

REPORT TO: Corporate Services Policy & Performance Board

DATE: 23 February 2010

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Health & Community

SUBJECT: Corporate Community Engagement Audit

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To report the findings of the recent Corporate Community Engagement audit and provide some guidance on strategic requirements.

2.0 RECOMMENDED: That

- 1. Corporate Services PPB receives the report and comments on the audits findings.**
- 2. Considers arrangements for community engagement activity contributing to a co-ordinated corporate approach and supporting strategic requirements and assessments.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 In April 2008, the Audit Commission undertook a Comprehensive Performance Assessment Inspection of Council Services. One of the key areas for their inspection was community engagement and they concluded.

“There is a duty on the Council to inform, consult and involve. The Council and its partners must collect and evaluate comprehensive information on both the needs of different community groups and the way our current service delivery addresses those needs. Local people, partners, staff and suppliers should be involved in the commissioning of services, whilst the Council and its partners strive to improve access to services, outcomes and value for money based on robust evaluation. The Council and its partners should also establish whether the information provided to the community is deemed by residents as being relevant to them. To these ends, engagement activities will need to be co-ordinated across partnerships effectively.”

3.2 The Comprehensive Area Assessment process is already underway and to date there has already been significant focus from the Audit Commission around community engagement approaches. The CAA process pays particular attention to the following key areas of

activity: -

- Local services need to be ‘effective at giving voice to those who are vulnerable or at greater risk of disadvantage and inequality’.
- How well local partners know and understand the nature and extent of inequality and disadvantage within their communities and how effectively they are working to reduce or eliminate discrimination.
- How well authorities specifically engage with vulnerable and marginalised groups.
- “Evidence of service users views, specifically children and young people; those who may experience disadvantage in accessing public services; groups and individuals seldom heard, people whose circumstances make them vulnerable and the third sector.” An authority must demonstrate a sound understanding for the needs and views of such groups, and how priorities and services reflect their needs. The Local Area Agreement (LAA) is pivotal to this and should demonstrate partnership support for community engagement to promote an empowered and cohesive community in Halton.

3.3 From April 2009 best value authorities have a ‘Duty to Involve’. This duty is outlined in Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities (Statutory Guidance) and an extension of the existing Duty to Involve requirements. The government White paper Communities in Control, Real People, Real Power further embeds the governments increasing emphasis on community involvement and participation in decision making, service management and policy development.

3.4 The central government policy context is centred on increasing citizen participation and developing mechanisms to increase power to communities, giving them real control over local decisions. The key expectations for local authorities are: -

- Duty to promote democracy
- Extension of Duty to Involve
- Streamline consultation and engagement – “public bodies should where appropriate join up with other organisations”

These will be supported through: -

- Accessible and understandable information
- Petitions – requirement to respond to all petitions/e-petitioning
- Public scrutiny – inform and support participation in overview and scrutiny arrangements
- Councillor Call for Action
- Community Asset Transfer
- Parish Councils
- Community Contracts (extension of Community Charters)

- 3.5 Halton Strategic Partnership Board (HSPB) launched a Community Engagement Strategy in October 2005 and set out to review the strategy in three years, this review is now overdue.
- 3.6 The strategic approach from the partnership involved a multi-agency community engagement network. The aim was to deliver multi-agency engagement activity and share expertise and resources. A consultation register and toolkit were also developed to support partnership approaches, a co-ordinated approach to activity and sharing of research.
- 3.7 In practice, the Community Engagement Network has had an operational role in particular, delivering training for front line officers but a strategic role has not been realised. The consultation register has not been used greatly. There hasn't been universal participation from the strategic partners or indeed across Council departments hence, we do not have a comprehensive or co-ordinated vision of engagement activity across the Borough.
- 3.8 The Improving Engagement Steering Group agreed a piece of work was required to provide a corporate vision of engagement activity, this would also be desired, across the Strategic Partnership however an audit of Council activity would firstly be undertaken.

4.0 **Consultation and Engagement Audit Framework**

- 4.1 A consultation and engagement audit (appendix two) and analysis framework (appendix one) was developed in-house and approved by the steering group. The audit was designed to collate data of consultation and engagement on four levels: -
- Information giving
 - Consultation
 - Deciding together
 - Acting together
- 4.2 The audit was disseminated by the Chief Executive to third tier management. Twenty five responses were received from across the Council's four Directorates. Whilst this is not a complete picture, the information collated provides a significant snapshot of engagement activity across the Council.
- 4.3 The data provided was considered against the analysis framework for measurement in terms of volume and quality of activity.
- 4.4 Appendix 3 categorises activity across the four levels of participation. In summary, the responses were: -

4.5 **Information Giving**

- 4.5.1 Sharing information is a key activity across the Council with both traditional and innovative mechanisms being applied. Departments collaborate well and know individually who they are trying to engage. All respondents advised their information giving activity goes beyond producing leaflets and newsletters, the most frequently cited method being information over the web. The range of information giving is both rich and varied, from literature, dvd's, sms texts, facebook, dedicated websites, face to face promotions/public events, posters, press releases and Halton Direct Link both for displaying information and utilising the call centre facility.
- 4.5.2 There is evidence of some joined up information provision across services and partner agencies.
- 4.5.3 The information giving responses scored out of a maximum of 4: -
In the analysis framework
- 3 for level of planning.
 - 3/4 for quality control, consistent approach and corporate guidance.
 - 3/4 for external and internal integration, plenty of evidence of working with partners.
 - 2/3 for breadth of engagement

4.6 **Consultation**

- 4.6.1 From the responses received over two thirds of the services undertook surveys or questionnaires. Almost half did less than five a year with a quarter carrying out between 6 and 20+ surveys or questionnaires annually.
- 4.6.2 From figures provided, which are not exhaustive across the Council, 8556 surveys were returned. The majority of the surveys were not commissioned through the Research and Intelligence Department and were designed and delivered within the service areas. This is a key area that should be addressed to avoid duplication of effort, ensure efficient use of Council resources and limit consultation fatigue.
- 4.6.3 Focus groups were delivered by half the respondents with 46 focus groups reported in the last year.
- 4.6.4 Face to face events and road shows were also a key feature with 131 events reported with approximately 8460 people attending.
- 4.6.5 There is evidence of some shared consultation with partner agencies.

4.6.6 Feedback mechanisms varied from letters, leaflets, meetings, training, information on web, PPB's, you said we did posters, newsletters face book responses and community meetings.

4.6.7 The consultation responses scored out of a maximum of four in the analysis framework: -

- 2 for level of planning, activity in isolation, could be better co-ordinated and some consistency/streamlining of feedback mechanisms. Need to support and further expand vibrant and innovative methods of consultation.
- 3/4 for quality control for the wealth, range, frequency and volume of consultation.
- 2 for external and internal integration need to increase shared consultation both internally and externally and share best practice.
- 3 for breadth of engagement. The authority knows which sections of the population need to be engaged and resources such as the data observatory enable access to rich, robust data sources. Strong awareness of seldom heard and marginalised group, requires reflection in consultation activity.
- 2/3 for depth of engagement. Activity here is largely quantitative with some examples of more qualitative information. To achieve the next level a consistent approach across the organisation is required.

4.7 **Deciding Together**

4.7.1 This category is defined as a two way process where users are involved in designing and developing services. At this level participants in engagement become more active and involved and can influence outcomes. This level of engagement activity demonstrates accountability and responsiveness and is often applied to service monitoring and improvement.

4.7.2 The response to this category is more descriptive of mechanisms than quantitative from the responses. There is a high level of activity, which varies in its form across the thematic areas of work. Streamlining the responses which sited similar activity (i.e. SSP's, Area Forums) there is approximately 14 different examples of 'deciding together' activities: -

- SSP's
- Local Strategic Partnership Transport Board
- Involvement in Traffic Calming Scheme's – Affected households.
- Development on Arts Strategy with users/participants
- Consultation groups for SEN provision
- Locality Management
- Steering groups for service areas i.e. Personalisation

- Apprentice Support Project, HPIJ
- Castlefields Village Square Development Group
- School Travel Plan Steering Group
- Service User Involvement – i.e. Norton Priory, café, DDA requirements
- Community Safety Projects i.e. Bonfire initiative
- Planning Live – support plans with individual budgets
- Area Forums
- People’s Panel
- Young Inspectors

4.7.3 This is not an exhaustive list and Council wide the level of activity would expand greatly.

4.7.4 The Council needs to have a corporate understanding of these mechanisms and the volume of activity to accurately reflect community engagement at this level to our regulators. There are examples of good practice high impact deciding together activity that can make a positive contribution, provided it can demonstrate an impact on service provision.

4.7.5 The deciding together responses scored out of a maximum of four in the analysis framework :

- 3 for level of planning
- 3 for quality control
- 2/3 for external and internal integration
- 3 for breadth of engagement
- 4 for depth of engagement i.e. LSP’s, Area Panels, N.M.
- 3/4 for community experience

4.8 **Acting Together**

4.8.1 At this level, the Council is willing to listen, negotiate, change or review strategy and involve stakeholders at the beginning of the process. This is a participate, agree, implement model. It differs from ‘deciding together’ as it is about service shaping, monitoring and evaluating and requires a long-term approach.

4.8.2 This level of activity tends to be more strategic and must be able to demonstrate impacts and outcomes from activity.

4.8.3 The examples of ‘acting together’ activity in the responses were: -

- Haltons Cultural Partnership
- Local Strategic Partnership & Specialist Strategic Partnerships
- Locality Management
- 14-19 Strategic Partnership
- Personal, Community, Development Learning Partnership
- Waste Strategy Reviews and consultations

- School Travel Plans
- Young Voices Volunteer Steering Group
- Halton Lea Library Steering Groups (Young People and Community History)
- Youth Bank
- My Place

4.8.4 The Acting Together responses scored out of a possible four: -

- 3/4 for level of planning
- 3 for quality control
- 4 for external and internal integration
- 4/3 for breadth of engagement
- 4/3 for depth of engagement
- 4/3 for community experience

5.0 **Conclusion**

5.1 The Duty to Involve and CAA place community engagement at the heart of assessment success. Local Authorities need to be able to evidence how engagement translates into improved outcomes.

5.2 There is a plethora of activity at every level of engagement from the snapshot of responses received. The Council has a variety of mechanisms for informal and short term community engagement activity. Information giving is a key layer of this, this area is massive across the Council and e-access is increasing. The Council's Communications and Marketing department provide a level of co-ordination although most activity happens within service areas. The CAA is looking for evidence of tailored and targeted information co-ordinated with partners to avoid duplication or crossed messages. Lower level engagement activity, consultation is key to many service areas and there is evidence that changes to service delivery are effected at this level. The volume of activity is significant and encouraging but requires some co-ordination to meet expectations of joined up approaches both across Council departments and with partner agencies. The Consultation level is a key area for engaging with hard to reach communities through targeted approaches without long-term expectations for participants. The LAA requires 'local services to be effective at giving voice those who are vulnerable and at greater risk or disadvantage and inequality' and will seek evidence of service users views in service provision. Some disadvantaged groups have a greater need for Council services whilst experiencing greater barriers to accessing them.

5.3 The deciding together and acting together tiers of activity are pivotal to meeting 'duty to involve' expectations. There are numerous mechanisms across the Council although there is a fragmented approach to delivery. These two levels of activity scored highly, this is no surprise as the mechanisms are geared towards high level

engagement. The frequency of activity is less than at information giving and consultation levels. In meeting duty to involve authorities need to demonstrate: -

- They understand the interests and requirements of the local community.
- Authorities in their understanding to ensure information consultation and involvement opportunities are provided on the right issues, targeted at the right people, and accessible to those the authority is trying to reach.
- They have an appropriate **corporate** approach to providing information and consulting and involving in other ways that flow throughout their organisation – from strategic policies into individual service delivery – and that they co-ordinate their engagement activities with partners where appropriate.
- Local people will feel that the authority provides relevant and accessible engagement opportunities and will know how to get involved, either directly or through their elected representative. Local people will recognise that the authority's priorities and policies reflect this involvement and services are tailored to local needs, even though difficult choices in service provision need to be made.

5.4 Empowering communities to participate effectively is a long-term process and requires commitment and resources from public sector agencies. It is widely recognised empowerment has a strong link to well-being and cohesion in communities built on community development approaches.

5.5 The 2008 Places survey showed that 24.8% of people thought that they can influence decisions in their locality this is slightly less than the unitary average of 27.6%. Three in ten (31%) said they would like to be more involved in decision making and six in ten (60%) could become more engaged depending on the issue.

6.0 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

6.1 Corporately we need to map engagement activity. The audit has demonstrated the volume of activity as a mere snapshot across the Council. There is engagement activity going on that could be shared as best practice and support strategic regulatory requirements, for example, the evidence collated in Health and Community that supports commission for quality care inspections.

6.2 The Council's consultation register should be modernised to provide a mechanism that serves as a corporate register and evidence base of engagement activity. Such a mechanism needs to record demographic participation and identify engagement activity with hard to reach groups to ensure the Council and its partners understands who it is engaging with, where gaps exist and a sound evidence

base.

- 6.3 In respect of service planning, the Council should consider including involvement plans through service planning. This could be an add on in the Service Plans to include community engagement activity that supports the service provision/delivery. This would provide a thread of consistency in approaches to considering community engagement in service arrangements. This would require some corporate guidance/information around understanding community engagement and Halton's vision and aspirations.
- 6.4 The Council should strive to better co-ordinate and streamline activity both internally and with partners. This may be prompted through the review of the HSPB Community Engagement Strategy and the Community Engagement Network arrangements. This review needs to get underway with the Council providing a lead role.
- 6.5 Internally there maybe merit in considering a link from engagement activity to Area Forums. This could be reporting research, consultations and service impacts as a result of community engagement activity, providing a thread through the democratic process.
- 6.6 The Council should consider how to strengthen and support the Councillor role in community engagement. Statutory guidance emphasises the Councillor role as advocates for the communities they service. The Councillor role "is crucial in order to advance community involvement in decision making, in accurately defining local needs and in helping to judge the impact of delivery." Councillors should be aware of engagement mechanisms and planned activity to enable them to lead and promote local involvement. Councillors should be supported with tools to engage their communities, area forums is a positive example of this. Training and support for Councillors in engagement processes, tools and techniques could be provided and Members should be briefed on adhoc engagement activity, in particular at the information giving and consultation levels.
- 6.7 The Council also needs to agree an approach under the 'Duty to Promote Democracy' requirement and understand the strengthened powers for Members with the 'Councillor Call for Action' power. This came into force on 1st April 2009, the powers are limited to issues affecting single council wards.
- 6.8 Community Ownership and Asset Transfer is another key area of focus in government policy as it demonstrates empowered and engaged communities at the highest level of involvement. The Council has some examples of this approach, Murdishaw Community Centre, Churchill Hall, Loose Music with Queens Hall, My Place and Kingsway Health Centre and Runcorn Linnets with Halton Sports. These arrangements should feature on a corporate

engagement register and could be hi-lighted in future reporting on community involvement in Halton.

7.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 Failure to address many of these areas could weaken the Council's approach to developing Community Engagement. A number of the recommendations may require some policy amendment or change.

8.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 There are no financial implications for this report.

9.0 **REFERENCES**

- Project Brief, Community Engagement, HBC, January 2009.
- The Duty to Involve, Making It Work, Community Development Foundation, 2009.
- Councillor Call For Action, The Centre for Public Scrutiny and Idea, February, 2009.
- Network of Empowering Authorities (NEA) Framework, Idea, April 2009-10-26
- Transforming Your Authority, Creating Real and Lasting Change.