

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
22 NOVEMBER 2007**

**NEIGHBOURHOOD ACTION GROUPS
(Assistant Chief Executive)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This paper details the changes that have been proposed to the neighbourhood consultation process (in particular the Neighbourhood Action Groups or NAGs) and is an update on the current situation with regard to neighbourhood engagement.

2. SUGGESTED ACTION

- 2.1 **That the Commission notes this report.**

3. SUPPORTING INFORMATION

The Bracknell Forest Partnership adopted a jointly resourced Community Engagement Strategy with Thames Valley Police, one element of which is supporting the Neighbourhood Consultation process. In 2005, the first Neighbourhood Forums were held in order to identify local issues that residents considered to be priorities. A review of this process was undertaken in January 2006, at which it was decided to keep this approach under ongoing review. In March 2007 a Working Group was set up to consider the efficiency of Neighbourhood Forums and developments in the way that neighbourhoods are consulted in the light of advances in Neighbourhood Policing and community expectations.

Context

- 3.1 Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs) are driven by Central Government's "Neighbourhood Policing" agenda in which neighbourhoods must be consulted once a year. A public forum was identified as the best mechanism to undertake this, subject to a review of effectiveness. A pilot project was set up in October 2005 and a review of the process was taken to the Executive in March 2006, where it was decided to keep the process under review.

Review from the Police of the Thames Valley pilot project

- 3.2 "The pilot project of Neighbourhood Forums and Neighbourhood Action Groups has done much to support the implementation of Neighbourhood Policing within Bracknell Forest. However, further work needs to be done in order to empower the NAGs to drive their own problem solving agenda. The pilot has identified the need for NAGs to employ a range of consultation methods to ensure that they are addressing appropriate issues from their communities. They need to ensure representational engagement from hard to reach groups and encourage more involvement from the Voluntary Sector. The membership of the NAG should ensure a balance between elected members and the community, and they should all have a competent and appropriate Chair"

Review of the project in Bracknell Forest

3.3 Over the last year, attendance at the Neighbourhood Forums has been very patchy (ranging from 3 people to 20). The forums are seen as Council led by the members of the local NAG who are not fronting the Forum to seek residents' views. Attendance at the NAGs has also been variable.

3.4 The process of neighbourhood engagement (and NAGs and Forums specifically) has been discussed in the Developing Neighbourhood Consultation Working Group. Below is the summary feed back from this review taken to the Community Cohesion & Engagement Working Group in April and also feedback from the meetings of the Developing Neighbourhood Consultation Working Group, comprising officers from the Police, Voluntary Sector, the Council's Youth Services, Children's Services and the Community Development Officer.

3.5 Recommendations from the Council's Community Cohesion and Engagement Working Group:

- ensure NAGs set their own agendas and don't feel coerced into selecting priorities that may not be most significant ones to them.
- ensure NAGs reflect makeup of the community they cover.
- develop strong links between NAGs and other forums and groups
- provide high quality training to NAG members to ensure they work effectively and do not become dominated by single issue groups.

3.6 Recommendation from Developing Neighbourhood Consultation Working Group:

- Make each NAG the local decision making body (rather than the Forum) with the responsibility for consulting in their Neighbourhood, and work towards becoming constituted bodies with the ability to draw down funding.
- Review membership - NAGs to have a core membership consisting of the Police Neighbourhood officer, Borough/parish/ town councillors, community safety team, youth workers, head teachers, businesses and community representatives, extended schools officers and efforts to be made to include youth representation at each meeting.
- Co-option onto group – NAG to have ability to co-opt appropriate officers of Council and partner agencies onto group
- Stick to 1 – 2 appropriate themes of work to improve local community and identify these by undertaking a consultation of the Neighbourhood through an annual public forum and a questionnaire to find out what key local issues are.
- NAGs to link with other groups/networks within their area e.g. extended schools, and engage with appropriate regional and national groups.
- Suggest could also be used as a surgery for local Members to help residents with their concerns.
- Use as a mechanism for consultation, engagement and involvement in the Council's decision making processes (e.g. Community Cohesion strategy, planning policies).
- Schedule a rolling, coordinated program of publicity/ advertising to engage residents using existing networks, Council publications, community workers, BFVA, parish magazines etc. NAGs could also be encouraged to publish their own publicity in their own community outlining "who's who" and publishing contact details.
- Hold a program of training for all chair people (suggested topics include "How to Chair Effective Meetings", Introduction to Council Services").

- Before the start of the autumn round of Action groups, hold a meeting of all the Chairs to explain the new process and to adopt the Terms of Reference.

3.7 An important part of the review process is Members' views; they were sent a questionnaire, the results of which were given orally at Executive Briefing. Three key questions were asked:

- 1) Have you been involved with your local Forum/NAG?
- 2) Do you think the NAGs/Forums are well run?
- 3) Do you think they are effective?

and Members have been asked to rate their answers on a sliding scale of 1 to 5 Where 1 is "very poor" and 5 is "very good".

Of the 7 Members who replied:

Only one had not been involved in NAGs up to now but was keen to start.

2 felt the NAGs were "very well run" and "very effective".

1 felt they were "badly run" and "not effective"

2 felt that they were run "OK", but "not effective"

1 felt that they "could do better"

Are the NAGs effective?

3.8 The Department of Communities and Local Government advises that there is no one measure for the effectiveness of these community engagement structures and the national picture is one of a struggle to put an effective benchmark in place. However, there is scope to involve the Action Groups directly in monitoring future progress and one of the benchmarks for Bracknell Forest could be whether there is an increase in the "influencing decisions" indicator when the final measure is taken in 2009.

Drivers for Change

3.9 The Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs) for the Council's CPA Assessment by the Audit Commission show that a mechanism enabling dialogue between the Council and its residents is in place and effective. Previous themes in KLOEs in 2005 included Theme 1, "Ambition for the Community". Key Question 1.2 of Theme 1 was "Are ambitions based on a shared understanding amongst the Council and partner organisations of local needs"? The evidence asked for is, inter alia, that "... community organisations are encouraged to give their views and are supported where necessary in doing so". A key structure in this process is the Neighbourhood Action Group.

3.10 Another compelling motivator is one of the Council's current Local Area Agreement/Local Public Service Agreement targets which relates to community leadership. This brings with it a reward grant, 80% of which is linked to a survey question on perception: "Do you feel able to influence local decisions?" Members should note that this is a requirement by Government in all LPSA's/LAA's. Currently a project plan is being developed by the Chief Executive's Office to encourage residents to feel that they can influence what is happening locally. The project has four strands and all are aimed to improve:

- feedback from consultations
- engagement and take up of Neighbourhood Action Groups.

- communication about local issues
- transparency of the democratic process.

- 3.11 In order to enable residents to see the direct links between raising a local issue and action taking place on that issue, a project is being planned where the messages to residents will be in the form of “You said.... We did.....” and a report detailing this plan will be taken to CMT early in July. One key aspect of this mechanism is the growth and development of the mechanism for Neighbourhood consultation.
- 3.12 Taking this all into account, in July 2007, the Council’s Executive approved changes to the way that the neighbourhood engagement processes are organised in time for the autumn round of NAGs and Neighbourhood Forums (NFs), which are now underway.
- 3.13 A training session for all Chairmen of the Action Groups was held in September to explain the new processes for the groups and to enable chairs to share any concerns, or examples of best practice with others in the same situation. The training was attended by half the Chairmen and was supported by Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action (BFVA) and the Federation of Community Groups.
- 3.14 One of the first actions of the NAGs was to consider adopting Terms of Reference and a Model Constitution in order to ensure that they are properly organised. This would also enable the NAGs to access support from the Federation of Community Groups, or BFVA.
- 3.15 Although originally a Neighbourhood Policing agenda, the Council has taken an active role – servicing and shaping the NAGs and Forums. However, the Council has limited resources available and in order to build on the successes already achieved, partners are asked to actively support this engagement process by helping to facilitate the NAGs attending the NFs, contributing toward the venue costs and the cost of any publicity.
- 3.16 The Safer and Stronger Communities Trust is currently being explored to pay for additional practical support.

4. CURRENT SITUATION

- 4.1 A borough wide consultation with residents was launched in September, to coincide with the autumn round of Neighbourhood Forums. The purpose of this was three fold:
- i) to ask residents to identify their three priority areas that they would like to see action on.
 - ii) to complement consultation taking place at the Forums by extending it deeper into all the neighbourhoods.
 - iii) and to publicize the existence, dates and times of the Neighbourhood Action Groups.
- 4.2 To date there have been upward of 1000 responses, which are being collated by neighbourhood and entered into a database specifically designed for the purpose.
- 4.3 It is envisaged that initial results will feed back into the winter round of NAGs and, together with the results from the autumn round of Neighbourhood Forums, will enable them to set more meaningful priorities for their particular neighbourhoods.

- 4.4 It is also proving to be an excellent data gathering exercise, with issues being raised in the questionnaires which affect other Council services (such as Planning, Trading Standards, Environment and Leisure) These are being fed back to the appropriate services as they arise.
- 4.5 It is planned to take an update on the process to the Executive early in the New Year.
- 4.6 A diagram of the current process is attached at Annex A.
- 4.7 Further review of the Neighbourhood Action Groups should be considered in 2008/09

Web link to “Developing the Neighbourhood Consultation Process” report and Appendices.

<http://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/liv-neighbourhood-engagement.htm>

Web link to Dates and locations of Autumn Neighbourhood Forums

<http://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/living/liv-housing/liv-neighbourhood-forums/liv-neighbourhood-areas.htm>

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