



COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Committee Report

Public

Date of Meeting: 13th November 2003

Title: DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT BEST VALUE REVIEW: UPDATE

Report of: Dave Taylor and Carolyn Taylor

Report reference: SP34/03

Summary:

This report has two main parts. The first provides the Committee with an update on progress with the review and the second gives an indication of the 'key aims' which are emerging from the review.

Recommendations:

Members are asked to:

- consider and comment on progress with the review;
- offer views on the 'key aims' emerging from the review.

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1. Introduction

This report is divided into two main sections. The first section details progress with the review since the last report to the Committee on 28th August. The second section shows the 'key aims' which are starting to emerge from the review process.

2. Progress with the Review

In general terms, the review is progressing satisfactorily. Almost all the compare work, most of the consult work and some analysis of the results have all been completed since the report to the August meeting. There has, however, been some slippage against the project plan timetable (see Appendix 1), largely due to the difficulties of securing officer time for the completion of tasks during the period relating to the CPA inspection of the authority and the regional government submission. The review team remains confident that the work will be almost complete by the end of the calendar year and the remaining tasks next year will relate to steering the final report and action plan through this Committee. It is hoped that a draft final report can be brought to the Committee's meeting on 8th January 2004.

For ease of understanding, progress and findings have been broken down by the sections of the project plan:

Detailed Compare Work

This is now almost complete – individual members of the team took the themes of the review and looked to other authorities for potential improvements. Some of the main points highlighted by this work were:

- Some authorities have tried new forms of official meeting to increase public engagement;
- Many authorities have found that greater support and training for Members was needed to enable them to fulfil their local role;
- With the widespread increase in consultation, a consistent corporate approach is required to ensure that the authority is undertaking appropriate consultation;
- In general, other authorities have not found 'the answer' to increasing electoral turnout – but there are elements of best practice which we could implement.

Consult with Members

Members will be aware of this work – a workshop was held with the Community O&S Committee along with focus groups with the Labour and Liberal Democrat groups. The focus group with the Conservative Members is in the process of being arranged. Three Members of the Community O&S Committee are members of the review team and have contributed significantly to the direction of the review and the developing ideas for improvement.

Inevitably, the findings from the consultation work with Members covered the full range of the subject of the review. Some of the key points raised were:

- Increased support/training for Members to fulfil their local role;
- Backing from most Members for more localised, area-based working;
- Special public meetings on a single issue would help re-engage people;
- Greater use could be made of the O&S Committees for gathering community views;
- Making voting easier would need to be accompanied by making voting seem more relevant.

Consulting with Others

We have undertaken considerable consultation with other groups of people. Specifically, we have pursued the following:

- The Committee has previously seen the results of the ‘attainer’ (people who were eligible to vote for the first time at the 2003 elections) questionnaire. Six respondents stated that they would be happy to be consulted again and we intend to send them the draft Action Plan later this month for their views;
- Dialogue has also continued with the journalism students from the Cumbria Institute of the Arts and they have been consulted about the ‘Key Aims’ document;
- All Parish Councils have been consulted;
- The first meeting of the ‘Reference Group’ has also taken place - those present included 6th form students, a teacher, a representative of Carlisle City Council front-line staff and two representatives from the media – one print, one broadcast. A further

meeting will be held towards the end of the review;

- Staff will be consulted on the 'Key Aims' document within the next month – the review group wanted the Community Committee to have seen and commented upon this document before taking it further.

The review team leaders have also started consulting individually as the key aims have emerged. To date, the Portfolio holder, Councillor Knapton and the Head of Member Support and Employee Services have been consulted. Further consultations will take place over the next month or so with other officers who will have key roles in delivering elements of the final Action Plan.

The Citizens Panel consultation will be going out within the next month. This is a specially prepared consultation on 30 key questions relating to the review. The results will be used to shape the action plan.

Corporate Consultation Policy

At an early stage of the review, it was recognised that a revised Corporate Consultation Policy was needed to bring greater co-ordination to the consultation activity within the authority and to ensure that best practice is followed. Members will recall that this Committee approved the draft Corporate Consultation Policy at its June meeting. After consultation with Business Unit Heads, this policy has now been approved by the Corporate Management Team.

Analysis

As one might imagine, as the review team has completed tasks, certain themes and conclusions have emerged. In particular, many of the findings from the 'Compare' part of the work were echoed in the findings from our consultation work. The review team is now in the process of refining the findings of the review and developing the 'key aims' document so that a full Action Plan can be prepared.

It should be stressed that the 'Key Aims' section below is at an early stage since the consult and compare work is not yet complete. In particular, the results of the Citizen's Panel questionnaire may lead to significant modifications.

3. Key Aims of the Review

- **Make improving democratic engagement a priority for the authority**

Establish Member support

A Portfolio holder will have responsibility for improving Democratic Engagement

Establish officer support

Business Unit heads will ensure improvements to democratic engagement are included in their Business Plans

- **To improve engagement of the public through official meetings.**

Make the papers and procedures for official meetings of the council as publicly accessible as possible;

Undertake a review of agendas/minutes/forward plan/reports to see if they can be made more accessible to the public

Pilot an open question session at the start of Full Council where members of the public do not have to give notice in advance

Name plates for Members at all public meetings

Provide training for officers in report writing

Introduce and promote new types of meeting with a specific community focus;

Introduce an annual "Question Time" style debate at a neutral venue away from the Civic Centre where the authority shares the platform with other agencies, including the Police, Health Authority, and others

Ensure that State of the City debate takes place every year

Improve the type and level of communication about meetings of the Council;

Make agendas and minutes accessible over the internet

Add more text to website about workings of the Council

Promote meetings with topical interest on website, through local press and Carlisle Focus

Pilot the web-casting of meetings

- **To improve the quality of consultation by the authority**

Foster a more positive culture towards consultation within the authority

Consultation to be incorporated into each Business Unit's Business Plan, where necessary

Training to be made available on consultation techniques

Ensure that feedback to those consulted is carried out as a matter of course

Ensure that consultation is regularly evaluated

Promote a range of consultation mechanisms

Limit consultation fatigue by co-ordinating and ensuring that consultation is only carried out when appropriate

Set up consultation database within the authority

Create a new page on website with the results of previous consultations and allowing people to register for forthcoming ones

Introduce a corporate approach to consultation

Introduce a Corporate Consultation Policy to improve standard and consistency of consultation

Establish a mechanism to oversee the Council's annual consultation programme

Greater use of O&S in community role

Investigate the possibility of establishing another committee to increase capacity for taking on community role

- **To enhance the role of Members in furthering democratic engagement**

Enhance Community Leadership Role

Increase co-operation with County Neighbourhood Forums

Make greater support available to Members, particularly as relates to local role

Produce best-practice guide for surgeries

Look at ways of improving the current referral system

(Administrative support currently under discussion)

Improved information flow to Members

Put onus on Heads of Business Units to inform Members about developments in their ward and to keep MSES Unit informed of developments so they can provide an 'information hub' for Members

Examine potential improvements to the monthly Members Briefing

Review information flow to Parish Councils

Investigate the creation of a Members' Room

Improved induction and training for Members

Introduce a Members Development Programme in consultation with Members

Organise open days for all business units

Improved public access to information about Members

Include e-mail addresses of Members in Focus

Make list of Councillors searchable by postcode of constituents and make this mechanism possible for those in Customer Centre

Enhance information available about each Member – to include dates, locations of surgeries, Committees on which they serve and outside organisations

• To improve the engagement of the authority with young people

Develop, with other partners, including schools and those agencies working with disaffected and disengaged young people, and Action Plan which will create more opportunities for all young people to become involved in identifying issues and in the decision making processes

Introduce Citizenship packs into schools

Include youth-based features in Carlisle Focus

Develop the youth-based section of the website

Appoint Youth Champions in appropriate business units

Incorporate 'Youth Issues' into the title of a Portfolio holder

Adopt the European Charter of the Rights of the Child

Develop a more formal link between the City Council and the Youth Panel to enable regular dialogue between the two

- **To ensure that the authority's engagement with all groups is as effective as possible**

The authority will play an active role in the new County Group on Diversity and Equality to share knowledge and pool resources (Detailed actions will arise from involvement in this group, including: producing a list of groups to be considered for all major consultations; ensuring these groups are integrated into the consultation process.)

Extend role of Community Involvement and Regeneration officers to use their positions to promote the work of the authority and encourage people to become more involved

- **To increase the proportion of the potential electorate who are registered and vote**

Ask the Electoral Registration Officer to investigate:

Piloting different voting systems when possible

Promoting registration and voting through various mechanisms

Working with estate agents and house builders to try and boost rolling registration

Adherence to outstanding aspects of ODPM good practice guidance on registration

Redesign of voter registration form (Form A) to be more appealing

Polling cards with more information (map showing polling booth + information on postal voting)

Different methods for promoting the election: council's website, car parking tickets, mail franking etc

On-line registration

Reconsider decision to elect by thirds each year

Focus on explaining why voting in local elections is important

- **Others**

Encourage candidates for local elections

Include pages on website with details of how to stand for election and what being a councillor entails and carry features in Carlisle Focus

In conjunction with political parties, offer workshops on what being a councillor is like

Consider lessons learnt from the drive to increase number of candidates for Parish Councils

Message from the Review for Members and Political Parties

Produce summary of findings of direct relevance to the way political parties operate (particularly relevant for electoral issues/youth consultation work)

Communications

The City Council's Communications Team will use the local media, Carlisle Focus and the City Council website, among others, to promote the Democratic Engagement Best Value Review Action Plan and its aims to improve democratic engagement and continue to promote the Council and the work of officers and Members.

Activity	Period											
	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	
Scoping	█											
Gather Initial Data		█	█	█								
Finalise Review Plan			█	█	█							
Initial Compare Work				█	█	█						
Detailed Compare Work						█	█	█				
Analyse results of compare work								█	█			
Consult with Members						█	█	█				
Analyse results of consulting with members								█	█			
Consult with Others						█	█	█				
Analyse results of consulting with others								█	█			
Consolidate information and Develop Options for Improvement									█			
Consult on Options for Improvement									█	█		
Assess Options										█	█	
Action Plan Development											█	█
Key Meetings												
O&S Committee (Management)		⊖										
O&S Committee (Community)			⊖			⊖		⊖		⊖		
Reference Group							⊖			⊖		⊖

Appendix 1: Original Project Plan

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