A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK
FOR THE ISLE OF WIGHT

CONTENTS

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Isle of Wight Council, Island Strategic Partnership and Isle of Wight Rural Community Council

ISLE OF WIGHT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

1. Introduction

1.1 All public authorities have a statutory duty to involve the public in decisions that affect them because it is seen as a way of promoting local democracy and local accountability, supporting local people to play an active role in decisionmaking about the services they receive, and become more actively involved in their local area. On the Isle of Wight, there are a number community engagement activities being carried out by different organisations but they are not very well coordinated. This is potentially confusing for the public who do not always know who is doing what, and it involves wasteful duplication of effort for the organisations concerned. There is a growing recognition nationally that community engagement activities being carried out by public bodies and voluntary organisations need to be coordinated in some way. The most common approach is for coordination to be achieved through a local Community Engagement Partnership.

1.2 This **Community Engagement Framework** is intended to provide a basis for the organisations that are involved in community engagement activities on the Isle of Wight to collaborate in the development of a shared approach. It is written in response to the findings and conclusions of the **Review of Community Engagement on the Isle of Wight** that was carried out during the spring and summer months of 2010. It builds in particular on the ideas about how community engagement could be improved that came from members of the public and from organisations that promote or take part in these activities. It also draws on the approach to community engagement that is being adopted in other parts of the country. Terms such as 'community' and 'community engagement' used in the Framework are defined in the **Isle of Wight Community Engagement Toolkit**.

2. Why the public think that having a say is important

2.1 As part of the research on which the Review of Community Engagement is based, more than two hundred members of the public were interviewed to find out what they thought of the various community engagement activities being carried out on the Isle of Wight, and how they would like to see them improved. An overwhelming majority of the people interviewed thought that it was important to have some kind of say in the way that decisions affecting them and their communities are taken:

"… because local people have first-hand knowledge of what is going on in their area, their voice should count."

"... because people making the decisions in the Council often don't know the local area or the community's needs."

"... if people are involved in a decision they are more likely to be committed to the outcome."

3.   How the public thinks community engagement can be improved

3.1   Members of the public had clear ideas about how community engagement could be improved on the Isle of Wight. Ideas included the following:

- there should be better information for the public on how to get involved;

- face to face contact between officers and members and members of the public should be encouraged – get officers out into the community more so that relationships can develop;

- contact details of people in the council who have responsibilities for community engagement should be published so that people can get in touch with them;

- the key role of Isle of Wight councillors in helping to bridge the gap between formal council decisionmaking and informal community engagement activities should be recognised;

- local media could run debates in addition to reporting decisions; focus groups could be set up to look at important issues; more volunteers should be actively involved in helping to organise and promote community engagement;

- schools, community centres, health centres, libraries and similar venues could be used as places where surgeries and informal discussions can take place, in addition to their role as places where posters and leaflets can be available.

4.   How organisations involved in community engagement can make it more effective

4.1   Organisations that joined in discussion groups as part of the review came up with good ideas for the way that their community engagement activities could be improved. They suggested that there is a need for:

- better planning and coordination of community engagement activity;

- better information about the user groups, neighbourhoods and communities that are the focus for community engagement initiatives, and the sharing of this information so that different agencies are working from the same mapping data;

- the development of relationships with citizens and customers that do not just depend on the last interaction with a particular service user;

- setting out a clear agenda for the public that explains why engagement is taking place, what the limits are, what the format is, how people can be involved and how feedback will be given;

- the need for organisations that are carrying out community engagement to work through existing networks and structures wherever possible rather than starting from scratch every time – local councils, faith organisations and community associations are three examples of networks that are there to be used;

- the need for the council and other agencies to employ people who can advise and support those carrying out community engagement activity on methods and techniques, and possibly assist in coordinating activity between departments and agencies.

5. The Framework - principles and aims

5.1 Drawing on the results of the research, the **Isle of Wight Community Engagement Framework** is based on the following principles:

- everyone should have the opportunity to be involved in the decisions that affect them;

- everyone deserves high quality public services, which are shaped around their needs;

- the policies and strategies of organisations that provide public services should reflect people's needs and take into account how they want to see them delivered.

5.2 The aims of the Framework are therefore to:

- encourage each of the Community Engagement Partnership members to adopt clear and transparent processes through which people can contribute to their decisions about the policies and services that will affect them and their community;

- ensure that there are appropriate opportunities for people to express their views, and become involved in a variety of engagement activities in a way, place and at a time that is convenient to them;

- promote collaboration between partnership members in their community engagement activities through structures that are simple for the public to understand and take part in, simple for organisations and their staff to manage, and which avoid wasteful duplication of effort;

- provide information about the way partnership members will carry out their community engagement activity, and the way they will respond to and take account of the needs and ambitions of local people and communities in preparing and reviewing their policies, plans and services.

6. The partnership's values

6.1 In addition to the aims set out above, the Community Engagement Partnership will be committed to upholding the following values in its community engagement work:

- only using community engagement processes when there is a real opportunity for people to influence and change decisions and services;

- openness and honesty about the aims of community engagement activity and the constraints on what it might achieve;

- respect for the people involved and for the skills, knowledge and experience that they bring to the process;

- transparency in the way decision-making processes are carried out and in the way people and communities are involved;

- inclusiveness, with fair and equal access to community engagement activities for all people and communities, and a recognition that community engagement must reflect the public sector Equality Duty.

7. The partnership's objectives

7.1 The Community Engagement Framework is important in delivering a number of the partnership's policy objectives:

- keeping communities informed;
- supporting people to be involved in their local communities;
- promoting local democracy;
- supporting community involvement in shaping communities;
- supporting community involvement in shaping services;
- improving the partnership's understanding of how communities work; and
- co-ordinating community engagement activity.

8. Ways in which the partnership will achieve these objectives?

Keeping communities informed

8.1 Members of the partnership will:

- be clear about the purpose of communication and make sure that we provide feedback to communities on what we have done with the information they have given us, on the decisions we have taken and the reasons;
- talk to people about the kinds of information that they need and the methods of communication they prefer so that we provide the right information in the most accessible way at the right time;
- test the effectiveness of the communication methods we use, and explore ways of using new technologies to reach communities who are familiar with these media such as younger people, and those who may seek to make their views known through electronic communication rather than by attending meetings.

Supporting people to be involved in their local communities

8.2 We will:

- work with and support our partners in other statutory bodies, town and parish councils, the voluntary and community sector and the business community to promote opportunities for involvement and volunteering in all parts of the Island;
- work in partnership to develop opportunities for people and communities to come together through the provision of a range of activities and events including culture, arts and sports that also create opportunities for engagement on shaping communities and services;
- work with communities to ensure that barriers to active engagement are removed and that those with social care needs are able to take a full part in community life.

Promoting local democracy

8.3   We will:

- develop ways of helping our local communities to understand local democratic processes more clearly, so that they understand what Isle of Wight councillors and town and parish councillors do and how their decisions influence the way services are provided and communities are shaped;

- encourage people to seek election and to take part in local democracy at all levels;

- support and make greater use of existing networks in promoting community engagement including town and parish councils, faith networks and community centres;

- help councillors to develop their local community leadership role and to develop the skills they need to lead and serve their communities.

Supporting community involvement in shaping communities

8.4   We will:

- encourage face to face relationships on the ground between councillors and officers, community groups and voluntary organisations, and the people and communities that they serve as a basis for opening up communication between organisations and the public;

- continue to invest in and support community development activities to help build the capacity of all our communities so that they can realise their potential and engage fully in the opportunities available in their area;

- share good ideas and best practice among partnership members and promote successful community engagement activities so that they can be copied by other organisations and in other parts of the Island;

- explore the possibility of transferring knowledge and experience from neighbourhood management and multi-agency collaboration in the Pan area to other parts of the Island, especially in more deprived areas;

- support town and parish councils to become more representative of the communities they serve and engage their communities in parish planning in all parts of the Island;

- provide opportunities for our communities to influence the way public money is spent in their areas, and investigate the potential for some communities to have control over specific budgets to deliver projects that meet their needs and priorities;

- work closely with each other to support a thriving voluntary and community sector and ensure that a voluntary and community sector perspective is represented at strategic decision-making levels.

Supporting community involvement in shaping public services

8.5   We will:

- ask peoples' views on the services they receive in a number of different ways including immediate user feedback and consultation, and we will respond to them;

- take a more active role in working with individuals and communities to decide which organisation is best placed to provide a particular service, and to give them more of a say in how services are commissioned and delivered;

- reorganise our internal planning processes so that issues raised by the community make a real difference to the way we plan and deliver services;

- make sure that we provide timely feedback on the results of any involvement in developing our services so that people understand what difference their input has made;

- give people the opportunity to tell us whether what we have done has made a difference to them, or whether there is further work that we need to do;

- explore the opportunities that exist for co-locating our services in local offices across the Island to bring our services and the staff who provide them closer to each other and to the communities we serve.

Improving our understanding of how communities work

8.6   We will:

- build on our existing knowledge of communities by pulling together data from a range of different sources including our customer feedback systems, national, regional and local statistics, performance related intelligence and the local knowledge of our councillors and staff working in the community to build a 'map' of communities, characteristics and needs that can be shared by all the organisations that are involved in community engagement activities;

- ensure that we work with and understand the needs of under-represented groups including minority communities, disabled people and other people with legally protected characteristics, new arrivals and other 'hard to hear' groups;

- jointly carry out regular surveys to develop our understanding of our communities, to track our performance in meeting their needs, and to establish their levels of satisfaction with the services we provide.

Co-ordinating community engagement activity

8.7   We will:

- explore ways of promoting, supporting and coordinating the various outreach and community development activities being carried out by departments and organisations on the Isle of Wight in order to maximise its effectiveness, minimise duplication and avoid confusion for the public;

- share best practice and promote opportunities for joint working so that we do not bring about 'consultation fatigue' in our communities;

- develop training and guidelines for all officers involved in local area office, outreach and community development activities.

8.8 We have published the **Isle of Wight Community Engagement Toolkit** linked to this Framework which will be used by our member organisations to guide their engagement activities, as well as by members of the public who have an interest in taking part.

9. The partnership's priorities for supporting community engagement

9.1 The partnership's initial priorities include:

- establishing a multi-agency group of managers and officers who have responsibility for community engagement activities to draw up an action plan designed to embed this Framework into the way their organisations and the partnership work;

- review the sources of information and intelligence currently being used to profile communities, gather intelligence and target engagement activities by public and voluntary sector agencies, as a basis for agreeing a common data set for mapping communities, their needs and interests, and protocols for information sharing across the partnership;

- consider ways in which the front line staff employed by different organisations can achieve a closer working relationship up to and including sharing office or outreach facilities as a method for closer engagement with the people and communities they serve;

- review the way information is currently communicated by authorities to the public, and to particular interest groups or geographical communities, with reference to use of the Island's media, printed information, use of websites and face to face contact;

- develop a web-based resource for consultation activities that will bring together in one place

  - guidance for residents and communities,

  - guidance for staff and elected members,

  - information on past, present and future community engagement activities, and

  - links to other sources of information, guidance and support.

10.   Who is the Community Engagement Framework intended to benefit?

10.1   We cannot do all this by ourselves. We need everyone to play a part including:

- all our residents, customers and communities;

- elected members of the Isle of Wight Council, town and parish councillors, and the people who sit on the governing boards that oversee other statutory and voluntary services, all of whom play a key role in shaping and overseeing the delivery of partnership organisation policies and services, and in allocating resources;

- all our staff, especially those that have contact with the public;

- community groups and voluntary sector organisations who provide local services, work directly with local people and organisations, and represent the views of their service users and communities;

- a wide range of other people and organisations with whom we work, including private businesses, to make sure that decisions are taken in a way that is open and accountable, and that services across the Island are what people want.

11.   Indicators of success

11.1   We will know that our approach to community engagement is successful when:

- people know how to get involved and have the right information to do this;

- there is more involvement by people and communities in discussions and decisions about public services and the future of communities on the Island;

- more people, community groups and voluntary organisations believe they can influence decisions about our services, especially those for whom barriers to engagement exist and those who may have been excluded in the past;

- services are improved, and levels of service user and resident satisfaction with our services improve as a result of community engagement.