

Community Engagement Strategy and Review

Cabinet Member Cllr Colin Slade
Responsible Officer Head of Communities and Governance

Reason for Report: To update Members on progress made with the Community Engagement Action Plan (2014-15) and to review the strategy and focus for 2015-16.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

1. That the work taking place to engage with a wide range of Mid Devon residents and stakeholders is noted.
2. That Members note and agree the revised action plan.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: It supports the aims of the Corporate Plan 'empowering our communities' which is a priority for the Council and to ensure that our services are accessible and meet the needs of our community.

Financial Implications: Quality community engagement activities need to be budgeted into service plans.

Legal Implications: The Council has a 'Duty to Consult' (Local Government Act 1999) its residents, customers, and stakeholders under relevant legislation. Meaningful engagement will reduce disruptive legal challenge advised by the Best Value Statutory Guidance 2011.

Risk Assessment: Not engaging with residents in an appropriate way may result in services that do not meet the needs of residents, damage the reputation of the Council and may lead to legal challenge.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Council has focused on providing good quality services while continually reducing budgets and identifying savings. The Council has a duty to consult and engage effectively with residents, partners, employees and other stakeholders when deciding about service changes, particularly at a time of service cuts. Changes to policy or services that impact a particular stakeholder are to be engaged early in the process to ensure we meet the needs of our users.
- 1.2 As a council we must offer value for money and customer satisfaction therefore engagement is an essential part of a service review in order to meet this criteria.
- 1.3 Within the Council there are a number of good and innovative examples of consultation and community involvement. We wish to continue to engage and to work more closely with the communities we serve, our partners and other organisations (such as the voluntary sector, health, police, fire and other agencies) to develop services.

- 1.4 However, as a council we are:
- Required to make significant savings and to make tough choices about service priorities.
 - Look at the way services are delivered and ensure best value.
 - Respond to the increasing demands of an ageing population.
 - Respond to the needs of areas of deprivation within Mid Devon.
 - Respond to the effects of welfare reform and the impact it is having on low income families.
 - Seek to meet the challenges of changing national policy.
 - Respond to the calls for greater transparency and localism.
- 1.5 This re-enforces our need for greater and more meaningful public engagement to influence decision-making, service delivery and performance reviews. The level of engagement should be proportionate to the impact it will have on the community sector resulting in services which are fit for purpose and will reduce legal challenge against Council decisions.

2.0 What we have achieved in 2014-2015

- 2.1 Over the last year, we have continued to improve how we engage with residents. The following outcomes have been achieved in order to develop our services based on the needs of our residents:
- Recruited and maintained the Citizens Panel - we consulted with the Panel three times this year with a number of services using the panel to undertake consultations and measure satisfaction levels. The panel is a cost effective way to regularly engage with residents and a valued resource. The panel is representative of Mid Devon's profile.
 - Involving children and young people – we have used the participatory budgeting model with a number of young people e.g. Tiverton Skate Park.
 - Our tenant-led Scrutiny and Improvement Group were instrumental in producing our Housing Services Annual Report.
 - We have piloted a new waste and recycling service and currently consulting with users from the pilot areas to ensure we deliver a satisfactory service across Mid Devon.
 - We have identified specific groups which would be affected by a change to policy or legislation and contacted them directly e.g. Cat Boarding licensing.
- 2.2 To co-ordinate and improve community engagement throughout the Council
- Methods of community engagement – Services are identifying the need for consultations earlier and therefore able to plan / use the appropriate method for the topic and target audience from street to online surveys, focus groups, exit interviews and forums (e.g. for businesses, equality groups and landlords).
 - The Council has also been committed to maintaining a range of communication channels from our website, facebook pages, twitter, youth forum, parish matters and Mid Devon Talk. We are conducting a digital transformation review to ensure we are able to offer a range of methods to engage with an ever changing landscape and growing use of tablets and smart phones so we are up to date and make it easier for customers to contact or comment about our services.

- URLs are available for staff to clearly advertise activities and results e.g. www.middevon.gov.uk/getinvolvednow and www.middevon.gov.uk/getinvolvedresults. Officers have been sending through information for these pages throughout the year.
- A dedicated Consultation and Youth Involvement Officer is in place to support services conduct consultations and advise on best practice, including engaging with young people around antisocial behaviour and leisure provision and building relationships with community groups.
- Specific webpages have been developed in order to be open and honest with residents as to how their views have influenced our decisions. URLs have been created for each page so staff can advertise these pages clearly in communications with the public.
- The Council has an adopted Statement of Community Involvement to widen engagement in land-use planning processes by setting out when and how people have their say.
- The Community Development Team continually work with communities to deliver grassroot schemes and support communities to plan for their area. Community Development has had success setting up committees in order to apply for funding to address local need.
- Active officers which regularly engage and consult stakeholders share best practice and identify joined up working, creating opportunities to reduce cost and officer time.

3.0 Community Engagement 2015-16

3.1 Our vision set out in the Community Engagement Strategy is:

- To enable local people and communities to take more control and to feel that they can make a real difference to the quality of life in the place where they live.
- Residents have a stronger voice in influencing services.
- Residents influence and improve services, based on a relationship of trust.
- That we feedback to residents regarding consultation results 'you said, we did' model.
- The range of information available to elected members and senior managers is improved as a result of effective community engagement.

3.2 In order to meet the Council's objectives and to provide services fit for our residents the strategy and action plan highlights that consultations are:

- **Proportionate:** the level of engagement needs to be proportionate to the impact of the decision / change. Therefore making the best use of our resources and residents time.
- **Targeted:** using the most appropriate method for the target group / community e.g. services should use the citizens panel to target residents as it is a cost effective method and statistically valid.
- **Influential:** consultations will only take place if the consultee is able to influence a decision unless legislation states otherwise.

3.3 Appendix A is the Action plan for 2015/16.

4.0 Summary

4.1 In summary the Community Engagement Strategy and Action Plan 2015-16 reflect the Council's need to:

- Engage with the relevant stakeholder over a service or policy change and identify the level of involvement required in proportion to the impact.
- Involve residents in designing services to meet changing needs.
- Improve the range of information available to residents and the methods we use.
- Only consult if the results will be influential.
- Conduct meaningful engagement that will reduce disruptive legal challenge.

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Background Papers: Community Engagement Strategy 2013-16, Community Engagement Action Plan 2015-16

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