

Connecting Communities

Review of Community Involvement, including
My Neighbourhood arrangements



Final Report for Cabinet – 22 January 2020

Task Group:

- ▶ Councillor Aniela Bylinski Gelder (Chair)
- ▶ Councillor Jacky Alty
- ▶ Councillor David Howarth (from November 2019)
- ▶ Councillor Peter Mullineaux
- ▶ Councillor Matthew Trafford
- ▶ Councillor Angela Turner (up to November 2019)
- ▶ Councillor Karen Walton

Foreword

It has given me great pleasure as the Council's first Cabinet Member for Community Engagement, Social Justice and Wealth Building to lead this cross-party review of community involvement.

I passionately believe in putting our residents at the heart of everything we do as a Council, giving them a voice and involving them in their local communities. This is a key part in delivering our exciting new corporate plan.

This report follows a strategic 'root and branch' review of the way the Council involves its residents and communities in decision-making, service delivery and improving their local area.

The Member Working Group has tried to be as inclusive as possible and engage widely to find out what works well now and what would make our approach even better in the future.

I've been bowled over by all the brilliant examples of existing work across the Council to involve our communities and the enthusiasm to build on this and take it to the next level.

There has been lots of opportunities for Members to engage with this review as community leaders and I look forward to the discussions continuing in the future.

I would like to thank my fellow Member Working Group Members – Councillors Jacky Alty, David Howarth, Peter Mullineaux, Matt Trafford and Karen Walton. I'm also grateful for Councillor Turner's contribution in the early part of the review.

I'm really looking forward to working with Members and our communities in turning this review into a reality and achieving our vision of South Ribble:

"a health and happy community, flourishing together in a safer and fairer borough"

I would welcome any ideas or suggestions of how we can enhance our community involvement approach in the future or my wider portfolio.



***Councillor Aniela Bylinski Gelder
Chair of the Cross-party Community Involvement Member Working Group***

Rationale for the Review

At the Annual Council meeting on 15 May 2019 the Leader outlined the Cabinet's desire to strengthen and enhance community involvement in the way the Council is run. As part of this a new Community Engagement, Social Justice and Wealth Building Cabinet portfolio was created.

As part of appointing Chairs and making some changes to the boundaries of the My Neighbourhood Forums it was reported that a fundamental review of the Forums would take place.

In order to ensure we consider and maximise the benefits of involving our communities more and the close links with the My Neighbourhood Forums it is felt that a strategic review should take place.

A cross-party Member Working Group was therefore created to undertake the strategic review and report back into Cabinet.

Cross Party Member Working Group

The cross-party Member Working Group was created with nominations from the three political groupings on the Council.

The following Members served on the Working Group

- ▶ Councillor Aniela Bylinski Gelder (Chair)
- ▶ Councillor Jacky Alty
- ▶ Councillor David Howarth (from November 2019)
- ▶ Councillor Peter Mullineaux
- ▶ Councillor Matthew Trafford
- ▶ Councillor Angela Turner (up to November 2019)
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Review Aims and Objectives

Aim:

To ensure the Council has an innovative and effective community involvement framework in place, which allows influence over the way we design services, make decisions, puts our communities at the heart of everything we do and is best practice.

Objectives:

- ▶ To carry out an assessment of current activities, including value and costs.
- ▶ To research best practice and look for innovative new approaches.
- ▶ To produce a set of recommendations and way forward for Cabinet to consider.

Issues in the Scope of the Review

Co-operative/Collaborative Council approach to community involvement, including:

- ▶ Consultation
- ▶ Community engagement and participation, including participatory budgeting
- ▶ My Neighbourhood Forums
- ▶ Work with Parish/Town Councils
- ▶ Work with the Voluntary Community and Faith Sector
- ▶ Work with young people, including Youth Council, Debate Club, citizenship education
- ▶ Democratic engagement, including Member surgeries, ward walks, participation in meetings, webcasting, Cabinet in the Community

Links with our Corporate Plan

The review links directly with our new council vision:

‘A healthy and happy community, flourishing together in a safer and fairer borough’

There are also links with all our new priorities:

- ✓ Health, wellbeing and safety
- ✓ Excellence, investment and financial sustainability
- ✓ Our people and communities
- ✓ Place homes and environment

Methodology

The Working Group met formally on 9 occasions as part of the review, in addition to attending a number of events and workshops during the period of the review.

During the review, members of the Working Group:

- ✓ Considered national, regional and local best practice with regards community involvement
- ✓ Facilitated an all-Member Workshop
- ✓ Facilitated 2 employee focus groups
- ✓ Engaged with parish/town councils
- ✓ Considered existing data and information held on community engagement e.g. previous resident engagement, community strategy consultation etc.
- ✓ Undertook a visioning exercise
- ✓ Attended the Local Government Chronicle Council of the Year best practice sharing conference
- ✓ Attended the National Association of Local Councils Annual Conference
- ✓ Observed meetings of South Ribble Local Strategic Partnership
- ✓ Held sessions at 2 My Neighbourhood Chairs and Vice-chairs meetings
- ✓ Engaged at My Neighbourhood Forum Planning Meetings
- ✓ Met with Lancashire County Council Youth & Community Services
- ✓ Met with South Ribble Secondary Heads Association
- ✓ Researched good practice from Chorley, Preston, Wigan and Oldham councils
- ✓ Met with the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network.
- ✓ Considered key documents such as the Council's constitution, My Neighbourhood Forum Annual Reports and action plans etc.

A copy of all the evidence gathered as part of the review is available on request.

Key Findings of the Review

Using the above evidence sources and valuable feedback the Working Group came up with the following findings:

- ▶ The Council has a good track record of involving communities with good practice examples cited as the Green Links and Worden Hall engagement activities. However, it was felt that a more corporate structured approach was required to embed community engagement in the every day work of the Council. There was a sense that a more holistic approach was needed from consultation and engagement through to active sustainable participation of communities. A system of evaluating the effectiveness of community involvement would assist the Council in ensuring it remains a key priority and activities are targeted in the most appropriate way.
- ▶ Whilst there is evidence of the needs and views of residents through South Ribble Partnership's community strategy consultation, it is some time since the Council last undertook a representative formal residents survey.
- ▶ My Neighbourhood Forums provide a useful structure of local Ward Members to meet, discuss local community issues, develop action plans and lead specific local community projects. Whilst these projects can be helpful ways to engage communities in projects, it is not felt the Forums are the most effective way to corporately engage with residents, hard to reach groups and communities in their current format.
- ▶ Looking at practice elsewhere and feedback from Members the alignment between the My Neighbourhood Plans and the Council's corporate and budget planning programme could be strengthened further to deliver our corporate priorities and local projects. The process for allocating spending by My Neighbourhood Forums was felt to be inefficient, time consuming and not the best use of resources. It is acknowledged that a change would be required to the Council's constitution, but safeguarding public money could be achieved in addition to having a more streamlined and effective process.
- ▶ In addition to the existing funding for My Neighbourhood projects, a ward Member grants scheme should be set up to pump-prime local community projects with appropriate governance and link with the needs of local communities.

- ▶ Feedback received by the Working Group showed that some Forums are more effective than others and that there was a desire for the Members in each My Neighbourhood area to design mechanisms to engage with communities and implement community activities which are tailored to their individual needs. Research has shown that no one size fits all and that in the spirit of devolving influence and decision-making, it should be down to each My Neighbourhood area to consult on a model that would be most effective for the communities it serves.
- ▶ As part of the review, the Working Group looked at practice elsewhere, which included the potential to work through a parish/town council rather than duplicate a structure that already exists, some would like more formal engagement through a local committee, some would like a more devolved community development approach concentrating on smaller local areas with specific needs. The Working Group felt that My Neighbourhoods should work up models that work for them.
- ▶ The Working Group found that the Council needed to build on existing work by the Council in sports development and neighbourhoods in involving young people in shaping the services and Borough they would like to see in future. As a district council it can be difficult to engage with young people and yet our services affect their every day lives. We work with some schools in the Borough through specific services and contacts, but a more comprehensive education programme and offer for schools is needed to engage and continue a positive relationship with citizens of the future.
- ▶ Best practice on involving young people in democracy suggests that created a Youth Mayor and Youth Council gives a voice to young people, equips them with important skills and leads to better evidence-based decisions and services.
- ▶ Raising awareness of what the Council does and important role it plays in communities is key to ensuring engagement, with re-starting initiatives such as young people's work experience with council services, employability days, mock interviews, Young Enterprise etc.
- ▶ In addition to engaging and involving young people, there is work to do on engaging the wider population that we serve. Democracy is at the heart of what we are about as a council and the communities we want to see. A key part of democracy is the electoral and voting system. Whilst our electoral register and voter turnout is above average nationally there is more we can do to encourage residents to play their part through information and tailoring our message to them.

- ▶ Unlike many other councils we allow public participation in our meetings with residents able to ask questions and comment on any items of the agenda. This relies on residents travelling and taking the time to attend. It is felt to be quite daunting to speak at a meeting for the first time, or know what to expect in attending our meetings. There is further work that could make our meetings more accessible and welcoming to residents. Taking our meetings out to local communities increases the potential for involvement.
- ▶ With the development of technology an increasing number of councils and organisations are choosing the webcast their meetings to increase transparency and provide a visual record of how decisions are made – taking the Council out to a wider audience.
- ▶ The Borough is very privileged to have many voluntary, community and faith sector organisations that provide the social fabric and enriching experiences for our communities. There has not been an umbrella organisation bringing these organisations together for a number of years, which presents a challenge for us in engaging with the sector as whole and providing support. South Ribble Local Strategic Partnership is looking to engage more with these groups and has a number of strands, including a volunteer strategy. It is felt that the Council can complement this work and provide support, with appropriate senior Member support.
- ▶ Equality and diversity is important to us as a council and whilst engagement is carried out with representatives of the protected characteristics under the Equality Act, there is a more co-ordinated, regular and formal process needed to strengthen this further.
- ▶ South Ribble has 7 parish/town councils, with part of the Borough in Leyland, Lostock Hall, Bamber Bridge and Walton-le-Dale not being parished. A more structured and consistent approach to working with parishes is needed at a Member and officer level. The positive impact of parishing areas was appreciated and whilst it is important that communities themselves show their wish to be parished, the Council should support residents achieve parish status.

Review Recommendations

Ensuring a Community Involvement Culture

1. The Council becomes an affiliate member of the Co-operative Councils Innovations Network to learn and share community involvement best practice.
2. The Council works to become an accredited Co-operative Council, embedding the co-operative values of self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity to transform the engagement relationship with our residents.
3. Community involvement is placed at the heart of every service through service planning, project management and decision-making so that it is co-ordinated and allows the community to shape what we do.
4. A community involvement toolkit and training be developed to help Members and employees involve local communities more effectively.
5. A survey of residents is undertaken at least every two years to understand the needs and views of residents with specific questions to assess the level of community involvement activity.
6. An annual report on the Council's community involvement activities takes place and is presented to Full Council.

My Neighbourhoods

7. Informal My Neighbourhood planning meetings with Members continue to develop plans and projects, including greater alignment with My Neighbourhood plans and the Corporate Plan and budget process.
8. My Neighbourhood Forum meetings be reviewed by each of the five forums, with the option to change them to meeting local circumstances, with 12-month trial models explored by the review, such as:
 - Where area parished, arrange meetings as part of parish meetings
 - Adopt an area committee approach
 - Develop a neighbourhood/community development approach
 - Community partnerships with councillors and partner organisations
 - Hybrid of what works for each area, within existing resources

An evaluation process be developed and agreed with Cabinet so that at the end of the trial period, success against that criteria can be measured.

9. The My Neighbourhood Chairs and Vice-chairs meeting be formalised with a forward plan, agenda and minutes.
10. The governance arrangements for spending My Neighbourhood Forum be streamlined to include the sign-off by the My Neighbourhood chair and vice-chair.
11. A more corporate approach is taken to supporting My Neighbourhoods and making linkages across all council teams to make the most of the opportunities available.
12. A grant scheme be developed to help fund local community action projects.

Involving Young People

13. A more co-ordinated approach be taken to strengthen our work with schools with an education package put together linked to the national curriculum and objectives of the Council, including environmental issues, debate clubs, mock council meetings and competitions.
14. A Youth Mayor and Youth Council is established to allow young people to gain a great understanding of democracy and play an active part in informing council policy, local issues and community action.
15. The Council provides more structured and extensive work experience opportunities for students to learn more about the work of the Council and gain valuable experience.

Extending Democracy

16. An annual communications campaign encouraging residents to enrol on the electoral register and vote in elections is developed.
17. Full Council and other key meetings are webcast to make our meetings more accessible to our residents.
18. Cabinet meetings are taken out into the community at least twice per year on a pilot basis.
19. A series of annual Question and Answer sessions with the Cabinet and key partners takes place through the My Neighbourhood Forum models adopted locally.

20. Our meetings are more welcoming to members of the public with more user-friendly information and guidance provided, encouragement of questions being submitted in advance and officers on hand to brief and support the public prior to meetings.

Strengthening the voluntary, community and faith sector

21. A borough-wide equality forum is created to bring together the groups representing protected characteristics to help us strengthen our approach to equality and diversity and be a sounding board to making our services more accessible and eliminate discrimination.

22. A database of voluntary, community and faith sector organisations is developed for residents and staff to access as a signpost to what's available and how they could be more involved.

23. A Member Champion is appointed for volunteering.

Parish and Town Councils

24. A parish/town council charter is developed with the Council outlining roles, responsibilities and expectations.

25. The Council designates a parish/town council liaison officer.

26. Where local communities express a wish to form a parish/town council the Council will actively support the creation of parish and town councils leading to a community governance review.

27. Regular informal meetings will take place between the Cabinet and parish/town council representatives.