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# VOiCE Case Studies

## Creating the Conditions to Support the Use of VOiCE

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## Overview

A development site within the Community Planning Partnership in South East Glasgow took a strategic partnership approach to joining up community engagement activities across Community Planning structures. This case study explores how different partners became involved in applying VOiCE.

## Context

Community Planning Support Team staff worked together with a wide range of partner agencies. These included Fire & Rescue, the Police, Culture and Sport Glasgow, local colleges, Land and Environmental Services, the Local Health and Community Care Partnership and the South East Strategic Youth Partnership. Local residents were represented through their participation in two Community Reference Groups. In turn, the Community Reference Groups[1] selected representatives to sit on the South East Community Engagement Co-ordinating Group.

The Community Engagement Co-ordinating Group initiated and lead the work with inputs and links developed with the 2 Community Reference Groups, 5 Thematic Management Groups (Safe, Working, Health, Learning & Vibrant), Area Co-ordinating Group and the 2 local Community Planning Partnership Boards.

## The VOiCE aspiration

Community Engagement
Co-ordinating Group

5 Thematic
Management
Groups

"Joined Up
Community
Engagement"

2 community
Reference
Groups

2 Local CPP Boards
Area Co-ordinating Group

[1] Community Reference Groups have been established in each of the ten local community planning partnership areas in Glasgow. Nominated or elected individuals from a wide range of community based organisations are involved. The aim has been to engage a range of community interests across each area by ensuring membership from all the neighbourhoods as well as groups of people from different backgrounds. The CRGs have a role in communicating the priorities of local people to the local Community Planning Partnerships.

## The Plan

Work was designed to focus on partnership activities, not individual agency's own community engagement work. By focusing on the connections and interface between the various structures, partners sought to:

- develop consistency across the South East area
- promote partnership working
- link operational and strategic activities
- provide tangible engagement opportunities for a wide range of people
- define added value from community engagement activity

At the outset, people were not discussing community engagement at a partnership level. There was no evidence that future planning and priority setting was being done on the basis of any sound analysis of community needs. Furthermore, there was no sharing of any intelligence or needs assessments from individual agencies.

There were no explicit links between the Thematic Groups and the Community Engagement Co-ordinating Group (CECG). The partners who came together as the CECG were not necessarily involved at a relevant thematic level.

Initial meetings with the Community Reference Groups had raised concerns about partners duplicating their efforts. Members also felt that they were simply being told things. They were seeking more purposeful consultation and opportunities to enter into meaningful dialogue and partnership with relevant agencies.

The Community Planning Partnership was moving ahead with a programme approach to delivering services under its 5 key themes. Several key stakeholders were concerned that this would progress without community engagement as an underpinning component.

The Community Planning Support Team was keen to act on the issues raised in the *Evaluation of the impact of the National Standards for Community Engagement*[1] which was published in 2008 by the Scottish Government. The local staff specifically wished to address the need to support partners in planning and co-ordinating community engagement. They were keen to explore how best to do this.

From the Team's perspective, there was a need to monitor and co-ordinate community engagement activities, pool resources and create synergy across themes and structures.

## Application

VOiCE was used as the catalyst for driving change and creating consistency across the Partnership. By actively promoting and supporting the use of a standard toolkit, it was hoped that partners would become accustomed to using a common language.  Some people had difficulty in conceptualising what good community engagement could look like and partners had different interpretations of what they should be doing.

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1. Evaluation of the impact of the National Standards for Community Engagement, The Scottish Government, 2008

A series of information sessions and workshops was programmed with the Community Engagement Co-ordinating Group and each of the Thematic Groups. These were designed to get partners thinking about why they needed to adopt a more strategic approach to planning and evaluating community engagement. Partners also discussed what they would need to do to ensure that their community engagement work had an impact on current and future planning.

Each Thematic Group agreed to:

- include community engagement  as a standing item on their agenda
- adopt an agreed template for community engagement planning and reporting
- produce regular reports to the Community Engagement Co-ordinating Group (CECG)
- identify a link officer between them and the CECG

VOiCE was presented as the ideal vehicle for assisting the groups to achieve these changes in their working practices. The key components of VOiCE were introduced at these initial sessions.

As a result of these discussions VOiCE was adopted as a systematic approach for planning and reporting community engagement across the Community Planning Partnership. Partners across all of the various structures committed themselves to using the trigger questions in VOiCE to assist with their planning. The database records would also be used to build up intelligence about community engagement activity across the whole of the South East area.

Follow-up sessions were arranged to identify potential projects which would benefit from the use of VOiCE. These discrete 'projects' were intended to provide practical, tangible examples of VOiCE in practice around a relevant thematic issue. There was a real danger that both VOiCE and community engagement would remain abstract or theoretical concepts the longer partners talked without committing to action.

As a result of the initial discussions, two additional 'projects' were added. These concerned Youth Engagement as a cross cutting theme, and a specific initiative, Queen's Park Performance Project, which was being led by four community councils.

It became clear that people needed to understand why community engagement was important and develop awareness of appropriate levels i.e. informing, consulting and engaging before they could actually use VOiCE effectively.

It was recognised as being important that partners separated the process – addressing the questions VOiCE raises - from recording the answers. In order to use VOiCE, it was acknowledged that very few people would need to access the database to input information. Support could be provided at a later date as part of the ongoing work as people began to implement VOiCE.

Some discussions got bogged down by people worrying about how to access the tool and records. Several concerns were raised by partners about their IT departments not permitting shared access.  In order to progress, a decision was made to allocate a dedicated member of the Community Planning Support Team to each 'project.' These officers were already identified with specific Theme Groups and Youth Engagement. It was agreed that they would open up discrete projects on the database and begin recording information. Having one person to input the data and prepare regular reports from the database for everyone else simplified the process and alleviated some of the partners' fears.

A facilitated session on VOiCE and the development site's aspirations was held with the Community Planning Support Team. This enabled the staff to share their concerns and practice inputting information in to the database. It was also beneficial to establish a small group of key people who could sit at the centre of the Development Site with access to all of the 7 discrete VOiCE projects as they progressed.

Sessions / meetings were arranged with appropriate groups of partners to support practical application and the development of the separate 'projects.' These were often facilitated discussions which involved groups of partners agreeing what they were going to do. The Community Planning Support Team keyed appropriate information to the database afterwards.

It was agreed that VOiCE reports and progress updates would be given to the Community Engagement Co-ordinating Group on a monthly basis. The VOiCE reports which were generated from the database would provide a consistent mechanism for monitoring community engagement activity.

Community Reference Group members agreed that as they were not directly involved in the development of the thematic VOiCE projects, they would wait until there was progress to report before becoming actively engaged in the development site. A session was booked which also aimed to develop CRG members' confidence in holding partners to account by clarifying the purposes of their engagement.

# VOiCE Glasgow South East Development Site Initial Time Line

| December | January | February | March | April |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Information session with CECG | Sessions with 5 Thematic Groups to introduce VOiCE and get agreement to include community engagement as a standing item on their agendas | Thematic VOiCE projects identified | Training session for Community Planning Support Team staff | Sessions with Thematic Groups and stakeholders for the discrete VOiCE projects continue |
| Agreement to lead Development Site & promote VOiCE | Link officers from each Theme identified to join CECG | Community Planning Support Team staff allocated to maintain VOiCE records | Sessions with Thematic Groups and stakeholders for the discrete VOiCE projects begin | |
| | Agreement to adopt VOiCE to plan & record community engagement work at each Thematic Group | | | |
| | Update to CECG | Update to CECG | Update to CECG | Update to CECG |

Voice

## Issues and learning

In terms of planning to use VOiCE, the main issues encountered were around agreeing the core purposes of any intended community engagement. Given that partners had never discussed community engagement in these terms, some care was needed.

The openness and transparency which VOiCE offered was double edged. Many partners welcomed the opportunity to record and report on community engagement activities that VOiCE provided. Others felt anxious about their own community engagement practice and became defensive. For the first time, some partners felt accountable for delivering their community engagement activities differently. This clearly felt threatening for some people. Likewise, those who were reluctant to participate fully in discussions about the purposes of their engagement did not relish the prospect of their work being recorded on a database which other partners might have access to.

Understanding community engagement as distinct from direct service provision to communities remained a challenge. What VOiCE did was provide an objective approach with clear definitions which people could respond to. The discipline of methodically answering the questions which VOiCE posed helped people develop understanding and develop stronger partnership approaches.

Good facilitation skills were crucial in terms of working with partners to enable them to use VOiCE. Consensus had to be built within the groups about what they were going to do and why. The best way was to apply VOiCE was though facilitation and not to talk about VOiCE as a 'thing' they had to do.

Some partners viewed community engagement as an add-on rather than an underpinning principle of their work. The best way to apply VOiCE principles i.e. starting with a clear purpose, working through a logical reflective process and seeking to achieve higher levels of engagement were crucial in helping people to understand that benefits could be derived by working more effectively with sections of the community.

The absence of an outcome based planning approach to the groups' previous work potentially impeded the effective application of VOiCE. Often this was a double whammy. If people weren't used to agreeing a set of outcomes and they didn't understand community engagement, then getting started took much longer than envisaged.

It was apparent within each of the groups that there needed to be a clear purpose and reason for using VOiCE. Ideally people should already be talking about community engagement in a partnership setting. VOiCE can then be introduced as a tool to help them achieve their outcomes.

Once the 'projects' were up and running, many of the earlier concerns disappeared. When people could see reports and hear of the benefits and impacts from using VOiCE, they relaxed and became more enthusiastic.

The flexibility of VOiCE should be emphasised. It can be used for specific engagements as well as for strategic planning. Some partners were not ready to undertake strategic pieces of work in collaboration with other agencies. However, that should not stop them from using VOiCE in their own work.

The CPP set out to use VOiCE both as a development tool to improve practice and as a management / monitoring tool simultaneously. While this was undoubtedly complex and challenging, VOiCE did prove to be robust enough to meet these potentially conflicting demands.