Engaging with Communities Task Group Notes

Notes of the meeting of the Engaging with Communities task group held on Monday 10 November 2014 at the Civic Centre, Poulton-le-Fylde.

Task Group Members present:
- Councillor Bannister
- Councillor Brooks
- Councillor C Birch
- Councillor Hewitt
- Councillor Jones (Chair)
- Councillor Moon
- Councillor Ormrod
- Councillor Walmsley

Others present:
- Councillor Lady Atkins (Lead Member for Rural East)
- Councillor Kay (Lead Member for Cleveleys)
- Councillor Robinson (Lead Member for Rural West)
- Councillor Treece-Birch (Lead Member for Fleetwood)
- Peter Foulsham, Scrutiny Officer

EC.17 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs E Anderton and McKay.

In the absence of Cllr McKay, Cllr Jones chaired the meeting.

EC.18 Declarations of Interest

None.

EC.19 Notes of last meeting

The notes of the meeting held on 8 October 2014 were agreed as a true and accurate record.
The Chairman welcomed the four Lead Members to the meeting. She explained the purpose for inviting them and referred to a list of questions that had been raised by the task group and circulated previously, to which responses from the Lead Members were invited.

Lead members summarised the methods of engagement that they currently used most frequently, specific comments being made about newsletters and surgeries (in Hambleton) and closer working with Town and Parish Councils. The Shaping Your Neighbourhood funding was a specific focus for Lead Members’ engagement with communities, with slightly different approaches being taken in different parts of the borough.

It was noted that in Garstang the revised Parish Charter would include reference to Shaping Your Neighbourhood (SYN).

In Fleetwood all bids for SYN funding were scored against a matrix in order to achieve some consistency and objectivity in the allocation of money.

Cllr Kay commented that in Cleveleys once the money had been allocated there needed to be improved communication between the councillors, the community and officers to ensure that the preferences of the community were appropriately actioned.

Cllr Brooks suggested that rather than discussing relatively local issues the task group ought to be focusing on visionary things, and asking residents about their opinions on the council’s policies. He questioned whether SYN was really helping the council to think about doing things differently, and wondered what it was that explained the fact that 60% of residents chose not to vote in elections. He challenged whether this approach to engagement was over and above the work of ordinary members and suggested that it was important to raise the level at which the council engages with people; it should not just be about funding.

The Lead Members made the following additional points:

- The SYN funding had become the major focus of community engagement, perhaps to the detriment of other aspects of higher level engagement. The money “gets in the way”.
- Lead Members played a key role in signposting people to other potential sources of funding.
- Lead Members had not received any training specific to the role, although the role had been explained to them at the outset.
- Lead Members felt as though they had been left to work out the role for themselves, although they had received excellent support from individual officers in the Transformation Team.
- The Poulton Forum, which was now very clearly community-led, was continuing to work well, with anything up to one hundred residents attending meetings.
o The Fleetwood Forum had also been very successful when it was in existence, prior to the demise of the Wyre Strategic Partnership.
o PACT meetings no longer took place which removed another forum for community engagement.
o Some councillors were not engaging with their communities very effectively at the moment. Lead Members needed to try to encourage greater involvement in SYN by all other councillors in their area.

The Lead Members agreed that the following improvements should be considered:

- The role of Lead Members needed to be better defined, to include clarity about the difference between the Lead Member role and that of any other non-Executive councillor.
- Specific, tailored training for Lead Members was required.
- Consideration should be given to stopping the SYN funding as it was a distraction from genuine community engagement; there was more to being a Neighbourhood Lead Member than being responsible for the allocation of funding.
- The same methods of engagement were not necessarily appropriate for all parts of the borough.
- The re-introduction of Area Forums should be considered in some parts of the borough.

Cllr Jones thanked the Lead Members for attending the meeting and sharing their views and experience with the task group.

EC.21 Next Steps

The results from the consultation with the Engagement Network and from the survey of councillors’ engagement methods would both be reported to the task group at the next meeting.

Members said that they would like to opportunity to consider some examples of ‘good practice’ in community engagement, perhaps by making some comparisons with neighbouring councils. Peter Foulsham advised the meeting that Wyre’s Lead Member role was unique as far as his research had indicated, so this was an area in which Wyre needed to develop its own expertise.

South Ribble Council continued to have a local strategic partnership model, similar to the one that was effectively in place in Wyre until December 2011. Councillors Moon and Walmsley volunteered to go to South Ribble to talk to officers and members about their engagement structure. Peter Foulsham agreed to make the arrangements.

Peter Foulsham added that Pendle District Council had a structure that included Area Committees and the task group agreed that further information about that model should be obtained and presented to the next meeting.
The Local Government Information Unit was running a seminar on Friday 21 November entitled ‘Community Engagement in the Current Climate’. It was thought that it would be beneficial to the task group for a representative to attend and feed back to councillors at the next meeting. Cllr Hewitt expressed interest in attending the seminar on behalf of the task group and agreed to feed back to the members at the next meeting.

**EC.22 Date and time of next meeting**

Provisional date: Tuesday 2 December 2015 at 6pm. To be confirmed.