

# **COUNCIL BUSINESS COMMITTEE**

## **Local Government Association 'Keeping it R.E.A.L.' programme. 14 March 2013**

### **Report of the Head of Community Engagement**

#### **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

To seek members views on developing the community leadership role of councillors

**This report is public**

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS OF HEAD OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

- 1 That members consider the findings of the REAL programme.**
- 2 That members consider whether they would wish to do more joint working with officers on this theme and if so which issues they would wish to explore further.**

##### **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 Council Business Committee, at its meeting on the 26 April 2012 resolved:  
*"That the council apply to retain level one of the Member Development Charter."*
- 1.2 At its meeting on the 13 September 2012 it further resolved that:  
*The Member Development Strategy be approved and referred to Council to be endorsed.*
- 1.3 In doing so it recognised that the Council's Corporate Plan has a clear emphasis on community leadership and commits the Council to delivering an:  
*...increased number of Councillors undertaking training/development in community leadership.*
- 1.4 The Council's budgets and resources are continuing to shrink and it is unlikely to be able to continue to provide all of its current services, therefore it needs to encourage communities to do more for themselves. The Council's Take Pride campaign encourages people to take pride in our area and take a more of an active role. The role of the councillor is becoming more and more important to help to get these messages across and encourage people to do more for themselves.
- 1.5 Earlier in the year, on the 8 February 2012, twelve councillors attended a Community Leadership training event. At the end of the event members were

informed that the Council had submitted an 'expression of interest' and been successful in securing a challenge, support and development programme from the Local Government Association (LGA) for exploring the councillor's community leadership role. The Council is one of twelve authorities across the country selected to take part in the programme.

- 1.6 The 'Keep it REAL' (Responsive, Efficient, Accountable and Local) programme offered the opportunity to benefit from a tailor made pack of support in:

- good, evidence-based decision-making
- genuine community engagement
- strengthening representative and participative democracy.

## **2.0 Report**

- 2.1 Over the past 8 months a number of discussions have been held with approx. 20 councillors to talk about their role including building relationships with local residents to engage and bring people together. These discussions were facilitated by a representative of the LGA, a peer member from another authority and council officers

- 2.2 Following on from these discussions a limited number of one to one meetings with Councillors have been held. These meetings provided an opportunity to listen to councillors personal views on how things are/what they perceive needs to improve and test some of the three key themes that have emerged during the REAL programme:

- What can the council do to support councillors? What could it do more of or how could it do things differently?
- What can the council do to support councillors to engage their ward residents? To bring people together to address local issues.
- Acknowledging that councillors work in different ways, would there be value in providing opportunities to share knowledge and build relationships?

## **2.3 General findings from the REAL programme**

### **Internal Councillor Support**

- Generally Members are happy with officer support; they know who to go to, to get things done.
- Many Members have good relationships with officers; however the importance of responding to councillors and reporting progress was raised.
- Building relationships and knowledge take time; this can be frustrating for new councillors.
- Although an induction and training is provided, many Members rely on their own abilities – "being a councillor is what you make of it"
- These are differing views on whether councillors are 'The council' or an 'advocate for residents'.

## **2.5 Ward Councillor Support**

### One size doesn't fit all

- All wards are different therefore councillors work in different ways.
- Some councillors are reactive, others are proactive.
- Visibility and relationship with community are key.
- Surgeries don't work in some areas – better to attend other things and let people know that they can raise issues with you.
- Available time can impact on different levels of working with communities.
- Time and experience helps councillors to build relationships with residents.
- Some councillors are clear of their city council remit and refer anything that falls outside this to the relevant/professional agencies.

### Communication

- There are varying levels of local communications channels – lots of channels already exist e.g. some wards have newsletters, website, monthly community meetings, PACT meetings, whereas others have nothing. Possibly more likely in rural areas.
- Explaining council tax and the three tier system can be challenging.
- Residents think that the council are making the cuts not central government.
- Review ongoing communications to councillors e.g. newsletter, briefings etc.

### Working with other councillors/tiers

- Most councillors work well together within their wards, however there can be differences of opinion between ward councillors which can cause confusion for residents about who to go to for what.
- Some councillors identify their strengths and share the roles/workload out to reflect this.
- Most councillors do not have a working relationship with the county councillor within their wards but with county council officers.
- Some councillors work well with and support their parish councils.
- Responsiveness of the County Council was raised as an issue for some Members.

### Encouraging Active Communities

- Many councillors play a community leadership role - enable and facilitate community activity.
- Some councillors feel that their enabler/facilitator role is restricted as they have no control over certain areas e.g. county functions such as highways, arts and children and young people services.
- Some communities are already doing more for themselves, although this is different depending on the ward.
- It is important to build capacity to enable residents to articulate their issues.
- Some councillors were unsure about communities running public services themselves owing to uncertainty as to their capacity and commitment and the ability to cover future maintenance / revenue costs.
- Acknowledgement that pride in a place has a positive impact/lack of pride the opposite to developing pride and community engagement is important

- Acknowledgement that reducing budgets puts onus on communities, as well as public sector to do more and/or work together for benefit of communities.

## **2.6 Sharing Councillor Knowledge and Experience**

- There are some strong examples of best practice amongst our members
- There are some common problems faced, for which some councillors have developed solutions
- However there is a lack of a network for councillors to share experiences and learning
- More meetings, information and training opportunities would be helpful.
- Most councillors are supportive of opportunities to share knowledge and learn from other councils, however, they realise it is a challenge to get some councillors to attend training.
- Acknowledgement that wards have similarities which can be shared/learnt from.

## **2.7 Other**

- Most councillors feel that they have a district responsibility as well as their own ward.
- Less phone numbers have made things simpler and mean that most residents contact the council directly.
- Support to improve young people's provision would be helpful.
- Community Rights information would be useful.
- The councillor role is important to provide a local connection – people don't feel connected to the town hall.
- It is important for the council not to get too distant from communities.
- Residents relationships and interests change with age e.g. schools, church or drama groups. Local pubs have lost community role.

## **3 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the councillors that have been involved in the programme recognise the benefits of good community leadership. As a group, on the surface, it can appear they have little in common. Some have political differences, work in diverse areas i.e. city, coast and countryside, have differing levels of skills and abilities and different ways of working.

An observation might be that Councillors have no set way of doing things – they are doing what they believe is best. However, there are undoubtedly examples of perceived existing good practice (given in Appendix A) and clearly a lot of shared experience and learning that could be beneficial for members and communities as we move forward into an era of shrinking budgets and resources.

**CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

(including Health & Safety, Equality & Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, HR, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

An improved community leadership role for councillors could have positive impacts on all these issues.

**LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no legal implications arising as a result of this report

**FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications arising as a result of this report other than officer time if members wish to do more work in this area.

**OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

**Human Resources:** None

**Information Services:** None

**Property:** None

**Open Spaces:** None

**SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS**

The Section 151 Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

**MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS**

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

**BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None

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## **Appendix A**

### **Some perceived good practice examples**

- Walkabouts with relevant officers
- Working closely with Parish Council and attend meetings
- Work with Morecambe Bay Partnership and take part in activities
- Attends monthly community meeting/coffee mornings – provides an opportunity to talk to residents in an informal environment and is more useful than having a separate surgery.
- Attend PACT meetings and work closely with PCSOs
- Walk about, being visible and people stop to talk in the street.
- Sharing workloads in multi – member wards.
- Weekly surgery attended by other agencies e.g. Police and Help Direct
- Working closely with the local community centre.
- Jointly run a surgery with County and Parish Councils which results in more joint action.