

3 September 2019		ITEM: 7
Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Collaborative Communities – Thurrock’s approach to Community Engagement		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Key	
Report of: Natalie Warren, Strategic Lead - Community Development and Equalities		
Accountable Assistant Director: Les Billingham, Assistant Director - Adult Social Care and Community Development		
Accountable Director: Roger Harris - Corporate Director, Adults, Housing and Health Karen Wheeler - Director of Strategy, Communications and Customer Services		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

In recent years, Thurrock Council has embarked on a number of programmes to improve our approach to community engagement with residents. This has included formal consultation processes, face to face engagement and the development of new ways of working that empower citizens to work together to form associations to realise ambitions for their communities.

This paper sets out initial proposals to build on best practice in order to embed a pan council approach to how we work with communities.

Under the umbrella term “Collaborative Communities”, the scope includes co-design and influencing decisions as well as working together to address societal challenges. The principles can be summarised as:

- A) Improving our approach to community engagement and involvement to shape delivery and influence decision making
- B) Supporting resilience within communities so that the council enables rather than hinders when communities want to improve their area or conditions
- C) Enabling dialogue around common challenges to help explore how the council can best support communities with ideas for improvement and development

Achieving this aim will require all council services to consider how they can enable communities to achieve local ambitions including devolving power, reducing bureaucracy and enabling different ways of working. Our ambition is to reduce the red tape that communities often experience when taking community led action so they are more enabled to achieve local outcomes.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee is invited to comment and contribute to the ideas set out in this paper so that these may be developed with the voluntary sector and communities to inform a new framework for engagement. A draft Strategy will then come back to the committee for comments before being presented to Cabinet for decision later this year.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 That Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the proposal to develop a new framework for community engagement building on the principle of collaboration with communities.

1.2 Comments are invited to support the scope in this paper and the development of this approach.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Community engagement is an essential component of any policy development and underpins all council work. Often, a 'ladder of engagement' is referred to recognising that different engagement tools can be used to inform, involve or influence depending on what is being developed and the scope for citizens to purely endorse a preferred option, or shape a new policy approach. Good community engagement tends to increase how well people feel about where they live as a place and whether they are valued as active citizens. All services are required to demonstrate they have consulted and considered the impact of changes before taking decisions. The Equality Act 2010 sets this expectation out in statute.

2.2 The term 'citizen' demonstrates the commitment to ensuring council processes and procedures work to enable communities to carry out the activities or developments in their areas they consider to be necessary to improve quality of life. Often, council processes can create unintended barriers that prevent, or deter, communities from taking control of parts of their lives or social issues where the state, or council, should have a limited role.

2.3 Over many decades, communities have become disempowered from many of the ordinary tasks that neighbours used to carry out day to day. The collaborative communities programme seeks to remove barriers and red tape so that people feel able and supported to be active citizens and good neighbours, taking pride in where they live.

2.4 The emerging framework will seek to complement the role of ward councillors when engaging with residents about local priorities and issues of concern.

Elected MPs and Councillors hold a democratic mandate to represent residents. In terms of local engagement, the community leadership role of members is key to helping ensure that varying local needs and aspirations are considered and understood within the context of council policies. Elected members should be at the heart of any community engagement activity helping to represent the priorities of our communities locally.

2.5 Currently, community engagement across council is predominantly managed within specific services. Support and advice is provided through the Community Development and Equalities Team to help embed nationally recognised best practice. This includes scoping consultation exercises, developing stakeholder lists, promoting, communicating and encouraging participation. Support is also provided through the Communications Team as appropriate. The range of tools available when consulting includes:

2.5.1 The Consultation Portal

Recently, new software has been procured which enables a much higher level of digital engagement than previously available. There are various tools available which offer far more than a question and answer survey format of engagement, enabling two way discussions between us and residents, and for residents to see and comment on each other's responses. Some of the tools include the ability for residents to ask questions and for us to respond publicly – forming an FAQ, to upload videos, photos and stories and to contribute to discussion forums or share ideas. There is a mapping tool called 'Places' which enables us to both present information and gather community feedback and ideas directly on a map. Participants drop a 'pin' in the area of discussion and then can add photos or fill in a quick survey. There is also a participatory budgeting tool available to us through the supplier.

2.5.2 Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector Engagement

Developing an understanding of the voluntary sector and its value in advocating for communities of interest as well as place based community associations is a fundamental principle of the collaborative communities programme. Often, voluntary sector organisations work directly with specific communities and they are well placed to help give voice to the opinions and aspirations of groups of people with a common bond be it, for example, disability, gender, a shared health condition or a shared neighbourhood. Sound community engagement requires an understanding of the potential of the sector as valued local partners with varying roles to play in understanding local issues, developing community led solutions, delivering services and empowering communities to influence change.

2.5.3 Thurrock's Joint Compact

The Compact articulates the commitments across the council and voluntary sector to enable strong partnership working enabling us to work well together for the benefit of local residents, using resources efficiently. The Compact

sets out shared principles impacting on key areas for example volunteering, funding, and consultation. This is a timely opportunity to update the Compact to better reflect the collaborative communities approach and principles to maximise opportunities for more effective engagement and co-design.

2.5.4 Joint Strategic Forum (JSF)

This is a joint meeting between Thurrock Council and the voluntary sector led by Thurrock Community and Voluntary Service (Thurrock CVS). The Forum has explored a number of key issues to further positive joint working between sectors around shared objectives. A recent example is the development and review of the council's Social Value Framework and supporting strategy. This helps to ensure that opportunities for community gain are focussed and maximised through a range of council activities including procurement, commissioning and grant funding.

The format of the JSF is currently under review to enable it to have a clearer focus on key themes and look at joint solutions. Thurrock CVS supports a move to themed meetings to tackle specific challenges in a joined-up way.

2.5.5 Your Place Your Voice (YPYV)

YPYV was originally initiated to support engagement with the Local Plan, two programmes of face to face engagement events have been held to help scope local priorities for improvement whilst considering the potential of different approaches to development to help realise future ambitions.

The local priorities identified through Your Place, Your Voice will be further developed through the consultation portal as well as libraries and community hubs and local networks so they evolve and enable ongoing discussion. As the Local Plan develops, the opportunity to build on local aspirations and develop ideas to support growth will be essential to ensure that we achieve the right type of development in the most appropriate areas.

2.5.6 Community Forums

Although independent of the council, community forums are recognised for their potential to bring residents together with partners in a locality to consider local issues. Most wards in Thurrock have an active Forum and all commit to at least four public meetings and an AGM each year. Forums have a dedicated website and use social media to help their reach beyond public meetings and many organise community or social events to help build cohesion in their neighbourhoods. All Forums were asked to express interest in developing a community hub when this programme started and this relationship remains today with Forums represented on Hub Steering Groups.

2.5.7 Community Hubs

The Community Hubs programme is active in six areas. Five hubs are co-located in libraries and the Communities First Strategy sets out the ambition for libraries and hubs to align across the borough. Hubs enable residents to come together around issues within a neighbourhood and to take an active role in local improvements. They provide a base for people to meet, talk, share ideas and socialise. In partnership with libraries, Hubs provide support to residents to get on-line, helping ensure people are connected both digitally and within resilient communities.

2.5.8 Current best practice in services

Many services across the council are already committed to working differently with residents to enable community led action, and to collaborate on ideas for improvements posed by residents. The recent Great British Spring Clean for example has generated more than 40 tonnes of rubbish collected by residents with the environment team providing litter pickers, refuse bags and disposing of collected waste.

In order to effectively manage increasing demands, innovative approaches have been developed and implemented to address how health and social care is redesigned in Thurrock.

Fundamental to the programme has been a commitment to a shift in thinking from a deficit model (a focus on 'what is wrong?') which creates dependency to a strength based model (a focus on 'what is strong') which can open opportunities for collaboration, placing the citizen at the centre of opportunity for change. This transformational programme has included testing new ways of working including Local Area Co-ordinators, Thurrock First, community led support in Tilbury and Chadwell St Mary and challenging funding-silos to create new opportunities.

The success of the programme to date is predicated on a dedicated programme to create a culture of change within teams, as well as the willingness to try new ways of working and testing fresh ideas.

2.5.9 Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)

As a concept, 'ABCD' seeks to embed what is strong about communities, rather than what is wrong, building on the principle of moving from a deficit model as explained at 2.5.8. This approach requires an organisation to develop an understanding of what association and natural connectors exist in a neighbourhood.

Using a strength based approach, ABCD can challenge how we consider our relationship with communities by asking;

- What can citizens do for themselves?
- What can citizens do with some help?
- What's our remaining offer? (what is the space that citizens need us to fill?)

An example to illustrate this is:

Community clean ups –

- Communities are passionate to demonstrate local pride and can organise clean ups, involving residents and bringing people together
- Council can help by providing equipment and arranging collections
- Communities need us to collect refuse and enforce fly tipping.

Using ABCD effectively can help to change our relationship with communities, encouraging a less paternalistic approach to work and helping to empower community led solutions that are often better for communities and more sustainable than providing a local service.

2.5.10 Clustered Neighbourhood Engagement

Thurrock is a large borough where individual towns and villages enjoy a local identity and sense of pride. In order to effectively communicate and involve people we propose to cluster wards into wider neighbourhood areas so that targeted e-newsletters and borough wide engagement activities can be managed effectively. They can also be aligned to the Your Place Your Voice events taking place within these areas. The proposed areas are:

- Aveley
- Chafford Hundred (including North Stifford)
- East and West Tilbury (including Linford and Mucking)
- Grays (including Little Thurrock)
- Orsett, Bulphan and Horndon
- Purfleet, West Thurrock and South Stifford
- South Ockendon
- Stanford le Hope and Corringham (including Fobbing and Homesteads)
- Tilbury and Chadwell St Mary

Enewsletters will encourage local community events and activities to be promoted as well as council news. Engagement events in clustered neighbourhoods will use a variety of venues and where possible, be planned in conjunction with existing events or existing footfall to maximise the opportunity for local engagement.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 As set out in 2.1 there is a clear business need for developing a strong approach to community engagement. Thurrock is growing with an increasingly diverse population. It is crucial that we harness the ambition and pride within our communities to create stronger communities for the future.

As set out above, there is a great deal of good work already happening in Thurrock, some of which has caught national attention such as the

transformation of health and social care. Building on this foundation we want to develop a strategy for 'Collaborative Communities' to include:

- A) Improving our approach to community engagement and involvement to shape delivery and influence decision making
- B) Supporting resilience within communities so that the council enables rather than hinders when communities want to improve their area or conditions
- C) Enabling dialogue around common challenges to help explore how the council can best support communities with ideas for improvement and development

3.2 The strategy we develop will be underpinned by the council's equality objectives. These currently inform service planning and can only strengthen by guiding our future ambition to build collaborative communities. Our current equality objectives are:

- Access to services
- Supporting community integration and cohesion
- Improving resilience
- Workforce development

3.3 Our ambition is to develop a framework and set out commitments to achieving collaborative communities. In doing so we recognise this will require the council to ensure it is able to respond and genuinely enable communities to explore new ways of working.

3.4 We intend to engage with partners to explore ideas, and to develop a framework. Comments are welcomed to shape this approach.

3.5 A conference will be held 7th October, hosted jointly with Thurrock CVS, to explore the principles underpinning collaborative communities and the emerging framework. Opportunities to invite participation through the new consultation portal will also be explored.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

4.1 Community engagement is an essential component of any policy development and underpins all council work. Effective community engagement impacts on how well people feel about the area they live and their ability to shape services and influence decisions that impact on their lives. Effective engagement also improves community cohesion as citizens express the issues they care about, recognising shared concerns within communities.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

5.1 Work to date is based on engagement with the voluntary sector through Thurrock CVS and Joint Strategic Forum, as well as feedback from residents on current processes such as the consultation portal. Further engagement including use of the portal and a conference in the autumn will help formulate

ideas for this agenda. Corporate Overview and Scrutiny are invited to contribute ideas towards a future engagement plan.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 The proposal to review our approach to engagement fits with the council's vision 'An ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future'. The new strategy will underpin all council priorities.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Jo Freeman**
Finance Manager

Whilst there are no direct financial implications arising from this report, implementation of the proposed Strategy through consultation and engagement activities may generate financial implications. These will be considered as the strategy and implementation plan is developed alongside options for using existing resources more efficiently to meet any new costs.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Tim Hallam**
Acting Head of Legal, Assistant Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

Whilst there aren't any specific legal issues raised in this report, the proposed strategy, amongst other things, addresses the legal requirements and principles in relation to consultation and engagement including the (common law) doctrine of legitimate expectation and Gunning Principles (1985). Certain functions of the Council, including planning, have statutory requirements to consult. Failure to consult or inadequate consultation could leave the Council in breach of its legal requirements and open to challenge through a judicial review application.

Other specific legislation, including the Local Government Acts (including the 1972, 1999 and 2000 Acts), the Localism Act 2011 and the Equality Act (2010) must or can be taken into account when appropriate and relevant.

The proposed strategy will be reviewed every four years or sooner to comply with changes to the law or policy and practice or as otherwise required.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Price**
Team Manager, Community Development and Equalities

In recent years, the council's approach to engaging and empowering local communities to design and deliver community-led solutions has evolved significantly with the introduction of Asset Based Community Development. This practice has been successful in a number of areas although only through close joint working with the voluntary, community and faith sector to enable and facilitate the involvement and participation of residents and specifically protected groups who may also be users or beneficiaries of the sector.

The proposal for a 'Collaborative Communities Strategy' will consolidate learning and best practice associated with consultation and engagement including those associated with ABCD and Your Place Your Voice.

A community equality impact assessment (CEIA) will be completed for this strategy which will set out the council's equality objectives for the next four years. This CEIA will not however alleviate the responsibility of individual services to understand and respond to the specific needs of communities and individuals with protected characteristics by actively seeking them at the outset of designing and then implementing policies, programmes and services at a borough and neighbourhood level.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children)

None

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- The proposed strategy will seek to refresh Thurrock's Joint Compact between the statutory sector and the council. The current compact can be viewed here <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/strategies/thurrock-joint-compact>

9. **Appendices to the report**

- None

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