County Council Meeting – 14ᵗʰ March 2024

Question to Councillor Victoria Wilson
Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture

By Councillor Arshad Afsar

Question

As we strive to build a more inclusive and participatory community, I would like to inquire about the county's current efforts to engage with residents from diverse backgrounds and ensure their voices are heard in decision-making processes. How are we promoting transparency and accessibility in local governance, and what initiatives are in place to foster meaningful dialogue and collaboration between the council and community members?

Reply

Community Engagement

The county council frequently engages with residents, partner organisations, and other members of the community. There are lots of ways the engagement takes place, and it varies depending on the activity, and the people we are talking to.

Engagement could be through service-specific routes that involve routinely engaging with service users, or it could be corporately, for example through our social media channels or as part of a major council-wide piece of engagement. Often, we use a combination of methods to make sure we reach as many people as possible.

We want to make this engagement even more effective. To help us do this, we have recently developed a toolkit that all staff can use, which helps to ensure that any engagement meets the same set of quality principles. This means that our engagement will be more consistent, and staff will be more supported to do it well.

The five quality principles focus on **trust**, **clarity of purpose**, **clear communication**, **good planning**, **transparency**, and **doing things collaboratively**. The guidance gives staff information about the different audiences they should consider engaging with, and, and information on the groups of people with protected characteristics, who must be considered as part of any engagement or policy. It contains details of options like translation and when this might be useful to support inclusive engagement,

along with other aspects such as digital inclusion to ensure that as many people as possible can engage.

The Community Engagement Guidance also sets out a range of different ways that staff could engage with the community and helps them decide what is most appropriate for their work. Alongside well-established channels of communication and engagement, there are some particularly in-depth methods such as co-production and citizen assemblies, which are models that bring service users or residents to the heart of decision making. As a recent example, working with the diverse community groups in Burton helped to understand how to support people to take up the covid vaccine and these relationships continue to be a central source of guidance on how we design and implement information campaigns.

Over time, as we do more and better engagement, the guidance will continue to evolve. We will be able to give, more examples of successful engagement and share best practice, and support more staff to use these models.

This toolkit and set of principles have been developed with expert staff and tested with members, and the final areas of our staff intranet are now being developed. It will be demonstrated to members and launched across the organisation.

Engagement with under-represented and protected groups

Staffordshire County Council seeks to ensure the views and opinions of its most vulnerable and protected groups are at the heart of its strategy development and decision-making processes. Central to this is the Council's Community Impact Assessment (CIA) process. This framework encourages officers to think about how plans and services being developed may impact upon communities and people with protected characteristics. It ensures the council has given due regard to the wider impacts upon its communities, enabling officers to identify those things which need to be changed in order to ensure services are more accessible and inclusive.

The county council also has access to a range of corporate and partnership mechanisms for engagement, which can be used independently as part of developing a wider conversation with our communities around a specific theme, issue, or service, enabling them to have a voice on the issues that matter most to them. These mechanisms are often targeted and are set out below with a range of examples provided that help demonstrate the breadth of public voice work undertaken with our citizens.

- Healthwatch Staffordshire continues to play a key role in acting as our independent consumer champion for health and social care issues. Their role involves creating opportunities for patients and residents to engage and be listened to so that they can influence the services and decisions that affect their lives.

- The County Council commission a VCSE Capacity Building Framework that enables us to build capacity with voluntary sector groups who provide support to seldom heard communities. These, include Support Staffordshire who work with, for example, groups that support older or rurally isolated people, and SCVYS who, for example, support groups working with children with SEND and groups that support young people in BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) communities. These groups will directly engage with communities and signpost people to support either centrally or though their locality workers.

- There is also a wide range of specific place-based engagement work which is conducted in localities, often with those vulnerable under represented communities. Whilst coverage does vary by area, involvement tends to be appropriate and focused where it is needed the most. Locally, engagement is often supported by our Strategic Delivery Managers and wider staff. In addition, service engagement takes place on a routine basis.

- The Let's Talk Staffordshire website is a new system for our digital engagement and consultation activity. It allows a number of innovative engagement methods which can be 2-way, such as discussion forums, mapping, and functions around Ideas or Stories. Engagement via this can be both short and long term, or even ongoing.

- The role of the local county councillor (member) is also crucial. Through the democratic process residents have a voice through their county councillor, and therefore members receive invaluable feedback through these local routes, including via MP letters. This local intelligence continues to be fed back into the organisation through a range of mechanisms, and therefore provides a rich source of contextual information which we use to supplement our existing data and feedback.

Forthcoming Communities Strategy

A recent example of effective engagement by the county council has been the Our Staffordshire Communities work, to help us develop our Communities Strategy. As part of this work:

- We used member and partner networks to access people beyond our usual audiences and existing reach.

- We made use of digital channels, including social media, and considered our offline audiences. Paper copies of the main resident

survey were available through libraries and key partner organisations.

- We spoke to partner organisations and VCSE sector forums across the county to take their views and feed in.

- We used our extensive network of council staff to help spread the word about the engagement and the reasons behind it and encouraged them to take the survey and share it with family and friends.

- We commissioned specific work to focus on our enquiry themes in a different way. By finding different ways to ask people questions, we made our engagement more accessible. This sought out people who are "seldom heard" in "harder to reach" groups to ensure that their voices were reflected too in our engagement. This work has meant that our data is more robust and more reflective of the full breadth of Staffordshire's people.

- This commissioned work sought to reach people living in areas of deprivation, people with disabilities, people from ethnic minority groups and people living in rural communities. Through additional separate work we also reached young people in the care system, those who have left it, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and foster carers.

The initial engagement stage ended in February. We are now evaluating the data and considering next steps to enrich the insight and consider how we could further engage with the community about this. This will include doing work to understand if there are any gaps in who we heard from, and how we reach those people.

The residents' responses have clearly told us that they want stronger communication between the county council and its communities. We will be working to understand what this means for the various communities, and together with our partners and residents, this will be a major focus of the forthcoming Communities Strategy.