

## Report of the work of the Community Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee for 2008 – 2009

The work of the Committee this year has been to scrutinise initiatives designed to develop the better involvement of the residents of Leicestershire in civic society. We believe our work has added value by exploring and communicating the potential advantages and drawbacks of proposals. We have approached our work with a desire to foster good ideas but also with a degree of useful, not destructive scepticism about ideas. In other words, we have not been prepared tamely to endorse the new simply because it is the new. At the time of writing, part way through the year, our work is necessarily not yet complete, so this report must anticipate some unfinished business.

I should like to deal first with Community Forums. A review of Forums is being considered in the context of the wider engagement framework, in the light of the duties on the Council to ensure that people can engage better with Council services. The White Paper “Communities in Control – Real People, Real Power”, is part of the background.

The review of the role which Community Forums play in engagement is an aspect of the review of current consultation and engagement processes for Leicestershire Together. Feedback from Forum meetings provides one source of information about their role and effectiveness, and the Committee has twice received such information about two different rounds of meetings. I will concentrate on the more recent feedback, as being more relevant to the sense of the Forums’ development.

66% of meetings were rated as Good or Excellent, 26% Satisfactory, and 6% Not good. The average rating of Good or Excellent for previous Forum rounds was just under 50%. The satisfaction with venues is slightly higher than with the meetings overall, so we appear to be addressing issues raised earlier.

The aspects of meetings which people liked most, in descending order, are:

- Information in the presentations;
- Discussion/engagement, including being taken seriously;
- The questions and being able to get answers;
- Interactive voting;
- Informality and access to senior officials.

In cases when participants felt meetings were particularly well run and chaired, this was also mentioned favourably.

The aspects which people liked least are:

- Not being able to hear speakers/general venue problems;
- Presentations which are too long, boring/inappropriate or filled with jargon;
- Negative attitudes, whether from officers, members or other participants;
- Situations where councillors dominate or the meeting is not chaired in a way which allows everyone to contribute effectively

A wide range of issues has been put forward for consideration at future meetings; no single subject predominates. The number of suggestions and the high level of satisfaction with information provided indicate that, for those who attend Forums, they are playing a significant role in informing the public and enabling engagement to occur. I should, however, like to draw attention to the comment about councillors dominating. I should also like to suggest that officers and others making presentations should always be sensitive to their audiences, and not address a meeting for so long that there is insufficient time for questions and discussion.

There are some issues concerning the number of residents who are attending meetings. This no longer features as a major source of dissatisfaction in the feedback and as Forums have become more established, attendance by residents has generally risen. It is still clearly an issue though for some of the Forums areas and was raised as a major concern by Chairs of Forums at a Networking and Development Event in January. Forums seem to be a source but not a comprehensive source of consultation, a point made at a recent meeting of the Scrutiny Review Panel on Consultation and Engagement.

An example of a Forum having had a positive influence and seeing attendances rise in parallel to this is provided by three public Forum meetings held in the Bradgate, Rothley, Mountsorrel and Birstall Area. Attendances rose from 26 to 37 to 53. Outcomes were action to avert the closure of Birstall Longslade Swimming Pool and a raised awareness of flooding concerns and the need for a meeting of various agencies.

The achievement of outcomes was also identified as a measure of success at the Networking and Development Event, mentioned earlier. A number of other successes were also celebrated then, and suggestions made for solutions to problems. Four notable suggestions were:

Setting out clearly the purpose of Forums, what they can achieve and how they fit with wider engagement;

Having a prize in each Forum for the best innovative solution to a local problem, thus helping to generate publicity and credibility;

Encouraging particular members to champion issues raised and to follow them up on behalf of the Forum;

In rural areas, including an agenda item of particular relevance to the venue village, whenever possible, to increase local interest.

The Scrutiny Committee endorsed the four suggestions, with the exception of the second. It was felt that "recognition" in some form would be preferable to "a prize".

It seems that support for the Forums is slowly growing. Measures are now needed to speed up the growth of support. Officers are being asked to draw up proposals to define clearly the role of Forums in relation to other forms of engagement, and to improve media coverage to encourage greater participation.

The Spokesmen and I have written to all Forum Chairs to remind them of the ability each Forum has to ask the Committee to help to resolve issues. A copy of the letter is attached to the report as Appendix A.

As well as making suggestions as reported above the Committee has been informing itself to prepare a more wide-ranging review of Forums, based on ideas not just from within Leicestershire but also from around the country. We know that Participatory Budgeting is already planned. The review is proceeding but is not yet complete. It seems appropriate at this stage to include as Appendices B and C two examples of the information gathered, namely "Potential roles for local forums" and "Different Models for Community Forums". It is interesting to consider when looking at "Potential roles for local forums" how far along the "ladder", as it is called, from left to right, we should proceed.

This report so far has concentrated on Community Forums. I should now like to turn other matters.

The Committee has been charged with scrutinising the delivery arrangements for the Stronger Communities elements of the Sustainable Community Strategy and the Local Area Agreement. We were pleased to see the progress made and discussed a publication entitled "Welcome to Leicestershire". We felt it contained much useful information but were concerned that contact telephone numbers and addresses in it could quickly become out of date. It was therefore felt that it would be beneficial to add a disclaimer to the document indicating that all contact telephone numbers and addresses were correct at the time of publication. It was explained that the document was intended primarily for publication on the internet and that the version we were shown would be updated as and when required.

We have also considered the Review of Neighbourhood Management, carried out on behalf of Leicestershire Together by Social Regeneration Consultants (SRC). We were concerned that some statutory agencies were identified as "hard to engage". They seem not to be acting in the same spirit as others and are thus creating gaps in the engagement process.

The Committee considered the Report of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering and Manifesto for Change in relation to volunteering activities in Leicestershire. Among the points we noted were that monitoring returns by Voluntary Actions and Volunteer Centres in Leicestershire in 2007 -2008 indicated that over 50% of newly recruited volunteers were under the age of thirty, contrary to the perception that most volunteers were of retirement age. We welcomed the fact that more young people were becoming engaged in volunteering.

We resolved that the Leicestershire Stronger Communities Board, in partnership with the Community Infrastructure Organisation, be invited to establish the role of a volunteering champion or champions, and that the Council be invited to consider appointing a County Councillor as a volunteering champion.

It is pleasing to note progress to put "champions" in place. There is a lead officer for volunteering who sits on the Stronger Communities Board, and who takes the champion role. The Chair of the Board sits on Leicestershire Together with the lead

role for volunteering issues. A member of the County Council's Cabinet has been appointed by the Leader as the volunteering champion. The new Community Infrastructure Organisation will start operating fully on 1 April, so at the time of writing is not in a position to have a champion. It is hoped that they will.

Clearly the nature and effectiveness of consultation has featured in this report and in the Committee's discussions. A Scrutiny Review Panel on Consultation and Engagement, which I chair, began work in January of this year and is due to report in April. The Panel's Terms of Reference are included as Appendix D.

I should like to thank the Spokesmen for their collaborative approach to the Committee's work and all Members, presenters and officers who have contributed to the Committee's discussions and development.

Richard Shepherd  
Chairman of the Community Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee