Leicestershire Families in conjunction with Leicestershire County Council. Service users had highlighted difficulties they were experiencing with completing housing benefit and housing application forms. This information will help shape the service provided and the working group will assist with reviewing the application forms.

Involving

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager stated that the aim of this level was to bring people together to talk about issues. She advised that the Council hosts Parish Liaison Meetings. She added that the focus had shifted over the past 12 months towards joint working, with the Parish Councils being asked to set the agenda. She advised that the meeting taking place this month would be discussing developing an approach to Leicestershire County Council's reductions in grass cutting. She highlighted that the Council also provided financial support to Voluntary Action Leicestershire.

Consulting

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager explained that the Council undertook a lot of consultation and highlighted the routine consultations on service developments by Leisure. She highlighted that the Council can also utilise Citizen Space to run surveys and consultations online. She advised that this facility had been utilised on 44 occasions in the last 2 years to undertake 15 consultations. She commented that this facility could be utilised more; however it was difficult to say if this was due to officers being unaware. She added that the Council had increased face to face contact, and highlighted the consultation which had taken place on the Local Plan whilst at Measham Heart of the Forest Festival, Coalville's Picnic in the Park and Castle Donington's Music in the Park. In 2014, officers had attended 3 events and had engaged with over 400 residents.

Informing

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager commented that informing was the more traditional way of working with residents. She advised that the Council had a range of leaflets available and had improved the way in which it informs residents about key issues. She added that the basis of the discussion was how this could be built upon.

7. GROUP DISCUSSION

Councillor S Sheahan asked how it was decided what form of engagement was the most appropriate, and how it was ensured that this was right first time.

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The Stronger and Safer Team Manager stated that the key was being realistic about what information you are seeking. She added that it was difficult to say how you should decide what the most appropriate form of engagement; however the highest possible level of consultation should be aimed for.

Councillor S Sheahan asked if this needed to be set out in the strategy to ensure that officers could aspire to it.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager acknowledged that this could be set out more clearly in the strategy.

Councillor M Specht referred to the Leisure consultations and sought clarification on whether this was surveys sent or conducted in the Leisure Centre. If these surveys were sent out, this would give a measure of the response rate.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager agreed to clarify this and provide the information to Members.

Councillor M Specht commented that personally he found the community engaged quite well face to face, when gazebos were situated in the precinct for example. He asked if the Council was doing enough face to face engagement and whether more could be done.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager commented that there was definitely room for improvement. She referred to the consultation on the rival market policy which had been put out with a very short timescale as an example of where the right form of consultation had been utilised, however respondents had been given too short a timescale to reply. She added that following complaints from the Parish Council, this had been addressed.

Councillor V Richichi sought clarification on whether the financial assistance to community groups such as the Whitwick Coffee Shop came from the Council or whether the Council offered a signposting service to other organisations.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager advised that mostly the assistance provided to community groups was signposting through the grant finder service. She explained that the assistance required by the Whitwick Coffee Shop was with setting up a constitution and signposting to help them secure funding. She added that the aim was always to bring external funding into the district. The cost to the Council was in officer time or small scale support such as printing leaflets.

In response to a question from Councillor M Specht, the Stronger and Safer Team Manager confirmed that the Whitwick Coffee Shop was a not for profit organisation and that Talent Match was funded through the National Lottery project.

Councillor V Richichi asked if there was a limit to how much support the Council offered to community groups.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager advised that officers had had to be realistic with competing demands and reduce the amount of time they offered in support, and officers now signposted to external services as much as possible. She added that there were examples where additional support had been given, such as credit unions, where there was a real benefit to the whole community.

Councillor S Sheahan suggested that the best results were achieved when officers and Members were working side by side, and consideration had to be given to how that could be achieved. He felt that it was right to have a broad strategy with a hierarchy in terms of the levels on engagement. He commented that it was difficult to come up with an 'off the peg' solution and engagement needed to be tailored to the individual circumstances. He

Chairman's signature

added that the relationship with housing tenants had come a long way and there were permanent structures in place there. He felt however that it was not always best to push issues out to tenants and felt there should be more of a collaborative effort with scrutiny. He concluded that he fully agreed with the hierarchy and with aiming for the highest level of engagement, but he did not agree with seeking to move towards a standardised approach.

Councillor M Specht referred to the legal duty to involve outlined in the strategy which had come into effect in 2009. He commented that the chart showed this happening in 2008 so presumably the Council had already commenced this prior to the legislation taking effect.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager stated that she felt one of the areas which needed to be reviewed was how success was measured.

Councillor M Specht concurred with those comments and noted that the figures in respect of the annual residents survey from 2011 were still listed as to be confirmed. He asked why these had not been updated.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager advised that she would clarify when these measures were last made as she was not certain that the annual residents survey had taken place due to economic factors. She commented that this may not be the best measure of success and asked Members to consider a more appropriate and more easily quantifiable measure. She added that it would also be more meaningful to state what action had been taken as a result of the consultation.

Councillor M Specht asked if there were any forthcoming consultation exercises.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager advised that the £20,000-for-Seven grant scheme was now open for applications.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that he suspected there was not much choice in many areas.

Councillor M Specht added that there had not been a lot of time to apply for this scheme either and he had received a lot of complaints about this.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager stated that she would feed this back and added that these were valid comments.

Councillor S Sheahan asked if the projects which had automatically qualified for the funding due to lack of competition had been evaluated.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager advised that all projects were required to meet certain criteria

Councillor S Sheahan commented that the process was not terribly transparent.

Councillor J G Coxon commented the community forums were referred to in the strategy.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager advised that the community forums were no longer held. She added that she could show the sections of the strategy that were no longer relevant in track changes for the next meeting if this would assist Members.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that when the community forums had been set up, the District Council had wanted to do something similar. He wondered whether the District Council might want to fill the gap now that Leicestershire County Council had withdrawn.

Chairman's signature

He added that having said that, he had been sceptical about their longevity when they were established and he felt that perhaps the format may have run out of steam.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager agreed to look into this.

In response to a question from Councillor M Specht, the Democratic Services Officer advised that Vision magazine was no longer in publication.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that the Local Plan consultation was a very live issue, and was probably the most important consultation the Council would undertake in the near future. He emphasised the need to get this right.

In response to a question from Councillor M Specht, the Stronger and Safer Team Manager agreed to provide further information about how many communities were engaging at the next meeting.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that the Local Plan Advisory Committee and the Council would want to know what was the most appropriate way to consult residents on the Local Plan. He wondered if it would be appropriate for the Task and Finish Group to take a view, or whether it would be sufficient to state that the consultation should be of the highest level where possible and allow the Local Plan Advisory Committee to form its own view.

Councillor V Richichi referred to the measuring success section of the strategy and commented that he felt NI3 and NI4 were the most important measures. He asked if the annual residents survey was undertaken nationally.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager stated that she would look into this and advise Members accordingly.

Councillor V Richichi commented that if people felt they were able to influence decisions and participate, this would raise their satisfaction level with the Council as a whole.

8. PROPOSED CHANGES TO CONSULTATION STRATEGY DOCUMENT

It was agreed that the Stronger and Safer Team Manager would produce a version of the consultation strategy document for the next meeting which would provide a more meaningful basis for discussion.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager reiterated the points that Members had emphasised in the group discussion, that the strategy should state that engagement should be carried out at the highest possible level, and there should be more face to face interaction.

Councillor M Specht emphasised that it was crucial to know how many surveys had been issued so that the return rate could be measured.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that it should be more implicit that the levels of engagement were a hierarchy, and he felt that there should be a new category at the top called Partnership; which could take the form of engagement with housing associations or tenants associations. He asked that this be considered as he felt that this was already done in practice but may not be regarded as engagement.

Councillor M Specht commented that a prime example of this was the engagement with Parish Councils on the grass cutting. He felt that Parish Councils were working with the District Council in partnership and vice versa.

Chairman's signature

Councillor S Sheahan added that this could bring benefits in service delivery.

Councillor V Richichi asked if the general public's views would be sought in developing the strategy.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager felt that the general public's views should be sought if the strategy was about consultation.

Councillor V Richichi commented that he could not see how the public could really get involved and added that this was a mammoth task unless roadshows took place to get people interested.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager took the comments on board; however she was mindful of the timescales in that the Task and Finish Group were to report back to Policy Development Group in January. She suggested that the redrafted strategy could be written by the group and and Citizen Space could then be utilised to measure whether people were satisfied with the way in which they are able to influence services.

9. AGENDA FOR NEXT MEETING

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager reiterated the items which had been raised during the discussion:

- A revised draft engagement strategy
- Updated figures in respect of survey return rates

Councillor M Specht sought clarification on the current stage of the Local Plan consultation. He asked the Stronger and Safer Team Manager to ascertain how many people had made representations to the Council in respect of the Local Plan, and if this was very low, engagement needed to be increased before the close of the consultation.

The Stronger and Safer Team Manager agreed to provide further information and a timetable in respect of the consultation at the next meeting.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that it would also be useful to look at good practice from other local authorities with some practical examples.

10. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

It was agreed that the next meeting of the Task and Finish Group would take place at 6.30pm on Wednesday, 19 November.

The meeting commenced at 6.33 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 7.24 pm

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