

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT: A REVIEW OF CURRENT PRACTICE

This is a summary of the Review. Sections contained in this summary marked *

CONTENTS OF THE FULL REVIEW

Section	Title	Page
	Executive Summary *	3
1	Introduction *	4
2	The public policy context for community engagement *	6
3	Community engagement on the Isle of Wight	
	– Community engagement led by Isle of Wight Council	8
	– Attitudes towards Isle of Wight Council-led engagement	13
	– Community engagement led by other organisations	17
4	Participation and community engagement – what members of the public think	24
5	Barriers to community engagement	26
6	Overcoming the barriers to engagement	29
7	The organisation of community engagement in other local authorities	32
8	Themes and issues from the research *	35
	Appendix 1: Individuals and organisations that took part in the research *	38
	Appendix 2: Profile of members of the public who took part in vox pop interviews *	40

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

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT: A REVIEW OF CURRENT PRACTICE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Published guidance on good practice suggests that in order to be successful, community engagement should start from what people and communities are interested in and what their concerns are, not the statutory duties and programmes of public authorities. However, with a few exceptions, the review found that most community engagement activity on the Isle of Wight is driven by statutory requirements. It is not always accompanied by a commitment to building long term sustainable relationships between public services and the communities they serve.

The review also found that community engagement on the Island is often fragmented, and only involves ad hoc collaboration between different departments and organisations. The evidence suggests that while there is an increasingly positive approach to community engagement on the part of individual practitioners who are collaborating with each other, there is little collaboration at an organisational level.

Among the many consequences of this are that public expectations that were raised in the recent past about the Council's commitment to openness and engagement have not been fulfilled. Opinion polls carried out by the Council over the past five years show that there has been a sharp fall in the confidence Isle of Wight people have in their ability to influence Council decisions. Public sector agencies, town and parish councils, and voluntary groups that took part in the review said they shared this lack of confidence.

Nevertheless, there is good work on community engagement being carried out within the council at practitioner level, by agencies sponsored by the council, and by the council's public and voluntary sector partners. Within the council, the Pan Neighbourhood Project and the Youth Team-sponsored Youth Council are building a track record of engaging with and empowering particular communities and groups. The NHS primary care trust's Public Health Team, Hampshire Police, LINks and charities like Age Concern are going beyond one-off consultation exercises and events, and are using community engagement techniques to build relationships with service users, neighbourhoods and communities. Learning from other organisations' experience, the Fire Service is adapting its statutory consultation processes to achieve a better outcome in terms of community input into its service delivery. All this provides a good foundation on which to build for the future.

Most of the public and voluntary sector agencies that participated in the review believe that communities and public services would benefit from a less fragmented, more coordinated approach to community engagement. They see the Island Strategic Partnership (the ISP), or a similar body if the ISP is dissolved, as the obvious way to achieve coordination. The advantage of a partnership approach is that successful community engagement does not then depend on any single individual or organisation to lead it. An organisation might play a more or less prominent role at different times, but the partnership would provide continuity and drive. The evidence from other areas is that working together would improve effectiveness and could also save money.

I. INTRODUCTION

- I.1 The Isle of Wight Rural Community Council (IWRCC) provides support to rural communities, is the Council for Voluntary Service and is also the Volunteer Centre for the Island. One of the IWRCC's aims is to empower Island communities to address their local concerns, especially with regard to issues of disadvantage and inequality. Working in partnership with the Isle of Wight Council (IWC) and the Island Strategic Partnership (ISP)¹, IWRCC obtained funding in late 2009 to:
- I.1.1 review the community engagement activities being carried out by ISP members;
 - I.1.2 report the findings, compare them with best practice nationally and make recommendations for new approaches; and
 - I.1.3 develop a strategic framework and a toolkit for community engagement, to provide practical guidance for those commissioning and taking part in community engagement activities.
- I.2 North Harbour Consulting was appointed to carry out this work under the supervision of a steering committee whose members are listed in Appendix I.
- I.3 The environment in which the research took place has changed since the work started. Nationally, the banking crisis followed by a recession has changed perceptions about what kinds of services the central and local government can afford to provide. The 2010 general election resulted in a new coalition government in which the majority partner has come down strongly in favour of cuts in public expenditure up to 2015. The Conservative Party, under its leader David Cameron, has outlined a vision for 'The Big Society' in which the state does less, and people do more for themselves supported by a vibrant but more self-sufficient community and voluntary sector.
- I.4 Over much the same period on the Isle of Wight, there have been dramatic cuts in public expenditure even before the national spending cuts came into effect. Public concern over reorganisation of schools and the refuse collection service, road maintenance issues following the heavy snowfall on the Island in early 2010, increases in car parking and public transport charges, the closure of the Vestas wind turbine factory and in particular a very tough round of budget cuts for the 2010/2011 financial year were all issues that had a high profile during the 'vox pop' interviews with members of the public carried out as part of this research.
- I.5 Partly as a consequence of the general economic and political background, and perhaps also partly in anticipation of a public reaction to local issues, the Council was cautious about allowing its officers to be interviewed for the research phase of this project.

¹ The Island Strategic Partnership (ISP) is a representative group of leading Island organisations which includes the Isle of Wight Council, the NHS Trust, Hampshire and Isle of Wight Police, the Isle of Wight College, the voluntary and community sector and the business community. It aims to encourage joint working and community involvement, and prevent different agencies that share aims working in isolation from each other, with the general aim of ensuring that resources are used in the most efficient and effective way to address local needs.

- 1.6 The lack of information from the council's service departments about their approaches to community engagement has made it difficult to interpret the critical perceptions of the Council and its approach to community engagement that were expressed by people working for other agencies and the general public. Against this background the report's authors have tried to stay as close to the original brief as possible, while recognising that this is a somewhat different study than was originally intended.

Terms used in this report

- 1.7 Consultation: In the sense used in this report, consultation is the process by which organisations find out views or obtain feedback from people about their needs or their experiences as a basis for decisions made by the organisation that is consulting them. This does not necessarily imply any involvement by the people who are consulted in the decision or in the way the decision is taken.
- 1.8 Participation means 'taking part' or 'sharing in the activities of a group'. In the field of public policy, participation means expressing an opinion about something or setting out to influence a decision. Thus we use the terms 'public participation' to mean involving people in discussions or decisions about an aspect of public policy or a service.
- 1.9 Community engagement refers to the way in which public authorities, voluntary organisations and community groups try to build an ongoing relationship with the people and communities they are set up to serve. Community engagement can be seen as covering a spectrum of different activities that include giving people and communities information, consulting them, involving them as active participants in the decisionmaking process, promoting their ability to collaborate over the delivery of services and projects and, ultimately, handing over services and projects for people and communities to run. There is a discussion of some of the concepts underlying community engagement in the Community Engagement Toolkit that accompanies this report.

The format of this report and the companion volumes

- 1.10 The project brief asked for three reports to be prepared:
- 1.10.1 This report – Community Engagement on the Isle of Wight: a review of current practice – looks at the way community engagement is being carried out on the Isle of Wight, identifies barriers to engagement and discusses the way in which they can be overcome, gives a summary of key findings and identifies a number of important themes that emerged from the fieldwork.
- 1.10.2 The Isle of Wight Community Engagement Framework picks up these themes and provides a basis for organisations to adopt a joint approach to community engagement. It builds in particular on the ideas about how the quality and effectiveness of community engagement can be improved that came from members of the public and from organisations on the Island and elsewhere that promote engagement activities.
- 1.10.3 The Isle of Wight Community Engagement Toolkit offers ideas and techniques for involving the Island's residents and communities in decisions about policies and services being taken by public and voluntary sector organisations. It focuses in particular on how to engage with 'hard to reach' groups.

2. THE PUBLIC POLICY CONTEXT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

2.1 There has been interest at both central and local government levels in promoting ‘public participation’ in policy and service development for more than a decade. Five themes are shaping policy in this field.

The ‘Renewal of Democracy’

2.2 There is concern in political and policymaking circles about increasing levels of dissatisfaction with and distrust of the political process and of politicians, senior civil servants and public service managers, which arises for a number of different reasons:

2.2.1 the emergence of politicians and senior managers in the civil service and local government who, it is argued, increasingly see what they do as a career choice rather than as public service;

2.2.2 an increasingly presidential style of government which emphasises strong leaders and cabinets, both of which reduce the role and the visibility of back-bench MPs and councillors;

2.2.3 the Parliamentary expenses scandal, and specific cases of ‘sleaze’ involving members of the House of Lords, MPs and local councillors, which leave people with the impression that politicians are in it for what they can get for themselves;

2.2.4 a strong party system coupled with the ‘first past the post’ voting system, which leave many people thinking that their vote is wasted in wards and constituencies that have a large built-in majority favouring one party over others.

2.3 The public policy response to these concerns is to promote citizen engagement in order to ‘renew democracy’ by getting people involved in a wide range of voluntary and civic activities – as school governors or JPs, for example.

2.4 However, while fewer people are participating in formal politics, recent research² has found that more than one third of the people who do not vote or join a political party are members of or are active in a charity, community group, public body or campaigning organisation³. This suggests that a significant section of the population believes that voluntary action will make more of a difference than electoral politics.

Active citizenship

2.5 There are concerns that rising affluence and changing life styles mean that people are no longer as active in their neighbourhoods and communities as they were twenty or thirty years ago. Part of the Conservative Party philosophy of The Big Society (see below) is rooted in this concern⁴. This suggests that people need to be re-engaged as ‘active citizens’, and enabled to take informed decisions about their lives, communities and workplaces.

² The Power Inquiry (2006) *Power to the People: The report of an Independent Inquiry into Britain’s Democracy*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation; reported in Brodie, E, Cowling E and Nissen N (2009), *op. cit.*, page 8

³ This is reflected in the results of fieldwork carried out for this research.

⁴ Rt Hon Cameron D (2009), *The Big Society: Hugo Young Memorial Lecture*, November 2009

2.6 However, many people who are disengaged also lack the skills, knowledge or understanding that is required. This is particularly true for people with little formal education and who are most at risk of social exclusion on other grounds. As part of the remedy, people are needed who have the motivation, skills and confidence to speak up for their communities, say what improvements are needed, and where appropriate, act as volunteers in a wide range of civic and voluntary sector roles.

Stronger communities

2.7 In 2002, tensions between different ethnic communities in a number of northern towns led to concerns that, in some parts of urban Britain, communities defined by their ethnicity, faith and culture were leading separate and parallel lives. A succession of investigations and reports⁵ agreed that a cohesive community is one where there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities; the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued; those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities; and strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods⁶. So there is a belief in government that involving people in local decision-making processes and bringing them together around a common cause or interest can empower communities and help build social cohesion.

Partnership with public bodies

2.8 There has been a shift in the way in which public services are delivered, moving away from a 'one size fits all' approach to one that tailors or 'personalises' services to meet peoples' needs up to and including giving them the resources to purchase the service they need for themselves⁷. This requires a new approach from public service providers in which they enter into a dialogue about the nature of those services and the way they are delivered with the people using the services and with the wider public. The need to shape services in the way that people want also requires active partnership between public service providers, individuals and communities. Hence there is a need to engage with communities over the full range of public services and to promote active community leadership. In many local authorities and other public bodies like the NHS and the police, this is currently the main driver for public participation.

The Big Society

2.9 In his 2009 Hugo Young Memorial Lecture⁸, David Cameron, the future Prime Minister, set out his vision for The Big Society which has since become an important part of the coalition government's social policy agenda. He argues that what he calls 'big government' and recent developments in the welfare state have promoted a dependency culture and have 'atomised society'.

⁵ Select Committee on Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Sixth Report.

⁶ Brodie, E, Cowling E and Nissen N (2009), *op cit.*, page 6

⁷ The 'Personalisation Agenda' or the personalisation of services can be defined as changing the content of a service and or the way it is delivered so that it fits into the customers' personal needs, wishes and values.

⁸ Cameron, D (November 2009), [The Big Society: Hugo Young Memorial Lecture](#)

- 2.10 David Cameron outlines three approaches which he believes will redistribute power away from the central government and its institutions:
- 2.10.1 decentralisation of national decision-making to a more local level wherever practical ('localism');
 - 2.10.2 greater transparency in the way that central and local government behaves; and
 - 2.10.3 greater accountability by central and local government institutions to the people they serve.
- 2.11 To achieve these changes, the Prime Minister suggests that it will be necessary to engage with the social entrepreneurs who have the capacity to run successful social programmes in communities with the greatest needs; and with community activists who unlike social entrepreneurs, do not play a formal role in their communities, do not have the time or inclination to run a social programme with all the responsibility that involves, but who do help - running parents groups, organising beat meetings with the police, getting people together in a front room to discuss ways to improve the neighbourhood. He argues that more community activism and more community activists are needed. It will be the state's role, he says, to provide training and other kinds of support to promote more local activism.⁹

8. THEMES AND ISSUES FROM THE RESEARCH

- 8.1 The study brief suggests that a more consistent and higher profile approach to community engagement is needed on the Isle of Wight '*so that residents are better consulted, engaged and empowered*'¹⁰ and have '*the maximum influence, control and ownership over decisions*' made by public agencies that affect their lives. The research team has considered whether these ideals are shared by the organisations that have taken part in the research; and if they are, whether the efforts to promote community engagement that are currently being made are sufficient to achieve them.
- 8.2 It is clear from the research findings that not all of the organisations that have taken part in the research do so from a perspective of citizen empowerment. Organisations have different reasons for using community engagement at different times. If we refer back to the policy 'drivers' that have led to community engagement becoming a significant issue within public organisations nationally, we can see what part these drivers have played on the Isle of Wight. Of the four main drivers – renewing democracy, promoting active citizenship, creating stronger communities, and developing partnership between public service providers and their customers – it is really only the last of these that has been at all significant. All of the organisations studied have, in their different ways, been working towards some kind of system for the public to say what their needs and preferences are, and how successful people think the agency is in meeting these requirements.

⁹ Andy McSmith, 'The Big Society: A vision for Britain's future – or just empty rhetoric', in [The Independent](#), 20 July 2010

¹⁰ Study brief

- 8.3 Some approaches to community engagement that are taking place on the Island do aim to create the conditions for a dialogue to take place between an organisation and the public that may in due course turn into a longer term relationship or partnership. However, there are also examples where the agency sets the agenda and asks the questions, then takes whatever information it gets back into the heart of its decisionmaking processes and the public receives no feedback until a decision is announced in the press. It seems clear therefore that with the possible exceptions of the Pan Neighbourhood Project and the Youth Council which are seeking some degree of empowerment for people, most community engagement on the Isle of Wight is about either a series of one-off consultations about services and budgets, or it is about constructing an ongoing dialogue through which feedback on service development and delivery can be conducted almost in real time.
- 8.4 The first conclusion to be drawn therefore is that, in most cases, community engagement on the Isle of Wight is not intended to promote resident empowerment, and does not in fact do so.
- 8.5 Even if the reality falls short of the ideals set by the research commissioners, however, involvement of the public in determining the priorities and choices on which decisions are made by public service organisations is an important aim in itself. Given the socio-economic profile of the Isle of Wight's population, it seems likely that a majority of the Island's residents depend on public services of one kind or another. So it is a worthwhile aim for improvements in community engagement aimed at involvement by the public in decisions about services to be a focus for discussion.
- 8.6 Here there is much more that can be drawn from the review of engagement activity on the Island. In particular, the research team is interested in the way in which practice is evolving in the youth service, the police service, and in charities like Age Concern. The experience of the Pan Neighbourhood Project is also there to be drawn upon. Each of these local exemplars of evolving good practice is adopting a number of different approaches. In each case, the organisation has tried things out; has built on what has worked; and has dropped initiatives that have not worked. Now organisations like the fire service, which found that conventional approaches to consultation did not work, is learning from what other organisations have done. The outlines of a community engagement practitioners group are beginning to evolve. But to be really effective, partnership working also has to be promoted and supported at an organisational level. That is why the involvement of an existing partnership organisation such as the ISP is potentially important.
- 8.7 The second conclusion to be drawn is that while there is a wide variation in community engagement practice, some of the lessons that have been learned from experience on the Isle of Wight are similar to the lessons that have been learned in other parts of the country.

- 8.8 A number of requirements that should underpin good practice have been identified from the Isle of Wight cases and from the experience of other local authorities.
- 8.8.1 If agencies are to collaborate effectively, then as in any other partnership, there has to be agreement about the aims and objectives, and the purpose of engagement activity. Is it only short term, or does it have immediate short-term objectives with longer term aims? An example might be short term consultation about use of a disused church hall with the longer term aim of developing a community enterprise that could take over management of a new neighbourhood centre, which in turn could become a focus for community involvement in neighbourhood management or community planning. Examples of community engagement that have been conducted by local councils appear to have the potential for this type of longer term development.
- 8.8.2 The aims of the engagement activity will influence the kinds of information and communication that are to be used. Members of the public who were interviewed during the vox pop process said that relevant information about why the engagement exercise is taking place and how people can get involved is not always available. Furthermore, the critical importance of providing people that have taken part in some form of engagement activity with the results is often overlooked. It would be good practice to talk to people about the kinds of information that they need and the approach to communication that they prefer.
- 8.8.3 Those planning community engagement need to consider which methods of engagement are appropriate, and whether some people will need support to take part if the process is to be inclusive.
- 8.8.4 As suggested by people interviewed in this research, face to face contact is often more effective than communication via leaflets, the media and websites. These all have a role in providing supplementary information, but if the aim is to build lasting relationships then there is no substitute for a personal approach. As part of this, the role of elected members needs to be thought about, as do the role of employees who provide the service at the front line, and the potential role of volunteers and existing community leaders.
- 8.8.5 Underpinning community engagement is the need to understand the community or user group who are to be engaged with. There are many different types and sources of data being used as background for community engagement on the Isle of Wight. Some organisations are using similar data sets, others have their own data. But there does not seem to be a shared approach to community profiling and the conduct of surveys and the use of results. The quality of information would be improved and the cost of obtaining it would almost certainly be reduced for individual organisations if a shared approach to information collection and analysis was taken.
- 8.8.6 The same arguments have been used on the Island and elsewhere in favour of a joint approach to community engagement. Responses to the interviews and focus groups have suggested that a shared approach would be less confusing for the public, would lead to better results for organisations, and would also lead to economies – an important consideration at a time of cuts in public expenditure.

- 8.9 Most of the public and voluntary sector agencies that were interviewed during the review believe that both the Island's communities and the quality of public services that they receive would benefit from a less fragmented, more coordinated approach to community engagement. They see the LSP as the obvious body within which coordination should take place. Nationally, the requirement for local authorities to develop an LSP is to be scrapped. Yet a number of local authorities adjacent to the Island are reviewing what works and what does not work, and are planning to maintain some existing partnership structures under other names. The new Local Economic Partnership (LEP) structures will also be relevant to collaborative working between agencies at a sub-regional level.
- 8.10 The advantage of this partnership approach is that successful community engagement does not then depend on any single organisation to lead it. Individual organisations might play a more or less prominent role at different times, but the partnership would provide continuity and drive.
- 8.11 The findings and conclusions of this research form the basis for developing a framework for community engagement (**Isle of Wight Community Engagement Framework**) that accompanies this report. This sets out a framework for collaboration between Isle of Wight organisations and for coordination of their community engagement activities. Leading on from that, the **Isle of Wight Community Engagement Toolkit** provides advice on the techniques that can be used, and how some of the barriers to effective engagement can be overcome. The Toolkit identifies other sources of information and good practice, and describes case studies from the Isle of Wight and other parts of the country.

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North Harbour Consulting
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APPENDIX I: INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS THAT TOOK PART IN THE RESEARCH

Interviews

- Assistant Chief Officer (Operations and Fire Resilience), Isle of Wight Fire Service,
- Vice Chair, Voluntary Sector Cabinet and Chief Executive, Age Concern
- Vice Chair, Association of Local Councils
- Manager of the Isle of Wight Local Involvement Network (LINKs)
- PAN Regeneration Partnership
- Hampshire and Isle of Wight Police
- Chair, IWRCC and Chief Executive, The Riverside Centre.
- Youth Empowerment Officer, Isle of Wight Council

Meetings and focus groups

- Anglican Archdeacon of the Isle of Wight and five members of the Church Leaders Group
- Head of Public Health Strategy & Partnerships and nine members of her team, Isle of Wight PCT
- Youth Empowerment Officer and fifteen members of the Isle of Wight Youth Council
- nine members of the Association of Local Councils
- five members of the Voluntary Sector cabinet
- eleven people representing organisations working with young people
- nine residents on the PAN estate
- two housing association tenants
- fourteen young people attending East Cowes Youth Club
- fourteen people representing a mix of public (IWC and NHS), voluntary sector and business organisations
- participation in the Equals Forum 2010, on the theme 'Are you Listening: Engagement with minority ethnic communities on the Isle of Wight

Location of Vox Pop sessions

- Co-op supermarket, Freshwater
- Co-op supermarket, West Cowes
- Medina Leisure Centre, Newport
- Newport Bus Station (2 sessions)
- Newport Library
- Summerfield supermarket, Ryde
- The Heights Leisure Centre, Sandown
- Ventnor Library
- West Wight Leisure Centre, Freshwater

* * * * *

APPENDIX 2: PROFILE OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC WHO AGREED TO TAKE PART IN VOX POP INTERVIEWS

Visible characteristic	Number of people interviewed	Percentage of people interviewed
<u>Gender</u>		
Male	82	39.0%
Female	127	61.1%
<u>Approximate Age</u>		
Under 25	24	11.7%
25 - 60	103	50.0%
Over 60	79	38.4%
<u>Ethnic Origin</u>		
UK White	204	97.6
Other White	2	1.0%
BME	3	1.4%
<u>With a visible physical or sensory impairment (Disability)</u>		
Yes	25	12.0%
No	184	88.0%
TOTAL	209	100%