

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to the Executive for Decision 1 December 2014

Portfolio: Policy and Resources
Subject: **Community Action Team (CAT) Review**
Report of: Director of Finance and Resources
Strategy/Policy: Communications
Corporate Objective: Strong and Inclusive Communities

Purpose:

This report sets out the results of the recent Community Action Team (CAT) review and seeks approval for a number of changes to the way the Council undertakes public engagement.

Executive summary:

Community Action Teams (CATs) were set up in 2007 with the aim of increasing engagement with Fareham Borough residents. The 2013 Residents' Survey indicated that residents would be more likely to attend meetings if the content was different and it was therefore agreed at the 6 January 2014 meeting of the Executive, that a review of Community Action Teams would take place and a report would be presented at a future date.

CAT officers, CAT Chairmen, the Executive Leader, the Deputy Leader, the Leader of the Opposition, the Deputy Opposition Leader and the Police took part in the review. Whilst some aspects of the meetings were considered successful, there were a number of issues with the current arrangements that participants felt needed to change.

This report outlines the main feedback from the CAT review and outlines a number of proposals which could make them more responsive to both the needs of Fareham residents and the Council.

Recommendations:

That the Executive agrees that;

- a) the five CAT areas be replaced with ten smaller neighbourhood areas;
- b) the majority of CAT meetings be replaced with single agenda item meetings, that take place only when there is a 'hot topic' occurring in a neighbourhood at a relevant critical time;

- c) regular “meet the Leader” summer meetings to be held in five of the neighbourhood areas in one year and then in the remaining five areas the following year; and
- d) the most appropriate Chairman for individual meetings will be nominated by the Executive Leader on a meeting by meeting basis.

Reason:

To ensure that community engagement is carried out with Fareham residents in the most effective way.

Cost of proposals:

There would be some redundancy costs associated with the termination of five CAT Officer posts but these can be contained within existing budgets.

Appendices: **None**

Background papers: Resident’s Survey results

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Executive Briefing Paper

Date: 01 December 2014

Subject: Community Action Team (CAT) Review

Briefing by: Director of Finance and Resources

Portfolio: Policy and Resources

INTRODUCTION

1. The purpose of this report is to review the use of Community Action Teams (CATs) and CAT Meetings and to analyse whether, in their current format, they are an effective way of engaging with Fareham residents.
2. The report then proposes a number of changes to the way the Council engages with residents, which are designed to increase participation in the decision making process.

BACKGROUND

3. The Local Government White Paper – Strong and Prosperous Communities was published in 2006. The paper required Councils to place a greater emphasis on neighbourhood working. To achieve this, the Executive agreed at the November 2006 meeting, to develop a Community Engagement Strategy, based around the development of five neighbourhood fora at Portchester, Crofton, Titchfield, Fareham Town and the Western Wards.
4. At the April 2007 meeting of the Executive, the creation of five CAT areas, and the nomination of Chairmen, was agreed. Two Community Engagement Officers, supported by a Community Assistant were recruited to run the CAT areas and support the Chairmen at CAT meetings which were held quarterly in each area.
5. At the time, the 2006 Community Engagement and Consultation Joint Strategy for the Hampshire Police Authority and Hampshire Constabulary emphasised the police's commitment to informing and engaging with local residents. CAT meetings were identified by both the Police and the Council as a useful tool for supporting this. The Police were therefore invited to present at every CAT meeting.
6. The original aims of Community Action Teams can be distilled into the following:
 - Inform residents of Council decisions, changes and activities.

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- Get more residents engaged and involved in influencing decisions.
 - Help residents talk about, work together and take responsibility to tackle local issues.
7. It was hoped that CAT meetings would achieve these aims and allow people to feel more engaged with the Council and their communities, and open up a two way conversation. It was agreed that the meetings would be structured, with a designated ward Councillor as Chairman running the meeting, supported by a Community Engagement Officer.
8. Each meeting would follow the same format:
- a) Chairman's Introduction.
 - b) Police Update – talk about local crime statistics and issues.
 - c) CAT Officer update – talk about community funding, consultations and other Council activities of interest.
 - d) Main agenda items – presentations by the Council or a partner organisation.
 - e) Questions from the floor.
 - f) Walkabout – an opportunity for residents to speak directly to ward Councillors attending the meeting.

CATs change over time

9. In 2008 a review of CATs was carried out and a report put to the December Executive meeting, where the Executive agreed to:
- Split the Fareham Town CAT area into Fareham North-East and Fareham South-West.
 - Replace the existing officer structures with a dedicated officer for each CATs area (by giving additional responsibilities to existing Council Officers), working for an average of 20 hours per month in addition to their normal substantive role within the Council.
 - Reduce the frequency of meetings from 4 to 3 times per year.
 - The Executive Leader to present on the direction the Council is taking at one cycle of meetings per year.
 - Allow ward members in attendance to answer questions if requested by the Chairman, but not to raise them.
10. The above changes came into place in April 2009. A further review took place in April 2010 and the Executive agreed to combine the Fareham North-East and Fareham South-West areas into a single Fareham Town area, due to low attendances at meetings. This change also resulted in the number of CAT officers reducing from six to five.

The changing face of engagement

11. The world has changed considerably since CATs were started in 2007. The emergence and growth of social media over the last five to ten years (Twitter only began in 2006) has had a big impact on public engagement and consultation, enabling far more people to take part in meaningful dialogues in a timely and open way.
12. The amount of communication and engagement taking place online has risen rapidly. More and more residents are using the Council's Facebook (over 3000 followers) and Twitter (nearly 3000 followers) accounts for functions associated with CAT Meetings e.g. to keep up to date with Council initiatives, get issues resolved and find out what is happening across the Borough.
13. Social Media is also growing as an effective tool in consulting with young people. For example, just under 23,000 people found out about the recent Park Lane voting exercise mainly via young people sharing the information among their friends on Facebook. Of these, just under 1000 voted online for their favourite design.

Residents' views on CATs

14. The results of the 2013 Residents' Survey showed that 90% of our residents had never attended a CAT meeting. Of the 10% that had been to a meeting, most only went to one if there was something on the agenda they found interesting.
15. Residents were asked about the types of agenda item that would make them attend a CAT meeting. The majority stated that they would only be interested in attending if there was an issue that directly impacted them e.g. plans for a large development locally or the closing down of a service e.g. doctor's surgery. Far fewer, were interested in hearing about the work of the Council or our partners e.g. Police.

The need for a review

16. In light of the Residents' Survey results, it was agreed at the 6 January 2014 meeting of the Executive, that a review of Community Action Teams would take place, with a report being presented at a future meeting of the Executive.

Review methodology

17. Evidence from the 2013 Residents' Survey was supported by separate group discussions with all the CAT Officers and CAT Chairmen. This was followed by discussions with the Executive Leader, Deputy Leader as well as the Leader and Deputy Leader of the opposition.
18. During these discussions, there was a look back at previous meetings with an initial focus on successful ones, particularly those where there was a high attendance and good level of engagement. Participants discussed what it was about them that worked and meant they were engaging to residents.
19. This led on to discussions about meetings that were poorly attended with little participation. Talks then focused on the factors that contributed to the relative lack of success of these meetings.

20. Finally, participants talked about the ways that CATs could be improved in the future so that they were more engaging to residents.
21. In addition to Councillors and officers, the Police fed into the process by providing their opinion on how effective CATs were as an engagement tool.
22. The feedback that was gained from these discussions forms the basis of the recommendations made in the review.

Results of the Review

What works?

23. The review found that a number of meetings had been successful, judged by the numbers of people attending and getting involved during and after the meetings. These meetings tended to be focused on a 'hot topic' e.g. the recent Newlands Farm Planning Application, taking place at a 'crunch time' and the Locks Road Surgery closure consultation.
24. The 'walk about' time when residents have a chance to talk directly to Councillors and Officers at the end of meetings was also considered a positive aspect of the meetings.
25. The Leader's annual summer presentations have regularly proved to be a popular topic with residents, particularly the question and answer session that follows the presentation.
26. The Police felt that the meetings were a valuable tool for community engagement and complemented their beat surgeries. However, they stated that they could reduce in frequency.

What should change?

27. Whilst there were some positives, the overall feedback focused on the need to change CATs. The following were the main themes that emerged from discussions:
 - Too many CAT agenda items are not engaging to residents.
 - The set timings of meetings (booked a year in advance) means that many engaging local issues are not included on CAT agendas because they don't coincide with when CAT meetings take place.
 - The content of CAT meetings often duplicates information given in other local meetings e.g. residents' associations, making them less attractive to potential attendees.
 - The quality of Chairmanship of CAT meetings is inconsistent.
 - The amount of CAT Officer's time spent on both processing community funding bids and organising agenda items stops them from getting out and engaging with residents face-to-face.

- The current format of the meetings needs to be more flexible. Some topics don't benefit from the traditional model of presenting and chairing of meetings.
28. As well as the main themes identified above, other comments such as the need to reduce the size of some of the CAT areas and share the Chairmanship of meetings amongst more Councillors were mentioned by some of the participants. The possibility of supporting local priority setting by residents and allocating funding towards this was also raised.
29. Overall, there was a belief that CATs were not always working in their current format. From experience, everyone agreed that the agenda was critical to the success of a CAT Meeting, and that it should be the emergence of an issue that residents feel strongly about that drives the need for a meeting, as opposed to the current format where the meeting drives the need to find an agenda item to fill it.
30. This is supported by the Residents' Survey results, where respondents said that the most important agenda topics were issues that impacted on them and their local area directly. "There are plans for a large development near my home" (38%) and "a service in my community is changing or closing" e.g. local surgery closing (31%) were the two most motivating topics to inspire residents to attend a CAT meeting.

What next?

31. Taking into account the results of the feedback from the Residents' Survey, the views of Officers and Councillors it is clear that a number of changes need to be made to CATs. The following proposals aim to focus resources towards more effective engagement with residents on issues that matter to them.

Place a greater focus on engaging with smaller communities on issues that matter to them locally

32. In order to ensure that meetings are of relevance to local communities, we should focus on geographically smaller areas. To support this, the five current CAT areas should be increased to the following 10 neighbourhood areas across the Borough:
- Crofton
 - Fareham East and Wallington
 - Fareham North, North-West and Funtley
 - Fareham South
 - Locks Heath and Titchfield Common
 - Sarisbury and Park Gate
 - Portchester
 - Fareham West and Titchfield
 - Warsash
 - Whiteley



A map showing the proposed CAT areas

Replace the majority of the regular CAT meetings with meetings that only take place when there is a 'hot topic' at a 'crunch time'.

33. This is the current arrangement in place for Special CAT meetings. A good example of how engaging for residents these meetings are is the fact that more than 400 people attended the two recent CAT meetings about the Newlands planning application.

Still have a summer meeting in each of the ten areas

34. In order to be kept up to date with developments in the Borough, and offer residents an opportunity to quiz the Leader, each area should play host to their own summer meeting every other year. There would be meetings in 5 areas one year and in the other 5 areas the following year.

Make the meetings more focused, with a single main agenda item.

35. Residents are motivated to attend meetings by an agenda topic that is of interest to them, not by hearing about the work of the Council or our partners. A single agenda item also allows more time to be spent on the agenda item that residents care about.

The most appropriate Chairman will be nominated on a meeting by meeting basis

36. In order to help ensure the smooth running of meetings, it would be beneficial to appoint an experienced chairman with detailed knowledge of the topic being discussed. For example, if the agenda item relates to a specific service area, then it would be beneficial to have the Executive Member whose portfolio it falls within to act as Chairman. Alternatively, it might be more appropriate for a Ward Councillor to Chair. This would be done on a meeting by meeting basis with the Executive Leader having responsibility for nominating a Chairman.

Consider which method of public engagement to use depending on the issue e.g. public meeting or exhibition.

37. Different topics may benefit from different approaches to engaging with residents. For example, discussing plans for a large development may benefit from having a public exhibition or combination of meeting and exhibition. By adopting a more flexible approach on a topic by topic basis, we should be able to engage more effectively with residents.

Combine the 5 CAT Officer roles into a single Engagement Officer role

38. The five hours per week currently allocated to each of the five CAT Officers could be combined into a part time (25hrs per week) post. The officer would focus on arranging and actively promoting the meetings, supporting Members and engaging with local residents and organisations on 'hot topics' that might require a meeting. They will also get out across the Borough, with Councillors as appropriate, to engage face-to-face with residents with the aim of getting them involved in consultations and engagement events.
39. The processing of Community Funding bids i.e. checking applications, getting comments and writing reports could be transferred to the Customer Services Manager. The majority of the face-to-face promotion of the fund amongst local community groups, charities and residents could be carried out by officers from the Leisure and Community team, as they have most direct contact with potential applicants. The Engagement Officer could also promote the fund face-to-face when appropriate.

Budgets

40. CATs currently falls within the Neighbourhood Working Budget. The employment cost for CATs in 2014/15 is £21,900. The cost for the new proposals would be £21,900 per annum, so no additional budget would be required.
41. There would be minor redundancy costs associated with the recommended changes and these can be covered within existing budgets.

What Next

42. If the above changes are adopted then it is recommended that the changes are introduced from the end of this calendar year. Currently, there are only the regular autumn meetings booked. In addition to this, there is likely to be demand for ad hoc public meetings linked to issues as they crop up e.g. high profile planning applications. Existing CAT Chairmen would continue to chair any ad hoc meetings until the end of this municipal year.
43. Recruitment for the Engagement Officer post would commence in the New Year, with the aim of having an officer in post by the end of February.

Conclusion

44. The engagement landscape has changed in recent years and our approach to engaging with residents needs to reflect this. The review of CATs takes into account the views of a broad range of Councillors, officers and young people.
45. It emerged from the review that whilst there have been examples of effective

engagement through CATs, its limitation as a tool for building an effective dialogue with residents was clear. A new approach is needed which focuses more on going out directly to our residents and talking about the issues that matter to them. It is hoped that the proposals in this report will facilitate this change.

Reference Papers:

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