

Agenda Item 11

Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

10 March 2010

Influencing Decisions Place Survey O&SC 10.03.10



Place Survey – Residents Influencing Decisions

Summary

The results of the 2008 Place Survey were considered by the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 September 2009 and members requested that further investigation be undertaken with the respondents to the survey to find out why they felt they could not influence decisions. This was the worst result for the Council for the 18 National Indicators measured by the Place Survey and the only one for which we featured amongst the worst 25% performing district councils in England. Officers conducted a survey of the respondents to this question in the 2008 Place Survey and ran two discussion groups during November and December 2009 to tease out the issues behind the low score. The findings of the further engagement were explored by senior officers who have identified potential improvements for the Committee to consider.

Recommendation:

That the Committee considers the potential improvements to the way residents feel that they can influence decisions in the local area as far as the District Council is concerned and selects those improvements most likely to bring about positive change.

With regard to Planning:

- More information to local people on how Planning works explaining how people can get involved and to what level, including:
 - A structured interview between the media and the Head of Planning and Development Control Manager.
 - Publicise the LDF further, showing its importance as this is the stage where people really can have some influence.
 - Publicise all future Planning Policy consultations much more widely and make them more inclusive as this is where the public and Town and Parish Councils can make a difference.
 - Publicise the Planning Committee and Planning Process leaflets widely and sent to all Town and Parish Councils.
 - Make the online 'Planning Guide to Objectors' easier to find on the website and promote it.
- Have a dedicated conclusion section on Planning reports written in Plain English detailing Planning Officers comments on objections.

With regard to Elected Members:

- A5 sized Members contact cards with a photo and their contact details could be produced and placed in village/ town notice-boards and local shops. This would help address public concern that they don't know who their Councillor is or how to contact them.
- Elected Members could explore additional ways of providing feedback on decisions as well as by informing Town and Parish Councils.
- Elected Members could attend more community or Council organised events to meet local people e.g. Countryside's Wet and Wild Weekend. These events already attract the public and so are opportunities for Councillors to meet and engage with members of the public. This approach would also involve no special budgets as the events are already organised and paid for.
- Elected Members could take up the opportunity of writing an online blog.
- Publicise the work of the Standards Committee, and what it is trying to achieve, more widely.
- Collect and promote good practice examples from Elected Members of where they have been able to action issues raised by their constituents and where they have actively sought and acted on feedback.

a) Reasons for Recommendation

The Place Survey is a very important Government survey, carried out by every local authority in England. The Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) expect that the results will be used by all local public service providers, including EDDC, to understand and improve the area they serve. They expect action to be taken on any issues arising in the results of the survey, including any poor results. It is very important that these follow up actions are implemented for the benefit of residents and the Council’s reputation, and also for CAA and the developing Engagement and Empowerment Agenda.

b) Alternative Options

None.

c) Risk Considerations

It is expected that the Council will consider and act upon the Place Survey results and that doing so will avoid the Council being criticised in a future inspection and prevent any compromising of the Council’s reputation and budgets.

d) Policy and Budgetary Considerations

The recommendation calls for consideration of improvements to the way residents feel that they can influence decisions in the local area as far as the District Council is concerned. The improvements that the Committee selects are likely to have an impact on current practice and possibly on policy but are not expected to have significant budgetary implications.

e) Date for Review of Decision

The Place Survey is due to be carried out every two years with the next one scheduled for the autumn of 2010 when it is expected residents will be asked the same questions, including whether they feel that they can influence decisions in the local area. The results of that survey will be reported to members in the spring of 2011.

1 Main Body of the Report

1. Place Survey

East Devon District Council sent out the Place Survey to a selection of residents in the autumn of 2008 on behalf of national government. The Place Survey involves the use of a questionnaire to capture residents’ views, experiences and perceptions, so that public bodies can use the results to decide upon their priorities and solutions for their area.

2. Influencing decisions in the local area

One of the questions in the Place Survey was: ‘Do you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions in the local area?’

Only 24.8% of East Devon residents agreed with this statement. This was a comparatively poor result and placed us in the bottom quartile nationally.

% of people that feel they can influence decisions in their local area= 24.8%

Devon Districts	South West Councils	English Councils	Position amongst District Councils	Quartile position amongst Districts	Position amongst SPARSE councils
27.9	27.4	28.9	168 th	Bottom Quartile	81 st

3. What can EDDC do to improve this?

This result, amongst others, was reported to Communities Overview and Scrutiny on 16 September 2009. At this meeting Elected Members requested that further investigation be undertaken with the respondents to the survey to find out why they felt they could not influence

decisions. This investigation has now been completed and a more detailed summary of the method and results is attached.

4. Methodology

We went back to the respondents from the survey and asked them to tell us why they felt unable to influence decisions, either by attending one of two discussion groups, or by completing the short questionnaire we sent out to them.

5. The findings of further engagement

The same issues arose in both of the discussion groups and the paper based questionnaires. The three main findings are set out below.

5.1 By far the main reason that residents did not feel they could influence decisions in their local area was due to planning decisions being made with disregard to what the residents and Town and Parish Councils want or recommend.

27 of the 43 residents (63%) that commented on the paper based form talked about being able to have no influence on Planning, as did very nearly all the people attending the focus groups. In the focus groups it was by far the most commonly mentioned issue taking up at least half the time spent in discussions in each focus group, and most people had several examples of where they and their Town/ Parish Councils had not been able to influence Planning decisions in their local area. This is by far the most important factor affecting how able residents feel to influence decisions. Residents also wanted information and feedback on planning decisions and more regular enforcement of planning restrictions.

5.2 Residents felt that most Councillors do not listen to or act upon the views of their electorate. They also felt Councillors did not give enough information or feedback to their residents.

In the focus groups nearly all participants mentioned Councillors, two stated that they had very good Councillors and this made them feel a lot more able to influence decisions. The others felt that Councillors didn't appear to listen to or act upon the views of their electorate and didn't feel they give their electorate feedback or information.

10 of the 43 residents (23%) that commented on the paper based forms stated that Councillors made them unable to influence decisions. They felt that Councillors acted in their own self-interests or the interests of their Party, and not the interests of their own electorate. They felt Councillors needed to get back in touch with and act upon the views of their residents and Town and Parish Councils.

5.3 Residents also felt that when they gave views on other issues their views were not acted upon. (Other than Planning.)

In the focus groups residents felt that when they gave their views or complained/ requested various services and suggested plans for the future of their areas, what they said was often ignored. There was also a feeling that even if there were valid reasons as to why what they said could not be acted upon, this was never fed back to the people that commented or complained. Several of the participants felt that there was no point in trying to influence decisions as the decisions had already been made.

13 of the 43 residents (30%) that commented on the paper based forms felt that in general what they say is ignored by the Council, and in some cases not even responded to. They felt that the Council has a disregard for what people want and even if residents are consulted their views are not acted upon.

6. Potential Improvements

Meetings were held with Directors/Senior Officers to discuss how we could improve on the top two findings as set out in paragraphs 5.1 and 5.2.

6.1 By far the main reason that residents did not feel they could influence decisions in their local area was due to planning decisions being made with disregard to what the residents and Town and Parish Councils want or recommend.

The issues concerned with this finding were explored with Senior Officers and the main points of discussion, current practice and potential improvements are detailed below.

The main points raised were:

- Planning is a balancing act, many issues need to be taken into account including a wide variety of often conflicting local views.
- Planning is quasi-judicial and EDDC has to take into account national and regional Planning Law and Guidance.
- The Planning process allows everyone to have their say but the decision making process is more constrained. Decisions are bound up with policies dictated by the Local Plan/ Local Development Framework (LDF) which is where the true engagement process lies, along with Village Design Documents and Parish Plans.
- Planning decisions are not taken dependent upon the volume of objections, there have to be specific material planning objections for the comments to be taken into account. It is not simply a matter of counting the number of objections or supporters.
- There is a need to appreciate local distinctiveness when Planning decisions are made but it is dependent upon whether this is possible under national Planning legislation/guidance.

What is already happening:

- All planning applications, decisions and reports are scanned in and put on the Planning Online website for public viewing.
- Planning are in the process of simplifying the website of Planning Online, including better web links.
- The online Planning system allows people to register interest in their street, village, town and they will receive alerts on any applications received from these areas. If they comment on an application they will receive alerts on the progress of the application and the final decision.
- A leaflet on how Planning Committees work has been drafted and another one is planned on how the Planning process works.
- We already have one of the best Planning Websites in the UK, which key objectors were invited in to help us design.
- Members have had training in the constraints they face when making planning decisions.
- We have already been out to Town and Parish Councils to educate them on how the Planning process works and how to use the online Planning system.
- Statistics show that we have actually disagreed with Town and Parish Councils on very few planning applications.
- When there is public speaking the public speakers are given printed information about how to object and what will be done with their comments.
- If someone objects to a planning application and that application goes forward for decision to the Development Management Committee, that person will be advised of the date and time and how they can take part in that process.

Potential improvements:

- More information to local people on how Planning works explaining how people can get involved and to what level, including:
 - A structured interview between the media and the Head of Planning and Development Control Manager.
 - Publicise the LDF further, showing its importance as this is the stage where people really can have some influence.
 - Publicise all future Planning Policy consultations much more widely and make them more inclusive as this is where the public and Town and Parish Councils can make a difference.
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6.2 Residents felt that most Councillors do not listen to or act upon the views of their electorate. They also felt Councillors did not give enough information or feedback to their residents.

The issues concerned with this finding were explored with Senior Officers and the main points of discussion, current practice and potential improvements are detailed below.

The main points raised were:

- There is a public perception that Councillors do not listen to or act upon the views of their electorate.
- 'Meet Your Councillors' surgeries have been trialled nationally and generally do not work unless in response to a key local (particularly controversial) issue or are part of a wider event.
- Some Councillors engage well with their communities and attend local council meetings – but not all Councillors do this.
- Councillors have to balance the wants and needs of their community with all sorts of other issues e.g. legislation.

What is already happening:

- A formal induction/welcome process is organised for newly elected councillors.
- Informal advice and opportunities for engaging with their community are created by Democratic Services and Service Heads.
- Community Involvement/how to increase community engagement was discussed at the Member Development Working Party on 1 March.
- Democratic Services and elected Members pick up on issues raised at events and try to progress them, e.g. Local Democracy Week at Sidmouth College.
- Some Elected Members take part in Grumble Walks with Streetscene. These involve walking round an area/neighbourhood, talking to residents and identifying how to address issues raised.
- Elected Members feedback to Town and Parish Councils on decisions.
- Each Elected Member has the opportunity through the Council's ICT systems to write an online blog. This would help the public to understand the work and roles of Councillors and provide a communication channel. So far no Councillor has committed to a blog through the Council's systems.
- There are some very good practice examples of what East Devon Councillors are already doing.
- The Standards Committee produces a quarterly up-date article for the Knowledge to help the public understand its purpose and the issues that it deals with.
- The new Licensing Act arrangements enable residents living near licensing applications to track them on the Council's website. They can then make representations to the Committee. Feedback from those who attend the Committee to make representations suggest this has been very well received by residents.

Potential improvements:

- A5 sized Members contact cards with a photo and their contact details could be produced and placed in village/ town notice-boards and local shops. This would help address public concern that they don't know who their Councillor is or how to contact them.
- Elected Members could explore additional ways of providing feedback on decisions as well as by informing Town and Parish Councils.
- Elected Members could attend more community or Council organised events to meet local people e.g. Countryside's Wet and Wild Weekend. These events already attract the public and so are opportunities for Councillors to meet and engage with members of the public. This approach would also involve no special budgets as the events are already organised and paid for.
- Elected Members could take up the opportunity of writing an online blog.
- Publicise the work of the Standards Committee, and what it is trying to achieve, more widely.

- Collect and promote good practice examples from Elected Members of where they have been able to action issues raised by their constituents and where they have actively sought and acted on feedback.

7. Recommendation

It is recommended that the Committee considers the potential improvements to the way residents feel that they can influence decisions in the local area as far as the District Council is concerned and selects those improvements most likely to bring about positive change.

Legal Implications

The duty to promote democracy will shortly be a statutory duty on local authorities to promote understanding of local governance systems and opportunities for members of the public to be involved. This will include promoting understanding of the local authority's own functions and how local people may get involved and influence its decision-making arrangements, as well as those of its partnerships.

The duty extends to promoting public understanding of the role of councillors and how to become one.

It will also include a duty to promote understanding of the functions and democratic arrangements of connected public bodies ('connected authorities') where local people can get involved, as well as explaining about specific civic roles, such as lay justices, and the opportunities to take them up.

This duty is contained in Section 1 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, in response to the Councillors Commission Report 'Representing the Future'. The specific activities undertaken to meet these duties will largely be at the discretion of local authorities but will include publishing information about local democracy. Councils will need to make reasonable adjustments to ensure information is made available in accessible formats in accordance with equalities legislation. Statutory guidance will link the duties relating to the promotion of democracy strongly with equalities duties, and best practice guidance will suggest a range of methods and media such as websites, leaflets and posters, and targeted work with schools. Mentoring schemes, shadowing, work with community groups, and open days targeting under-represented groups are likely to be encouraged.

Financial Implications

In agreeing the recommendations the committee must ensure that the costs associated with them, can be met from existing budgets

Consultation on Reports to the Executive

Background Papers

One appendix follows this report which sets out details of the further engagement undertaken and the findings.