

PRINCIPAL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

5 June 2006

SCRUTINY REVIEW – COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

REPORT OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INFORMAL SCRUTINY GROUP

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RECENT REFERENCES:

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Principal Scrutiny Committee agreed in July 2005 to set up an Informal Scrutiny Group to look at how the Council communicates and engages with the community. The Group commenced its work in December 2005 and has taken evidence from a number of officers, Councillors and representatives from other organisations and the community.

In the course of its work the Group has identified many examples of good engagement, ranging from the extensive communications exercise in support of the Alternative Weekly Collection pilot through to one-off meetings in individual Parishes to explain issues of local concern. The Group also identified communication and engagement that had been less successful, where messages had been confused, meetings poorly attended and agreed service standards for responding to correspondence not met. Examples of wider good practice were also considered, drawing on both national and local evidence.

The Group concluded that the Council is most effective where communications are well planned, using appropriate and varied methods of engagement, with a clear focus on the message and good project management of the exercise.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the following issues be referred to Cabinet for consideration:

1. That, the Council prepares a rolling Public Engagement Plan that includes notice of public consultations and engagement envisaged in the next six months.
2. That, on important issues, the Council uses a variety of methods to advise the public of the public engagement process, with a toolkit of such methods being prepared for use by officers.
3. That each public engagement exercise is well planned with clear goals, an adequate time scale, sufficient resources and a good promotional programme.
4. That the results of each Citizens Panel consultation are made available to relevant scrutiny panels to discuss.
5. That the Cabinet is clear as to which Member is accountable for public engagement, public consultations and communications.

6. That public engagement outside the town of Winchester is improved through working with clusters of parishes and/or with public forum meetings in geographic areas on the lines of the Winchester Town Forum. This would help the Council to achieve progress in neighbourhood empowerment the Government is seeking without creating another layer of government.
7. That the Council encourages and supports communities to prepare Parish (or neighbourhood) Plans, with clear procedures to allow issues raised to be reported back to the City Council and Winchester District Strategic Partnership.
8. That the Corporate Management Team is urged to consider whether it would be useful to name a senior manager as the chief contact point for parishes or groups of parishes.
9. That the Corporate Communications Team approve all Council publications, standard letters and one-off letters intended for wide distribution and be asked to review the wording of statutory notices.
10. That training in letter writing is reviewed.
11. That officers are urged to improve their performance in answering letters and telephone calls from the public, with Internal Audit asked to carry out checks to see where some parts of the Council are finding it difficult to achieve the Council's minimum standards. CMT is asked to ensure that the service standard is being met in response to letters to Parish Councils.
12. That the review of the Council's many publications involves Members who have a view on which publications are of value to them in their work.
13. That an online customer feedback form for the public to comment on specific services is developed, together with arrangements for residents to text the council
14. That a list of key corporate policies and strategies is published on the Intranet showing when each was approved and when it is due to be reviewed.
15. That a mobile van to visit parishes on a regular basis with information on local services is considered with the costs covered by sponsorship.
16. That advertisements in the local media, in particular Statutory Notices, are reviewed to improve their presentation and put in a format that is easier to read.
17. That the Planning Development Control Committee is asked to address the complaints of Parish Councils that the time spent on waiting to appear at meetings appears to them to be unreasonable.
18. That officers presenting to the Planning Development Control Committee are asked to respond to all points made by Parish Councils in their comments.
19. That attendance by Portfolio Holders at meetings of the Winchester Joint Consultative Committee with the Winchester District Association of Parish and Town Councils is reviewed by the Cabinet in the light of Parish Council complaints that the City Council is inadequately represented.
20. That understanding of the role of the voluntary sector is improved by holding a conference for Members and senior managers on the work of the sector, involving not just those organisations that are funded but others as well.
21. That Cabinet obtain a copy of the LGA checklist on empowerment and consider how this could be used in the district.
22. That the effectiveness of the Council's community engagement is reviewed annually by Principal Scrutiny Committee, aided by a report to be presented by the accountable Cabinet Portfolio Holder.

Relevance to Corporate Strategy

The Council's Corporate Strategy for 2005 – 2008 (current at the time this review was undertaken) identifies open and honest communication as a key value for the organisation. Two of its key aims were to

- improve arrangements for communicating the Council's aims, objectives, policies and performance to Members, staff and the wider community;
- make customer service the key to all we do by seeking to provide services which reflect the needs of our citizens, by improving access to our services and by improving the timeliness and accuracy of advice and information we provide.

This review was designed to examine how well these aims were being achieved and make recommendations for improvement that will help achieve the current aims in the 2006 – 2009 Corporate Strategy, which looks, amongst other things, to achieve the following:

- Customer Focus – putting customers at the heart of our work
- Clear Communication – enhancing communication with customers, elected members and staff

Resources

The review presents ideas to Cabinet for improvement. Some of these have no specific resource implications but others would either need to divert existing resources or identify new resources to be achieved. If the recommendations are accepted, further work will take place to identify resource requirements and submit these as bids in the preparation of the 2007/08 onwards budget.

Background Documents

Notes of meetings of the Community Engagement Informal Scrutiny Group
Detailed notes of evidence given or submitted by those identified in section 4 of the attached report.

Above documents are available, on request, from the Chief Executive's Directorate.

Appendix

Community Engagement – Report of the Community Engagement Informal Scrutiny Group



Winchester
City Council

**PRINCIPAL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
REPORT**

**COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT**

June 2006

SCRUTINY REVIEW – COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INFORMAL SCRUTINY GROUP

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Principal Scrutiny Committee decided on 11 July 2005 to set up an informal scrutiny group on Community Engagement with the following terms of reference:
- To analyse examples of where engaging the community has been successful and where engagement has been less successful;
 - To identify critical factors in successful engagement;
 - To consult voluntary organisations and public bodies to get their view on how well WCC engages with the public;
 - To find out how neighbouring local authorities engage with the public;
 - To consider how the Winchester Town Forum approach would be suitable for trial in one or two areas such as county council divisions;
 - To recommend ways in which community engagement can be improved within the district.
- 1.2 The group has now concluded its work and in this report sets out its findings and recommendations.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Committee appointed Councillors Bidgood, Chamberlain, Cook, Lipscomb, Mitchell and Stallard to the informal scrutiny panel. At the same time it set up an informal scrutiny panel on the local strategic partnership.
- 2.2 Shortly afterwards Councillor Allgood was appointed to the Board of the Winchester Local Strategic Partnership. Principal Scrutiny Committee agreed to the suggestion that Councillor Allgood should participate in the community engagement work and that Councillor Chamberlain would join the LSP panel.
- 2.3 The panel met on seven occasions on 6 December, 18 January, 14 February, 24 February, 13 March, 21 March and 25 April.

3. Scope of the Review

- 3.1 It was agreed that the review would:
- Focus on the Council's engagement with the community and key organisations;
 - Look at proactive engagement where the Council is seeking to gain the views from the community, rather than reactive engagement where it is responding to individual complaints;
 - Seek examples of good and poor practice that already exists within the authority;
 - Consider whether the City Council is engaging with the whole community, including young people and the elderly;
 - Review whether different geographic areas feel engaged with the work of the City Council;
 - Examine how well the Council listens to the views expressed by the community, including the results of the Citizens Panel surveys and how they are disseminated within the organisation.

4. Work Plan

4.1 The panel carried out interviews with 23 people to collect a variety of views on community engagement. Notes of each interview are available on request to the Chief Executive's Office.

4.2 **Officers of the Council interviewed were:**

4.2.1 Robert Heathcock, Head of Environment, on how the community was engaged on the pilot programme of alternative weekly collections.

4.2.2 Howard Bone, Assistant City Secretary (Legal), on how the Council carried out its duties of engagement under the new Licensing laws and under the Freedom of Information Act.

4.2.3 Fiona Tebbutt, Head of Planning Control, on the planning process.

4.2.4 Richard Botham, Head of Housing Landlord Services, on engagement with Council tenants.

4.2.5 Andrew Palmer, Head of Strategic Housing Services, on how the council engaged on seeking sites for affordable housing.

4.2.6 Greg White, Strategic Planning, on progress of the Statement of Community Involvement.

4.2.7 John Kelly, Research Officer, on how the Council manages the Citizens Panel.

4.2.8 Jen Anderson, Head of Policy, on procedures for checking the tone of standard letters and publications and on her previous experience of community engagement at East Hampshire District Council.

4.2.9 Ian Hogg and Eleanor Hodge, Corporate Communications Team, on the publications review.

4.3 **City Councillors interviewed were:**

4.3.1 Sheila Campbell, Leader, in her role as Portfolio Holder for communications and community engagement.

4.3.2 Brian Collin, whose Portfolio includes some aspects of community engagement.

4.3.3 Peter Rees, Chairman of the Winchester Town Forum.

4.3.4 In addition, all Councillors were invited to provide examples of good practice and evidence where communications had not worked well.

- Councillor Collin provided an example of good practice regarding the West of Waterlooville Major Development Area (see paragraph 5.1.2 below)
- Councillor Jackson gave information about an incident where poor communication by the Council had left residents' feeling that action they had taken to maintain the local street scene was not appreciated, and the disagreement escalated to the point where the residents were considering resorting to the ombudsman. She felt this could have been avoided had more thought been given to how the matter was explained at the outset.
- Councillor Bennetts highlighted areas of good and productive community engagement within his Ward which had helped set and achieve local objectives. He also stressed the importance of being realistic about what could and could not be achieved when engaging with the community.

4.4 **Others consulted were:**

- 4.4.1 Fernley Calver, Senior Youth Worker for Hampshire County Council.
- 4.4.2 David Cruden and Alan Rickman of TACT (Tenants and Council Together).
- 4.4.3 Mike Davies of Age Concern.
- 4.4.4 Patricia Edwards, Chairman of the City of Winchester Trust.
- 4.4.5 John Harrocks, Chief Executive of the North Hampshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
- 4.4.6 Alison Matthews, Winchester Association of Parish and Town Councils.
- 4.4.7 Diana Wooldridge, Chief Officer, Winchester Area Community Action.
- 4.4.8 In addition, the panel interviewed two members of the Citizens Panel chosen at random: Janet Hoff and Estelle Monaghan.
- 4.4.9 A letter sent to all Parish and Town Councils in the District inviting comments on the draft Statement of Community Involvement, also invited thoughts on more general examples of good and less successful community engagement. In response,
 - Whiteley Parish Council pressed for Parish Councils to be engaged at the earliest possible stage in all strategic issues and also to be engaged from the outset in proposals for new development.
 - Itchen Valley Parish Council endorsed comments made to the Informal Scrutiny Group by Alison Matthews, its Parish Council Chairman (see 4.4.6 above), and also drew attention to its concern about the way that Planning Development Control operates and the way that planning policies are implemented.

4.5 **Written evidence was studied from:**

- 4.5.1 Centre for Public Scrutiny website on community engagement models of other authorities.
- 4.5.2 Evidence from local authorities in Hampshire.
- 4.5.3 A booklet issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on “Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment.”

5. Findings

5.1 **Examples of Good Practice**

Some of the best examples of good practice in community engagement were:

- 5.1.1 Silver Hill. Meetings were held with the public, an exhibition conducted in the Guildhall and ideas requested on the shape of the proposals for a major revamp of the Broadway and Friarsgate area of the city. These have resulted in amendments to the Plan. Comments suggested that the traders and residents felt involved in the consultation process.
- 5.1.2 West of Waterlooville Major Development Area. Over the last four years the Council has worked in partnership with Havant Borough Council and Hampshire County Council to plan a development of 2,000 houses and industrial development with community facilities in an area in the parishes of Denmead and Southwick and Widley. Workshops have been held

and attended by over 100 people to discuss various options, public displays have been well attended and meetings held in public. The process is guided by a West of Waterloville Forum of Councillors who meet in public and listen to the views of the public under the chairmanship of Councillor Collin. Since Councillor Collin took the Chair particular emphasis has been given to strengthening on-going community involvement in plans for the new development. This has led to the production of a draft Community Development Strategy that sets a framework for long-term community engagement.

- 5.1.3 Alternative Weekly Collection. This was a potentially controversial exercise of replacing the weekly collection of refuse with a system of alternative weekly collections of refuse one week and recyclables the next. A pilot area was selected and a great deal of consultation took place once the decision to proceed had been taken. Robert Heathcock demonstrated that more than one route to engagement was pursued, including a road show, a programme of six written communications, media interviews and a dedicated phone line for inquiries. As a result the pilot was judged a success by those who participated.
- 5.1.4 Parish Plans. The Council is working with several parishes to promote the production of parish plans, village design statements and market town healthchecks in partnership with Hampshire County Council and Community Action Hampshire. The exercises involve a large number of local people who are able to influence the shape of the communities where they live.
- 5.1.5 Statement of Community Involvement. This is a new process requirement of the Local Development Framework and is basically a planning process. However the City Council sees this as an opportunity to strengthen its engagement with the public.
- 5.1.6 Motocross meeting. This is a local issue that has become very controversial, involving motocross activities at Three Maids Hill on the outskirts of Winchester. Through a packed public meeting called at the request of a local Member and serviced by a strong coterie of Officers from several disciplines, the issue was given a thorough airing and residents were able to put their views, although many of the problems remain.
- 5.1.7 Licensing hearings. Under the new licensing laws whereby public houses and restaurants were able to apply for extended hours up to 24 hours a day, the applications were widely advertised locally and objectors were able to attend hearings to put their views to the panel of three Councillors considering the application. In many cases the arguments of the objectors were sufficiently strong to warrant amendments to the applications and compromises were sought. It was recognised however that more should have been done to keep Members and Parish Councils advised of the results of the hearings.
- 5.1.8 Town Forum. The Winchester Town Forum brings together all 18 Councillors representing Wards in the old city of Winchester. They hold hearings in public on themes and invite the public to attend and speak. Councillor Rees felt the key reasons for this success was that people had a chance to raise issues of concern and engage in a dialogue with Members and officers, and they had an opportunity to see where their money was spent and could influence how it was spent.
- 5.1.9 Perspectives magazine. The Leader felt that this had been successful with the idea of using a major theme for each publication with the most recent issue in particular exploring the theme of sustainability.

- 5.1.10 The Citizens Panel appears to be working well. John Kelly said that of the 1600 residents who had been recruited for the Panel the average response was 68.6% with 74.4% achieved in 2004. In 2006 the Council also needs to carry out a separate consultation in line with guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on benefits, planning and general satisfaction with council services. The Informal Scrutiny Group felt that more use could be made of the valuable results.
- 5.1.11 Working with youth. The Council started to engage with young people in 2005 by holding events at Swanmore College of Technology to gather views on the West of Waterlooville development and at Kings School in Winchester on Silver Hill. Feedback from the schools was good.
- 5.1.12 Engagement with business. This was considered to be of a high standard. John Harrocks listed a number of events where local business had been engaged in recent months – Simon Eden, Councillor Richard Knasel (Portfolio Holder for Economy and Transport) and Kate Crawford (Economic Development Officer) had attended Chamber lunches, a breakfast seminar and consultations on specific issues.
- 5.1.13 Engagement with the voluntary sector was considered to be excellent. Diana Wooldridge thanked the Council for its level of funding, its involvement of the voluntary sector with the Local Strategic Partnership at an early stage and in the delivery of services such as child care on behalf of the Council. There was however room for improvement such as longer-term agreements, the way the Voluntary Sector Compact is delivered, and understanding of the work of the voluntary sector outside the Community Development Division.
- 5.1.14 Engagement with the Council tenants was regarded as effective – particularly the work of the Tenant Participation Officer, support for tenants' associations and forums to discuss issues.

5.2 **Examples of less effective practice**

- 5.2.1 PUSH plans. The Leader admitted that meetings to discuss this had produced disappointingly small audiences, partly because there was no budget to organise them as well as the Council would have liked and partly because time was short to give more notice.
- 5.2.2 Travel tokens. The Leader said that a letter had been written to all those who had previously claimed tokens or bus passes but admitted the letter may not have been as informative as it should have been. There had been many complaints from the public that bus passes were of little value if there were no local buses and it appeared that insufficient research had taken place into the groups affected.
- 5.2.3 Highcliffe community planning. Andrew Palmer felt there had been mixed messages about what was being looked at by the Council with two exercises – one the search for sites for social housing and the second looking at sites for groups perceived as a threat to the public – being confused, thus resulting in bad publicity. Good project management was needed to manage such consultation exercises.
- 5.2.4 Failure to respond to letters, emails and telephone calls. It was admitted that the main reasons for failing to meet Council standards was the pressure of work.

- 5.2.5 Lack of plain English: Attempts have been made in letters to the public to remove jargon but this was not always possible.
- 5.2.6 Statutory notices in the press. These were often insufficiently clear when printed in the local press, as they used technical or legalistic language and appeared in small type. The Informal Scrutiny Group felt that input from the Corporate Communications Team at final drafting stage would be helpful.
- 5.2.7 Planning meetings. A complaint was made about the length of time that Parish Councillors have to wait in order to speak. Some Parish Councils have given up on attending because of this. Complaints had been received that letters inviting comments arrived after the deadline had passed and sometimes many letters arrived with conflicting information.
- 5.2.8 Parchment Street. The business community felt it had not been involved early enough in the proposals to reverse the flow of traffic. The Chamber had not been consulted in the early stages but was drawn into the matter after local business became concerned about the impact of the proposals.
- 5.2.9 Payroll changes in the voluntary sector. WACA had been informed of the changes at the same time as other organisations and was prevented from working with the Council to help manage the communication and explore alternative options.
- 5.2.10 Liaison with Parish and Town Councils. The Council still has work to do to develop positive relationships with the Parish and Town Councils and Meetings within the District. Planning Development Control matters remain a particular source of contention. The City Council must be seen through its correspondence and deeds to have listened to Parish Council views and should respond to all points raised, though areas of genuine disagreement will inevitably remain.

6. Other evidence

- 6.1 East Hampshire. East Hampshire District Council has organised Area Committees with some devolved decision-making. At first the Parish Councils were sceptical but have been won over by their effectiveness. Area Committees encourage and support the development of Parish Plans by local people within Parishes and can provide grant support for small projects flowing from these. They can also act as advocates to help wider needs identified by Parishes to be addressed by the District Council or Local Strategic Partnership for the area. The District Council has also developed citizenship lessons in local schools.
- 6.2 Eastleigh Borough Council has an online customer feedback form for the public to comment on specific services. Residents can also text the council.
- 6.3 Test Valley Borough Council also has online forms for the public to comment on services. This applies not only to complaints for also for praising individual officers for excellent service. Test Valley has a Citizens' Panel organised on the lines of the Winchester panel.
- 6.4 Community empowerment.
 - 6.4.1 At a conference on community empowerment organised by the Local Government Association, the deputy chairman, Richard Kemp, said it was important that councils empower local communities and win their trust instead of holding meaningless consultations

that generally lead nowhere. The aim of the conference was to discuss how public bodies can engage with the public to set and achieve common goals.

- 6.4.2 Mr Kemp said it was important to decide what neighbourhood governance actually meant. “It is about giving people more power to influence public decisions, whether about the future of the place where they live or work, the public services provided in that area or the taxes they pay towards the costs of the services. It is not about consulting people on issues where the decision has already been taken or on things where there is really no choice. People are disillusioned about sham consultation.”
- 6.4.3 He said that the LGA had issued a checklist on neighbourhood governance. This asks councils if they are aware of the communities of interest that residents identify with and if they know what the communities want over the next 10 years. Councils can engage better if they have given ward councillors the power, influence and support needed to do things on behalf of their communities.
- 6.5 Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister issued in February 2006 a guide for local authorities on how to enhance their capacity for public participation. This has the following chapters:
- Effective citizenship: why it is important to help the public become more effective citizens.
 - Learning and citizenship: how councils can make community involvement more effective.
 - Tailoring initiatives to target audiences: this is concerned with the needs of individual groups, not only marginalised people but also the “silent majority”.
 - Changing the council’s culture: how councils can adjust to foster effective citizenship.
 - Measuring success: how to evaluate whether the public has become more effective in engaging with the council.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1 The Council is effective when:
- it plans ahead with plenty of time to publicise an event or plenty of time for residents to respond to a consultation;
 - it uses different methods to engage the public;
 - it tackles single issues;
 - it exercises strong project management.
- 7.2 The Council is less effective when:
- there is a lack of clarity on what we propose;
 - there is insufficient notice of proposed engagement meeting, because of limited advertising and reliant on newspapers that few people read;
 - people are given insufficient time to respond;
 - insufficient resources are committed to supporting the ongoing engagement process
 - and project management skills are missing.

8. Recommendations

- 8.1 The Council needs to prepare a rolling Public Engagement Plan that includes notice of public consultations and engagement envisaged in the next six months.

- 8.2 On important issues the Council needs to use a variety of methods to advise the public of the public engagement process. A toolkit of such methods would be valuable to officers.
- 8.3 Ensure that each public engagement exercise is well planned with clear goals, an adequate time scale, sufficient resources and a good promotional programme.
- 8.4 Results of the Citizens Panel consultation need to be made available to scrutiny panels to discuss.
- 8.5 The Cabinet should be clear on which Member is accountable for public engagement, public consultations and communications.
- 8.6 Public engagement outside the town of Winchester needs to be improved, through working with clusters of parishes and/or with public forum meetings in geographic areas on the lines of the Winchester Town Forum. This would help the Council to achieve progress in neighbourhood empowerment the Government is seeking without creating another layer of government.
- 8.7 Linked to this, the Council needs to encourage and support communities to prepare Parish (or neighbourhood) Plans, with clear procedures to allow issues raised to be reported back to the City Council and Local Strategic Partnership.
- 8.8 The Corporate Management Team is urged to consider whether it would be useful to name a senior manager as the chief contact point for parishes or groups of parishes.
- 8.9 The Corporate Communications Team should approve all Council publications, standard letters and one-off letters intended for wide distribution and be asked to review the wording of statutory notices. Training in letter writing should also be reviewed.
- 8.10 Officers are urged to improve their performance of answering letters and telephone calls from the public. Internal Audit is asked to carry out checks to see where some parts of the Council are finding it difficult to achieve the Council's minimum standards. CMT is asked to ensure that the service standard is being met in response to letters to Parish Councils.
- 8.11 The review of the Council's many publications that is in progress needs to involve Members who have a view on which publications are of value to them in their work.
- 8.12 An online customer feedback form for the public to comment on specific services should be developed, together with arrangements for residents to text the council
- 8.13 A list of key corporate policies and strategies should be published on the Intranet showing when each was approved and when it is due to be reviewed.
- 8.14 A mobile van to visit parishes on a regular basis with information on local services needs to be considered with the costs covered by sponsorship.
- 8.15 Advertisements in the local media, in particular Statutory Notices, need to be better presented and in a format easier to read.

- 8.16 Planning Development Control Committee is asked to address the complaints of Parish Councils that the time spent on waiting to appear at meetings appears to them to be unreasonable. Officers presenting to the Planning Development Control Committee are asked to respond to all points made by Parish Councils in their comments.
- 8.17 Attendance by Portfolio Holders at meetings of the Winchester Joint Consultative Committee with the Winchester District Association of Parish and Town Councils needs to be reviewed by the Cabinet in the light of Parish Council complaints that the City Council is inadequately represented.
- 8.18 Understanding the role of the voluntary sector could be improved by holding a conference for Members and senior managers on the work of the sector, involving not just those organisations that were funded but others as well.
- 8.19 Cabinet should obtain a copy of the LGA checklist on empowerment and consider how this could be used in the district.
- 8.20 This issue is so central to achieving good local government for Winchester District that effectiveness should be reviewed annually by Principal Scrutiny Committee, aided by a report to be presented by the accountable Cabinet Portfolio Holder.