

MEETING OF THE ENGAGEMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP

THURSDAY, 18 JULY 2013 2.30 PM



GROUP MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Ray Auger
Councillor Harrish Bisnauthsing
Councillor Michael Cook (Chairman)

Councillor Vic Kerr
Councillor Nick Robins
Councillor Rosemary H Woolley (Vice-Chairman)

OFFICERS

Head of Housing and Neighbourhoods (Ian Richardson)
Head of People, Projects and Performance (Sue Griffiths)
Service Manager Legal and Democratic Services/Deputy Monitoring Officer
(John Armstrong)
Acting Service Manager Customer Services (Lee Sirdifield)
Consultation and Engagement Officer (Siobhan Reilly)
Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer (Carol Drury)
Democratic Officer (Lucy Bonshor)

11. COMMENTS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

12. MEMBERSHIP

The Group were notified that Councillor Vic Kerr was substituting for Councillor Jock Kerr for this meeting only.

13. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Ibis Channell.

14. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

None disclosed.

15. ACTION NOTES FROM THE MEETING HELD ON 6TH JUNE 2013

The action notes from the meeting held on 6th June 2013 were agreed as a correct record. A comment was made about referring to Councillors by their name, it was agreed that in future references would be generic rather than specific.

16. UPDATES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chairman referred to the dog fouling issue that had been referred to at the last meeting, the issue was to be put on the agenda for the next Cabinet/PDG Liaison Group. He also informed the group that he had received a thank you from Councillor Selby for the prompt response to his question which had been referred to the PDG.

The Service Manager Legal and Democratic/Deputy Monitoring Officer, John Armstrong, had been asked to attend the meeting in the Monitoring Officers absence to give his view on whether Parish and Town Councils could attend planning training sessions put on by the District Council. In his view there were two distinct remits for parish/town councillors and the district councillors, one was a consultee and one a decision maker and his view was that training should be undertaken separately, it was not appropriate for them to attend the same training as it could be perceived from the outside that undue influence was being used and there was the potential for conflict.

A brief discussion followed about the need for Parish/Town Councillors to have training on the planning process, it was agreed that the Service Manager Management Services, Pat Reid be contacted about possible information /training guidance for Parish Councils.

>Action Note

Pat Reid to be contacted about possible information/training guidance for Parish Councils

The Chairman informed the group that the Working Group looking at governance arrangements had met once and the next meeting was scheduled for 1st August 2013.

17. TENANT ENGAGEMENT

Following the last meeting the Head of Housing and Neighbourhoods, Ian Richardson had been asked to attend the PDG to give an update on tenant engagement.

He briefly outlined the arrangements for tenant involvement referring to the

local neighbourhood groups that had been used in the past. However, these had not been demographically representative of the district and the issues discussed had been location focused. The council had supplied admin support but this had been stopped following a review of the arrangements.

Following the introduction of the Localism Act the housing service wanted to look at different ways to work with tenants especially as the Audit Commission inspections had been replaced by the Homes and Communities Agency with a more co-regulatory framework for the Council to work closely with tenants and for them (the tenants) to scrutinize the service they received.

Consultations had been undertaken with the neighbourhood groups across the district and they were broadly supportive of the new proposals. The revised arrangements meant that resources that had previously been directed at the neighbourhood groups were now redirected to the new tenant scrutiny panel and the two service review groups which Officers assisted.

Mr Richardson then spoke about the recruitment process for the scrutiny panel and the service review groups. Expressions of interest had been asked for and application forms completed. To ensure an unbiased view an independent panel made up of three assessors (the Manager of the Grantham CVS, the Service Manager of Community Safety and Licensing and a member of the Communication Teams who also worked with tenant involvement) had gone through each application checking them against a criteria list. All personal information had been removed from the applications during this process. Following the process 30 people had been invited to join the groups and had undergone inductions, team and skills training. The selection process had brought a diverse range of skills and demographic representation to the panels and groups. A meeting of the first review group had been held and Mr Richardson was encouraged by the way that they had approached the work.

Members welcomed the report and the improvements made. Concern was expressed about having representations from the different towns but Mr Richardson said it was not proportional representation. The current demographics of the groups contained a wide cross section of tenants including younger people and people with disability. The panel and groups were there to give a thematic approach rather than look at individual problems. Concerns raised by neighbourhood groups would still be looked at by officers in Housing.

A discussion then followed on the makeup of the groups with Mr Richardson reiterating that a blind selection of the groups had been undertaken. Following the discussion a Member asked if Ward Members could attend the new groups. Mr Richardson said that it was a decision for the groups themselves, Terms of Reference and Codes of Conduct were still being drawn up but he would pass on to the Groups the Members interest in them, but it was the Groups decision and they may not wish Members to be present until they had "found their feet" and even then, they perhaps would not feel comfortable having Members present.

The Chairman thanked Mr Richardson for attending the meeting and his presentation.

18. MEANS OF ENGAGEMENT

Customer Feedback

The Head of People, Projects & Performance, Sue Griffiths referred to customer feedback and how the Council was seeking to improve how customer feedback was handled. She introduced Lee Sirdifield acting Customer Services Service Manager who had a key role in championing and policing customer feedback. Mrs Griffiths briefly reminded Members of the background, no overall consistent approach to complaints or compliments, no detailed guidance and no consistency across the authority. There was no ethos and the software used, Covalent was not understood by all. Complaints that overlapped services had no ownerships. Services were doing the best job but there was no common approach.

In order to address this Customer Services was now responsible for complaints and compliments. Feedback had been looked at in detail about how services dealt with complaints/compliments and this information had been fed back to Managers with how they could improve. Training had been undertaken and standard letter templates had been devised which did not contain bureaucratic or defensive language. Complaints were now handled more swiftly, letters were less likely to escalate a complaint. Clear lines of what was and wasn't a complaint were known, and better data was collected on Covalent in order that lesson could be learnt.

The procedure for dealing with complaints had improved and this had been based on best practice and research. Clear definitions of complaints, compliments and comments had been defined and set timescales for dealing with them put in place.

Mrs Griffiths then spoke about how a complaint would be dealt with.

- Stage 1 – Service Manager deals with complaint with Head of Service reviewing letters.
- Stage 2 – Independent Head of Service to review (within 3 months of initial complaint)
- Stage 3 – Independent Director – through review prior to Local Government Ombudsman

In relation to complaints concerning housing, in the past they had been dealt with by the Local Government Ombudsman, however since April 2013 these would now be dealt with by the Housing Ombudsman after first having gone through a Democratic Filter, this was to ensure consistency when dealing with housing complaints. The Democratic Filter would comprise of a panel of tenants

taken from the tenant scrutiny panel and a local resolution would be sort wherever possible.

The changes to the procedure enabled a more independent review at an earlier stage. Management were in a position to change policies and procedures if these were found to be causing complaints. The change at Stage 3 from an Ad Hoc Members Panel to an Independent Director helped alleviate the intimidating process that could be seen as adversarial.

The role of Members would be to receive an annual report which would be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet at the same time as the Ombudsman's letter dealing with the complaints received about the authority. Members would have a clear procedure that they could communicate to their residents and help them. There would be more focus on the lessons learnt and Members would have the knowledge that the authority was operating on a best practice basis.

A short discussion followed and the Chairman thanked Mrs Griffiths for a clear and concise presentation; however he felt that the annual report should go to Council as well as Scrutiny and Cabinet.

Comments were made about when the Ward Councillor could get involved, however it was stated that unless the complaint went to the Ward Councillor first then there were data protection issues and the Ward Councillor did not have a right to be involved unless the complainant had contacted them directly.

Citizens Panel update

Mrs Griffiths referred to the need to modernise engagement with the public to make it more vibrant and inclusive and the report had been brought before the Group to update them.

Mrs Griffiths introduced the Consultation and Engagement Officer, Siobhan Reilly who presented report PPP05.

Recruitment of the panel had been undertaken by a specialist organisation (SMSR) who had recruited members using a combination of telephone and face to face recruitment techniques. Recruitment had taken place during March and April 2013 and press releases informing the public that recruitment was underway had been sent to all local papers with small articles in both the Grantham Journal and the Stamford Mercury. Using information from the 2011 Census SMSR were given demographics on gender, age, disability and geography. The tables within the report showed the figures that had been achieved for each category by SMSR who had managed on the whole to reflect the demographic characteristics of the area's population. Other demographic information was also collected on religion and belief, employment status, household composition and home ownership which would be useful at points in

the future.

As part of the process applicants to the citizens' panel were asked three taster questions. The responses to the questions showed that 92.3% were either very or fairly satisfied with their local area as a place to live (where the local area is defined as the area within 15 to 20 minutes walking distance from their home). 78.6% were very or fairly satisfied with the way the Council ran things. The report then listed which of the Council services they used. The figures provided a good measure of how members of the panel interacted and participated with Council services and the positive perspective that they had of the Council.

As a welcome gesture and to establish a two way dialogue with the panel a newsletter had been sent to all panel members giving them information on:

- How the panel was going to work
- What was coming up
- What had been said so far (feedback on the recruitment asked questions)
- How to contact us

A web page had been dedicated to the citizens' panel in order for members of the panel to contact the Council and for us to contact them.

The first topic that the citizens' panel would look at was Customer Access, how accessible were the Council's services, how the services were currently accessed and how they would be accessed in the future.

Members felt that the results that SMSR had received concerning the demographics were impressive; It was suggested that the cost of sending the newsletter, 58p was perhaps not cost effective. Mrs Griffith replied that different ways of sending information were being looked at and most of the citizens' panel had asked to be notified electronically.

Members asked if the results of the surveys undertaken by the citizens' panel could be shared with the PDG. Mrs Griffiths said she would be happy to feedback to Members the findings in an update. The Chairman said he would be happy for the update to be given either in person or written and thanked both Mrs Griffiths and Ms Reilly for their presentation.

19. WORK PROGRAMME

Ms Drury informed the Group that a written work programme would be available for their next meeting on 19th September 2013. She informed the group that there would be a presentation by First Contact at the next meeting and gave a very brief description of the scheme.

20. CLOSE OF MEETING

The Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and closed the meeting at 4.15pm.