

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

Public Engagement and Communications Task and Finish Group

Thursday 2 February 2006

Present

Councillor Christopher Malpas (Chair)

Councillor Michael Hill

Councillor Anjona Roy

Councillor Brendan Glynane (Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee)

Thomas Hall Corporate Manager

Sean Silver Community Development Manager (Item 4)

Lindsey Cameron Participation Team Leader (Item 4)

Lindsey Ambrose Area Partnerships Co-Ordinator (Item 4)

Derrick Simpson Print Services Team Leader (Item 4)

Alison Betts Finance Manager (Item 4)

Observing

Councillor T Woods

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Andrew Simpson and Margaret Martin (Consortium).

2 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were none.

3 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 13 JANUARY 2006

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 January 2006 were agreed.

4 GATHER AND REVIEW EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

Councillor Roy advised that the purpose of this review was to be able to demonstrate that the Council consults and involves more residents and that the residents are satisfied with their levels of involvement. The Group had agreed at its initial meeting to focus on one outcome indicator: -

“To have by July 2006 more than 50% of residents feeling we consult and involve them and to increase to 55% residents who are satisfied/very satisfied with us by April 2006”

The Group therefore requested the Officers that had been invited to attend this evening's meeting to give a view regarding that outcome indicator and how work could be used to achieve that outcome.

(a) The budget

Alison Betts advised that the budget process had started very late this year. There had been three strands to the budget consultation: -

- Workshop for Area Partnerships and Forums
- Questionnaire to all Councillors

- BMG carried out a questionnaire

Members of the public had complimented the Authority on how the consultation was carried out. They supported the way in which the Authority had carried out its consultation this year ahead of budget setting. The Authority had decided to carry out its budget consultation this way so that it could influence decision.

Last year just 50 responses had been received. This year in excess of 200 had been received. All feedback was very positive about the way in which the Consultation was carried out, with opportunity to ask questions. However, it was felt that 200 was still a low response rate considering 1,500 questionnaires had been issued, including a survey. This equates to a response rate of about 10-15%.

Alison Betts advised that consultation comments could be fed into this Group. In response to the Group's query regarding the process of these comments being made, A Betts commented that it had been disappointing. It had been a good piece of work but there was a need to look at what the Authority does with it. She highlighted that the budget was about making numbers add up, aligning with service priorities.

A Betts emphasised that the consultation process had started late and felt that it would be unfortunate if it appeared easy for Members to dismiss it on the basis that it was only part of the process. T Hall added that this Group should take account of this comment.

A Betts added that the public had felt that community safety and street cleansing were priority areas. This would be a good opportunity to prove that finance was being put into areas that the public perceived as priority. The Group commented that these areas would have received increased finance regardless of the comments made in the consultation process; however, it was thought that the consultation, in relation to these issues in particular, gave the right perception. It was suggested that a press release could be issued along the lines of *'you told us this; we did this and reflected it by this..'* L Ambrose added that the Pensioners' Forum had asked for information in advance, some had found it to be a lot of information to digest. A Betts highlighted that if a more interactive process was carried out, it was difficult to send out information in advance. In response to a query whether the use of a power point presentation could be given, A Betts suggested that it would be better to have less information receiving by the public, making way for more information giving, therefore, there should be a reduction in power point slides.

S Silver advised that L Ambrose had done all she could to support the consultation with the Area Partnership and Forums; members of which had commented that the process had been good so far.

A Betts advised that once a budget proposal had been through Improvement Board and Cabinet, a short report would be issued to all Councillors, together with a covering note explaining how the consultation process fed into the process.

Councillor Roy referred to the purpose of this review and asked whether the public was being asked about its satisfaction on consultation. In response, A Betts suggested that it was not just about asking the public for its satisfaction on the process, but also about getting the message out wider. A pre-cursor to consultation was looking out the documents that were sent out, making this information user friendly before you go out to consultation. Details of the consultation process will be included in an issue of Core Brief.

Councillor Roy felt that the budget consultation demonstrated quality of engagement.

A Betts reported that it had been agreed at today's Improvement Board that a short presentation be given to Full Council how the budget process had been carried out differently this year. She suggested including consultation details in the presentation.

(b) Planning

D Simpson advised that there were two issues in relation to Planning:-

- Planning Policy
- Development Control.

The Group confirmed that it wanted to hear about consultation in respect of Development Control.

D Simpson reported that:-

- Around 1,700 applications were received each year
- Approximately 12,000 individual letters were received, 5-6,000 responses were sent out
- One press release per application was issued
- Site notices for applications for put up
- Approximately 5, -6,000 letters were sent out informing individuals of the Planning Committee's decision. Details were also placed in the press.

D Simpson added that the only consultation that the department took with the applicant was regarding the level of service received and how they understood the process. The department was looking to develop a Forum. From the feedback received regarding e-enablement, forms had been amended.

D Simpson highlighted the area where it was difficult to consult, for example, with residents who had responded to an application and also with those who had not. Due to the amount of correspondence received, the department states that general correspondence will not be responded to. However, a map will be attached to the consultation letter so that residents can actually see where to proposal is.

The Planning Authority has a statutory duty to consult all agents on a three-yearly basis on all planning decisions. It also consults with applicants and agents on a quarterly basis.

Satisfaction to services tended to be 88-90%. 100-120 consultation letters were sent out each quarter, with approximately 30 received back.

D Simpson emphasised that planning was a very emotional issue. For example, if an applicant did not get their application approved and then they were asked whether they were happy with the service, they tended to reply no as my application was turned down. Regarding householder applications, often if they got on with their neighbours a favourable response to the consultation is received, if not, often objected.

Research has been carried out with other Local Authorities and many tended to stop at the statutory agent and applicant consultation stage.

The Group then questioned D Simpson,

Regarding the Statutory right to consult with properties that abuts the application, how do you ascertain who should receive a consultation letter?

Statutory adverts are placed. 32-34% of applications are advertised. The Authority only has to advertise 14%; therefore, NBC is way ahead of this. It also tries to extend boundaries where possible and could double its consultation but there would still be a percentage of individuals stating that they were not consulted with. NBC carries out more than double the statutory consultation.

Officers work on a graphical database to expand consultation easily and achievable.

The map on the reverse of consultation letters is difficult to read, please enlarge.

On some applications the map is nice and simple, however, on large applications the size of the site has to be reduced to fit on the page.

If you are looking to expand the group you consult with, it would be easy to increase and not expensive but what is expensive is doing something about it.

To send out individual letters and respond to all of them would increase staff resources. Officers acknowledge letters and if a request has been put in for a copy of the officer's report they are sent a copy. It would be very difficult to answer all points in individual's letters and try not to take too much time explaining that the issues were not a planning factor.

People do not understand the complexity of Planning Law. A separate sheet stating 'you have the right to object on x and underneath list issues that are not a planning factor,' would be beneficial.

Milton Keynes Council sends out a 'Dos and Don'ts brochure'. Such a document would assist, and NBC Planning Officers were looking to produce one.

Could we use the names and addresses on the Planning database for other consultation?

The CRM system is being implemented and would be address based, which would be more up to date than Planning's database.

However, caution should be applied about using the Planning data base for consultation issues, other than the issues that the individuals were initially

consulted upon in respect of the Data Protection Act. The CRM system could be used as the individuals are contacting the Council and they could be initially asked if they were happy to be part of future consultation. As individuals contacted the Authority, names and businesses could be added – it is a live database.

L Ambrose added that earlier in the year she had renewed the membership of Partnerships and Forums and had asked participants if they wanted to take part in future consultation.

What examples of good practice can you give that we could apply elsewhere?

D Simpson commented that Officers made sure that what they wished to consult on was well communicated. They kept extending the boundaries and the consultation areas and published well in advance. There was also a need not to take anything for granted and to make sure that the public was aware of what the issues were that it was being consulted upon and that all options had been investigated.

The Group acknowledged that an essential part of the process would be to issue consultation notes to say what has been consulted upon and what will be consulted upon.

D Simpson advised that Officers consulted with Parish Councillors, the Environment Agency and any group they had previous knowledge of. Consultation with groups was as wide as possible. Plans are sent out with every letter. As planning applications are now published on the Council's web site, the public can view the plans on line. The information on the web site has been increased and is in plain English. Individuals feel engaged if they speak at a Planning Committee. The WNDC will be taking on some of the major applications, which would be a public meeting but D Simpson was unsure if they would permit public speaking.

D Simpson concluded, commenting that with major applications, public meetings were often held and the vast number of public attendees had astounded him. The attendees would then disseminate the information further.

(c) Area Partnerships and Forums

S Silver advised that Area Partnerships were a facility and process that enabled citizens to raise questions in their locality. Councillors took the lead but the meetings have never been exclusively about Council services. Meetings are recorded in detail. The Area Partnership Co-ordinator facilitates the service and provides a follow up service.

He brought to the Group's attention that NCC was indicating that it did not class the Area Partnerships as a priority in the next financial year.

The budget consultation had included the Area Partnerships and Forums. It was felt that this was a piece of good practice. Area Partnerships are a good way to consult, however, they are not understood very well internally. There was also an issue regarding attendance levels, for example AP6 covers a

large area – the Hunsburys and Nene Valley and attendance is very low. Transport can be a problem to some of the venues.

The Partnerships are area based and they decide on the issues to be discussed. The Fire Service has consulted with Area Partnerships and the Police often address them too. The Partnerships have given feedback from recycling issues. The Town Centre Commission has been to Partnerships, namely AP1 and AP8.

Area Partnerships are a means of communication that have potential and they are not exploited, as they should be. Residents like Area Partnerships, which are a good discussion forum; but more could be done with Area Partnerships than is at present.

S Silver commented that Area Partnerships are very good about enabling local people to raise an issue, for example, residents' parking scheme issue can have the venue full of interested individuals. Therefore, where there is a local issue of interest people are motivated to attend. Colleagues at the highways department, NCC, often use the Partnerships as a means of engaging with the public on highways issues. There was an audit trail of demonstrable service.

L Ambrose advised that the barriers to Area Partnership were lack of publicity. Sometimes meeting dates changed. However, efforts had been taken this year to book the venues in advance. Some individuals and organisations had offered to place an advert about an Area Partnership meeting in their newsletter.

The Group commented that the public often made efforts to find out when and where an Area Partnership meeting was taking place.

Councillor Hill commented that Area Partnership 6 was poorly attended; it was rare to have more than nine attendees. Individuals tended to attend the parish council meetings. L Ambrose agreed that AP6 had distinctly lower attendance than the other Partnerships.

The Group then made observations and asked questions.

It would be interesting to know how many NBC Councillors were also NCC Councillors at Area Partnership meetings.

In response to the query what actually happened to the points raised at the consultation and whether the work of Area Partnerships was sufficiently wired in to the Council's decision making and service delivery, the Group heard that if an individual raised an issue, it was taken back to the appropriate service area and an answer obtained. A matters arising sheet is then produced, which includes details of such questions. If contact details are requested these are recorded in the minutes of the meeting. However, taking matters arising is not consistent across the Partnerships.

S Silver commented that the above highlights the lack of policy and strategy engagement in Area Partnerships.

There is a review of Area Partnerships and Forums in the offering. It is not obvious that Area Partnerships should be 'all things to all people'. It might be that they are good at dealing with operational issues, but if you are looking at an issue as an overall policy evaluation, Area Partnerships are not the best meeting for a discussion.

Area Partnerships offer locality. There is a need to think when it is appropriate to go out to the localities.

In order for Area Partnerships to be effective it has to be a balancing act – what the public want to talk about and what they are informed. There has to be a good case for an Officer presentation. Area Partnerships have their own feel, AP1 and AP2 are older and show a maturity that others probably do not. AP4's attendance levels fluctuate. Councillors need more guidance, in particular NCC Councillors. At the last three meetings of AP4, Officers from a particular NCC service failed to attend. Some Area Partnerships tended to be run for the Council's benefit rather than the public's. Councillor Roy pointed out that Area Partnerships should have a community-led agenda, not have all their issues decided by the Council. There is some good practice locally that could be built upon. There is a need for AP guidance notes to be produced. The public attends Area Partnership meetings because it wants to inform the meeting of issues but there are times when the Area Partnership needs to consult with the public.

In response to a query whether there was a Beacon Council that had been noticed for good practice in respect of Area Partnerships, T Hall advised that Tameside MBC was a Beacon Council and had been acknowledged for its Getting Closer to Communities publication. He emphasised that any review should explore Tameside's ideas. L Ambrose added that she had spoken to Tameside, who had tried advertising on the sides of buses but this had proved not to be feasible. Advertising on local radio was preferred. Local groups were given information packs. L Ambrose stressed that there was not yet an available budget to pilot any of Tameside's ideas in Northampton. Such issues would be looked at as part of the wider Area Partnership Review but there would be cost implications.

Regarding the circulation of Area Partnership posters, Councillor Roy suggested that it would be beneficial to receive these by email and she could print off the required amount for distribution. It would be beneficial for the posters to include pictures. L Ambrose suggested there was a need for a meeting with the Meeting Services Team Leader regarding such issues.

Councillor Hill suggested the Group could visit Cambridgeshire regarding its Area Partnerships.

L Cameron then briefly explained his new role of Participation Team Leader. His role included equality, tenant participation, Forums, community development and citizen engagement. He was responsible for 40 staff. P Field is the other team leader in the team – Cultural Development Team Leader and S Silver managed the section that reports to T Hall, Corporate Manager.

It was suggested that at the next meeting the Group begin to produce its report.

AGREED: That the Group begin to compile its report at the next meeting.

5 REVIEW DESKTOP RESEARCH

The Group was reminded that Councillor A Simpson had offered to carry out desktop research, looking at good Councils (Beacon Status) in respect of their Communications Strategy and benchmark to ascertain what they have been doing well in particular in relation to how they are consulted. T Hall had carried out a little research into other Local Authorities of good practice and had forwarded details to the Group for information, which contained details for the Local Government Chronicle's annual awards, which included 'Community Involvement'. Councils that were short-listed included Brighton and Hove, Bristol City and Cambridgeshire CC. Tameside MBC was a 'Beacon' Council for Getting Closer to Communities and the Institute of Public Relations has a good Local Government section, which makes a series of awards in relevant categories, which includes awards for Internal Communications (Liverpool City Council) and Civic Newspaper (Colchester Borough Council).

6 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would be held on 17 February commencing at 6.30pm in the Godwin Room. The Group would begin to compile its report.

The meeting closed at 8:05pm