Rushbury Parish Council
Community Engagement Strategy

September 2008

Introduction

The Community Engagement agenda has been developed particularly in relation to principal local authorities, police authorities and health care trusts. It may be seen as a response to public disenchantment with politics in general and local politics in particular as evidenced by the low turn out at elections. There is an increasing trend of fragmentation in society, despite or perhaps because of multiculturalism and the celebration of diversity, and attempts are now being made to promote community cohesion. It is argued that by empowering communities, passing more political power to more people, they will become more cohesive. Engagement is a pathway to empowerment. Encouraging democratic participation and citizenship is another related strand in this policy objective but this is the subject of another strategy document.

What is the relevance of this to a parish council in a small rural parish, the composition of which is, in general, more uniform than that of England as a whole? The ratio of electors to members is many times lower than that for principal local authorities and hence it could be argued that the parish council is already highly representative of the community it serves. Against this view is the fact that many parish council elections are not contested and where they are turnout is very low so the electoral mandate is limited morally if not legally. The powers, responsibilities and budgets (in practice if not in law) of parish councils are all limited so that there appears little scope for further devolution. However more power and funding is likely to pass to parish councils, in particular the Power of Well-being will be extended to suitably trained Quality Parish Councils and principal authorities will be encouraged to pass more power to these councils. It is likely therefore that parish councils will become more powerful but with this power must come greater responsibility to engage with and empower the community it serves.

Engagement in Practice

Community engagement consists of the following elements in order of impact:

- **Informing** about problems, possible alternative solutions and decisions, for example by newsletters, reports, website

- **Consulting** about analysis of problems, alternative solutions and decisions, for example by surveys, e-polling, weblogs

- **Involving** by working with the community on all aspects of analysis, solutions and decisions to ensure views are consistently understood and considered, for example through public meetings, residents panels, focus groups

- **Collaborating** by working in partnership with the community on all aspects, for example using working groups, third sector organisations and by simulations

- **Empowering** by supporting the community in coming to their final decision, for example helping a local group in the delivery of a project or service.

Definition of Community

*1 A group of people living in the same **locality** and under the same **government**.*
*2 A group of people having **common interests.***
*3A group viewed as forming a **distinct segment of society.*** (www.thefreedictionary.com)

These definitions demonstrate some of the often conflicting views of community; it may be seen as a whole and distinct parts of that whole. Clearly the households within the civil parish of Rushbury define the primary community of our interest but this community may be divided into intersecting subsets. This may be done on the basis of simple demographic factors such as age and gender, useful because different approaches may be required in engaging with say the young and the old. A commonality of interest will define other groups, formal such as the Women's Institute and informal such as groups that come together to play a sport at the Village Hall. Distinct segments of the community are instanced by considering faith or lack of it. Some communities may come together such as Anglicans who regularly attend church services or may never meet or know of each others existence such as atheists. On a more practical level it is important to remember the dichotomy of the community between those with Internet access and those without. The importance of this analysis is that in considering any community engagement it is essential to be clear how that particular community is defined in order that the engagement be tailored to it. More detailed and accurate information about different subsets of the Rushbury population will be required for effective action.

Implementation

Leadership and teamwork will be required for successful implementation. The Parish Council has a role to play, both the corporate body and individual members, as community leader. However it must also be prepared to change policies, plans and priorities as a result of engagement activities. It will be important to foster links with specific subsets of the community for collaborative ventures and to empower them.

Voluntary groups should be encouraged to work with the Council on the specific needs and contributions of those they represent. However there must be clarity about what groups or causes in society they represent, how they involve those interested when developing their policies, and how they respond to consultation. Wherever possible, they should consult local people, including volunteers, members and supporters. More work is required with business in the parish to understand needs and concerns. Many of these will be very small organizations but together they make a vital contribution to the local economy.

The Parish Council will not be alone in engaging with our community. The new Shropshire County Council and Shropshire County Primary Care Trust are amongst the organizations that are likely to wish to undertake similar exercises. There may be opportunities for joint approaches and it is likely that Shropshire County Council may wish to devolve some of its functions to the Parish Council to allow a more local solution. It is important to be aware of these possibilities.

The most difficult task will be to engage with those hard to reach members of the community who have no Internet connection and are not members of any local groups. Typically but not exclusively these will be elderly, perhaps infirm and socially isolated. There are also the busy commuters not working locally and those who are totally disenchanted and feel that nothing they do will make any difference.

Finally it must be remembered that engagement is not the responsibility of one member but relates to all the activities of the Council and is a responsibility for all members and staff.

Resources

There is a need to consider the resource implications of the strategy. Sending the Annual Report and Newsletter to all households would involve postal costs. Website development will have cost implications. Undertaking valid and reliable surveys of the whole population would involve considerable expense for design, testing, interviewing and analysis. Collaborative policy development would involve the costs of venues and facilitation. While it may be possible to obtain grants for some of this work most of the cost is likely to have to be found from the precept. Another significant but hidden cost is members time.

It will be essential to scale down plans that we would ideally wish to implement to what can be reasonably afforded. We must therefore seek the most cost-effective solutions and whenever possible use opportunities to cooperate with other public bodies and organizations.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Better community engagement should result in better outcomes and ideally the change in outcomes should be monitored. The quality and quantity of outcomes is difficult to measure as is the reliable attribution of the observed change to a specific intervention so it will be necessary to measure the process of engagement. Examples of relatively simple process indicators are:

- Records kept by parish council

  1. the annual number of engagement opportunities made available to all sectors of the community and including those which are hard to reach

  2. the annual number of people with whom the parish council has engaged in consultation, discussion, participation and empowerment.

- Repeat surveys

  3. percentage of residents who are satisfied with the way the parish council discharges its duties and responsibilities

  4. percentage of residents who feel that the parish council is trustworthy

  5. percentage of residents who feel that the parish council provides value for money

6. percentage of residents who feel that they are kept well informed by the parish council

7. percentage of residents who feel that the parish council listens to their views

8. percentage of residents who feel that the parish council acts on their concerns

9. percentage of residents who feel they can influence decisions affecting the parish

10. percentage of residents who feel that parish council involves them in making decisions about future priorities

11. percentage of residents who feel that they have opportunities to participate with the parish council

12. percentage of young people who feel engaged in democratic processes.

- Election turnout

13. percentage of residents who vote at parish council elections.

This list is not exhaustive but is indicative of the type of monitoring activity that may be put in place.

What We Will Do

The council will do the following as time and resources permit:

- ensure that all members and staff consider the community engagement aspects of all their council work

- develop a directory of informal and formal groups to which residents of the parish belong including information about the nature (not names) and conditions of their membership

- develop a directory of businesses within the parish

- continue to publish and distribute the quarterly Newsletter and the Annual Report but also to investigate how these can be brought cost-effectively to a wider if not universal audience

- develop a new parish council website (details in a separate action plan)

- use the new website to provide additional information, undertake surveys and provide an interactive forum for parish council matters for residents using a weblog

- provide feedback on the results of consultations

- through our Democracy and Citizenship Strategy investigate how we can engage with 'hard to reach' residents of the parish

- investigate how many parishioners lack Internet access and the feasibility of providing access from a suitable site in the parish

- involve the electors in decisions on policies and in particular in deciding the budget and hence the precept

- undertake a survey to update the Parish Plan

- work with other agencies on the information requirements in relation to the 2011 Census, for example by conducting a major survey at around the same time as the census so that the two data sets (albeit that census data will be aggregated) may be analysed together

- monitor the strategy using a suitable set of indicators.

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