

WINCHESTER TOWN FORUM

9 March 2016

REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INFORMAL GROUP

Contact: Councillor Hutchison, Chairman of Community Engagement Informal Group
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RECENT REFERENCES:

WTF226 - Community Engagement: Spreading the word – Community Groups, Neighbourhood noticeboards and newsletters – 23 September 2015.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- Winchester Town Forum established an Informal Group in September 2015 to consider matters relating to community engagement within the Town area.
- The Group considered the role of the Town Forum and how effective it is in engaging with the residents of the City area, in this it was helped by contributions from officers and representatives from local organisations.
- The Group focused on engagement activities and mechanisms that are working well and those that are less effective.
- The Group identified a number of important complex issues that need to be considered if the Town Forum is to be effective and respond to a wide variety of concerns important to the residents of the City. Within the limited time available it was not possible to carry out the in depth work required to address these; they have been identified and require time and resources to be investigated further.

- A number of low-level actions have been identified, along with a series of more complicated issues that have not been possible to consider fully within the limited timescale available to the Group. It is for the Town Forum to recommend which, if any, of these issues should be investigated in more depth by members of the Town Forum after the May election.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That Members of the Town Forum contribute to the forthcoming the Governance and Community Engagement Reviews.
2. That community plans developed within the Town area are in future presented to the Town Forum for comment, and endorsement.
3. That the Town Forum encourages the establishment of a Network of Community Associations to provide support to Associations across the Town Forum area.
4. That the involvement of communities, through Friends' Groups and/or other mechanisms, are welcomed as partners in improving and maintaining open spaces, with financial assistance if required, and that support for establishing groups should be considered where appropriate and possible.
5. That Members of the Town Forum will be put on the BID mailing list.
6. That the Town Forum nominates a representative(s) to attend BID meetings and the BID is asked to accept them as a member of the BID Board.
7. That the Town Forum seeks to be involved in the very early stages of all Major Developments (commercial and public facilities and housing developments of more than 10 homes) or public space improvements when concepts are being considered and Briefs drawn up and requests that consultation/engagement should not be left until after a concept or application has been worked up in detail.
8. That the Town Forum establishes a Working Group at its first meeting after the May elections to carry forward the work started by the Group and the Working Group should investigate the more substantial issues set out in paragraph 5.2 of the Report.

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DETAIL:

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Winchester Town Forum decided on 23 September 2015 to set up a cross party Informal Group to consider matters relating to community engagement within the Town area.
- 1.2. The Group has now concluded its work, with this report setting out its key findings and conclusions.

2. Background to the Study

- 2.1. At its meeting on 10 June 2015, the Forum requested that the work programme for future meetings include an item on the subject of *Promotion of community engagement*. The debate that followed prompted the Forum to establish an Informal Working Group to consider the subject in more detail.
- 2.2. Councillors E Berry, J Berry, Hutchison, Maynard and Osborne were appointed to the Group and Councillor Hutchison agreed to chair the Group. Councillors Maynard and Osborne were unable to attend daytime meetings and although one meeting was scheduled for an evening they did not participate in the work of the Group and Council Weir (Chair of the Forum) joined the Group in their place.
- 2.3. The Group agreed Terms of Reference with the following purpose:
 - a) To review which mechanisms for engagement currently work well in Winchester and which do not.
 - b) To consider the role that the Town Forum and Forum members should play in community engagement.
 - c) To identify how best to engage people in areas where no clearly defined "community" exists.
 - d) To focus on the mechanisms and process by which we engage, not the subject matter which we engage about.
 - e) To make recommendations to the Town Forum and present options for next steps.

The full Terms of Reference are shown at Appendix 1.

2.4. The Group met on four occasions during January and February 2016 to explore its terms of reference, take evidence on the issues identified and review findings. Members felt that it was important to report back to the Forum ahead of the May 2016 elections to provide a hand over to a new Town Forum. Within the time available it was not possible to cover all the issues raised in the initial Terms of Reference, but these remain as important issues to be considered in the next phase of the work.

2.5. The Group has been supported by Steve Lincoln, Community Planning Manager, and Elliot Prior, also from the New Homes Delivery Team.

3. Investigations

3.1. The Group agreed to invite input from several internal and external witnesses.

a) To discuss the general effectiveness of community engagement in the Winchester Town area, Susan Croker and Steve Tilbury were invited to give an Officer perspective.

b) External representatives were invited to discuss the specific role that their organisation plays in facilitating effective engagement; they were also asked to comment on their relationship with the Town Forum and how they thought it could carry out its task of engaging with its citizens better. Chris Turner (Winchester BID) spoke about engaging the business community; Pete North (Weeke Community Association) spoke about the role that a Community Association plays in facilitating engagement at a neighbourhood level; Catherine Mitchell (Winchester Hub) spoke about the engagement of the student population; John Beveridge (City of Winchester Trust) spoke about the Trust's role in relation to planning applications; Chris Holloway (WinACC) and Emma Back (Winchester Sport Art & Leisure Trust) were also invited to give perspective from external partners.

c) Steve Tilbury also discussed with the Group the effectiveness of the Town Forum in providing a 'voice' for Winchester.

3.2. The extent of the investigations was limited by the time available. Other internal and external colleagues could have added valuable insight and this may form a part of any work plan if it is felt that further work should take place post-election. Appendix 1 identifies some of the other people with whom the Group was keen to meet.

3.3. There was also no time to discuss examples of good practice from other areas, of which a number of interesting examples were identified. Suggested places to consider are Chichester, Frome, Salisbury, Andover, Canterbury, Plymouth and Eastleigh. This is an aspect that may be investigated as part of the Community Engagement Review approved by Cabinet on 18 February 2016.

4. Analysis of the current situation and recommendations

- 4.1. Throughout the course of the discussions two main issues recurred consistently. These relate to the role of the Town Forum in representing the views and opinions of the residents of Winchester and the extent to which engagement is sustained through the life of a project or activity.
- 4.2. It is perceived by some Councillors and members of the public that the Town Forum has little influence over the decisions that the Council takes on matters that affect the town or indeed in addressing issues that are important to its residents. The Town Forum is not a decision-making body and that creates a sense that there is no 'voice' for the Town area. This frustrates Councillors and can deter residents from engaging as they feel that the opinions they express are not fully reflected and represented in the decision-making process. There is also an unfulfilled expectation that the Town Forum is able to influence what happens in the town and is failing to be effective when it does not; in the absence of any other mechanisms to represent the residents of the town this was identified as a lack of involvement, or democratic deficit.
- 4.3. The discussions identified a number of ways in which the Town Forum might improve this situation within its existing powers and governance arrangements. It was suggested that the Forum might choose to suspend its standing orders during meetings to allow wider discussion of issues not usually addressed as well as a greater level of debate to take place than is currently the case. There was much support for the idea of the Town Forum hosting public debates on important subjects, which is something that used to happen and was referred to in a Principal Scrutiny Report on Community Engagement in 2006 as good practice, with remarks on the Silver Hill scheme suggesting, "...that the traders and residents felt involved in the consultation process". There was also a suggestion that the Town Forum could invite selected organisations to participate more fully as 'Partners' along the lines of LSPs (Local Strategic Partnerships). There is a feeling that engagement may be effective at the commencement of a project, but is not sustained effectively throughout the life of the project. It is often the case that early-stage proposals are well received and gain the support of many stakeholders, but that as a project moves towards delivery there are changes which make it less acceptable. While there are deliverability challenges and external factors that make some changes unavoidable, it is important that these are discussed with and explained to stakeholders so that the implications are understood.
- 4.4. A fully joined-up approach is required across teams and departments within the Council from the outset of any project, to balance conflicting priorities and ensure that best use is made of the time and money invested. This is equally important on smaller initiatives as well as the major projects. It was clear that good engagement does not always mean more engagement and that consultation fatigue can set in if consultation happens too frequently. In particular, this can be a disincentive if there have not been clear, demonstrable changes as a result of the previous engagement activity. It was felt that early discussion with Ward Members is essential before wider

consultation and can help identify issues and warn if consultation fatigue is a risk and what form of engagement is likely to be successful. Communication between Officers and Councillors should always happen at the earliest possible stage, to ensure that Councillors are well-informed before the wider community is engaged.

- 4.5. Particular issues of consultation were raised relating to Planning, major projects and housing developments, noting that it takes place far too late at the present time; leaving it to the point where a scheme has been worked up and an application is about to be considered makes it impossible to influence the outcome. What is needed is for engagement at concept stage and then again when plans have been developed further. There is a need to reflect and discuss at an early stage, not in formal meetings but with presentations from developers and the Town Forum needs to be engaged in the process. It was noted that the CWT does not represent the people of Winchester but is able to contribute the views of retired architects and planners but could also be more effective if included at an earlier stage. Linked to this is a need to ensure that issues relating to infrastructure are addressed; they are highlighted repeatedly.
- 4.6. The richness of local expertise, professional skills and knowledge, was referred on a number of occasions noting that there are many organisations, professionals and individuals with considerable expertise and willingness to contribute in Winchester; all too often they are put in a confrontational position rather than being embraced as partners, even though they may have essential skills and knowledge that are no longer represented amongst staff members.
- 4.7. These concerns could be addressed by the Governance and Community Engagement Reviews that are scheduled for 2016/17. It is important therefore that the Reviews are seen as an opportunity for members of the Town Forum to shape future arrangements so that the Town Forum is better able to fulfil its role.

Funding

- 4.8. Regularly during the Group's discussions, it became clear that the limited funding at its disposal restricted the Forum's ability to do things differently. Members of the Forum could seek to use the existing budget in different ways that (amongst other things) increased the emphasis on community engagement. This would present a challenge, as it would require funding to be taken from a current use and the budget is already stretched. Discussion of this highlighted a number of anomalies in the way in which the Town Forum's responsibilities and income sources have been allocated.
- 4.9. One way for the Town Forum to exert greater influence would be to increase the Town Charge. Alternatively, members of the Group were keen to investigate the possibility of securing for the Town Forum other sources of income, such as from the markets or parking in the Town area. This would not be a simple thing to achieve and would require assistance from Officers in

Finance Services to help understand what might be possible. The funding would, it was recognised be linked to greater management responsibility.

- 4.10. Small amounts of funding have been used in recent years to support community plans and other small scale initiatives, but more would be required if Members wanted to do things differently. One example could be for the Town Forum to employ a 'Town Officer' and/or dedicated staff, who would have the capacity to do the things that are needed to 'hassle' on behalf of the town, to initiate and drive in a focused way Town Forum projects which are beyond the remit of other Officers of the Council.

Winchester Vision and Community Plans

- 4.11. A number of discussions highlighted the importance of a community plan in identifying shared community objectives and creating a 'vision' for an area. This has been fairly successful in the larger neighbourhoods within the City area - one example being St Barnabas, where the exercise sparked a dialogue across the community and established some helpful ideas which organisations have used to shape their ideas for facility and service enhancements.
- 4.12. The Town Forum has provided vital funding for community plans in Stanmore, Winnall, St Barnabas & Harestock and Highcliffe in recent years. However, the completed plans have not always been brought to the Forum for consideration, comment and endorsement as happens at a Parish Council meetings in parished areas. Doing so would inform members of issues in other parts of the City and would provide valuable endorsement and awareness of the completed plans; their Action Plans in particular could then be embedded, as partners, in the Forum's work plans.
- 4.13. The *Winchester Vision* was discussed a number of times during the review and the feeling was that, while it gives a clear overview of the strategic aims for Winchester, it has little value without being linked to Action Plans and a programme of work. It should set a framework for major projects within the Town area and the Town Forum should play a key role in initiating, driving and monitoring its effectiveness. Ideally there would be an overall Framework Plan, incorporating the Community Plans and Winchester Vision that would contribute to the Town Forum's programme of work.

Community Associations

- 4.14. Community Associations exist in a number of the larger communities in the City area and are usually responsible for managing a community centre or other facilities. They can be a one-stop-shop for residents and provide a focus for community activity that facilitates increased engagement and participation. They have had little direct contact with the Town Forum.
- 4.15. Some Community Associations in the Town area are thriving, but others are struggling and it is important that support is available to help sustain them during difficult times. One way would be encouraging peer support between

Associations, through a network which used to exist District-wide but which folded when HCC stopped supporting this work. There was support for the idea of re-establishing the Network of Community Associations in the City area to encourage sharing of ideas, which would cost little other than a small amount of Officer time.

- 4.16. Weeke Community Association is currently thriving, but this was not always the case. The main factor in this change has been the appointment of a paid manager, who has been the catalyst for the change. In Weeke this was possible due to the sound financial footing of the Association and robust income streams provided by the building. However, not all community associations are so fortunate and it was suggested that the Town Forum could provide financial support for community associations that are struggling to break the cycle of declining attendance and use. While this could have big impacts, it would be costly to achieve. There was also discussion of areas that do not have community centres and how best to encourage community involvement in these areas.
- 4.17. There was also some discussion around communities taking on greater responsibility for their open spaces. There appears to be no problem with this idea in principle, though experience has shown that this level of community involvement cannot always be sustained in the longer term. There are examples such as St Giles Hill, where Officers have worked with the community to encourage their involvement and assistance, without handing over complete control. This approach should be applauded and encouraged.

Engagement with business

- 4.18. Winchester Business Improvement District (BID) has more than 750 businesses in its membership, but it became clear that many Members are not aware of BID activities. Members of the Town Forum will be added to the BID mailing list and it was also suggested that the Town Forum could nominate a representative(s) to attend BID meetings and the BID Board to generate closer working and greater awareness between the two bodies.

5. Issues concerning longer term consideration

- 5.1. The discussions between members of the Group and invited guests raised a number of questions and issues relating to consultation and engagement with the citizens of Winchester town that it was not possible to investigate further given the time constraints. In particular they highlighted the fact that the Town Forum does not engage as effectively as it might or reflect the views of the residents of Winchester and its varied communities, raising the question of how it can be more effective, whether Winchester needs a Town Council or different a different form of organisation to represent the people and how best to engage. It was also recognised that some consultation/engagement is more effective than others and that if well done it always takes time: consultation on the new skate park, and work being carried out by the Winchester University Hub with elderly people, with resident groups on St Giles' Hill and Hyde Abbey Gardens was seen to have been successful while

consultation on Planning and Major Projects was seen to be more problematic.

- 5.2. These discussions raised a number of points that are mentioned here so that they are considered as part of a more detailed investigation into the role, governance and responsibilities of the Town Forum, as well as the way in which it relates to the different communities within Winchester and facilitates giving them the opportunity to contribute to debate of Winchester town issues, and the Town Forum's programme of work. They included:
- a) The need for the Governance and Community Engagement Reviews to include consideration of different models for the Town Forum, or an alternative body, to more effectively represent and respond to the needs of the town; this would include options for a possible Town Council, area committees and links to the Cabinet system etc.
 - b) Identifying best practice in engagement and consultation, recognizing the difference between them. Examination of how other towns establish connection with their citizens through Town Councils and other mechanisms, including highlighting examples of good practice in engaging with different communities. Chichester, Canterbury, Andover, Frome, Salisbury, Plymouth and Eastleigh were all mentioned as places to look at as possible places from which to learn.
 - c) The potential for de-politicising the work of the Town Forum, or its successor.
 - d) Review options to increase the budget available to the Town Forum, such as an increase to the Town Charge and/or access to other income to the Council from the City area, links to economic generators. As a result, to be more responsive to the residents of the town, for more active community engagement to become the standard in the Town Forum area and to consider funding for Community Associations to encourage them towards a financial model that is sustainable in the longer-term.
 - e) The employment a 'Town Officer' and/or dedicated staff by the Town Forum to focus on the addressing the needs of Winchester Town.
 - f) Increased public involvement in meetings and/or hosting public discussion on important subjects.
 - g) Planning and the need for early discussion with officers and developers of concepts for sites and requirements for infrastructure, as well as further consideration as proposals are developed, but well before an application is nearing submission; strategic plan for s106/CIL.
 - h) The development of an Action Plan to ensure that the *Winchester Vision* is implemented.

- i) Improved partnership working with citizens, organisations and professionals to ensure that the town benefits from so much available expertise in a collaborative, but not confrontational way.
- j) Developing the role of local Councillors so that they play a more active part in engagement and the development of local plans/improvements in their wards.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

6. COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND PORTFOLIO PLANS (RELEVANCE TO):

- 6.1. The *Active Communities* outcome of the Winchester District Community Strategy (2010-2020) focuses on the people that work and live in the District, encouraging healthy lifestyles and **active participation in their communities** and ensuring that they can access the services they need.
- 6.2. The Portfolio Plans for 2015/16 include no direct reference to this work, but include many projects and initiatives for which the awareness and support of the community are essential. This would not be possible without the range of engagement options set out above.

7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 7.1. There are no resource implications resulting directly from this report.
- 7.2. Some of the longer-term ideas for future consideration may have resource implications for the Town Forum, including the allocation of Officer time. If those ideas are investigated further, the resource implications will be considered in more detail and reported to the Forum at the appropriate time.

8. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

- 8.1. Increasing the effectiveness of community engagement in the City area should lead to better outcomes and reduce the risk of resident or stakeholder opposition to any proposals.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

[The Academy of Urbanism – Place Partnering Visit to Winchester \(2011\)](#)

[Principal Scrutiny Committee Report – Community Engagement \(2006\)](#)

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1 Terms of Reference for the Informal Working Group

Appendix 2 List of people who met the Group and contributed to ideas contained in this paper:

Appendix 1

**Winchester Town Forum Informal Working Group (IWG):
'Community Engagement'****Membership of IWG (as approved by WTF)**

- Cllr Hutchison (Chair)
- Cllr E. Berry, Cllr J. Berry, Cllr Maynard, Cllr Osborne
- Lead Officer will be Steve Lincoln.

Purpose

1. To review which mechanisms for engagement currently work well in Winchester and which do not.
2. To consider the role that the Town Forum and Forum members should play in community engagement.
3. To identify how best to engage people in areas where no clearly defined "community" exists.
4. To focus on the mechanisms and process by which we engage, not the subject matter which we engage about.
5. To make recommendations to the Town Forum and present options for next steps.

Points to explore

- What events and forums are best for community engagement?
- The value of community plans in local neighbourhoods and the role of District Councillors in their development and implementation.
- The role of social media
- The role of community centres in the 21st Century.
- Can we build a more consistent pattern of grassroots organisations that feed into the Town Forum in a more effective way?
- What does 'community' mean in Winchester?
- What brings people together and what keeps them apart?
- Who are the enablers?
- Engaging communities of interest/identity as well as geographic communities.
- A town of the size and historical importance of Winchester needs a voice, but will it ever be one voice?
- How do we unlock the barriers and empower communities?
- What or who is needed to provide sufficient legitimacy for community groups?
- What can we learn from other places?
- Are we ready for devolution?
- Does the town need plans, short and longer term?

Possible contributors

- Neighbourhood Wardens
- Tenant Involvement Officers
- Community Associations
- Tenant / Resident Associations
- Churches
- Thematic groups (e.g. Fit 4 the Future?)
- City of Winchester Trust / Winchester 2020?
- PTAs
- Youth groups

Timescale and work programme

- Meetings will be held during daytime working hours (to secure officer support) and will be expected to last approximately 1.5 - 2 hours each.
- Three meetings are proposed, during January and February 2016. The first will agree Terms of Reference, work programme (who to call to give evidence) and to take evidence from members. Two further meetings will take evidence from invited participants.
- Report and recommendations to be completed by email if possible.
- The final report will be taken back to WTF at its meeting on 9th March 2016, so that it is considered before May elections. If appropriate, continuation of this work with new WTF may be recommended (to build on this work, address impact of smaller WTF and consider any implications of Devolution Deal).

Appendix 2

List of people who met the Group and contributed to ideas contained in this paper

- Chris Turner (Winchester BID)
- Pete North (Weeke Community Association)
- Catherine Mitchell (Winchester Hub)
- John Beveridge (City of Winchester Trust)
- Chris Holloway (WinACC)
- Emma Back (Winchester Sport Art & Leisure Trust)
- Imogen Dawson (Station Area Neighbourhood Group) who sent a note on behalf of SANG who were unable to a meeting.