The Improvement Service

Community Engagement

is.
improvement **service**

scdc
scottish **community development centre**

What is the purpose of the Briefing Note series?

The IS has developed an Elected Members Briefing Series to help Elected Members keep apace with key issues affecting local government.

Some Briefing Notes will be directly produced by IS staff but we will also publish material from as wide a range of public bodies, commentators and observers of public services as possible.

We will use the IS website and Elected Member e-Bulletin to publicise and provide access to the Briefing Notes. All Briefing Notes in the series can be accessed at http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/elected-members-development/.

The views expressed in any externally drafted Briefing Note do not necessarily represent the views of the IS.

This Briefing Note has been prepared by the Scottish Community Development Centre.

The challenge of community engagement

'Elected members have a key role to play in setting strategic direction locally and promoting and supporting community empowerment. Many councillors currently provide invaluable support to their local community groups; helping them to have their voices heard and to overcome hurdles they face in getting things done.'
(Scottish Community Empowerment Action Plan)

The Scottish Government has built the principle of community engagement into policy and guidance to public services. This is most notable for Community Planning through which the Local Government Scotland Act requires all public services to work together. The guidance on the act states:

'Community Planning is essentially a process to secure greater engagement from communities in the planning and delivery of services'.

It is widely accepted that public services that involve their users are likely to be of higher quality and more relevant to the communities they serve, so engaging constructively with communities is increasingly important.

Elected Members are critical to successful community engagement. As a community leader, you have an understanding of the challenges faced by your communities, and are able to work with them and other local partners to influence how best to respond. Few other community leaders have the mandate to co-ordinate and reconcile different and often conflicting interests and to facilitate open debate in the way that you can.

The National Standards for Community Engagement define community engagement as:

'Developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public body and one or more community group, to help them both to understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences'.

As an elected member, and with this definition, you are in a central position to help community engagement work well, to the benefit of both the communities you represent and the local authority you serve. As a bridge between the two you are in an excellent position to facilitate and support the dialogue that is central to good practice and effective engagement.

iS.
improvement **service**

scdc
scottish **community development** centre

You have a key role to play because:

- you understand your ward in terms of the demographics, the key challenges facing local people and communities and the services delivered by the council and other partners
- you represent the views and voices of local people and communities, by ensuring that they are taken into account by the council and its partners when making decisions
- you safeguard and enhance the interests and wellbeing of local people as the central part of your role and your accountability
- you are in a strong position to facilitate and negotiate solutions to community problems, that will empower communities and make governance more effective, and
- you can influence local government policies to make sure they are based on effective engagement with communities.

In a time of financial constraint, the case for community engagement is particularly compelling as it can encourage cost-effective solutions that can help communities be more resilient and self-resourcing. Engaging with communities in a spirit of openness and honesty can:

- aid a better understanding of the impact on communities of the different cost-cutting options
- identify costs savings not apparent to councils and their partners, and
- help find alternative and potentially better ways of achieving local outcomes through shared activities (often called co-production) or supporting community initiative.

Why does community engagement matter?

For the elected member, community engagement matters in four main ways. It matters in **policy**, it matters in the interests of **good governance** and the exercise of local authority functions, it matters in helping build and sustain **strong and healthy communities** and it matters to the core business of the elected member - **political engagement**.

Community engagement matters in policy

Community engagement is advocated in a wide range of policies and guidance across the functions of local government. The 2003 Local Government Scotland Act stipulates that:

> *'It is the duty of a local authority to invite and take suitable action to encourage all other public bodies, the functions of which are exercisable within the area of the local authority, and such community bodies as the local authority thinks fit to participate appropriately in community planning.'*

The Scottish Government's national performance framework highlights community empowerment as a key purpose of governance, and one which should be embedded in Single Outcome Agreements. A robust Single Outcome Agreement will incorporate community views and concerns at its heart and will seek to include communities in the delivery of solutions. For either of these things to happen, community engagement is a necessity.

Community engagement is one of the seven elements in Audit Scotland's Best Value 2 framework and requires that councils:

- understand the needs of their different communities
- involve them in developing a local vision
- have clear strategies for consultation, representation and participation, reflecting the National Standards for Community Engagement, and
- can demonstrate improved outcomes for local people.

This policy context supports you to deliver your responsibilities around engaging with and supporting communities.

is.
improvement **service**

scdc
scottish **community development** centre

Community engagement matters in good governance

Increasing the engagement and participation of local people and communities in the decision making of the council and its partners, and the achievement of local outcomes, will help to strengthen the governance and democratic accountability of local public services to their communities.

Effective community engagement should help to:

- ensure that decision making is based on representative views
- ensure that what happens in practice reflects the council's vision and local outcomes, and
- increase participatory democracy and improve the reputation of elected members as legitimate community leaders.

It matters to communities

Community engagement matters to communities, and to the local people that live within them. It matters to communities because:

- it increases the representation of the communities and helps them to shape service delivery in ways that have most impact locally
- it helps to improve the communities' understanding of how their council operates, how decision making processes work and what their role and contribution can be, and
- it helps to ensure that strategies and plans are developed which take account of local social, economic and environmental factors.

Community engagement matters to local people because:

- it encourages involvement and participation in decision making,
- it helps to ensure 'hard to reach' groups are represented, and
- it helps to engage local people in the resolution of their own problem and involves them in decisions on the allocation of resources to address local issues.

It matters politically

Frequently we hear in the media of concern at the low level of engagement with the political process and with democracy. In Scotland, there is a low level of political awareness and political education yet the everyday concerns of people, families and communities are the basis of political education – often people taking action on local issues is the route by which they become engaged in citizenship and a healthy democracy. Working closely with communities is a good basis for supporting local democracy. Elected members can encourage constituents to become active rather than passive, independent rather than dependent, so that political power can be shared rather than exercised.

is.
improvement **service**

scdc
scottish **community development** centre

Issues for Elected Members

Elected Members have to deal with a number of challenges in their role. You may act simultaneously as ward representatives, as members of council committees and the full council, and frequently as council representatives on outside bodies. These roles can sometimes conflict, and you may face the challenge of striking the balance between being accountable to the communities who elected you and your responsibility to govern. For example, you may find that in some cases, the interests of local communities conflict with decisions taken by the council that you have been party to. You also need to ensure that you do not only listen to and articulate the views of the 'usual suspects', as their understanding of local issues and priorities can be distorted.

A familiar issue is the perception that community engagement can bring councillors into conflict with communities. This can be particularly problematic when the interests of local constituents conflict with the policies or decisions that the elected member is party to in his or her role in local government.

In addition, every community is made up of different individuals and groups, whose particular views, interests and expectations may often be at odds and in some cases, not reconcilable. The challenge for Elected Members is to ensure that they seek the views of as wide a representation as possible. Your role is to support, encourage and work alongside local people, community organisations and local interest groups to get people more actively involved in decision-making and the achievement of local outcomes and to work collaboratively with other leaders (e.g. of local organisations, networks etc) to help establish a shared vision for the future of the community and how best to work towards it.

Some of the factors you will need to consider to encourage greater engagement from citizens and communities are:

- Deciding who best to engage with – should it be all constituents or would it be better to target groups that have a particular interest in the issues concerned? What are the risks of choosing not to engage with some constituents or community groups?
- Deciding which methods of engagement to use – various methods can be used such as surveys, focus groups, road shows, newsletters, blogging etc. You should choose the method most appropriate to your audience.
- Ensuring the engagement is accessible and any costs involved are commensurate with the resources at stake in any decision making process.

Towards good practice in community engagement

The National Standards for Community Engagement, launched in 2005 and endorsed by both public agencies and communities, set out a framework of good practice principles for community engagement.

Where the National Standards for Community Engagement are established in practice, the main features of good community engagement will be that:

- widespread consultation takes place across the range of community interests
- communities are able to represent their views of local needs and issues, and the actions of local government serve to meet their priorities
- communities and local voluntary organisations bring their knowledge and experience to bear in working with local government to work out the best way to achieve local outcomes
- local outcomes are achieved in partnership with other local organisations and communities themselves
- the delivery of local outcomes improve the quality of life in communities, particularly for the most excluded groups
- the assets and social capital that exists within communities, for example, networks of local groups, clubs, societies and informal connections which can complement and support the purpose of local government are used as a key resource to create the social conditions within which the activities of government can best flourish, and
- communities are recognised as having a key contribution to make to change and are supported to build their skills and secure assets such as premises or land to enable them to continue local activities at low cost or to generate income to support them to deliver programmes of activity independently.

Examples of good practice are included within the Community Empowerment Action Plan which has twelve case study examples of empowerment, and can be seen at: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/engage/empowerment/casestudies

Key issues/questions to consider

You may find it useful to consider the following questions, adapted from the National Standards of Community Engagement, to think about how you and your council currently engages with local people and communities and whether there is scope for improvement.

- Are you confident that you are in touch with the range of interests in the communities you represent?

- Is your council encouraging community involvement in decision making and the achievement of local outcomes?

- Are you aware of any issues that may prevent particular individuals or groups from participating in community engagement? What steps are you taking to encourage such individuals or groups to get involved?

- Are you using the most appropriate methods to engage with different communities? Would different methods help in some circumstances?

- Are you helping to ensure that community needs and issues are presented clearly and concisely to the council and its partners and are considered as part of the decision making process? Are there realistic plans in place to address these needs and issues?

- Are you confident that communities have access to the support and resources they need to help engage with the council and its partners? What is your council doing to help build people's understanding, skills and confidence and help them learn through their experience?

- Do you make sure that good information about the council and local issues is available to constituents, and in a useful and accessible format? Are you feeding back the outcome of council decisions to the community?

- Do you encourage connections between the community and other agencies that may need to be involved in providing solutions, and what are you doing to facilitate constructive relationships?

- Do you know where you can source local support and resources to assist you with community engagement?

- Does your council do all that it can to support community empowerment and engagement?

is.
improvement service

scdc
scottish
community
development
centre

Key messages and learning points for Elected Members

- Community engagement should be a key area of local government activity, and elected members have a key role to play in supporting, encouraging and working alongside local people, community organisations and local interest groups to get people more actively involved in decision-making and the achievement of local outcomes.

- Elected Members are critical to community engagement. As a community leader, you have an understanding of the challenges faced by your communities, and are able to work with them and other local partners to influence how best to respond.

- Community engagement is a key component of community development and is supported by interventions designed to build the capacity (skills, knowledge and expertise) in communities where there are long term indicators of deprivation to assist those communities to achieve positive outcomes. Community development, and therefore community engagement, is an essential approach to addressing equality issues and in working with vulnerable, excluded or disadvantaged groups. It helps people to come together, express their common concerns, builds their confidence and skills and ultimately enables them to participate as equal partners in the process of change.

- In times of economic restraint it is particularly important to build collaborative relationships with communities to build resilience and reduce reliance on public services. This is a key challenge for local government, which can be effectively led by elected members.

Further support and contacts

The **Scottish Community Development Centre** is the leading agency for community development in Scotland. We have developed a number of resources that can be helpful in planning and mainstreaming community empowerment.

- **Achieving Better Community Development** (ABCD) maps out and describes the basic approach to community development and is a framework on which activities and components can be mapped and assessed.

- **LEAP** (Learning Evaluation and Planning) is a participatory framework for planning and evaluation that poses critical questions about how to identify needs and outcomes, how to measure change, and how to make change happen.

- SCDC developed the **National Standards for Community Engagement** on behalf of the Scottish Executive and these provide a sound set of principles to inform engagement of communities with local government.

- **VOiCE** (Visioning Outcomes in Community Engagement) is a web based planning and recording tool that can help local authorities plan community engagement and record the process to ensure good practice and satisfactory outcomes.

- **SCORE** is a resource which can be used to assess the level of community capacity, and the quality of support for capacity building that is available from local authorities and other bodies.

- The **CHEX** team (Community Health Exchange) provides regular briefings on community health matters, organises seminars and events, and provides training programmes for community activists.

Further information on all these resources can be found at the SCDC website - www.scdc.org.uk - or by telephone: 0141 248 1964

The Community Development Alliance Scotland (CDAS) is an independent network of national organisations that have the promotion of community development as part of their goals. CoSLA is a member of (CDAS) on behalf of local authorities in Scotland. The CDAS website - www.communitydevelopmentalliancescotland.org - contains information about events, responses to consultations and reports and information on community development matters.