Appendix 2: The Local Area Working Public Consultation

Background

The council carried out a public consultation the framework for Local Area Working at the beginning of 2008. (The consultation was managed alongside the consultation on the draft Community Support Plan 2008 to 2010.)

A range of consultation methods were used to seek the views of a wide audience of citizens and partner organisations. These included consultation with:

- Briefings with staff across council departments with an emphasis on the Community Services unit
- Meetings with the management committees of council community centres
- Facilitated meetings with representative of the community, voluntary and statutory sectors
- Facilitated public meetings across the city for which we publicised open invitations
- Questionnaire surveys to 2,000 households
- An online questionnaire on the council website

Consultation format

The consultation on the proposed council framework for local area working focussed on four main questions:

1. Should local area working be a priority for the council?
2. What are the local priorities for Belfast?
3. How can the council best support ongoing local engagement?
4. What is the best way to get individual citizens involved in influencing the council's work?

The meeting and briefing sessions were well attended. We received 156 completed questionnaires relating to Local Area Working and nine organisational responses from:

- Belfast Community Sports Development Network
- Voluntary Services Bureau
- Belfast Area Partnerships
- East Belfast Community Development Agency
- Health Action Zone
- Ni Volunteer Development Agency
- West Belfast Partnership Board
- Rainbow Project
- Belfast Civic Trust/Arthur Acheson

Findings

We received a range of suggestions and detail on the concept of Local Area Working. Below we've summarised many of the recurring themes and details particularly important issues that respondents have identified.

General comments

   i. Overall, the concept of Local Area Working was greatly welcomed.
  ii. There was a general view that a Local Area Working approach for the council made sense as needs vary across the city.
 iii. It was acknowledged that it fits well with government proposals for Community Planning.

  iv. However, a number of reservations were highlighted:

  - That the important focus on **citywide issues** is not lost during the pursuit of local priorities.
  - That we involve communities and statutory agencies in **planning the 'City Place' boundaries** (such partners being aware of influential local strategic matters).
  - That we **avail of local knowledge and the local work** already delivered through neighbourhood processes such as Neighbourhood Renewal.
  - That we deal sensitively with **interface areas**.
  - That Local Area Working (and the wider engagement of citizens) is carried out in isolation of our statutory, voluntary and community partners.

   v. There were suggestions that we consider (where appropriate) aligning with existing local structures/boundaries, adjusting where necessary to ensure the opportunity for inclusion of all citizens. This was driven by concerns that Local Area Working might risk duplicating infrastructures or add further layers to already complex local structures. These included:

  o NIHE network areas
  o Community Safety Partnerships
  o Neighbourhood Renewal areas
  o Belfast Area Partnerships
  o Community Empowerment Partnerships (CEPs)
  o Community Sports fora

  vi. It was suggested that, in defining City Places, we work with statutory and non-statutory partners.
 vii. It was also suggested that we examine **neighbourhood management policies** in England with a view to identifying any lessons to be learned.
viii. There was a view put forward that Local Area Working could be described in terms of "Belfast - City of Villages", with communities defining the villages and with each village having a local "mayors" and access to local funding pots (community chests) to address issues of concern.

In defining Local Area Working and City Places Council will have to consider the implications of the Review of Public Administration.

It was generally viewed that whilst many issues would be seen as a priority for local areas working across the board (such as Community Safety and Good Relations), approaches to addressing these may differ between communities and local area working will allow for this. It was also generally acknowledged that different communities will have different priority issues to be addressed at local level. Council should always adopt a "fair" approach in service provision and should ensure accountability, accessibility and value for money.

It would make life easier for residents to engage with Council if they had a "point of contact" who could actually make decisions and get things done as well as provide useful information/guidance - it was suggested that each "city place" should have access to a local officer who could be the link with Council (much like the NIHE local officer role).

It was also highlighted that Council should maximise its "civic leadership" role and link "city places" with other key agencies with a remit for services/provision/issues, perhaps through this "local officer" who would act as an advocate/signposter. This was in response to difficulties experienced by local people in addressing the wide range of agencies responsible for issues of concern. Some even suggested a "one stop shop" approach involving other agencies.

Council, and others, should always feed back to communities etc. on actions taken/not taken in response to issues raised. This will help improve the relationship and understanding between Council and the local community and prevent the "them and us" perception developing. Open communication will also ensure that people have realistic expectations of what can and cannot be done by Council, and others.

Some suggested disseminating simple pamphlets with a consistent message/information, in plain English, with no jargon.

Some indicated that existing structures - schools, health centres, churches, etc. are an excellent way of reaching the community - i.e. going where people go. Posters displayed in these areas were also suggested.

City Matters was also cited as an excellent communication tool and is generally well received by citizens.

It was also highlighted that consideration should be given to adopting out of hours methods for engaging people within the community.

A number of organisations provided detailed written responses regarding the implementation of SNAP. Key issues are highlighted as follows:-

Health Action Zone

The HAZ supports the Council's plans to deliver services more effectively and to engage more easily with communities. Need to ensure the boundaries relate to existing structures in place e.g. CEP, NIHE, and NR.

Council needs to be clear to citizens re the benefits of participating in the programme or there is a real risk that it is seen as just another initiative.

A Council policy and approach to NR would be most welcome. Council should seek to maximise coherence with NR when establishing new ways of working.

Belfast Community Sports Development Unit

The BCSDU is completely supportive of the idea and practice of Local Area Working.

Council, through its Local Area Working, links to those already established Sports Forum's in the North, South, East, West and Greater Shankill and recognises their key role in relation to identifying local need.

Local Area Working is paramount but it is important that it links to broader strategies.

Need to recognise and recognise the level of consultation that has gone into the NR Action Plans.

Community Sports is a way of establishing closer relationships with the citizen at a local level.

Belfast Area Partnerships

Need to consider how to balance a universal and generic service/structure with more targeted interventions to address poverty, disadvantage, social inclusion from a system that is currently designed only to meet the Council's needs.

Will this be a prototype for the eventual establishment of a new Community Planning responsibility?

It would be simpler and more transparent to confirm from the outset that LAW is part of an evolutionary process in the Council preparing itself to assume slightly enhanced powers from RPA – and accordingly, seeking to establish the best fit of sub-city governance infrastructure to ready for Community Planning.

The Council should use LAW to seek to re-align the sub-city governance of Belfast and not just use it to focus on its own service delivery and a bi-lateral citizen engagement.

BCC should discuss with the APB's and NRP's how to establish a re-aligned governance for the city which meets the Councils Improvement Agenda; negotiate with DSD and BRO to align NRP's to the Cityplaces and contract the Belfast Area Partnerships to facilitate an overall citywide governance infrastructure alignment in the best interests of all.

West Belfast Partnership Board

- Stress the need to skew resources into areas of greatest need.
- Terminology is confusing – is LAW the same as SNAP.
- How will City Places complement NR? NRP's could serve as a useful starting place for the Council.

- Would welcome the creation of a detailed knowledge base which would be available to the public.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, consultation feedback indicates that Local Area Working makes sense as long as:

- Council works with others in the statutory, community, voluntary sector in terms of identifying boundaries and developing and sustaining appropriate methods of engagement.
- The identification of city places builds on existing structures and does not create new/more structures/layers
- Inclusion and fairness are adopted as underlying principles
- The implications of the Review of Public Administration are considered and incorporated
- A range of engagement and communication methods are maintained on an ongoing basis and fit the nature of the issues considered and the needs of the various target groups. Key methods highlighted included better contact with Councillors, good use of technology, establishment of local points of contact, use of City Matters, using existing networks, schools, churches, citizens panels, call centres, etc.
- Council adopts a role as civic leader and facilitates contact across other public bodies/decision makers and the wider community and voluntary sector

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