

Overview and Scrutiny Report

# Community Engagement



October 2013



North Tyneside Council

## **1. Executive Summary/Chairs Forward**

- 1.1 The Community Engagement Sub-group was established by Overview and Scrutiny Committee in July 2013 with the aim of contributing to the development of a new approach to community engagement which would focus on ward level engagement.
- 1.2 As part of the review, the sub-group consulted with a wide range of council officers and looked widely at examples of engagement strategies from other local authorities.
- 1.3 Throughout the review a key principle emerged that Ward Councillors need to take a clear lead in ward level engagement and that officers should be there to support them in this community leadership role. The need to always provide residents with feedback following any consultation or engagement was strongly emphasised, as the group felt this was key to keeping people engaged and positive about the impact they can have.
- 1.4 The sub-group acknowledged that resources would be limited in delivering ward level engagement, with wards not having individual budgets to spend. It was however recognised that there was a budget available to facilitate ward level meetings and that this would provide opportunities for Ward Councillors and residents to work together to shape and influence decisions and improve neighbourhoods.
- 1.5 The sub-group looked at some areas of the council that have a high level of contact with residents on a daily basis to see what engagement methods are already in use and how this work can contribute to the new approach of councillor led engagement.
- 1.6 The sub-group identified 11 recommendations for Cabinet which are aimed at helping to develop and establish successful ward level engagement and providing support to Ward Councillors. A summary of recommendations is attached as Appendix A.

## **2. Reason for the study**

- 2.1 In April 2013 Cabinet agreed to cease Area Forums and develop new ways of engaging with residents that was based upon a greater focus on ward level engagement.
- 2.2 In July 2013, Cabinet received a report which set out new principles for community engagement that would result in a greater focus on partnerships between Ward Councillors, residents and the Council, built on taking time to ensure full engagement in 'Our North Tyneside'.
- 2.3 At its meeting in July 2013, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee invited the Cabinet Member for Community Engagement to discuss the proposals for developing a new approach to Community Engagement and identify how scrutiny could help in the development of this policy.

2.4 Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee felt that this was an important issue to address and made it a priority topic for its 2013/14 work programme.

### **3. Method and remit**

3.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed that establishing a sub-group would be the most appropriate means of undertaking this piece of work. As there had been no formal Community Engagement mechanism in place since the end of the Area Forums in April 2013, it was important for this piece of work to be completed over a short period of time.

3.2 The following members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee volunteered to serve on the group:

Cllr Sandra Graham (Chair)  
Cllr Jim Allan  
Cllr Brian Burdis  
Cllr Marian Huscroft  
Rev M Vine

3.3 The sub-group met on a fortnightly basis to complete the work, a total of 5 meetings.

3.4 At its first meeting the sub-group agreed a scope for the study which identified the following objective:

‘To help shape policy development by carrying out the following activities and making evidence-based recommendations to Cabinet that encourage a more inclusive approach to community engagement:

- Studying past approaches
- Looking at the approaches of other local authorities
- Identifying support needs for Members
- Identifying existing mechanisms for engaging residents’

3.5 In order to obtain the relevant evidence needed to complete the study, the group met with officers from Community Engagement, North Tyneside Homes, Participation and Engagement, Marketing and Communications and Policy, Performance and Research.

3.6 The group looked widely at other local authority approaches to Community Engagement, including authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The conclusion of this part of the research was that there is no perfect model in existence that has managed to coherently link community engagement with the role of the Ward Councillor. The sub-group did however identify aspects of some authorities strategies that they thought could contribute to the model being developed in North Tyneside.

### **4. Findings and evidence**

#### **4.1 Policy Overview – Key Principles**

- 4.1.1 Throughout the review the sub-group identified key principles that should direct and underpin the new ward level approach to be taken to Community Engagement. These principles are detailed in the paragraphs below.
- 4.1.2 The sub-group discussed the way in which engagement had been carried out in the past and identified that there was an important change to be made to the roles undertaken by both officers and Councillors. It was agreed that future engagement needs to be driven by Councillors and residents rather than officers, to ensure that the issues raised come from and are of importance to communities. The role of officers should be to support Members in undertaking this role. This will assist in the building of relationships between Councillors and residents to develop a confidence in people that they have the opportunity to influence decisions taken within the Council.
- 4.1.3 In recognition that there are many different types of communities across the borough, the approach to ward level engagement must be flexible, as a single model of working will not be appropriate for every ward. Ward Councillors and residents should work together to find an approach that works well within their area. It was highlighted that whilst the structure must allow for local level engagement, it must also adapt for events that may be held which would be relevant to multiple wards, an area of the borough or borough wide. Some wards already have mechanisms in place that work well, for both Councillors and residents, and these should be encouraged to continue and direct topics of interest and concern.
- 4.1.4 The sub-group raised experiences of residents saying that there has been a lack of feedback when they have been involved in consultation or engagement events. The group stressed the importance of ensuring that people are kept involved and informed, even in instances where nothing can be done, as this will be vital in keeping people engaged and interested in the future. The group felt that 'listen, try, and provide feedback' is the approach that should be taken to all forms of ward engagement. It should also be explicit in all forms of consultation and engagement that residents are key assets and with the support of Ward Councillors and officers can achieve a lot in terms of improving quality of lives and the neighbourhoods they live in.

**Recommendation 1:** Officers work with Ward Councillors to ensure there is a clear feedback mechanism in place for all forms of ward level engagement.

## **4.2 Interlinking existing mechanisms**

- 4.2.1 The group agreed that engagement and consultation with residents is the responsibility of all teams and officers across the council, not just those with 'engagement' in their job title. However, there are areas within the council that are more outward facing who will engage with residents on a far greater basis. The group recognised the importance of interlinking these different strands, to ensure a consistent approach to engagement and to minimise duplication and maximise resources.

The sub-group looked at two key areas of the Council where engagement and consultation feature highly in the day-to-day service provision. These were North Tyneside Homes and the Participation and Engagement Team (Children, Young People and Learning).

## North Tyneside Homes

- 4.2.2 The sub-group received information from officers within North Tyneside Homes (NTH) in relation to the different methods used in delivering tenant and leaseholder involvement, including the development of tenant scrutiny. The group learnt that since 2009 tenant and leaseholder involvement at North Tyneside had improved rapidly from a few people being involved in a limited number of ways, to a wide menu of involvement activities through which over 2000 customers were engaged in the last year. Officers shared with the group examples of key achievements since 2009 and future priorities for tenant and leaseholder involvement within NTH.
- 4.2.3 The sub-group discussed in detail Area Housing Forums, in terms of impact and success. It was recognised that the purpose of the forums is to provide an opportunity for Members and tenants to meet with Housing Officers to discuss areas of interest, review performance and provide a platform for consultation to take place. It was concluded that there are currently mixed outcomes for the Area Housing Forums. Whilst some of the forums are well attended and focussed, i.e. Wallsend, some are often inquorate, leaving little opportunity for the forums to fulfil their purpose. Poor attendance was attributed to both tenants and Ward Councillors. The size of the geographical areas covered by the forums mean that it is hard to consider and solve issues at a very local level. This is at odds with the policy aim of ward based engagement. As the forums are resource intensive, the group felt that it would be beneficial to consider replacing them with a more direct, ward based approach to engagement, which would reflect the Council's overall engagement strategy.
- 4.2.4 In relation to estate walkabouts, there were mixed experiences from members of the sub-group as to whether they had been invited to participate in estate walkabouts in the past. Officers explained that estate walkabouts are being reviewed as part of the wider estate based working arrangements and this may lead to estate walkabouts being refreshed or replaced. It was noted that Members should be consulted directly in their area on how best to engage council tenants at a local level. The group noted that, as many estates across the borough have mixed tenure, i.e. Council tenants, private ownership or private letting, any local based event or walkabout should be focused on making improvements to streets and neighbourhoods as a whole. There should be an emphasis on all residents working together to achieve a better sense of place and Ward Councillors have a key role in facilitating this. Whilst the estate walkabouts or local based event meets the Council's statutory obligations in relation to maintaining its housing stock, they can also provide an opportunity for all residents to access support in raising local standards and engender a sense of ownership and pride in where they live.
- 4.2.5 Members of the sub-group felt that there is an opportunity to further strengthen links between the engagement work undertaken by NTH and Councillors, and stressed that Ward Councillors need to have greater involvement in this area of the Council. The group felt the NTH approach to engagement and consultation will align with the Council's overall approach to engagement and will be able to contribute significantly to ward level engagement in areas where there is a high level of housing stock.

**Recommendation 2:** Officers in North Tyneside Homes review Area Housing Forums where positive outcomes are not being met and work with Ward Councillors and tenants to identify a replacement that contributes to the ward engagement model, focusing on wards and issues local to residents.

**Recommendation 3:** As part of the estate based working review, estate walkabouts are refreshed or replaced. This will produce a greater involvement from Ward Councillors and a focus on improving neighbourhood standards for all residents.

### **Participation and Engagement Team (Children, Young People and Learning)**

- 4.2.6 The sub-group met with the Manager of the Participation and Engagement Team to discuss the work that is undertaken, both formal and informal, to consult and engage with young people in the borough. The engagement methods used combine long-term involvement with a project and one-off engagement activities. It was acknowledged that there are peaks and troughs in terms of the volume of young people engaging in these various activities and that the team schedule events appropriately according to other demands placed upon young people, i.e. little during exam time and more during the summer holidays.
- 4.2.7 It was noted that the mechanisms in place were effective but that Members would benefit from more feedback and information on the work being undertaken and how young people and Ward Councillors can communicate with each other. The group concluded that, similarly to NTH, the work undertaken by the Participation and Engagement Team needs to tie in with the newly developed direction for community engagement across the council, where Ward Councillors are at the centre of leading ward level community engagement activities.
- 4.2.8 The sub-group discussed ways in which Ward Councillors could engage more with young people and it was suggested that Members being visible in schools would aid this. It was suggested that this could be achieved through Ward Councillors acting as a link to their local school council, informing young people of the main issues and developments within the local area and borough wide, but also keeping up-to-date with the issues that are of greatest importance to young people. Providing opportunities for young people to directly influence and shape decisions that affect them from an early age would hopefully encourage continued involvement with activities within their local communities.
- 4.2.9 The sub-group recognised that there would be a certain level of onus on Ward Councillors to engage with their local school and arrange to attend school council meetings. Members of the group felt that this should be done prior to quarterly ward level meetings in order to feed the views of young people into these meetings. The group also felt that appropriate support should be provided and coordinated across various areas of the Council to help Ward Councillors achieve this. The group discussed further ways in which Ward Councillors could be kept informed of the work being undertaken in relation to youth engagement and participation. It was suggested that the minutes of

Youth Council meetings, along with any other relevant information on key events and activities, be circulated to all Ward Councillors via the Members Briefings.

- 4.2.10 It was acknowledged by the sub-group that involvement of young people in ward level engagement would have to be flexible and have a 'hook' for young people to be involved. Many young people do not identify with a 'ward' area as being their community, as they may live, play and go to school all in different wards. A football field or play park in the area they socialise is likely to be of interest to a young person, even if it's not located within the ward they live. Greater involvement of local Councillors in schools may encourage young people to get involved in ward level engagement activities and provide opportunities for inter-generational work on local issues.

**Recommendation 4:** Officers ensure that appropriate mechanisms and support be put in place to ensure that Ward Councillors are able to build closer links with young people through attendance at school council meetings.

**Recommendation 5:** The Participation and Engagement Team liaise with the Policy, Performance and Research Team to ensure that information is included in Members Briefings in relation to youth engagement and participation.

### 4.3 Ward Forums

#### Format

- 4.3.1 The sub-group discussed on several occasions ideas for the practical arrangements and methods that could be used in delivering ward level engagement. It was suggested the format of the forums would differ and could consist of:

- A public meeting with an agenda set by Ward Councillors and residents which would allow an inclusive discussion on issues of importance
- Estate walkabouts which would give residents the opportunity to raise issues and begin conversations at a very local level
- 'Ward Councillor Conversations' – 'pop-up stalls' to be set up in shopping centres, libraries and leisure centres to make Councillors more accessible to residents

- 4.3.2 The sub-group also suggested that existing structures could be used more effectively to expand on the engagement that already takes place between Councillors and residents. An example of this is the Members surgeries, where resources have already been booked, the council's partners could be involved to extend discussions and identify and address a wider range of issues. This could also include street surgeries, where certain geographical streets are covered and provide an opportunity to discuss issues at a local level.

#### Frequency of meetings and Chair/Lead

- 4.3.3 Whilst there should not be a prescriptive model to the structure and delivery of the ward level meetings, with flexibility being a key element of the approach,

the sub-group felt that it would be useful to have in place a guideline for the frequency of meetings/events. It was suggested that some form of engagement should take place in every ward on a quarterly basis, whether this be a meeting, an estate walkabout, a 'Ward Councillor Conversation' or another method developed by the Ward Councillors. It was emphasised that this should be a minimum and that activities should be arranged on a demand basis. It may be that some wards are more active than others, due to the drive and requirements of residents. It was also suggested that residents should be able to request a meeting to discuss topical issues of concern within the ward.

- 4.3.4 It was recognised by the sub-group that this new approach to community engagement would re-invigorate the role of the Ward Councillor and emphasise the role they have as a community leader. Therefore, in relation to chairing meetings or leading on engagement activities, the sub-group felt that all Ward Councillors should have the opportunity to take on this role. It is recommended that each ward operates a 'revolving chair' model to facilitate this. It was however recognised that Members possess different skills and that in some wards this model will not be possible or be the most appropriate. Therefore whilst the above approach to chairing meetings and leading on engagement activities is suggested as the preferred method, Councillors in each ward will have discretion to agree, in conjunction with the relevant support officers, the arrangement for their forum.

### **Getting Started**

- 4.3.5 It is proposed that Ward Councillors will have the flexibility to decide what will work best in their ward and the forums will not have to be at the same time and follow the same format. However, the group agreed that there needed to be a coordinated launch to ward level engagement across the borough. The group agreed with the suggestion that the agenda for this first phase of ward level meetings include an update on the actions being taken by the Council and its partners to address the risks of flooding as well as opportunities for residents to shape the ward level engagement approach.
- 4.3.6 The sub-group stressed the importance of the agendas for ward level meetings being driven by Ward Councillors and ensuring that the issues considered are those that have been raised by local residents as an issue of concern.

### **Coordination**

- 4.3.7 From the beginning of the study it was recognised that there would be issues that wards want to cover that are common to several or all wards. In studying best practice from other authorities, the group highlighted that it would be useful for each ward to develop an action plan which includes 3 priority areas for improvement. These plans would be developed by Ward Councillors in conjunction with residents. The plans would provide each ward with a sense of identity and a measure of success for the ward discussions. The plans would also allow coordination of the issues that the wards are covering and where appropriate, facilitate some joint working between wards to avoid duplication of effort.



**Recommendation 6:** All Ward Councillors, in conjunction with local residents and officers, set the agendas for ward level meetings within their area.

**Recommendation 7:** As a minimum guideline, each ward holds a meeting on a quarterly basis and arranges additional events as required to meet demand.

**Recommendation 8:** Where agreeable amongst Ward Councillors, the ward level meetings operate on a 'revolving chair' basis to allow all Ward Councillors to fulfil their role as a community leader and develop the necessary skills required.

**Recommendation 9:** Action plans be developed for each ward forum which highlight 3 priorities for that area and allow the activities of each forum to be coordinated appropriately.

#### **4.4 Alternative means of engaging**

##### **Council Website**

4.4.1 The sub-group recognised that many residents may not want to engage with Councillors face-to-face and that effective alternative means need to be in place. Individuals shared their experiences of using the Council's website and the general conclusion was that it was difficult to navigate, making it hard for residents to find out about what is going on in the borough. The group was informed that work was underway to redesign the website. It was hoped that the new website would include more interactive features that would allow residents to easily access information in relation to their local area and feed in their opinions about Council services.

4.4.2 As the group concluded its study, work was still underway to define the priorities for the development of the new website. A task and finish group, linked to the Council's Communications and Engagement Network, will be established to carry out this work. Members stressed the importance of ensuring that the website is user friendly and has a clear focus on interactive features that will allow the Council to consult and engage with residents in different ways.

**Recommendation 10:** The task and finish group established to develop the website give priority to the inclusion of tools that will allow greater interaction and engagement with residents.

##### **Social Media**

4.4.3 The sub-group also recognised the important and increasing role that social media has in communications between the Council and its residents. Officers from Marketing and Communications and Policy and Performance attended a meeting to discuss the current approach to social media across the Council. The group was informed that a new communications strategy was under development, which would include an approach to social media. The floods of June 2012 were identified as a situation where social media (twitter) was very useful in disseminating crucial information to a large number of people quickly.

It was noted that the new website would allow the council to move forward in its use and coordination of social media.

4.4.4 It was acknowledged that, in order for ward councillors to have contact with a wide range of residents within their ward and provide greater opportunities for people to engage with the council, social media would have to be embraced on some level by Ward Councillors. The risks of using social media were raised and it was emphasised that Ward Councillors would need to act responsibly and sensibly. Members of the group were provided with a copy of 'Connected councillors: a guide to using social media to support local leadership' to provide some initial information on how ward councillors could use social media to engage residents.

4.4.5 The group recognised that the potential use of social media would be a new concept for many Ward Councillors and that support and training would need to be provided. It was noted that some in-house training on social media was currently being developed by Human Resources, which would include an online training module (Autumn 2013) and a face-to-face session later in the year, as part of the member development programme.

## **4.5 Member Support**

4.5.1 As part of the remit for this study, the sub-group looked at the support that Members might need in order to take a more active role in community engagement within their ward. Members of the group received copies of the following documents to help identify some possible requirements:

- Community Leadership – Councillor Workbook.
- The Political Skills Framework – a councillor's toolkit.

These documents helped the group to identify the skills needed for local leadership, partnership working and communication, all of which are important to achieving effective and worthwhile engagement with residents.

4.5.2 The group was pleased to learn that a toolkit for Members and officers that will act as a checklist for going out and engaging the community was near completion. This will give practical advice on what to think about when arranging a public event/meeting and the different methods that could be used to engage with residents.

4.5.3 It was acknowledged that, in order to fully assess the needs of Members properly, the structure of the ward level engagement would need to be in place, so that individuals could highlight the support they need to carry out the role expected of them. It was suggested that these needs be addressed at a later date and the Member development programme be reviewed to ensure that training can be provided on the skill gaps identified.

4.5.4 Throughout the study, the group referred to the need for Ward Councillors to have access to clear, concise and up-to-date information in order to work with residents on issues of local concern. If Ward Councillors are going to be more visible in communities, it is important that they have knowledge of local issues to answer queries first hand. The group stressed the critical role that Ward Councillors have in interfacing with the public and that access to high quality

information is crucial to delivering this role. The group felt that at present, it was often difficult to access key information and that different mechanisms were used by Members to access answers to queries, i.e. going directly to officers or using the Members' Enquiry System. It was noted that a consistent approach needed to be undertaken. The group was informed that a review of Member communications was currently being undertaken and this would involve looking at how information is accessed and how this can be improved. Officers undertaking this review will be attending group meetings to gather experiences and suggestions in relation to this issue.

**Recommendation 11:** That the work currently being undertaken in relation to Ward Councillor communications recognise the new role for Ward Councillors in delivering ward level meetings and prioritise ways to improve access to clear, concise and up-to-date information.

## **5.0 Background Information**

Community Engagement Framework  
North Tyneside Council Engagement Strategy 2012-15  
Report to Cabinet 15<sup>th</sup> October 2002, Area Committees  
Report to Cabinet 14<sup>th</sup> January 2003, Area Committees (Interim Report)  
Community Leadership – Councillor Workbook  
The Political Skills Framework – a councillor's toolkit  
Connected councillors: a guide to using social media to support local leadership  
Notes of meetings of the group

## **6.0 Acknowledgements**

The sub-group would like to place on record their thanks to the following officers for the information, support and advice they have provided:

Felicity Shoesmith – Manager, Partnerships and Involvement Team  
Richard Brook – Business Development Manager, North Tyneside Homes  
Esther Windass – Tenant & Resident Involvement Manager, North Tyneside Homes  
Jeanette Hedley – Senior Manager Communications  
Vicki Nixon – Participation and Engagement Manager (CYPL)  
Mark Stephens – Performance Adviser  
Bev Harris – Performance Adviser  
Jacqueline Laughton – Strategic Manager (Policy, Partnerships, Performance and Communications)  
Emma Fagan – Scrutiny Adviser

### Summary of Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** Officers work with Ward Councillors to ensure there is a clear feedback mechanism in place for all forms of ward level engagement.

**Recommendation 2:** Officers in North Tyneside Homes review Area Housing Forums where positive outcomes are not being met and work with Ward Councillors and tenants to identify a replacement that contributes to the ward engagement model, focusing on wards and issues local to residents.

**Recommendation 3:** As part of the estate based working review, estate walkabouts are refreshed or replaced. This will produce a greater involvement from Ward Councillors and a focus on improving neighbourhood standards for all residents.

**Recommendation 4:** Officers ensure that appropriate mechanisms and support be put in place to ensure that Ward Councillors are able to build closer links with young people through attendance at school council meetings.

**Recommendation 5:** The Participation and Engagement Team liaise with the Policy, Performance and Research Team to ensure that information is included in Members Briefings in relation to youth engagement and participation.

**Recommendation 6:** All Ward Councillors, in conjunction with local residents and officers, set the agendas for ward level meetings within their area.

**Recommendation 7:** As a minimum guideline, each ward holds a meeting on a quarterly basis and arranges additional events as required to meet demand.

**Recommendation 8:** Where agreeable amongst Ward Councillors, the ward level meetings operate on a 'revolving chair' basis to allow all Ward Councillors to fulfil their role as a community leader and develop the necessary skills required.

**Recommendation 9:** Action plans be developed for each ward forum which highlight 3 priorities for that area and allow the activities of each forum to be coordinated appropriately.

**Recommendation 10:** The task and finish group established to develop the website give priority to the inclusion of tools that will allow greater interaction and engagement with residents.

**Recommendation 11:** That the work currently being undertaken in relation to Ward Councillor communications recognise the new role for Ward Councillors in delivering ward level meetings and prioritise ways to improve access to clear, concise and up-to-date information.