

# **Bromsgrove District Council**

## **Draft Community Engagement Strategy 2008-2009**

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### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 Effective and meaningful community engagement is at the heart of the Government's drive to secure better public services, a stronger public arena and more cohesive communities. Understanding the full remit of activities that combine to deliver effective community engagement provides a framework against which we can build an effective engagement strategy: one that meets the needs of our community, ourselves and our partners, as well as addressing the national agenda for better engagement set out by the Government in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill (developed through the Strong and Prosperous Communities White Paper) and strengthened further in the 'Communities in Control' White Paper.
- 1.2 This Strategy sets out the ways in which the Council will engage with its communities across the full range of its activities, to enable us to involve and work with local stakeholders and partners to deliver the shared vision for Bromsgrove District as set out in the Bromsgrove Sustainable Community Strategy and the Council Plan 2008-2011. The framework builds on and encompasses the 2006 and 2007 Consultation Policy and Guidance and the Statement of Community Involvement (2006) that underpins the Local Development Framework.
- 1.3 This Strategy provides a focus for all the Council's engagement activities, policies and processes to align with the Council's 'Sense of Community' objective. This strategy aims to support the development of strong, active and inclusive communities who are informed and involved in decision-making in order that we and our partners may improve public services to enhance quality of life across Bromsgrove District.

### **2. What is community engagement?**

- 2.1 Community engagement is about giving local people a voice and involving them in decisions that affect them, their community and their neighbourhood. This might

involve communities in the planning, development and management of services and can include individuals, voluntary and community organisations as well as other public sector bodies, working together to address local issues. At the heart of community engagement is the development of relationships, open and clear communication, networking and listening and building mutual understanding of the people and places in our District. This will enable us to deliver improved, accessible services that meet local needs as well as increased satisfaction, improved efficiency and enhanced community leadership.

- 2.2 Engagement is not a single process and can happen in a number of ways. This can be from the simple provision of information to 'letting go' through empowerment (by allowing others to take decisions and make things happen). Central Government's drive to improve community engagement across Local Government focuses on developing the processes around empowerment, involvement and participation, and there is certainly a clear link between empowerment and satisfaction that is valuable for all involved - as demonstrated by a recent survey of the Council's Equalities and Diversity Forum. This is a challenging national agenda and successful engagement must be supported by solid foundations of information, communication, consultation and feedback. For more advice and guidance on these processes please see Appendix 1 – Community engagement toolkit.

### **3. The national context**

- 3.1 Active citizenship through a number of new duties and a range of new and enhanced initiatives is an underpinning theme of the Department for Communities and Local Government's new 'Communities in Control' White Paper which builds on the messages of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, which was developed through the Strong and Prosperous Communities White Paper. Through these documents Central Government has been outlining its plans to pass more power to communities and give real control and influence to more people. The key theme of the new White Paper is the development of a participatory democracy and with more empowered citizens, and these provide the underlying principles for our approach to the development and implementation of this community engagement strategy.
- 3.2 The White Paper outlines a range of new and enhanced initiatives which are intended to have their greatest impact at a neighbourhood level. These are outlined below. Many of them will rely on improved engagement arrangements at a local level that will allow citizens to influence the future development of services and the way they are delivered to meet identified local need. The Council must therefore step up its existing good practice to meet this brief. The White paper outlines the following specific initiatives for councils that will support community engagement and citizen empowerment:
- Improved information provision, particularly via the internet (i.e. more up to date, more detailed information). Exploration of new ways of getting information across to citizens. A greater amount of information available to communities on how to get more involved in their local community.
  - A new duty to promote democracy whereby councils will be encouraged to use new, innovative methods to engage citizens and boost electoral turnout. This will

include campaigns and incentives that particularly target the less well off and the young

- Opportunities for citizens to become involved in participatory budgeting and (i.e. making decisions on commissioning goods and services and determining value for money).
- Encouragement of more people to stand for election through the use of formal qualifications that recognise the councillor commitment and a greater degree of liaison with employers so that individuals may stand for election and act as councillors without affecting their ability to work.
- Consolidation of consultation activities within the Council and with partners so that community engagement is consistent and joined up. This includes the need for greater community engagement in the planning process.
- An evaluation of the “quality of public engagement”, which will be included in the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (April 2009 onwards).
- Extension of schools’ Citizenship curriculum together with support for children and young people to become more engaged in the democratic process through school councils and youth parliaments.
- A ‘Take Part’ Pathfinder programme to help adults become more active citizens and get more involved in local democracy.

The White paper also outlines the following initiatives:

- The concept of discretionary budgets for backbenchers to use in their local areas.
- The introduction of a national £70m Communitybuilders scheme for community organisations help citizens to shape their areas and a £7.5m Empowerment Fund for third sector organisations to turn empowerment proposals into action.
- The establishment of a new asset transfer unit to advise on transferring assets to communities.
- Support to help create more neighbourhood councils where they are called for, as well as more directly-elected mayors
- Making the process of overview and scrutiny more visible to the public through more accessible meetings and greater information provision.
- The introduction of a new duty to respond to petitions, to ensure that issues affecting communities are properly debated (including those affecting the NHS).
- Central Government consultation to ascertain whether it should be made easier for the public to demand referendums
- Easier channels for citizens to complain to Councils, and standards for Councils to respond to such complaints are set.

## **4. Other duties**

- 4.1 There are a range of other duties for councils to engage and involve communities under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, the Local Government Act 1999, the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000, and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 as amended in 2005 and which came into force in 2006. Section 11 of the Children Act – Every Child Matters also details expectations for district councils to use the views of children and young people to shape services.
- 4.2 The development of the Council's Local Development Framework has also required a commitment for the Council to engage with the communities of the District at every stage of the process, and as such a 'Statement of Community Involvement' was adopted by the Council in September 2006, outlining the process by which the LDF will be informed by effective continuous community engagement. Over the next three years the Council will produce a series of three types of documents that will make up the LDF: Development Plan Documents (DPDs), Supplementary Plan Documents (SPDs) and other required documents. The views that are expressed by the community during any involvement activity to develop these documents will be fed into the process of document production. Feedback from consultation will be made available in summary form and will be used to influence the drafting of policy. Those who participate in the process will be told what the outcomes of consultation processes are and how the results will be used to move the process forward. Ensuring people are kept informed of the outcome of events is a vital part of the new planning system which reinforces the message that community engagement is helpful and worthwhile.

## **5. What we are already doing**

- 5.1 Bromsgrove District council already uses the following mechanisms to promote community engagement and inform the development and delivery of its services. The challenge in moving forward will be to act effectively to co-ordinate and review the information and feedback received so that it may prioritise and drive service improvements that meet the needs of the community.

### **Facilitated Community Engagement activities**

- Budget Jury
- Local Area Committees in Beacon/Waseley and Alvechurch wards
- District wide PACT meetings with commitment for the attendance of a senior officer at 85% of these meetings
- An annual LSP 'Town Hall' meeting
- Equalities and Diversity Forum Budget Bidding process
- Democracy workshops in local schools to promote Local Democracy Week
- The development of plans to hold a joint children's' and young peoples' participatory budgeting event in with Worcestershire County Council in 2009 using pooled budgets from FLOSS and the Council to cover all age groups

### **Council events**

- Street Theatre summer events (expanded across the District for the first time this year)
- Equalities and Diversity Forum Annual Conference

- Annual Management Conference

#### **Consultative fora**

- Equalities and Diversity Forum
- Disabled Users Group
- Parish forum
- Landlords' forum
- Leisure centre user groups
- Union liaison
- Staff forums
- Middle Managers Forum

#### **Consultation mechanisms**

- Biennial Place Survey (run jointly with other councils in Worcestershire)
- Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey
- Annual Quality of Life survey (will be discontinued in 2009 due to Place Survey)
- Ad hoc focus groups run by staff trained in their facilitation. This year focus groups have covered themes including the quality of life of older people in the district, customer access and customer standards
- Community consultation events such as consultation on the Bromsgrove Town Centre Regeneration Area Action Plan and on the Council's Play Strategy
- Service satisfaction surveys for Environmental Health, Housing, and Street Scene and Community services
- An annual staff survey
- Online Budget Consultation
- Sports Development Surveys

Additionally, planned community engagement activities are outlined annually in every Service Business Plan so that they can be overseen and consolidated where appropriate. These activities are also outlined in Appendix 2 – Annual Community Engagement Plan.

#### **Communications**

- Publication of the Council magazine 'Together Bromsgrove' three times per year
- Weekly press releases
- Production of a variety of public information leaflets
- Members' bulletins giving feedback and information on key issues
- An SMS text messaging service
- An accessible website, linked to other local councils through the Worcestershire Hub
- A Compliments and Complaints process, including Tagish software
- A Staff intranet which includes 'Chat with Kevin' and 'Bright Ideas' sections for staff involvement
- Connect and E-Connect staff newsletters
- A weekly core brief for all staff

A review of Communications Strategy has also recently taken place to ensure Communications adequately reflect developing community engagement needs.

#### **Other devices**

- Neighbourhood wardens across the district
- A member of the Worcestershire Ethnic Access Link translation service
- A member of the Joint Worcestershire Cross District Community Leadership and Engagement Group. The group has developed a Community Leadership and Engagement Framework to be used as a common framework by all districts, and have audited and compared their current engagement work with a view to identifying opportunities for joint working, avoiding duplication and sharing best practice.

## **6. What we will do next**

- 6.1 Based on our existing activities and the initiatives and ideas flagged in the new 'Communities in Control' White Paper, and whilst awaiting further guidance from Central Government, we plan to do the following in the course of the coming year:

### **Facilitated Community Engagement Activities**

- Expand Budget Jury process in 2010-11 budget round (to involve a greater number of participants)
- Extend Neighbourhood Area Committees to two more areas
- Hold Citizens Juries based on Budget Jury model on contentious issues (e.g. car parking charging)
- Employ more innovative techniques to engage citizens as part of the Bromsgrove town centre redevelopment and railway station projects such as 'Planning 4 Real'
- Investigate potential for introducing devolved budgets to backbenchers in the form of community kitties or introducing further participatory budgeting opportunities for communities in these areas
- Identify opportunities for greater working with schools and youth groups, both to promote democracy and build on the Children's and Young People's participatory budgeting event. (e.g. Councillor and younger staff visits to schools; political speed dating)

### **Council events**

- Investigate potential for holding Cabinet meetings around the District so that communities can observe democratic process at work
- Develop and implement a strategy to increase levels of voter registration and increase awareness of elections through events and activities
- "Town Hall" meeting twice a year around the District

### **Consultative fora**

- Identify links that can be made with LSP partners' consultation activity for potential joint working
- Look at setting up transgender and migrant worker forums or identify alternative methods of engaging with these groups

### **Consultation mechanisms**

- Streamline survey activity – exploring joining up with other districts and Worcestershire County Council to run a joint citizens panel survey which will provide greater value for money and help alleviate consultation fatigue
- Set up new process for Heads of Service to work together when developing their Business Plans to streamline planned community engagement activity

## **Communications**

- Introduction of a 'You Decide' (or similar) tagline to brand all community engagement activity and provide coherence for citizens
- Review the website to ensure that it provides accessible, relevant information that meets the needs of the community in a cost effective way – and develop 'what you said' pages to accompany 'have your say' pages – with feedback from surveys etc
- Investigate potential for a Children's and Young People's website – online poll, discussion forums questionnaire chances to win prizes (e.g. following the example of East Riding of Yorkshire)
- Continue work with local media to build more positive relationships (e.g. organise officer and Member shadowing for media staff to see what really goes on)

## **Other devices**

- Publish this Community Engagement Strategy and Toolkit
- Explore customer profiling through GIS plotting of existing survey data and customer segmentation systems (eg. Mosaic/ Acorn) so that targeted engagement activities can be developed (e.g. childhood obesity activities in deprived areas)
- Continue to run focus groups as necessary
- Implement approach to adopting Parish Plans guidance

## **7. Guiding principles for Community engagement in Bromsgrove District**

- 7.1 In order to meet the expectations of the District's communities the Council will need to ensure it uses the most appropriate ways to communicate and engage with them. Community engagement activities will therefore be:

Clear, concise and relevant

- All communication and consultation will be clearly structured and worded avoiding jargon and unnecessary information, using diagrams and pictures and recognising the diversity of our community. We will also be clear about the purpose of the activity and how it will be used to inform our decisions.

Timely and co-ordinated

- In order to achieve maximum value and efficiency we will ensure that we avoid duplication, use existing mechanisms to distribute information and evaluate our activities to ensure that we are meeting our objectives and the needs of our residents.

Accessible for everyone

- Communication, involvement activities and processes will provide everyone with the opportunity to get involved if they want to. In practice this means making sure that we tailor our approach to the needs of the audience or local communities recognising that we need to consider levels of understanding, timeframes, accessibility of venues and appropriate means of communication.

Genuine and realistic

- We will ensure that that we demonstrate our commitment to community involvement by being clear about what can be achieved and allowing enough time for people to be involved effectively where they can influence the outcome.

Feedingback outcomes and demonstrating change are vital to building the confidence of communities in feeling that they can make a difference.

Constructive and beneficial

- The approach we use for any given engagement activity will be constructive and will benefit both decision makers and those involved in the process, focusing on good practice and learning, and allowing everyone an opportunity to discuss key issues.

Proactive and innovative

- To be of value, the process of engagement will go beyond the minimum requirements where possible. In practice this will mean employing more tailored techniques or a combination of approaches and taking activities out to communities.

Used to promote ongoing involvement

- We will build on existing community engagement activities of regular customer surveys, feedback via our compliments and complaints process and other service specific consultation processes, by ensuring that we provide regular feedback to demonstrate the value of the processes and identify clear links between these activities and benefits to the community.

### **Date of Application**

September 2008

### **Planned Date of Review**

September 2009

### **Further Advice and Guidance**

Please contact the Corporate Communications, Policy and Performance Team.