

### **The work of the Community Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee: 2007 – 2008.**

This has been the first complete year of the Committee's existence.

A principal task has been to use the Scrutiny process to support, review and enhance the operation of the Council's Neighbourhood Engagement Policy and Community Forums. An example is the encouragement offered for the development of training opportunities to support Members in the community engagement and champion's role.. The Committee commented that Member training would need to deal with the way Community Forums were to operate as an occasion for discussion of common themes or issues arising in a local community, and as a means of engagement with public bodies. We have consulted Members about what is going well and not so well so far at Forum meetings, and begun to develop a database of key discussion topics and key issues raised at Forum meetings.

Associated subjects for consideration have been progress in Priority Neighbourhoods and Cohesive Communities in Leicestershire. A particular issue arising from the latter was a suggestion that the implementation of a strategy on volunteering would be of benefit to residents, developing a sense of self worth for some people. This in turn led to more detailed consideration later in the year.

The Committee contributed comments on extracts from the "This is Leicestershire – An Evidence Base" document on "Stronger Communities" and also the draft "Stronger Communities" chapter for inclusion in the draft Sustainable Community Strategy. Among other things, we noted that whilst it was appreciated that in the new Local Area Agreement all sectors of the community would need to work in partnership to achieve their stated outcomes, there was some concern that by measuring the contribution of voluntary organisations through performance indicators, some in the sector who had no wish to be involved in "bureaucracy", no matter how small, could feel alienated from their original purpose of serving their community. Engagement of the voluntary sector would therefore, it was felt, have to be treated sensitively.

In the light of the proposed new infrastructure for the Voluntary and Community Sector in Leicestershire the Committee invited four representatives of the Voluntary Sector to make presentations on the subject of volunteering in Leicestershire, which they did at our April meeting, with a focus on how voluntary organisations themselves work and their relationship with the County Council. The particular points of view offered were: the national perspective on volunteering; volunteering in the voluntary and community sector infrastructure review and business plan; the stronger communities perspective and social capital; and the practical arrangements for volunteering across the county. The presentations helped us understand the scope and significance of the subject and our work programme now includes looking at proposed terms of reference for a scrutiny review panel on volunteering.

We have had the opportunity to review and comment on some uses of media for communications. Another natural extension of our work has been to begin to consider

Consultation and Engagement and we are looking forward to continuing that work at our meeting in September.

We have agreed that a further piece of work for the Committee will be, especially as the Community Forums develop, to look more at outcomes than processes. We have made a start, as mentioned above, by considering the range of subjects discussed so far at Forums and we are beginning to look for common threads. As the evidence base develops, the Committee will be able to detect issues which it may be able to help resolve, if a Forum or Forums find that information from a service provider is not forthcoming, or is unacceptable. We are also committed to undertaking a review of the Forums early in 2009. We intend that review to be informed by, among other things, consideration of examples of best practice by Community Forums from around the country.

I believe that the meetings which have been held of the Chairman/Spokesmen/Lead Member have been most valuable in helping the Committee to work effectively for the benefit of the Council. They have produced a collaborative approach by Members to steering the Committee's work and shaping its development.

Finally, I should like to thank all Members, presenters and officers who have contributed to the Committee's discussions and development.

Richard Shepherd