

# **Consultation report on the Statement of Community Involvement – early public consultation – May/June 2011**

This report summarises how early public consultation was done and how it has been used to inform the draft Statement of Community Involvement for public consultation.

## **Introduction**

At a Better Environment Advisory Group in March 2011, it was agreed by District Councillors to set up a Member Working Group of five elected Councillors<sup>1</sup> to draw up a revised Statement of Community Involvement. This work was to include hearing evidence from the community to help form a draft Statement.

To obtain early community input, invites were sent to a variety of community groups and organisations to attend a Members Working Group meeting to speak with Councillors and/or to submit written representations. Representations made to the Council prior to the setting up of the Member Working Group were also looked at by the Working Group.

The results of the early consultation work have been used as part of the evidence to inform the draft Statement of Community Involvement that is subject to public consultation.

## **Statement of Community Involvement Member Working Group – Community meeting held 27<sup>th</sup> May 2011**

Invites were sent to 130 organisations. This included organisations responsible for services, utilities and infrastructure provision and community organisations that included resident groups, business associations, 'seldom heard' groups, access groups and developers.

9 written responses were received as a result of the invitation. Correspondence received prior to the invitation from a number local community groups and the minutes of a meeting between these groups and the Council Cabinet, held in February 2011 were also considered by the working group.

7 organisations were represented at the Members Working Group meeting held 27<sup>th</sup> May. The notes of this meeting is included as part of this report.

## **Summary of key issues raised during early consultation:**

- Process must consider comments made prior to this review.
- Document must be shorter, concise and written in plain English. Written communication needs to be better presented in an accessible format (use of font and colours). Illustrations helpful to those with limited reading skills.
- Statement of Community Involvement should be widened to encompass more of the Council's services – not just planning.
- Document should be based on 'principles' (note the Council received suggested 'principles' during early consultation).
- Consultation must be 'front-loaded' in the decision making process.

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<sup>1</sup> Politically balanced

- The affordability of consultation should not be an issue as good consultation can minimise costs later
- Consultation should be more effective and efficient.
- A number of suggestions were made about who should be consulted. A need was identified in linking consultation exercises with existing forums / networks for mutual benefit including time and cost. Town and Parish Councils must take a primary role in the process at a local level. Other groups and organisations can help with this.
- A number of documents that the Council should consult on were suggested.
- Need to ensure consultation methods employed are most effective i.e. consider needs/characteristics of local community. Need to recognise that not everyone has the internet (i.e. use 'traditional methods' such as local press, District, Town and Parish notice boards, local community magazines). Consider using Community Forums.
- Need for timely, effective and accurate feedback at each stage. People must know how their comments have been used to make decisions and must consider that they have been genuinely involved in decision making process.
- Need for groups to understand each other's position and compromise as ultimately, someone has to make the decision.
- Statement of Community Involvement must be effectively monitored to ensure compliance.

**A number of related issues were raised that were considered as part of the process of reviewing the Statement of Community Involvement – these include:**

- Need to take account of existing protocols/planning protocols with Town and Parish Councils and adjacent local authorities.
- People need more time to talk at planning committees - hard if the public do not have experience of speaking at a planning committee.
- Training for officers and Members.
- Regular meetings with statutory consultees such as infrastructure providers (outside of specific consultation periods).

**How the Statement of Community Involvement covers the key issues raised**

- The process of reviewing the Statement of Community Involvement considered all comments made to the Member Working Group including those received prior to its establishment.
- The draft Statement is intended to be much shorter and easier to read and makes use of graphics and clear presentation techniques.
- The draft Statement's scope has been widened to incorporate other Council services – it will act as a guide and benchmark for all Council services to use when involving communities.
- The draft Statement suggests six principles that need to be met when engaging with the community. These have been developed from suggestions received and account for many of the issues raised. These are to:
  - **Be timely** (front-loading consultation where relevant within reasonable timescales)
  - **Be inclusive** (ensure consultation is accessible and includes a representative cross-section of community)
  - **Be transparent** (clear, accurate information to participants – clear about what can be influenced by participation)

- **Be respectful of each other's views** (seek to respect the views of other people and balance relative merits of all views received)
  - **Be efficient** (work with other organisations and utilise existing networks. Tailor each consultation exercise accordingly)
  - **Be clear about results** (Inform in a timely way to those that have contributed)
  - The draft Statement suggests the use of Community Involvement Plans to demonstrate how those involving the community will accord with the six principles. The Statement provides an example template of a Community Involvement Plan. The process of forming a Community Involvement Plan requires the decision maker to detail who will be involved, why they are being involved and when, how people will be involved and what happens to the results of consultation. It is considered that if this approach is followed, then many of the concerns about consultation can be overcome because:
    - It will show clear and structured process on how involvement will be undertaken.
    - Allows flexibility to the process and encourages and supports a variety of appropriate techniques to be used including task specific exercises.
    - The Community Involvement Plan is done at the start of the process giving the community clear information on how the process is to be run.
  - The draft Statement outlines how its effectiveness will be monitored via the Council's Annual Monitoring Report.
  - The draft Statement's Appendices outline specific approaches to community involvement including Local Development Framework documents, dealing with planning applications and creating Planning Performance Agreements.
  - Supporting evidence will be made available at the same time as the document or decision that it supports.
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## **Notes of Statement of Community Involvement Members Working Group Meeting held 27<sup>th</sup> May 2011**

### **In attendance:**

Cllr Andrew Barrett-Miles  
Cllr Andrew MacNaughton (Chair)  
Cllr Edward Matthews  
Cllr Neville Walker  
Cllr Sue Hatton  
Claire Tester – Head of Economic Promotion and Planning  
Ioni Sullivan - Senior Community Partnerships Officer  
Nathan Spilsted – Senior Planning Officer

### **Speakers:**

Cllr. Anne Jones – Neighbourly Care  
Cllr. Bill Hatton – Hassocks Parish Council  
Mr. David Hill – Haywards Heath Society (spoke on behalf of Haywards Heath Society)  
Mr. Eric Bassett – Haywards Heath Society  
Mrs. Frances Gaudencio – Accessibility Action  
Mr. John Benstead – The Old Convent Estate Residents Limited  
Mr. Stuart Meier – CPRE Sussex

### **Apologies:**

Cllr Denis Jones  
Cllr Robert Salisbury

### **Summary of issues raised by speakers:**

- Current Statement of Community Involvement too long and needs to be made simpler. New Statement should be open and transparent.
- Need to consider demographic mix of the District's population as well as 'hard to reach' groups to ensure consultation methods are effective. 'Hard to reach' groups could be identified by the community - need for Council to talk to the key players.
- The key is visibility and time to provide a response. Early consultation is about effective use of resources. The affordability of consultation exercises should not be an issue as good consultation may minimise potential Inquiry costs later.
- Not everyone has the internet. Could use local press for monthly update of Council update on published items, notice boards on MSDC campus, libraries and Parish Council offices. Noted newspapers not read by all. Information could be provided via supermarket notices and through Parish newsletters. Community Forums were an opportunity for people to meet in their area and discuss issues, although attracts same people and need to be realistic about what can be achieved. Meetings could be arranged to bring all Councillors – District, Town and Parish – together to hear all the issues. Details need to be available of where and when a Council meeting will be discussing the issue
- Delegated planning applications lack democratic process - feeling that Parish Council views are overridden. Would be helpful if people had a longer time to talk at planning committees - hard if the public do not have experience of speaking at a planning committee.
- There is a need to see the realism of the Localism Bill. The Big Society will not be easy for Parish Councils and may be difficult to implement due to resource issues.
- Training for Officers and Members in communication and reaching all groups might be appropriate, recognising that communication is a two-way process.
- Written communication needs to be presented in an accessible format e.g. appropriate colours/larger font. The use of cartoons/illustrations might be considered.

- Distrust of Mid Sussex District Council could be because people do not always understand the issue/process. Need for groups to understand each other's positions and compromise as ultimately someone has to make the decision. Government policy can be restraining.
- People must be able to say that they were listened to and engaged in the process. Need for timely and accurate feedback - process should be ongoing. Same methods and identified contacts should be used when communicating results.

**Main points arising from general discussion and questions and answer session:**

- The Localism Bill is about what the community wants. Town and Parish Councils need to say what they want otherwise position will remain the same. Practical implications of the Localism Bill are unknown - should not be a 'NIMBY charter'. It should be noted that everybody is competing for the same resources.
  - Parish Councils have contact with a variety of people - meetings with Councillors and Officers would be useful to enable them to come together and discuss issues. Parish notice boards and community-based magazines cover most areas - cost-effective resource.
  - Community development workers for Town Councils seem a good idea. Town Councils need to take responsibility for meeting people. The message from the District Council is that this is a good idea. People need to believe that they are having an influence locally and Councillors need to put their head above the parapet. .
  - Community forums useful for less confrontational issues – question to whether it is the District Council's responsibility to arrange community forums. Localised meetings can be a useful way of reaching groups, maybe at ward level.
  - Consultation is the reason for the Statement but certain issues will require compromise, and this may include between the government and local people.
  - Need to find someone within the 'hard to reach' groups to communicate with the rest of the group. It should be recognised that communicating with 'hard to reach' groups is not impossible.
  - Apathy is an on-going problem and people do not always respond.
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