

Strong Communities

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Issue 1 Participation, Involvement and Influence

Identification of Issue

Public agencies in Devon undertake a great deal of consultation activity to help to inform the development of policy and services. Some organisations have arrangements which enable service users to actively participate in setting priorities and designing services. Consultation is also carried out by partnerships, such as Local Strategic Partnerships across the county, in order to decide on their priorities and activities in the light of community views. Consultation and participation activities are held at a variety of geographical levels – from parish or neighbourhood through to county wide. Some potentially involve the whole population, whilst others are confined to particular groups or individuals.

Although there is much excellent practice across a range of organisations, there is no overall strategy which ensures that people feel able to influence decisions which affect them and their local area. At least two of the current (2006-09) District LSP Community Strategies have identified improvement in community engagement as an area which needs to be tackled.

The White Paper and the subsequent Bill emphasise the importance of community engagement and the local leadership and place shaping role of councils and councillors. This is a further driver towards a better co-ordinated and consistent approach.

A mandatory indicator for the LAA from 2007 onwards is:
Percentage of residents who report that they feel that they can influence decisions affecting their local area (mandatory). This is currently at 25.5% in Devon, and there is potential to improve on this.

National research consistently shows that communities work best when people feel involved and influential. People report higher levels of satisfaction, crime and anti social behaviour levels fall and community activity increases.

Experience from research and from practitioners suggests that if public agencies enable the participation of people in the issues that concern them and the future of their communities, the following outcomes result:

- Public services better meet people's needs
- Agencies make better informed decisions
- People can be more in control of their lives, and thus more satisfied
- Communities are more self sustaining and self sufficient

Parish Planning activity across Devon has enabled residents to participate in thinking about the future of their areas. Participation levels have been extremely high in most villages, but somewhat lower in towns. 50% of towns and parishes are engaging in those processes. In Exeter a pilot programme of neighbourhood engagement activity is about to begin.

The challenges for the DSP are therefore:

- To develop effective mechanisms for participation and involvement
- To ensure that such mechanisms are accessible to everyone

- To develop processes which demonstrate that decision makers are influenced by local people's views and activity

This issue cuts across all other themes within the SCS. Successful development of policy and practice will support the whole SCS and the DSP.

Supporting activities

The Strong, Inclusive Communities theme group has begun to work up specific project plans which would contribute to solving this issue. These cover the following aspects:

- Joint engagement and participation processes across the DSP
- A community development strategy for the DSP
- Service user engagement – consistent, co-ordinated approaches
- Promotion of neighbourhood management approaches
- Building capacity in the third sector

Responses to consultation

The ESSG Equality Sensitivity Check was complimentary about the way this issue was presented, but observes that other theme analyses appear not to have taken into account the need for ongoing and inclusive participation. The group also saw an opportunity to promote the role of social enterprise and the wider voluntary sector in assisting the DSP to tackle this issue.

Other consultees raised the following issues, all of which support the inclusion of this issue in DSP priorities:

- 'Where people feel engaged and involved in their communities, wellbeing and social cohesion is improved'.
- 'There is evidence that where people are involved in their communities, they experience improved physical and mental health.'
- Support for the role of volunteers and voluntary action, particularly older and younger people.
- Informal, voluntary carer support can help people retain their independence
- The effects of climate change can only be effectively tackled with community participation
- Social enterprises often come about through community action
- 'Villages where people are active and involved can often tackle some of the threats they face'
- 'Where people are better informed about crime levels and are involved in developing local solutions, then fear of crime reduces.'

Issue 2 Equality and Diversity

Identification of Issue

Despite legislation to outlaw discrimination and to enable positive action to support people from minority groups within Devon's communities, a large number of people experience reduced life chances as a result of their particular characteristics. In 2004 the Devon Strategic Partnership adopted a programme of work under the title of 'A County for All' which aimed to tackle some aspects of reducing inequalities. This work is ongoing, but there is little evidence that overall, the extent of inequalities has reduced.

There is also evidence, both through official figures and surveys, of an increase in prejudice and hate crime against minority groups. Whilst reporting of this kind of crime remains fairly low, it is likely that actual crime levels are much higher. There

appears still to be an issue of lack of confidence amongst victims to report such crimes.

The demography of Devon is changing. Overall, the population is ageing and in the future there will be many more older people, particularly the very old, and a lower percentage of people who are economically active. This situation will be exacerbated by the current falling birth rates, and younger people migrating to other parts of the country. In addition, the percentage of black and ethnic minority people within the population is increasing. It is expected that by 2014 the BME population in Devon will reach around 4% of Devon's current population. This is still less than the national figure, but will lead to greater visibility of BME groups. Continued inward migration by people from the EU will also have an impact on our communities.

There is a range of groups which are likely to suffer from reduced opportunities to be fully integrated into their communities. Particular difficulties are likely to be experienced by people who fall into more than one group, resulting in multiple disadvantage, whether in their work, social or community life. Specific groups which are most likely to experience discrimination are:

- People of minority ethnic origin, including gypsies and travellers
- Migrant workers
- People with disabilities, including sensory disability
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people
- Women
- Older people

Public authorities have a particular duty, not only to take steps to eliminate discrimination, but also to positively promote positive attitudes and improve community cohesion. This suggests a significant community leadership duty across all public sector partners within the DSP.

This issue cuts across all other themes within the SCS. Successful development of policy and practice will support the whole SCS and the DSP.

The challenges for the DSP are therefore to:

- ensure that people in minority groups have the same access to education, training and work opportunities as the general population
- improve the awareness of the general population of the particular needs of minority groups
- support groups and individuals who are disadvantaged to articulate their needs and wishes
- Assess and respond to the needs of migrant workers within Devon

Supporting Activities

The Strong, Inclusive Communities theme group has begun to work up specific project plans which would contribute to solving this issue. These cover the following aspects:

- Strategic overview and co-ordination of equality and diversity work across public sector partners
- Specific projects relating to the needs of particular groups such as migrant workers

Responses to consultation

The ESSG Equality Sensitivity Check was generally complimentary about the way this issue was presented, but observes that other theme analyses appear not to have

taken into account the need for equalities issues to have a higher profile. The group also suggests that the evidence base, as written, does not go into detail about the needs of particular groups and does not give enough attention to new challenges, such as those presented by the influx of migrant workers.

Other consultees make the following points:

- People from minority groups make a valuable economic and cultural contribution to Devon life
- Vulnerable people in rural areas may be a greater risk of social isolation
- People from disadvantaged groups are more likely to be poor and to have difficulty accessing services, including affordable housing
- People from minority groups are more likely to be victims of hate crime, which is a priority of the Safer Devon Partnership

Issue 3 Accessible Services

Identification of Issue

Devon is a predominantly rural county. Apart from Exeter and the bigger towns such as Barnstaple, Exmouth and Newton Abbott, most people live in relatively small market towns and in the 400 or so villages and hamlets across the county.

Accessibility of services is not only about the location of key services, but also about how easy people find it to get information about them and how to access them. When we talk about services we are referring mainly to public services such as health, social care, housing, education and training, and general advice services, but also to key shopping facilities and leisure and cultural activities. These are equally important aspects of life which contribute to people's sense of well being.

Whether services are located where people are, or people have to travel to get access to the services they need are critical questions for all service providers. These are beginning to be tackled by planners through 'accessibility planning'.

Access to information is being tackled in part through electronic methods, the internet becoming a growing route to information. The development of customer service centres is another mechanism. However there are still large numbers of people who require material in written form, or face to face contact.

This theme is therefore about a combination of transport related issues and communication issues.

The national index of multiple deprivation includes a measure of access to key services including health services, post offices and schools. This shows that much of rural Devon is not within easy reach of such services. Rural Torridge, Dartmoor and the Blackdown Hills areas are among the worst affected.

Many parish and town community plans of indicate public transport as an issue, particularly in rural villages.

There has been a long standing trend towards increased dependency on the car to access key services. Reduced commercial bus services in rural areas have contributed to this and local initiatives such as community buses, fare car, car sharing schemes etc have had limited overall impact to date.

The Transport and Accessibility theme covers this subject in more detail.

The issues can be summed up as:

- Providing people who need services with the means to get information, when and where they need it
- Providing services in ways which make them physically accessible
- Ensuring that solutions to these two issues take into account the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our communities.

Supporting activities

The Strong, Inclusive Communities theme group has begun to work up specific project plans which would contribute to solving this issue. These cover the following aspects:

- Community facilities – local hubs for service provision
- Accessibility planning, including transport issues
- Appropriate and accessible services for young people

Responses to consultation

The ESSG Equality Sensitivity Check did not specifically comment on this issue.

Other consultees raised the following points:

- Dependency on the car leads to increased emissions which contribute to climate change. With alternative ways for people to access services there would be a reduction in energy use and the effects of climate change would be mitigated
- Costs of accessing services in rural areas can be high, disproportionately affecting poorer people
- Travelling to services can affect the sustainability of rural villages and reduce social cohesion
- Locating housing close to services is beneficial but may lead to villages becoming unviable
- Transport to health services is a key issue
- Older people and young people report that their ability to access leisure and other services is poor

Issue 4 Community Development

Identification of Issue

In some respects community development underpins other issues, not only within the Strong Communities theme, but also through other Sustainable Community Strategy themes. Essentially, community development is about assisting communities and neighbourhoods to identify and realise their aspirations. This may include enabling people to advocate with key public sector agencies, or it may be about people getting together to resolve their own problems.

Some communities are well equipped to develop themselves, through voluntary action by people who have appropriate skills and knowledge. Others may need the support of professional workers.

In Devon there is a very patchy picture of support available to local communities. Some District Councils have invested in community development workers, whilst others have not. The County Council offers support for particular projects – for example community and school travel plans, and youth projects. The County Council also employs staff to assist towns and parishes with community planning activity, which often includes a community development approach. A number of voluntary organisations are committed to community development approaches, and are commissioned through a variety of routes to undertake work either in particular communities or on particular issues, such as village hall development.

The current thrust towards increasing citizen engagement is unlikely to be effective in Devon without a more co-ordinated approach to community development, whether with particular groups of people or in local communities.

The current drive to encourage more people to get involved in public policy and service planning may lead to certain groups and communities being excluded. A concerted and co-ordinated approach to this across the key public agencies would reduce the risks of people being excluded.

There are already examples in Devon where community development workers' interventions have led to real improvements in people's lives. The outcomes have included reduction in anti-social behaviour and crime, residents taking collective action to improve their environment and advocating on behalf of their community for improved services.

A new LAA mandatory indicator from 2007 onwards is: Percentage of residents who report that they feel that they can influence decisions affecting their local area (mandatory). This is currently at 25.5% in Devon, and there is potential to improve on this.

The challenges for the DSP are therefore:

- To develop a co-ordinated approach to community development
- To target activity where it is most needed and can be most effective
- To assist public agencies to tackle the challenge of having more people participating in, and influencing, the development of public policy and services. (Issue 1)

Supporting activities

The Strong, Inclusive Communities theme group has begun to work up specific project plans which would contribute to solving this issue. These cover the following aspects:

- A Community Development Strategy for Devon
- Promoting a neighbourhood management approach in priority communities

Responses to consultation

The ESSG Equality Sensitivity Check was complimentary about the way this issue was presented and supports the use of community development approaches to tackle equality and diversity issues.

Other consultees raised the following issues, all of which support the inclusion of this issue in DSP priorities:

- Community action will assist in mitigating the effects of climate change

- Community development can lead to the development of social enterprises and help people to access financial and other services
- Community development could be central to social sustainability
- Housing enablers have used community development approaches to demonstrate the need for local affordable housing
- There is evidence that when people are involved in community activity their physical and mental health improves
- Helping people resolve their own community safety problems can reduce anti- social behaviour and fear of crime
- Community development can lead to improved opportunities for cultural and sporting activity. Sometimes people need support to achieve this.
- Local transport options can be enhanced through community development e.g car sharing schemes