



Councillor Paul Bettison
Leader
Bracknell Forest Council
Easthampstead House
Town Square
Bracknell
Berkshire
RG12 1AQ

Date: 10/10/2011

Dear Councillor Bettison,

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REVIEW OF NEIGHBOURHOOD ENGAGEMENT

As you know, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission decided to form a Working Group to contribute to the formulation of plans for neighbourhood engagement, in the light of the Localism Bill and local developments. The Working Group has met and reached views on the strengths and weaknesses of the five options for neighbourhood engagement, as set out in the completed consultation questionnaire, attached. We would also like to address some additional points to you in your capacity as Executive Member responsible for the Council's arrangements for Community Engagement.

The Working Group strongly supports Option 4 (the Town and Parish/elected Members model). At the heart of this, we firmly believe that Town and Parish councils are the fundamental building block for local neighbourhood engagement. We consider that giving Town and Parish Councils this enhanced role has various advantages, and no particular weaknesses. It would give a single point of focus, it would recognise their democratic mandate, it would empower them to do more within their communities, it would make better use of their infrastructure and capacity, and pushing responsibility downwards would yield better results.

If the Bracknell Forest Partnership and the Executive decide to adopt Option 4, it will be important for the Borough Council to assist them to achieve that through training and other appropriate support. The Council would also need to be mindful that each T&PC is different and consequently they should be allowed some flexibility to determine the most appropriate detailed arrangements for their circumstances.

The Working Group would also comment on two issues which were not the subject of questions in the consultation questionnaire:

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- The Working Group would support the transfer of ownership of the Community Halls to the Town and Parish Council, as we believe they would be much better placed than the Borough Council to own and operate them in concert with the Community Associations. We are cognisant of the maintenance backlog with some of the Halls, and the reported unwillingness of one Town Council to take over the Halls, but we would encourage the Executive to find a solution to making the transfer, even if this entails a cost for the Borough Council.
- Notwithstanding that education remains an important function of the Borough Council, we suggest that the Extended Services Area Partnerships should be encouraged to work in close partnership with the Town and Parish Councils.

The Neighbourhood Engagement consultation is very important, and we suggest that you should bring it to the attention of all councillors.

We hope you find these observations and recommendations helpful, and we look forward to receiving your response to this letter.

We anticipate that this letter and your response will be published with the agenda for the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 24 November.

Kind regards,

Councillor Robert McLean
Working Group Lead Member

Copies to: Councillors Leake, Dr Barnard, Kendall and McCracken.
Chief Executive; Director of Corporate Services

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RESPONSE BY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

NEIGHBOURHOOD ENGAGEMENT REVIEW CONSULTATION

QUESTIONNAIRE

September – November 2011

Introduction

Bracknell Forest Partnership engages with residents at a neighbourhood level through a number of community groups and organizations. Some of these have been provided with a significant amount of officer (and in some cases financial) support.

The Partnership felt that, in the context of the Coalition Government's Localism and Big Society agendas, the reorganization of Thames Valley Police and the health service, as well as this time of austerity, it was appropriate to review the way in which this work is carried out in order to improve its effectiveness and ensure that it provides value for money. At its meeting on 16 December 2010, the Partnership agreed to conduct a review of the way it delivers neighbourhood engagement, and a Neighbourhood Engagement Review was commissioned in order to consider the work of those groups which are provided with support by the Partnership and/or help to set and action community priorities:

13 Neighbourhood Action Groups
6 Extended Services Area Partnerships
14 Community Associations
6 Parish and Town Councils

Five options for neighbourhood engagement in the future were put forward in the Review, and these are detailed below.

The Council's Community Engagement and Equalities Team is consulting on behalf of Bracknell Forest Partnership from w/c 29 August until 4 November 2011 in order to find the most suitable option. We would be happy to receive your views on the strengths and weaknesses of each, and which option you think offers the best model for the future. We will take all the information we receive into account when the final decision is made in December 2011.

A summary of the Review can be found on the Council's website at:

<http://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/living.htm>

2. The five Options for taking forward neighbourhood engagement work:

Option 1 - No change

- Bracknell Forest Partnership continues to provide support to the groups considered in the review with the same level of resource.
- However, there will be a reduced level of support for Extended Services Area partnerships due to central government grant cuts.

Strengths of this Option? In places, it has allowed community engagement to succeed.
Weaknesses of this Option? Unaffordable, and unsatisfactory value for money. Also, Thames Valley Police have left the Council to provide much of the support.

Option 2 – Collaboration/mergers

- The organizations involved in neighbourhood engagement activity increase their collaboration and/or merge with each other.
- For example, Neighbourhood Action Groups could collaborate and/or merge with Extended Services Area Partnerships.

Strengths of this Option? None, other than some saving by servicing fewer NAG's.
Weaknesses of this Option? Very difficult to achieve without a lead partner. NAG's have no mandate or accountability.

Option 3 – Transfer support between partners

- Bracknell Forest Council withdraws its support to the Neighbourhood Action Groups in April 2012 and hands over all responsibility for support for these groups to Thames Valley Police.
- Support continues at the current level for the Community Associations.
- Support for the Extended Services Area Partnerships continues but at a reduced level due to central government grant cuts.

Strengths of this Option? Reduces the cost to the Council
Weaknesses of this Option? Unlikely that Thames Valley Police would want to take over the support currently provided by the Council. Reduced government funding would not sustain this option. Insufficient accountability.

Option 4 – Town and Parish/elected Members model

- Develop the capacity of Neighbourhood Action Groups and Extended Services Area Partnerships in through 2011/12 to become more independent, with the Council withdrawing support to NAGs in April 2012.
- Encourage groups to work more closely with the Town and Parish Councils in order to tailor engagement processes to meet local circumstances.
- Support continues for the Community Associations and the Extended Services Area Partnerships; the latter likely to be at a reduced level due to central government grant cuts.

Strengths of this Option? Town and Parish councils are the fundamental building block for local neighbourhood engagement, and they are best placed to determine which engagement format works best in their particular local circumstances. The issues raised at the NAG's rarely require any action by the Police, instead they are for action by residents themselves or the local authorities.

Weaknesses of this Option? If the Borough Council withdraws its support, some NAG's may cease to function, and some others may choose to adapt.

Option 5 – Stop support for neighbourhood engagement

Bracknell Forest Council stops supporting all neighbourhood engagement groups and/or structures; however, partners continue to engage heavily at a neighbourhood level.

Strengths of this Option? None

Weaknesses of this Option? Partner organisations are probably not inclined to increase their local engagement. The NHS prefers to engage on the basis of larger geographical areas. Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action appears to prefer to engage communities of interest rather than geographical areas. And engaging residents only once every two years is insufficient.

NOTE:

No matter which of these options are chosen, Bracknell Forest Council will work with its partners in order to continue to focus on borough wide engagement, using a biennial household survey.

Of the five options detailed above, which do you think is most viable given the need to improve the effectiveness of engagement and ensure that it is value for money? (Please tick one box only).

Option 1

(with Borough wide engagement through a biennial household survey)

Option 2
(with Borough wide engagement through a biennial household survey)

Option 3
(with Borough wide engagement through a biennial household survey)

Option 4
(with Borough wide engagement through a biennial household survey)

Option 5
(with Borough wide engagement through a biennial household survey)

Comments on any of the options:

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission strongly supports Option 4 (the Town and Parish/elected Members model). Giving Town and Parish Councils an enhanced role has various advantages, and no particular weaknesses. It would give a single point of focus, it recognises their democratic mandate, it would empower them to do more within their communities, it would make better use of their infrastructure and capacity, and pushing responsibility downwards would yield better results.

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission are supportive of a biennial household survey.

Please return this questionnaire by 4 November 2011 to:

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Easthampstead House
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