

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN**

*To:* **Cabinet**

*Date:* **23 February 2010**

*From:* **Rod Craig, Executive Director, Community and Adult Services**

*Electoral division(s):* **All**

*Forward Plan ref:* **2010/009** *Key decision:* **No**

*Purpose:* **To present to Cabinet the Council's Community Engagement Strategy and Action Plan for approval.**

*Recommendation:* **To consider and approve the Council's Community Engagement Strategy and Action Plan.**

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## 1. BACKGROUND

1.1 In 2008, increased focus was placed on local authorities to strengthen the ways in which they engage communities at a national level through the publication of the White Paper, *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power* in July 2008 and the *Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill* in December 2008. These set out the Government's vision for strengthening local democracy by increasing participation, to achieve 'a new style of active politics that not only gives people a greater say but ensures that their voices are heard and that their views will make a difference.'<sup>1</sup> Since this time, the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act has been passed (November 2009), which sets out new duties for local authorities in terms of empowering communities. These include:

- A new duty to promote democracy
- A requirement to establish schemes to accept and respond to local petitions
- A new duty to involve local citizens in their decision-making processes

1.2 At the same time that central government was highlighting the importance of strengthening ways to engage communities, the Council's Environment and Community Scrutiny Committee undertook an extensive review of the Council's community engagement activity. It highlighted the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of 2007 which concluded that the Council had a lack of effective engagement and feedback mechanisms in place and criticised the Council's piecemeal approach to engaging communities:

*Engagement with communities has often been driven by specific developments and initiatives rather than to enable the Council and its partners to obtain a shared understanding of what needs to be done to meet the needs of Cambridgeshire.*<sup>2</sup>

The Scrutiny review made a number of recommendations including that: 'The Council rise to the challenge of community engagement through the establishment of a comprehensive community engagement strategy.'

1.3 Since the Scrutiny Committee's review, the Council has restructured its services to place greater emphasis on working with communities. Part of the Director of Community Engagement (Fenland)'s role is to ensure that the Council is in a strong position to respond to the requirements of the above legislation, and that, with its partners, the Council is achieving the national indicators within the Local Area Agreement (LAA) under the Safer and Stronger Communities theme. These include indicators relating to community engagement and community cohesion:

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<sup>1</sup> Communities in Control: Real People Real Power, DCLG, July 2008, p.i. The policy and research which this paper builds upon include:

- Our Shared Future - Department of Communities & Local Government
- Strong and Prosperous Communities –White Paper (2006)
- An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success (2007)
- Participatory Budgeting Consultation and Pilot
- Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act

<sup>2</sup> Corporate Assessment, 2007

- National Indicator (NI) 1 - Percentage of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together
- NI 4 - Percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality
- NI 5 - Overall/general satisfaction with the local area
- NI 7 - Environment for a thriving third sector

1.4 Consequently, work has taken place over that last year to develop a new Community Engagement Strategy and Action Plan. Cabinet and members of the strategic management team have provided steer on these documents during their development, as a result of which certain principles have been adopted. These are to:

- Develop a strategy that is based on simplicity of approach and is clear, short, and easy-to-read (with no jargon)
- Build an action plan that focuses on improving existing services through community engagement and that has no extra cost attached to it
- Adopt a principle of localism, namely, to decentralise power to the lowest possible practical level
- Recognise and promote the vital role that Members have in being involved in the implementation of such a strategy

1.5 Inevitably, the focus for any new strategy must be on improving outcomes for local communities. However, it is important to stress that this strategy is as much about *how* the Council delivers services as about *what* the Council delivers. The outcomes of this strategy therefore need to be measured in terms of increased community participation in and responsibility for activities and in decision-making in their local areas.

1.6 A public consultation on the draft Community Engagement Strategy and Action Plan was held for 12 weeks from 1 September to 24 November 2009. The strategy and action plan attached have been revised and finalised in the light of the feedback obtained from this consultation.

## **2. CONSULTATION FEEDBACK**

2.1 The main form of consultation was via a survey, available on line and in hard copy, which was publicised through National Customer Services Week and Your Cambridgeshire, as well as being widely circulated electronically. 51 survey responses were returned, and a full analysis is available on request. In October 2009, four consultation workshops were held around the county. The workshops took place in Ely, Wisbech, Over and Godmanchester. Alongside Members and a broad cross-section of internal officers, representatives from a wide range of partner organisations attended. Over 100 people participated in total.

2.2 The majority of the feedback received has been positive, with survey respondents ranking the following three strategy objectives as the most important:

- Supporting people to be involved in their local communities
- Supporting community involvement in shaping places
- Supporting community involvement in shaping services.

- 2.3 A large proportion of public respondents stated that they would like to be actively involved in deciding how public money should be spent in their local area (75%), and that they would be likely to take part in public debates about what our funds should be spent on (59%).
- 2.4 Respondents also highlighted their preferred ways of getting in touch with the Council and Councillors:
- Public respondents' preferred ways to talk to the council were (in descending order): email; face-to-face; Internet (on-line surveys); telephone.
  - Public respondents' preferred ways to talk to Councillors were (in descending order): email; face-to-face; Internet (discussion forums) and Internet (on-line surveys).
  - Organisations' preferred ways to talk both to the Council and Councillors were (in descending order): email; face-to-face; telephone.
- 2.5 There is a significant interest in communicating through the internet:
- 78% of public respondents would like to see an area to raise issues about council services on the internet.
  - 69% of public respondents also stated they wanted an area to read about breaking news and new developments relating to council services on the internet.
  - 58% of organisation respondents also wanted an area to read about breaking news and new developments relating to council services on the internet.
  - 58% of organisation respondents and 53% of public respondents would like to have the opportunity to use e-petitions
- 2.6 General themes arising from the workshops are as follows:
- Identifying, promote and support community champions
  - Managing community expectations
  - Being transparent about decision-making processes, and communicate clearly what can and can't be influenced, and why
  - Joining up consultations and community engagement activity across partner organisations
  - Feeding back clearly to communities how their views have shaped decisions
  - Using the right language and settings to inform/consult/engage
  - Making use of existing community groups and networks
  - Ensuring we use a number of channels to communicate, including face-to-face and on-line
- 2.7 The attached strategy and action plan aim to address the themes and feedback outlined above. They have been developed with input from representatives from across the council services, with the aim of embedding community engagement across the organisation to enable existing services to be improved as a result. However, since the action plan was published for consultation, increased pressures have been placed on services' budgets. While the action plan was developed with a focus on delivering initiatives

within existing resources, as those existing resources are reduced, there is a risk that it will become more difficult to deliver against the action plan.

### **3. SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS**

#### **3.1 Resources and Performance Information**

3.1.1 See 2.7 above.

#### **3.2 Statutory Duties/Requirements and Partnership Working**

3.2.1 The implementation of the Community Engagement Strategy together with the ongoing work of the Community Engagement Programme Board to join-up current activity and oversee the delivery of discrete new projects, should place the Council in a stronger position to:

- Respond to the requirements of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act
- Achieve the targets of associated National Indicators, and
- Meet the requirements of CAA.

#### **3.3 Climate Change**

3.3.1 There are no direct implications arising from the proposals in this report.

#### **3.4 Access and Inclusion**

3.4.1 Implementing the approach to community engagement set out in the attached strategy should have a positive impact on the ability of the full range of communities served by the county council to access services and be included in consultation and decision-making. Strengthening the council's approach to community engagement has the potential both to reduce crime and disorder within the county and to improve the council's support arrangements for the voluntary sector.

#### **3.5 Engagement and Consultation**

3.5.1 Having consulted citizens on the development of the community engagement strategy, the Council is endeavouring to ensure that the strategy focuses resources accurately on responding to the local engagement issues within Cambridgeshire's communities.

<b>Source Documents</b>	<b>Location</b>
Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power	<a href="http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/communityempowerment/communitiesincontrol/">http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/communityempowerment/communitiesincontrol/</a>
Comprehensive Performance Assessment, 2007 – report to Cabinet	<a href="http://www2.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/db/reprack2009.nsf/e0c624b01b2e9ade80256b14004eb73b/5baba80cd8ef5d5e8025736b004fa279?OpenDocument">http://www2.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/db/reprack2009.nsf/e0c624b01b2e9ade80256b14004eb73b/5baba80cd8ef5d5e8025736b004fa279?OpenDocument</a>
Summary of feedback from the Community Engagement Consultation workshops and surveys	Ground floor, Babbage House, Castle Park, Cambridge