

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS
TASK AND FINISH GROUP

2 March 2006

PRESENT:

Councillor C Malpas
Councillor M Hill
Councillor A Simpson

Chair

Councillor Glynane

Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thomas Hall
Lindsey Ambrose

Corporate Manager
Area Partnerships and Forums Co-
Ordinator

Margaret Martin

Consortium

1 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor A Roy.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 February 2006 were agreed as a true record.

**4 REVIEW OF DESKTOP RESEARCH AND 5 FEEDBACK FOR VISIT TO
BEST PRACTICED AUTHORITY**

Consideration of items 4 and 5 were taken together.

T Hall, Corporate Manager, had sent an email to the Task and Finish Group suggesting Local Authorities of best practice that Councillors could carry out desktop research. Results of the desktop research would be presented to the next meeting on 16 March.

L Ambrose had obtained information from Tameside Metropolitan Council, Beacon Council for Getting Close to its Communities. She had also attended a presentation on the Authority's Area Committees and Decentralisation – District Assemblies.

Tameside MBC disseminated its good practice and its key messages are:

- Involving Citizens
- Strong Partnership
- Innovative Consultation Mechanisms
- Engaging Young People

Sharing Practice through practical help

- Practice based website
- How to Guides
- Themed Open days
- One to One visits

Resourcing the Dissemination Plan

- Partnership Approach
- Training and Event Organisation
- Practical Advice
- Use of Mainstream Resources

Tameside MBC has eight District Assemblies for a population of 225,000 based on recognisable local townships. They were introduced in 1998. The District Assemblies have decision-making powers. Their remit is mainly street scene, but there is some variance between the District Assemblies, each having their own budgets.

L Ambrose was not aware of published terms of reference for the District Assemblies. M Martin confirmed that Nottingham City Council's Area Partnerships had published terms of reference. The terms of reference was the same for each Area: Partnership and linked in to the Local Plan.

Tameside MBC's District Assemblies involved young people. Breakfast meetings were held to involve the business community.

The Task and Finish Group was informed of the District Assembly Framework:

- 6 to 12 Councillors in each Assembly
- Some Councillors sat on two Assemblies because of Ward/Township boundary differences
- 2-3 business representatives
- 2-3 voluntary/community group representatives
- 1-2 residents/tenant representatives
- 2-3 elected high school representatives (14-16 year old students)
- Local Police, fire service and the public.

An issue that Tameside had was how to make the District Assembly representative, **the Task and Finish Group felt that this was a question that could be asked when it visited a Council of best practice.**

Attendance at the District Assemblies was around 1,800 per year out of a population of 45,000 per District Assembly. The Task and Finish Group felt this to be an example of good engagement and also commented that on a scale basis, attendance at NBC's Area Partnerships was comparable. NBC's Area Partnerships also had regular attendees and for contentious issues, in particular planning, a lot of people would attend the meeting.

Part of the meeting of the District Assembly became *Open Forum – Have your Say (question time)*, approximately 12 questions per meeting were asked by the public.

The minutes of the meetings of the District Assemblies were referred to Tameside's Full Council.

The Chair perceived the District Assemblies to be of a similar format to Northamptonshire County Council (NCC)'s old Area Committee System.

T Hall advised that there was a need to ensure that NBC's Area Partnerships networked with neighbourhood management. There were a number of directions that could be followed but there was a need to ensure that they linked up properly.

M Martin suggested that a copy of Tameside MBC's consultation/Engagement Strategy be obtained for the Task and Finish Group's information. It would also be advantageous to have details of its satisfaction feedback and also details of how the Council consults with individuals who did not attend District Assemblies.

T Hall advised that strengthening NBC's Area Partnerships could only be part of the Task and Finish Group's recommendations.

Tameside MBC had also introduced *Tameside Voice – Tameside-Wider Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Forum* – an effective, accountable and representative structure. It embraced diversity of Tameside's communities through a wide range of member networks and forums. It enabled everyone who wanted to get involved and have a say and promoted the interests of Tameside communities, organisations and residents at all levels of strategic partnership working. **Councillor Glynane supported Tameside Voice, commenting that NBC had a perfect venue to hold such an event – the Great Hall.**

The Task and Finish Group was then referred to the London Borough of Croydon. It had ten Neighbourhood Partnerships, which were first set up in 2000. The purpose of the Partnerships was to consult, encourage comment on the provision of service locally and influence policies of the Council and its partnership agencies as they affected particular geographical areas. Croydon

had similar problems to NBC with its Area Partnerships. Often people would come to an Area Partnership meeting to voice concern; therefore the Partnerships lacked meaningful consultation. It held a review of its Partnerships and found that different Council departments were using the Partnerships differently and inconsistently, but these Partnerships were part of what made the London Borough of Croydon a Beacon Council. **It was suggested that it would be beneficial to ascertain what Croydon had done since its review.**

The Task and Finish Group commented: -

- Beneficial to hold an event similar to Tameside Voice, possibly the week before Full Council
- Advantageous for Area Partnerships to have decision-making powers.
- Planning issues achieved high attendance at Area Partnership meetings.

L Ambrose confirmed that she would attend the Group's next two meetings.

The Task and Finish Group was reminded that T Hall had carried out research into other Local Authorities of good practice and had forwarded details to the Group for information, which contained details for the Local Government Chronicle's annual awards, which included 'Community Involvement'. Councils that were short-listed included Brighton and Hove, Bristol City and Cambridgeshire CC. Tameside MBC was a 'Beacon' Council for Getting Closer to Communities and the Institute of Public Relations has a good Local Government section, which makes a series of awards in relevant categories, which includes awards for Internal Communications (Liverpool City Council) and Civic Newspaper (Colchester Borough Council). **T Hall suggested that from the work carried out, the Task and Finish Group had identified areas that it required more information on, what the key issues were and that key learning issues that should be brought back from other Local Authorities. He undertook to provide this information.**

As the Group had received information from Tameside it was suggested to visit another Local Authority of best practice. T Hall confirmed that he would devise a list of questions that could be asked on the visit.

A visit to a best practice Local Authority would be arranged possibly to a London Borough on 20th or 21st March. Councillors Malpas, Hill and Simpson expressed an interest on attending. As soon as a visit had been arranged, Councillors would be issued with the details.

6 REVIEW OF ORIGINAL SCOPING DOCUMENT

The Task and Finish Group reviewed its original scoping document, identifying whether there were any issues that required further information or analysis.

The purpose of the review was to be able to demonstrate that the Council consults and involves more residents and that the residents are satisfied with their levels of involvement.

The Task and Finish Group discussed potential outcomes: It was emphasised that they were potential outcomes and the Group had taken a too big remit initially.

1 *Councillors have a true picture of the integrity customer satisfaction measurement (for example, true, honest, decent) and understand that it is measured in the right way.* The Group commented that the Council had various pieces of consultation being undertaken but there was not a central unit to 'pull it all together'. There has not been a robust analysis of the measurement of customer satisfaction. There are however specific indicators, for example tenant satisfaction, but there are plenty of areas with no such indicators. **A potential conclusion could be that there were no standards; every public facing service should be in a position to know how its customers regarded it. A plan should be developed showing how services get to that position. There was the need for a more coherent approach. The Task and Finish Group recognised that the Council wants to be a customer focussed organisation but cannot judge its success, as it does not measure it.**

2 *Clear recommendations about how effective consultation should happen.* At an early meeting the Task and Finish Group had made suggestions regarding consultation. **There was a need for a clear mechanism, with some central theme. Consultation guidance should be produced and issued. All consultation data should go to one central unit, which should be centrally collated. (Community intelligence – access of information).**

3 *Scrutiny of consultation mechanisms to ensure all residents feels they are consulted and involved across all services to affect service improvement.* Councillors commented that this potential outcome related to 2 above.

4 *The identification of the risks that may occur that would prevent the overall targets being achieved.* **The Group had ascertained that no measurement was in place. Targets had been set as part of the Recovery Plan, for example: To have by July 2006 more than 50% of residents feeling we consult and involve them and to increase to 55% residents who are satisfied/very satisfied with us by April 2006. T Hall confirmed that in the course of preparing the Communications Strategy, figures had been proposed by consultants, which had been accepted by the Cabinet. He felt there was a need to look at the figures as a longer-term aspiration, especially as we were already in March. Regarding measurement, T Hall advised that this had not as yet been looked at in detail. A standard satisfaction survey was due in the autumn. He added that there were some Local Authorities that set similar target but they were usually good or excellent**

Councils. The Group suggested that its recommendations could include that this was not a realistic target and there was a need for appropriate methods to be in place by the autumn to give the Council meaningful results.

5 A comprehensive consultation process/strategy that is fit for purpose for the Council. A Communications Strategy had been produced and approved. A Consultation Protocol was also in existence but was rarely used. The Protocol had not been approved and at this stage was guidance only. Councillors suggested that it could be recommended that the Consultation Protocol be adopted. The Group requested that a copy of the Consultation Protocol be presented to the next meeting.

6 Evaluation of the Engagement Strategy. This potential outcome relates to 5 above.

The Task and Finish Group then discussed the information required section of its Initial Scoping Document:

1 How each service area is approaching the targets.

2 Who is taking responsibility for these targets across the Council?

3 What is the current percentage of residents who feel consulted and involved – and why do they feel consulted and involved

1 –3 above had been dealt with whilst discussing potential outcomes.

4 Best practice within Northampton (other public bodies)(and best practice external to Northampton and 5 What budget is allocated to achieve the targets Northampton Today was a Council produced document. Departments should be able to measure success; therefore there was a need for a budget. There should also be a central pot for consultation. A recommendation could be that the Council lacks specialist knowledge in consultation and there is a need for a consultation budget, whether or not the Council is successful in its bid to for funding from the Capacity Building Fund. Budget Heads would be reviewed in May and within these budgets there is a need for allocation to continuous consultation. It was also important that there was one common budget for consultation.

6 How do Councillors in their role as Community Leaders help to achieve the targets In respect of what Councillors expectations were via public meetings, surgeries etc. how did Councillors know that the public was satisfied with them? The Group felt that there was no way of measuring this. One of the political groups had; produced a feedback form measuring caseload work. Political Groups did things differently, based on political parties and the wards. The Task and Finish Group commented that Councillors were the public face of the Council. The recommendation could state that Councillors needed to be supported in

their role, being provided with the correct information and models of feedback.

7 *What feedback mechanisms are in place when a resident contacts the Council or takes part in consultations.* Covered during discussion of the potential outcomes.

8 *How the Council measures the satisfaction of resident* Covered during discussion of the potential outcomes.

9 *The current IT systems effectiveness to meet the Council's requirements.* **A Central Unit does not exist. The recommendation could state that there was a need for a Central Unit to bring all information together on a central database system.**

10 *The use of text messaging as a means of engaging particularly young people in the consultation mechanisms* **As a Council the use of text messaging is not used. Text messaging could be used to consult with harder to reach groups. The recommendation could state that all mechanisms to consult be investigated, such as website feedback forms and SMS (text) messaging as a means of communication.**

11 *The methods used to conduct previous survey(s)/consultation.* This information had been acquired at the Group's January meeting, when employees from: Planning, Finance and Area Partnerships and Forums had been interviewed.

7 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would be held on Thursday 16 March commencing at 6.15pm and the agenda would include: -

- Desktop Research
- Consultation Protocol
- Visit to Best Practice Local Authority
 - (a) Authority to visit
 - (b) Set of questions to put to employees on their consultation methods

The meeting concluded at 8.00 pm