

REPORT TO ENGAGEMENT P.D.G.

REPORT OF: Sue Griffiths- Head of People Projects & Performance

REPORT NO: RCC04

DATE: 24th May 2012

TITLE:	Community Drop in sessions - update	
KEY DECISION OR POLICY FRAMEWORK PROPOSAL:	N/A	
PORTFOLIO HOLDER: NAME AND DESIGNATION:	Councillor Paul Carpenter – Governance and Communications Portfolio Holder	
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INITIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT:	See paragraph 7	Full impact assessment Required: N/A
Equality and Diversity		
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT:	This report is publicly available via the Your Council and Democracy link on the Council's website: www.southkesteven.gov.uk	
BACKGROUND PAPERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy of poster • Copy of display board contents • Feedback on display contents • Record of those attending • Issues log from drop in sessions 	

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

The PDG is asked to note the revised approach to engaging with our communities. This is:

- To run a second round of community drop in sessions across locations in the district in the summer
- To change the venues and times of the sessions to coincide with market days/major events to maximise attendance

2. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

2.1 The community “drop in” sessions have been developed as an alternative means of engaging with the public and are seen both politically and strategically as a replacement to the local forums. The purpose of this report is to update Engagement PDG on the community drop in sessions that were held during the second and third of weeks of January 2012, and to evaluate their effectiveness.

3. DETAILS OF REPORT

Summary

3.1 The “drop in” sessions were held during the second and third weeks of January in Grantham, Stamford, Long Bennington, Bourne and Market Deeping. The report below outlines the background to the decision to replace the local forums with the drop in sessions, the details of the sessions that have been undertaken and an evaluation of their effectiveness.

Background

3.2 The consultation and communication team were asked to review the way in which the local forums operated back in 2010. The review involved:

- a. An audit of the local forums that had been held over the 3 years prior to the review date. This looked at the topics that were covered, the number of parishes that were signed up as

members, and attendance from other groups / representatives.

- b. Attendance at local forum meeting to observe the proceedings
- c. Two workshops, one with cabinet members and one with members of the local forums (attended by around 40 local forum members)

3.3 The evidence from these was reviewed and the overall impression was the forums were trying to be too many things for too many people, they were too formal and that the general public were being overlooked.

As a result of the review two work streams were identified. They were:

- a. Face to face engagement with the people who live in our area. It was thought that this would be achieved through attendance at various community events throughout the year where information about the different services provided by the council are communicated in an approachable and informal way.
- b. Improving the way in which we engage with our parish councils and the wider public. It was thought that this would be achieved through a parish council newsletter and holding a number of community "drop in" sessions.

Detail

3.4 The community "drop in" sessions have now been held. Five were staged throughout the district, 4 in the main towns and one in the north (Long Bennington) during the second and third weeks of January 2012.

3.5 Various steps were undertaken to ensure that the events were publicised – to members, parishes and the general public. These included:

- a. Designing a poster to promote the theme and dates of the drop in sessions. A copy is attached at appendix one.
- b. Writing to all town and parish councils on the 4th January 2012 and asking them to display a couple of posters on their local

notice boards. A couple of parish councils have subsequently indicated that they would have preferred to have had more time to put the posters up (and also would have liked to have been emailed) and this suggestion has been noted.

- c. Contacting 25 other public facilities, including our areas offices and arts centres, along with doctors' surgeries and libraries requesting that they display a poster.
- d. Releasing a press release the week prior to the first "drop in" sessions. This resulted in positive articles in the Grantham Journal, the Bourne Local and the Stamford Mercury on the 13th January (and positive coverage in both the 20th January and 27th January editions of the Stamford Mercury).
- e. Notifying all SKDC councillors through the Members News (on the 23rd December) and also by letter on the 4th January.
- f. Promotion of the sessions on the council's website from the first week in January

3.6 Each drop in session had the following characteristics:-

- a. They all had a head of service allocated to them – who was asked to act as the main point of contact for those requiring resolution of issues.
- b. All sessions ran from 4pm to 7pm
- c. The sessions were informal, with an 8 board display designed to communicate the council's new priorities, the projects it is planning to undertake and its spending plans for the 2012/13 financial year. A copy of the display is attached at appendix two.
- d. Those attending were asked to comment on the content of the display, whether they were in agreement with the projects that had been outlined and if they thought there were any other areas that the council should concentrate on. Comments were collected on feedback postcards and the results are included at appendix three. As part of this conversation they were also asked if they agreed with the council's proposal to freeze council tax – which was universally welcomed.
- e. To inform future sessions, those attending were asked how they found about the event, if they had any other questions,

what they thought of the display and if they had any suggestions for future topics. Feedback was positive, with suggestions for future topics including explaining the planning process and what is on offer for children/ teenagers.

- f. Members of staff from the consultation and communication section, together with local councillors and cabinet members, were on hand to answer any questions that people had. A record of the people that attended (and whether they were a district/parish councillor or a member of the public) has been attached at appendix four.
- g. Issues that could not be resolved immediately were recorded along with contact details, and have now either been dealt with or passed through to the appropriate and relevant service managers. A copy of the issues log is attached at appendix five.

Evaluation

- 3.7 To help us make a judgement on the effectiveness of the drop in sessions as a means of engaging with our communities, the following elements have been taken into consideration.
 - a. The number of events - The decision was taken to divide the district into 5 areas following some work that was undertaken to establish travelling times and mileages for all centres of population, using AA route planning software. To encourage attendance, we tried to mitigate the impact of people having to travel significant distances as much as we were able to. We specifically chose to run one in a village location in the north of the district, along with the four main centres of population so as to minimise the amount of mileage / travelling time those living in all of our parishes would have to travel. As a result of this approach, the vast majority of parishes (75 out of 78) were less than 10 miles (or 20 minutes) from their nearest venue. Using population estimates supplied by planning policy this equated to around 98.3% of the estimated population. Whilst more events could have been held at more locations, it was thought prudent (given the costs of staffing and hiring

- venues) to go with 5, and to look at the effectiveness of these before committing to any more.
- b. The timing of the sessions - All sessions ran from 4pm till 7pm. This was a deliberate decision, based on previous experience of planning consultation "drop -ins" (which are always busy). We wanted to give people the opportunity to drop in earlier if they didn't work (and weren't keen on going out at night) or later on their way home from work, but perhaps before they had settled down for the evening. People tended to pop in either at the beginning of the session (from about 4 till 5) or from half past six onwards. As such the success of timing the sessions in this way was mixed.
 - c. The venues – most sessions were held at council venues (arts centres in Grantham and Stamford, the Corn Exchange in Bourne, the community centre in Deepings) with the exception of Long Bennington which was held at the village hall. Whilst there were advantages to this, it may be that expecting people to make a special trip to find out more could have worked against us. It might be worth looking at trying different venues (for example market stalls) for the next set of events planned for the summer to see if this helps.
 - d. The time of year – it was decided to run the drop in sessions at around the same time of year as the old local forums. This was determined predominantly by the desire to have some informal feedback on the council's proposal to freeze council tax prior to the preparation of the 2012/13 budget. This meant that the events were held during cold winter afternoons/early evenings which may also have adversely affected attendance. It could not however be avoided.
 - e. The subject matter – senior management wanted the emphasis of the "drop- in" sessions to be on communicating the council's new priorities, projects and spending plans. This was publicised on the posters that were distributed and in the press releases. Whilst people were interested in the content, most who attended were there to raise a specific issue, unrelated to the display. This is in sharp contrast to other events that have been run to promote more contentious single issues – such as

the Southern Quadrant or the Grantham Area Action Plan- where people had a strong opinion on the proposals.

- f. Publicising the events – any evaluation of the effectiveness would have to include a judgement on how well the events were publicised. The steps taken to promote these sessions have already been outlined in this report and include the design and distribution of a poster to all towns and parish councils in the district and other public places, a press release to all local media, contacting all councillors and promotion on the website. Additional signage was also put up to direct people through to the rooms where the “drop-ins” were taking place. A couple of parishes indicated that they would have preferred a little more time to put up the posters but apart from that it is thought that enough was done to promote the sessions.
- g. Attendance – A table of those that attended each session have been attached at appendix four. All sessions were attended by between 12 and 20 people. The percentage split between parish/town councillors, district councillors and others was as follows - 22%, 40% and 38% respectively. Whilst the turnout wasn't great it's an encouraging start. It is hoped by altering the timing and the venues of the “drop ins” attendance can be improved.
- h. The issues that were raised – Those members of the public that attended the drop in sessions tended to do so to raise a particular issue. These varied from service specific (requesting an extension in the hours the public toilets are open in Stamford on the day of a music festival) to more generic concepts such as a definition of sustainability/ non sustainability in planning policy terms. A full list of the issues raised and the actions that have been undertaken will be available at the meeting. It should perhaps be noted that more queries were received about planning than any other service area.
- i. Feedback on issues – All issues noted at each of the drop in sessions have now been logged and passed through to the relevant service manager/authority to action. This means that

individuals should get their issue resolved more quickly than they did when the local forums dealt with them.

- j. Overall effectiveness –There are many positives to the drop in sessions. People liked the informality of the sessions and were able to raise issues of concern easily. By preparing an issue log and passing through those issues that could not be answered there and then it is hoped that they will receive responses to their queries much quicker than when the forums were operating. People liked the fact that we went out to them to communicate what our plans were, and that they could attend any one of the five sessions.

3.8 To a certain extent the events were successful but the main drawback of the sessions was that attendance wasn't as high as it could have been. It is hoped that by altering both the timing and venues of the next set of sessions (to market stalls/public events), along with careful consideration of the issue that this can be improved.

3.9 Dates have now been set for the second tranche of drop in sessions. These have been chosen to coincide with market days in Bourne, Stamford and the Deepings and with the Olympic torch run through in Grantham and will take place during July.

4. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The costs arising from the planning and facilitating of the drop in sessions are met from existing service budgetary provisions. Any variations to the number or frequency of the sessions will have a financial consequence that will need consideration.

6. RISK AND MITIGATION

7. ISSUES ARISING FROM EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9. COMMENTS OF FINANCIAL SERVICES

Any financial implications arising from the preparation and facilitation of the drop-in sessions are met from existing resources. Should there be a proposal to change the number or frequency of the sessions then there will be a financial consequence which will require consideration.

10. COMMENTS OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

The suggestion that specific events should be targeted for future sessions was made by several of those members of the public and councillors who attended these sessions.

11. COMMENTS OF OTHER RELEVANT SERVICES

12. APPENDICES:

Appendix One - copy of the poster publicising the drop in sessions

Appendix Two – copy of the display on priorities, projects and spending plans

Appendix Three – copy of feedback results

Appendix Four – list of attendees