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## VOiCE Case Studies

### Evaluating Engagement in a Neighbourhood Partnership

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# Evaluating Engagement in a Neighbourhood Partnership

## Overview

This case study highlights the review process undertaken by Liberton/Gilmerton Neighbourhood Partners (NP) who used VOiCE to evaluate the effectiveness of their engagement initiative. The NP sought to consult with the whole community as to whether the priorities identified in the local community plan were correct and reflected the needs and aspirations of the wider community. The record was filled in retrospectively on the VOiCE tool since the engagement had already taken place.

## Context

Edinburgh has 12 Neighbourhood Partnerships. Each one involves local Councillors and representatives from the Police, Health the Voluntary Sector and the local community, represented by Community Councils. Each NP has a range of action groups that bring these partners together to look at and work on priorities for the area. Much of the work of NPs is coordinated through a local community plan, which explains what needs to be done, and how it will be done.

The engagement by Liberton/Gilmerton Neighbourhood Partners was pitched at the consult level, that is supporting the community to take decisions within restricted options. This level was thought appropriate because the priorities were identified by workers and agencies in the area. The community were asked to comment on whether they were the right priorities and to rank these priorities in order of importance to them. The engagement initiative was taken forward by various partners in the NP who sought to consult as many local people as possible. The engagement process was designed to ensure that people felt that they had a voice and felt involved in the development of the local plans.

In order that local people could engage on their own terms the process was designed to have a variety of methods which included discussions at a Voluntary Sector Conference and Neighbourhood Forums. Information was also made available in local libraries, community newspapers and a variety of community events. Similarly, an innovative photography project was used to get young peoples opinions and to involve them in the engagement process itself. The NP also had over 400 responses to their community questionnaire.

As a result of the consultation one particular priority 'Young People and Alcohol' was drop because feed back from the various consultation methods suggested that the community did not feel this was a pressing priority. The NP proposed from the outset that it would only take forward the most pressing priorities identified by the community in the engagement process.

## Using VOiCE to Review the Engagement

The introduction of VOiCE to the NP came after the engagement had been planned and undertaken by the Partners. As a development site SCDC raised awareness of the tool amongst partners and supported some implementation in the area. Partners recognised that VOiCE would be a useful tool to retrospectively look at the engagement process and review the it against the National Standards for Community Engagement. The Analyse and Plan section within the tool were completed retrospectively on the day of the Review with key partners sitting round the table discussing the questions. The key partners include; Services to Communities, Community Learning and Development, Community Representative, Voluntary Sector and Health. The VOiCE tool was projected on to a white board so that all present could discuss the questions and collectively agree on the responses.



“It was useful to have partners around the table to formulate a collective view in an informal setting. The discussion focused on roles and function, what didn’t happen and what could have been better.” Neighbourhood Partnership Manager.

Partners discussed their initial thoughts when undertaking the work to fill in the Analyse and Plan sections of VOiCE. Each individual had their own perceptions of what worked and what didn’t work in the engagement process. This led to constructive discussions about the score for each of the Standards and the Engagement Outcomes.

As a result of these discussions, in the Review section partners concluded that the engagement exercise was very good but was weak when it came to involving the BME community. Participants agreed that they had not put in place specific methods to engage this group and that they needed to be aware of this for any future engagement activity.

## The Value of VOiCE

The group reported that they enjoyed using VOiCE for a number of reasons. It was seen as a positive process in which each partner had an equal say in the discussion which was subsequently recorded on the VOiCE tool. Community Representatives and community and voluntary sector colleagues felt that their voice was reflected in the record of the discussion. There was open debate which encouraged and supported partners to talk about their own perceptions of the engagement process. It was clear that community and voluntary sector colleagues had a different perception of the success of the engagement process from their statutory sector colleagues. In particular there were different views about how effective the group were at feeding back the results of the consultation, the community and voluntary sector colleagues felt that feedback could have been quicker and more thorough.

Participants found the scoring against the Standards a rewarding and informative process. By reviewing the Standards against a live project many felt it was a way to revisit the Standards and accompanying indicators in some detail and increase their knowledge of the application of the Standards in practice. VOiCE helped highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the engagement process and allowed for honest discussion and debate about what worked well and what could have been better. For many colleagues round the table this was the first time that they had collectively reviewed their work in terms of community engagement, they noted:

‘It [review of engagement] simply hadn’t happened in the past. You move on to another piece of work without taking time to reflect and look back.’

They reported that this was an opportunity for meaningful reflection and a way to identify and record the lessons that they have learned and identify key actions for the future.

Overall the participants felt good about the whole VOiCE review process, they advised that it was a very positive discussion and they particularly liked the fact that it was a self evaluation, conducted internally which didn’t involve external consultants. They described VOiCE review as a ‘breath of fresh air’ in comparison to the traditional approach of appointing consultants to evaluate initiatives as all the knowledge and experience was in the room. VOiCE helped harness and structure the discussion to produce an effective evaluation.

The Neighbourhood partnership manager has been promoting VOiCE to the wider Partnership including most recently the local Police. He has also been working directly with the community itself to plan future engagements using the VOiCE tool.