

Doncaster - Community Forums - Continually Developing Home Grown Capacity

Introduction:

During the second half of 1999 Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council established six geographically-based consultative forums as part of its Community Action Initiative. Each of the Forums were chaired by an Executive Director, supported primarily by a local authority funded Link Worker with financial assistance from the health authority through its Health Action Zone programme and had a 50k grant fund to be spent in accordance with criteria established by the respective forums. Public perceptions of the Council at this time were low, partly because of adverse publicity surrounding audit and probity problems. Since then the capacity and influence of the forums has grown. Two Doncaster wide forums - a black & ethnic minority forum and a youth forum have joined the area-based forums. Collectively, the eight forums have influenced the social regeneration of local communities, and will continue to do so as the development of the Borough Strategy, through its initial 5 year action plan, will encourage the development of local action plans throughout the Borough.

Context and Objectives:

Situated in South Yorkshire, Doncaster has a Labour controlled Council. It has 21 Electoral Wards, 11 of which are in the top 10% of most deprived Wards in England, [as shown in the 'Indices of Deprivation 2000' by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions]. Doncaster, has a history of actively encouraging community involvement, but like many other authorities, the sustainability of these initiatives varied.

In 1999 the Council were keen to set up a mechanism of community involvement and participation which was self sustaining and made a real difference to peoples lives directly, through community regeneration and indirectly, through influencing the core business of the council. The forums were set up on the premise that whilst the Council and other Agencies would support their development, they should grow 'organically', at their own pace, and to address community driven issues as well as council business. These forums were designed to be community led and as such, Members of the council and Officers are substantially advisors to the process as opposed to decision makers.

Key Achievements and Outcomes:

2 years on the forums are making a positive contribution. Whilst the primary driver behind the forums was the provision of a means for community engagement and participation the Council also hoped to improve the relationship between the Council and it's stakeholders (partner organisations, community groups and individual members of the public). Evidence that a home grown approach to the development of forums is making a difference includes:

The forums all meet on a regular basis to:

- Identify local issues
 - Respond to local needs
 - Get involved in consultation exercises
 - Allocate community forum funding
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- Forums employ a variety of means to do business and engage with the public, the council and other stakeholders including public meetings, planning meetings, sub groups and projects.

The forums have brought benefits to the community and the council by:

- More effective dialogue and better understanding of the needs of the public and Council practice
- Building better relations with partners and public and an improved public image
- Playing a part in community development activities through grant-aiding local groups and facility improvements
- Improving the ability of the Council to respond to community needs

There have been consistently high levels of activity within all forums - measured in the follow ways - attendance figures, events organised by the forums, grant process established.

Assisted by the IDeA - there is a performance management framework under development to measure their impact.

The training and employment of local people to undertake and support community projects, which in turn develop leadership and employability skills. Through the Community Leadership project [£1.3m, part European funding] approximately 100 part-time workers have been employed by the council and these people have been seconded to local organisations through which 108 different projects have been helped.

Shaping of quality of life themes for Doncaster's borough strategy (it's community plan) and through this starting to influence the priorities of the mainstream spending of the council and other agencies

Movement away from 'my house', 'my street' to a more spatial view of Doncaster and the choices made by the forums.

The development of citizenship through the taking on of responsibility

Capacity building in communities through the projects undertaken by the part-time workers and projects funded through the community grants

Organisational capacity building as officers have become engaged in the processes

Critical Success Factors:

- Strategy of allowing, for the first year, the forums space to develop organically at their own pace, without targets and rules imposed from the Council and other Agencies.
- Forum support teams, each with a dedicated Community Link Work have significantly driven better two-way communications between the council and the community and personify a new approach to the ways of working within the Council and beyond. Their role has been pivotal to breaking down barriers and communicating the council's agenda to the community and vice versa, particularly explaining what council decisions might mean for communities and how communities can most effectively impact on these decisions.
- Strongly binding senior and middle managers to a particular forum. Executive Directors for example have had a responsibility for chairing forums. Evolution has meant that 4 of the 6 area forums now have community chairs - but the expectation that the executive director still keeps a close association. The benefit of this arrangement is that the forums maintain high visibility and strong support.
- The allocation of a mainstream funded 50k grant, allowing the forums to choose how they spend it within criteria that they respective forums have established.
- The capacity building projects (for example training community workers) means that Doncaster's pool of regeneration and community development experts have grown.

Further Information:

Achieving Our full Potential - A 5 year Borough Strategy for Doncaster - Consultation draft- December 2001 [website address- www.doncaster.gov.uk]

Performance Management for Community Action - Final Report, Executive summary- February 2001

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