

Area Panels – Future Options

Summary

At its November 2015 meeting the Walsall South area requested a paper on future options for area based activity. The context for this paper was the proposal to withdraw area panels and associated grant funding (£40,000.00 per area). The proposal to cease area management and panels has not yet been agreed by Cabinet who will consider the proposal on the 3rd February 2016 and the Budget is on the Agenda for full Council on the 25th February 2016.

This paper is to help promote a discussion at the area panel on the future options for building community driven involvement in area activity.

Report Detail

This area panel received a report from Democratic Services entitled “Public participation”. The item was deferred pending the outcome of the budget. This item contained suggestions for a way forward in order to encourage greater meaningful public involvement in the work of the panels. If a reduction in meaningful public involvement this is the primary concern around the potential loss of panels then a number of options are available for consideration. These options would be shaped by the strength of various other activities within the area so a strong community association/volunteering network means that it may be an available route to develop the conversations on local decisions.

Options/Ideas

These options/Ideas are put forward for consideration on the understanding that “one size does not fit all” and that different solutions may well work together or that communities may identify something totally different from options here. There will need to be a dialogue around what works best for an area, is it Ward, area or broader groups/discussions.

Do nothing – Remove area panels and see what channels for local participation form. This option works well if there are strong leaders and groups within the community. The potential risk is that only really contentious matters receive public attention and attendance at meetings.

Activity/theme based approach – There are some very good examples of activities which bring together groups for a common purpose. We have local area priorities around health, reducing crime and anti-social behaviour, community cohesion, cleaner neighbourhoods, removing the impact of sex workers and drug dealers, improving education achievement, improving job prospects and improving roads and traffic flow.

These activities/themes will continue after any decision on area panels has been made because of the drive and energy of the leaders and supporters of this work. If money is required then other forms of funding will need to be identified such as general fundraising, private sector sponsorship, other funding opportunities.

Networking meetings – There are many community groups operating across the area of Walsall South. We have the potential to set up a networking group in each ward, bringing together like-minded people together to work in partnership to tackle the issues of the local residents and to organise events and activities that are needed in each area.

Ward Meetings – Similar to the Community Action Group (CAG) meetings back in the time of Local Neighbourhood partnerships (LNP), there is an opportunity to re-establish ward based meetings, bringing councillors, partners and community groups together to tackle community issues within the local ward.

Develop community involvement - Support the development of groups to influence thinking and feed ideas/views into consultation events for the delivery of Council services. At a time the Council is reducing its expenditure, consultation is a key part of the decision making process that ensures the views of the recipients of service and of the general public area taken into account. Shaping of local services can be influenced by this consultation.

Consultation should be an all year round activity giving members feedback on service delivery and the Council's ability to listen.

Funding for the Community/Voluntary - There is a proposal that, with partners, the support for the Community and Voluntary sector is re-designed to ensure Walsall gets more grant income, more volunteers and improved Community/Volunteer groups.

Conclusion

Councillors know their communities and area best so Councillor engagement on future options available is absolutely critical to the success of any new less formal structure. This local knowledge supported by evidence based information allows for improved decision making. Area Managers will be tasked with helping Councillors and Community Organisations to develop solutions that work for local communities and utilise the strength of those communities.

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