

Angus Council

Better Community Engagement – Initial Evaluation Report

1. Background

In August 2007 the Council's Chief Officer Management Team approved a proposal to take forward a programme of training in community engagement which had the following objectives:

- building an appreciation of the need for better community engagement across the public sector
- recognising existing good practice in public engagement with Angus Council and partner agencies
- identifying areas for development to achieve better community engagement
- supporting the development of collaborative action plans designed to achieve more effective community engagement

The programme was to run from autumn 2007 and cater for up to 150 participants, drawn from all community planning partners. The programme comprised a number of components:

- a pre-training audit of participants' existing community engagement involvements, experience and skills
- a one day training event to explore the nature of effective community engagement practice and how it could be affected through collaboration
- a period in which participants were expected to apply their learning and practice supported by programme materials
- a half day recall event to evaluate the progress and plan for further action

The programme was constructed using the National curriculum development framework for community engagement – Better Community Engagement, a framework for learning (Community Scotland, January 2007). It also drew on the National Standards for Community Engagement (Community Scotland, 2003).

Funding to support initial programme development was secured through a Communities Scotland training and development fund. This made it possible to secure support from the University of Dundee.

2. Progress

- 2.1 In Autumn 2007 a team of trainers was recruited to deliver the programme. This team included representatives from Angus Council's Community Learning and Development Service, Angus Council's Employee Development Team, the Community Planning Team, Volunteer Centre Angus and the Web Project.

This team worked in close collaboration with the University of Dundee to develop and test materials. Specifically, the University prepared initial drafts which were then refined through dialogue with the delivery team.

- 2.2 Eight courses have now been completed with a total of 83 participants. The majority of these participants came from Council departments, although there has been some involvement from Tayside Police and the Angus Community Health Partnership.

To date there has been no uptake from the voluntary sector or from other community planning partners, although Tayside Fire and Rescue Service have expressed interest in any future runs of the course. Angus Community Health Partnership has also expressed interest in further involvement with the programme. There has been dialogue with two key voluntary sector agencies to try and find a way of packaging the learning activity in forms which would be attractive to voluntary sector colleagues. Future runs of the course will seek to be more effective in targeting this particular sector.

- 2.3 There is a short waiting list of approximately 15 Council staff who were unable to take part in programmes run to date. Together with the expression of interest from community planning partners this has contributed to a decision to run two further programmes before the end of 2008.

3. Evaluations

3.1 Evaluation Process –

There have been three elements to the evaluation process:

- all participants were asked to provide some early feedback at the end of their first day of the training programme. This was done in a variety of ways, but essentially involved asking participants to identify positive and negative aspects of their day's learning experience
- all participants who attended the follow-up sessions were invited to complete extended evaluation forms
- the group of trainers, together with other key individuals who had been involved in planning the programme, provided feedback and considered the evaluation returns made by participants

3.2 Findings

3.2.1 Participants expectations –

The majority of participants completing evaluation questionnaires indicated that their expectations for the programme had been met or exceeded. There was a small number of people who felt unable to respond to this question directly, as they had arrived at the programme with no clear expectations.

Within responses to this question, a number of specific points were made which are worthy of note:

- the lack of knowledge which some people had of community planning processes and the Community Plan itself
- the low or unclear expectations that some people had of the programme. This appeared to derive from a limited knowledge or understanding of community engagement and how it might be relevant to them
- a fairly strong endorsement of the training process, particularly the level of dialogue which was embedded within the learning activity
- some conflicting information in relation to the balance between theory and practice within the programme. Some people felt that the programme had not been sufficiently practical, while others indicated that discussion had allowed them to hear a great deal about the practice of community engagement as its currently being taken forward by colleagues in Angus.

- a number of colleagues expressed general concern about the process of community engagement and the extent to which it can raise expectations within communities that cannot be met

3.2.2 **Relevance of the Programme**

Almost all participants on the programme considered the course to be relevant to them and their work.

A number of important points were noted:

- the sharing and networking that took place within the course were highly valued
- people indicated that their understanding of community engagement and its relevance to their work had increased
- a number of people commented on the community engagement standards as a useful tool and thought that they should be more widely known, understood and applied
- there was positive comment on the linking of theory and practice within the programme and the extent to which the course had helped people to focus their minds on community engagement issues

3.2.3 **Unhelpful elements of the course.**

There were no elements of the course that people identified as unhelpful. However, a significant minority of people indicated that the pre-course reading was too long and complex. For some this was a barrier to their initial engagement with the programme.

3.2.4 **Impact of the programme**

Participants were asked to comment on the extent to which the programme had impacted upon their practice in relation to community engagement. Given that they were being asked to respond to this question immediately on completion of the programme, it was inevitable that impact would be limited. However, the overall tone for responses was that participants had either intentions or firm commitments to take action in the future.

Specific comment was made in relation to the National Standards for Community Engagement, with a number of people indicating that they would make use of these standards, particularly in planning for community engagement activity.

Some people indicated that they would look to build on the connections and networks that they had made through the training.

A small number of people indicated that the training would have no impact and they would not be doing anything differently as a result of their involvement. Their comments were not sufficiently detailed to allow a judgement to be made on whether this was because they felt they were already sound community engagement practitioners, because community engagement wasn't relevant to their jobs or because they simply had no intention to change.

Within responses to this question there were some interesting comments on community planning and people's perceptions of it. Specifically, there was still some sense in which people regarded community planning as other people's business and not their own.

3.2.5 **Underpinning Skills** –

The ‘Better Community Engagement’ curriculum framework comprises a number of foundation elements for community engagement and a set of underpinning skills. At two points in the course, participants were asked to comment on their relationship to the foundation elements. They were asked to complete a pre-course questionnaire and also to provide reflective comment at the end of the training programme. The evaluation form also invited participants to comment on their levels of confidence in relation to the set of underpinning skills.

However, there are strong links to the Council’s Management Competence Framework, which is firmly embedded in continuing professional development practice.

Overall responses here were positive with the majority of participants indicating that they were either very confident or fairly confident in relation to the communication skills, process skills and the planning and evaluation skills described. That said, there were a number of areas where levels of confidence were significantly lower. They were:

- analysis and interpretation of data
- analysis and interpretation of policy
- financial planning and reporting

There is no source of data available within the Council which would allow comparison between these responses and more general evaluations of core communication, process and planning and evaluation skills. However, there are strong links to the Council’s Management Competence Framework, which is firmly embedded in APD practice.

3.2.6 **Foundations Elements**

As indicated above, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which the foundations elements for better community engagement were relevant to their job and to comment on why they had arrived at this conclusion. They were also asked to highlight any further support that they might welcome in relation to each of the elements.

Enabling communities to access resources and deliver services

Overwhelmingly people thought that this element was relevant to their jobs. Their comments indicated different views on why this was the case.

Comments generally reflected a customer facing view, with people concerned to know what individuals in communities wanted and what customers thought about existing services. The overall tone of responses related primarily to access to services, rather than access to resources which would enable people to deliver services for themselves.

This may point to some lack of understanding of the element and specifically to the area of capacity building practice.

Working in partnership with agencies, organisations in communities

Overwhelmingly participants thought that this element was relevant to their jobs. For many, the element was taken as a given and seen as part of normal business.

Some people were clearly vision driven, with a focus on developing services which delivered shared outcomes; others had a much more pragmatic view.

Comments did not reveal any strong sense of communities as partners and not all comments reflected the connection to wider policy agendas, which might extend beyond the immediate focus of respondents' daily business.

Involving communities in planning services

Overwhelmingly, people judged this element to be relevant.

There were a number of suggestions made on how staff might be supported to take this element forward. These included:

- access to contacts and networks of people who had skills in the area of community engagement
- practical support from people with expertise to take forward community engagement initiatives
- access to people who could take forward community engagement activities and initiatives on their behalf

For some people, this element was seen to be about managing expectations in communities, securing support for existing priorities and making effective use of resources. The extent to which people indicated that this element was about achieving shared vision and goals were more limited.

Addressing conflicts and supporting change

This element was regarded as relevant by most people.

Comments recognised that communities are not homogeneous and that conflict is inevitable. Some people felt that conflict was necessary for progress and change.

A significant number of participants saw managing conflicts in communities as problematic and identified a need for support in relation to the practical skills involved. This request for further support in relation to skills is not entirely consistent with the responses to the skills audit and requires further exploration.

Using participatory evaluation

Almost all participants indicated that this was relevant to their job, although comments suggested variable levels of understanding.

There was a strong focus on, and support for, the need to evaluate but no strong sense of understanding of participatory approaches and of communities as co-evaluators.

It was noticeable that no support needs were identified.

Being a leader and encouraging leadership

Almost all participants identified this element as relevant.

Comments reflected mixed understandings of the concept of leadership. Some participants were very clear on their role in leading and supporting others, while others felt that the responsibility for leadership lay elsewhere and primarily with more senior colleagues.

There was very little comment or clarity on developing and supporting leadership within communities and community organisations.

Supporting people and organisations to learn together

Almost all participants felt that this element was relevant.

There was recognition of the need for interagency training in developing capacity and for making effective use of capacity across partnerships, but little about supporting communities to develop their capacity to participate.

3.3 Future Action

Participants were asked to suggest what future action should be taken to continue the development of better community engagement practice across the community planning partnership. Responses included:

Support

- embedding community engagement within induction programmes for staff across the partnership
- tailoring future training interventions towards the job roles of participants and the level of involvement they might expect to have in community engagement activities
- targeting specific members of staff within organisation
- establishing effective networking arrangements to sustain dialogue and development
- establishing an internet site with access to community engagement resources
- undertaking further work to ensure staff buy-in
- further training input on the practicalities of community engagement, with a particular focus on diversity of approaches
- developing strategies for sharing information and best practice
- developing a tool kit of ideas and approaches
- preparing a directory of people with skills in community engagement who could act as consultants/facilitators for others
- undertaking further work to raise awareness of the National Standards for Community Engagement

Practicality

- making effective use of public engagement events as a vehicle for disseminating information to communities
- making more effective use of community engagement standards, particularly when working with partner organisations
- giving active recognition to informal methods of engagement

Strategy

- developing organisational strategy on the 'how and when' of community engagement
- establishing a culture of community engagement and resourcing accordingly
- sharing the outcomes of community engagement across the partnership

- increasing resources to undertake effective community engagement
- securing buy-in at the most senior levels of the partnership, with people of influence acting as champions
- clarifying the role of the Community Planning Team within the context of community engagement
- ensuring that community engagement is conducted in a “non party political” way

4. Good Practice in Community Engagement

The programme design offered participants an opportunity to share existing community engagement practice with each other and across services. This element of the process clearly confirmed that there is a significant amount of community engagement practice underway, some of which is being conducted to a very high standard and involves significant levels of innovation.

Some of the examples given were:

- extensive consultation and dialogue with individuals and groups who used the Webster’s Theatre to develop the design brief for the theatre upgrade. The diversity of interests were taken on board and it was possible to develop proposals which met the needs and interests of the majority of users.
- Trading Standards work closely with the business community and Tayside Police on matters relating to age restricted goods. This work included the use of questionnaires to create a point of dialogue with local business and members of the public.
- The Roads Department use a variety of methods to inform the public about proposals that will impact on them. These include individual letters, copy in newspapers and notices on lamp posts in affected areas.
- A number of partners use responses to letters of complaint to create a broader dialogue with individuals and develop services
- Regular attendance by Council Officers at meetings of local community groups, to provide information in response to enquiries and to participate in a wide dialogue
- Use of public surveys to gather feedback on perceptions of service
- Use of public meetings and focus groups as vehicles for gathering comment from stakeholders including members of the community
- Facilitating the operation of a sports forum which enables those involved in the voluntary sector to have influence over sports development activities
- Using interactive computer based programmes to gather feedback from participants in ways which are objective. Examples given included Viewpoint which has been used by Social Work and Health to gather feedback from children who are looked after
- Involving service providers and service users in working groups designed to bring about change and improvement
- Using open space technology to consult with service users. A particular example of this came from the mental health field, where a group of mental health service users became trained as facilitators of open space events. They subsequently facilitated consultative events for their fellow service users.
- Using partnership groupings such as Integrated Community Schools Partnerships as an arena for collaborative planning and delivery with partner agencies, including voluntary groups
- Using electronic voting systems to gain immediate feedback on issues and use this as the basis for further dialogue with communities

- Holding specific meetings with representatives from equalities groups to help identify their needs and secure their involvement in planning for improvement
- Supporting the development of tenants' and residents' groups as vehicles through which a range of partners could engage in dialogue with people in local communities
- Using church networks as a means of communicating information and securing contact and engagement with difficult to reach groups
- Using artists (including cartoonists) within the context of community appraisal work to present issues raised by community members in a visual way, as the basis for further discussion and action planning
- Using peer researchers in primary schools to identify needs in relation to mental health and wellbeing
- Establishing reference forums which place participants and service users at the centre and offer a vehicle for gathering feedback about a range of issues
- Publishing specific contact names to encourage user groups to make contact and express opinions
- The use of video/diary rooms within the context of public events to provide members of the community with an opportunity to express opinions in a reasonably confidential way
- The conduct of a systematic programme of community appraisals to identify issues and needs within communities as perceived by those communities.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 The Better Community Engagement programme has been reasonably successful in engaging managers within Angus Council in learning activity relating to community engagement. It has been less successful in engaging staff from partner agencies and has not succeeded at all in securing the active involvement of the voluntary sector. There is no clear information available on the reason for this lack of engagement and further efforts are required to provide support to voluntary and community sector partners agencies.
- 5.2 The majority of participants on the programme have a growing appreciation of the purpose and need for better community engagement across the public sector. They recognise community engagement as an important element of their job and one in which they are seeking to improve.
- 5.3 Participants in the programme self report their skills in relation to community engagement at a reasonably high level. The areas in which they are less confident are addressed by Angus Council's existing employee development programme.
- 5.4 There is a significant volume and variety of community engagement practice already underway in Angus. Some of this is of an interesting and innovative nature.
- 5.5 The better community engagement programme was successful in providing an opportunity for participants to recognise and share good practice in public engagement, within the context of their particular course or group. There is still a need to find effective means for disseminating this practice more widely across the Council and the Community Planning Partnership and promoting inter-disciplinary practice.
- 5.6 While knowledge and appreciation of community engagement practice has grown as a result of the programme, it is clear that there are still differing understandings of some key elements of the process. Specifically the capacity building dimension of community engagement practice is not fully understood. This may lead to a lack of investment in supporting communities' capacity to participate, with a resulting impact on the quality of

engagement and dialogue which takes place.

- 5.7 While the majority of participants report themselves as being committed to the development of better community engagement, not all are fully convinced that the Council and its partners have embedded community engagement in their planning and resource allocation.
- 5.8 If the full benefit of the better community engagement programme is to be derived, it is important that the Authority and its partners put effective ongoing support arrangements in place. These could include a mix of:
- resources to support community engagement practice
 - formal community engagement training
 - networking activities to support effective collaboration across the partnership
 - access to specialist expertise to support some community engagement activities.

6. Recommendations

A further programme of learning activity should be designed and delivered, which specifically targets voluntary and community sector activities

Reference should be made to community engagement in key organisational development activities within the Council and partner agencies. Specifically the Council's induction programmes should reinforce the importance of community engagement and programmes being designed as a follow up to the organisational and contextual knowledge programme should also make appropriate reference to community engagement

A programme of networking opportunities should be established, which provides practitioners with the opportunity to share good practice and explore methodology.

A section should be created within the community planning website which routes people towards key resources which would support effective community engagement practice

The planned audit of community engagement practice should increasingly focus on impact and be used as another vehicle for identifying information about further learning and support needs. It should also act as a key vehicle for gathering data on improvement in community engagement practice across the partnership.

Further efforts should be made to ensure that the National Standards for Community Engagement are widely disseminated and understood across the community planning partnership.

The Community Learning and Development Service and Community Planning Teams should act as initial points of contact for colleagues seeking advice and support in planning and delivering community engagement activities.

Appendix A

How do you rate yourself in relation to the core skills relevant to community engagement?

Communications skills	Very Confident	Fairly Confident	Not very Confident	Not at all Confident
Verbal presentation (in plain English)	19	31	2	
Written presentation (in plain English)	21	34		
Use of a variety of media including information and communication technology	14	28	10	
Listening	26	26		
Feedback	13	32	4	
Explanation	14	35	3	
Empathy	25	24	2	
Process Skills				
Motivation	18	31	3	
Advocacy	10	37	5	
Facilitation	18	33	1	
Empowerment	14	30	5	
Enabling	13	36	3	
Negotiation	16	39	3	
Mediation	11	28	8	
Support	22	29	1	
Leadership	17	31	3	
Training	14	32	6	
Mentoring	9	25	7	
Political Awareness and Judgement	7	28	17	
Planning and Evaluation Skills				
Envisioning outcomes	8	37	4	
Investigation	14	31	2	
Appraisal	10	39	3	
Assessment	13	37	2	
Monitoring	6	44	2	
Analysis and interpretation of data	8	32	10	
Analysis and interpretation of policy	7	34	11	
Reflection	16	33	3	
Prioritising	12	36	5	
Financial planning and reporting	8	28	15	1



**Appendix B
Angus Community Planning Partnership**

Better Community Engagement Training

Please complete this evaluation form and leave it with one of the tutors at the end of the training session.

Date of Training:

Location: Angus House, Forfar

1. Have your expectations for the training been met? (please tick)

Yes

No

Comments

There were:

2. To what extent has the training helped you to gain a better understanding of community engagement and its relevance to your area of practice?
(please circle)

Helped 1 2 3 4 5 Not helped

3 Which aspect/s of the training did you find most relevant?

4 . Which aspect/s of the training did you find least relevant or useful?

Please comment below

5 Will you do anything differently as a result of this course?

Please comment below

6 How do you rate yourself in relation to the core skills relevant to community engagement?

Communications skills	Very Confident	Fairly Confident	Not very Confident	Not at all Confident
Verbal presentation (in plain				

English)				
Written presentation (in plain English)				
Use of a variety of media including information and communication technology				
Listening				
Feedback				
Explanation				
Empathy				
Process Skills				
Motivation				
Advocacy				
Facilitation				
Empowerment				
Enabling				
Negotiation				
Mediation				
Support				
Leadership				
Training				
Mentoring				
Political Awareness and Judgement				
Planning and Evaluation Skills				
Envisioning outcomes				
Investigation				
Appraisal				
Assessment				
Monitoring				
Analysis and interpretation of data				
Analysis and interpretation of policy				
Reflection				
Prioritising				
Financial planning and reporting				

7. Please reconsider the following Elements of Better Community Engagement and their relevance to your practice

Foundation Element	Relevant (Please tick)	Not Relevant (Please tick)	Why to you say this?	What further training/support (if any) would help you to achieve better community engagement?
Enabling communities to access resources and deliver services				
Working in partnership with agencies, organisations and communities				
Involving communities in planning services				
Negotiating with communities and partners				
Addressing conflicts and supporting change				

Using participatory evaluation				
Being a leader and encouraging leadership				
Supporting people and organisations to learn together				

8. Would you recommend this course to others?

Yes

No

Please comment below

9. Are you interested in gaining academic accreditation for your training?

Yes

No

Please comment below

Thank you for completing this evaluation.

Name: _____

Email: _____