

## Improving Community Engagement Scrutiny Review – Interim Report

### Background to Review

1. In September 2012, having considered a scrutiny topic submitted by Cllr Barnes on ‘Engaging the Disaffected’, the Committee agreed to undertake a scrutiny review to look at the issues affecting levels of community engagement across the city, in the following three areas:
  - i. Community Engagement
  - ii. CYC Customer Services
  - iii. Financial Inclusion
2. A Task Group was set up to scope and carry out the work on the review on behalf of the full committee.

### Information Gathered

3. Members agreed it would be useful to carry out a comparison between two wards with differing levels of deprivation and reasons for lack of engagement, and agreed to focus their review on Heworth & Rural West wards.
4. Initially, the Task Group considered profile information on the two wards and compared levels of deprivation across those wards identified from the initial findings from the Big York Survey 2012.
5. The Big York Survey 2012 (BYS)  
The BYS is a key component in meeting the objective in the council plan of being completely in touch with our communities. The results of the survey also provide key insight into the progress, understanding and public perception of the council’s work to deliver the council plan priorities, and are used to help inform decisions around the allocation of resources and budget setting.

6. Due to the low number of responses from the two chosen wards, the Task Group agreed to group those two wards with similar wards, and use findings from those ward groupings to support their work on the review – see agreed ward groups below:

<u>Rural Wards</u>	<u>Highest Deprived Wards</u>
Bishopthorpe	Clifton
Wheldrake	Guildhall
Rural West	Heworth
Skelton, Rawcliffe & Clifton Without	Hull Road
Strensall	Westfield

7. In December 2012, the Task Group looked at the detailed results from the BYS 2012 together with a Cabinet report highlighting the concerns arising e.g.:
- Understanding of Protecting Vulnerable People priority - A higher than anticipated proportion of 'don't know' responses in relation to perceptions of progress on some of the council's priority areas, particularly around protecting vulnerable people.
  - Supply of affordable housing - 46% said that the supply of affordable decent housing needed improving.
  - Jobs Progression Options - one third of people were concerned that people had to commute out of York to work and 45% felt they would personally have to commute out of the York area to develop their career.
8. The Task Group learnt that action was already underway to address those concerns and therefore agreed there was no need for scrutiny to duplicate that work.
9. However, the BYS also showed that in regard to 'Influence on local area', only 29% of people agreed they could influence decisions affecting their local area, compared to 42% who disagreed, with 28% being neutral on the matter. The Task Group were therefore keen to understand how the Council planned to address this, particularly in wards containing Parish Councils, where there are no plans to develop a Community Contract (see paragraphs 23-25 below).
10. As a result on their initial investigation, the Task Group agreed the following review remit:

To identify ways of empowering people and improving community engagement

Objectives:

- a. To improve communications between CYC and Parish Councils
- b. To improve communications in non-Parish Council areas.

### **i - Community Engagement**

11. Community engagement is very important to a healthy political system. The more engaged a community is in how it is governed, the more it is likely to get out of those who govern it.
12. Parish Councils and other local councils i.e. town, village, community or neighbourhood councils, are local authorities in their own right. They generally have a much closer relationship with the community than a Local Authority has. However, parish councillors and ward councillors frequently complain about how difficult it is to get their community involved in their council's business. It is often said, no-one is interested. However, major planning proposals, waste incinerators and such like are usually pretty effective in filling local council meetings with members of the public anxious to know how they might be affected.
13. In York, residents with concerns about social, environmental and economic issues in their area are encouraged to engage with their ward meetings. The Council welcomes suggestions from anyone who lives or works in a ward including young people.
14. Currently, the Communities and Equalities Team (formerly Neighbourhood Management Unit) is working on ways of improving residents' access to information and ways of:
  - Encouraging people to bring forward ideas for their community
  - Fostering a greater understanding of local community issues
  - Getting people involved in their community and in voluntary activity
  - Making sure that what gets done is what the community most wants
  - Helping people see how their council tax is being used
  - Getting involved in local decision making on issues affecting their local area
15. In areas with parish councils, residents are also being helped and encouraged to:
  - Understand how parish business affects them
  - Stand for election as local (parish) councillors
16. Parish Council Engagement  
There are 31 Parish Councils in the York area:

Acaster Malbis	Haxby Town Council	Osbaldwick
Askham Bryan	Heslington	Rawcliffe
Askham Richard	Hessay	Rufforth with Knapton
Bishopthorpe	Heworth Without	Skelton
Clifton Without	Holtby	Stockton-on-the-Forest
Copmanthorpe	Huntington	Strensall with Towthorpe
Deighton	Kexby	Upper Poppleton
Dunnington	Murton	Wheldrake
Earswick	Naburn	Wigginton
Elvington	Nether Poppleton	
Fulford	New Earswick	

17. CYC maintains a close working relationship with those 31 parish councils through the Yorkshire Local Councils Association. York Branch (YLCA) is a membership organisation and nearly all of the local councils within the City of York area are members of that organisation. In particular CYC liaises with local councils through the Parish Council Liaison Group. The membership of the group is 5 local council representatives selected through the YLCA branch meetings, and an officer from the CYC Communities and Equalities Team. There is an open invite to the CYC portfolio holder to attend liaison group meetings. The purpose of those meetings is to provide regular contact between CYC and local councils to pick up key issues and to ensure ongoing dialogue. The liaison group also has responsibility for the Parish Charter. Those local councils who are not members of the YLCA are contacted directly by the Communities and Equalities team with key messages which are pertinent to all or groups of local councils.
18. In January 2013, the Task Group received a copy of a Charter agreed by CYC and the YLCA on behalf of the 31 local/parish councils in York, which sets out how they will work together. The charter:
- includes a commitment to the principles of democratic local government;
  - acknowledges and recognises that parish and town councils are the grass roots level of local government. By working with local and parish councils CYC aims to act in partnership with local communities, while balancing the needs of the wider locality;
  - recognises that parish councils offer a means of shaping the decisions that affect their communities and of revitalizing or sustaining local communities;
  - recognises the strategic role of CYC and the equitable distribution of services which it has to achieve.

19. Residents Associations

A Residents' Association is a group of local people who meet regularly to talk about things that affect them. They play an important role in building local communities by highlighting community concerns such as the environment and crime, and contributing to the making of policy that delivers services to tenants e.g. housing repairs. Anyone who is a resident within an RA's boundary can join, regardless of whether they are a council tenant or own their house.

20. There are currently 20 associations recognised by the council serving residents across the city, each with its own geographically defined area – see list of RAs in Annex A. The Task Group noted that Residents Associations tend to be formed in non-parish council areas. A list of the current Residents Associations, together with information on how they are organised and work etc is shown at Annex A.
21. The Task Group were pleased to learn that information on the Residents Association Federation is being provided online via the council website, to encourage more individuals to get involved. They agreed it would be helpful if the same information could also be made available offline for those residents with no internet access.
22. The Task Group was informed that overall feedback from Residents Associations in the York area showed a need for improved communication between them and wards councillors.
23. Community Contracts & Action Plans  
As Ward Councillors, the Task Group was already aware that Community Contracts were in development in many wards, enabling communities to have a greater understand of their ward, the challenges within the ward, services and facilities, as well as how to actively become involved . Also, that new methods of communication were being trialled, including the use of social media and Your Ward Online.
24. In December 2012 the Task Group considered the Ward Action Plan for Heworth together with information on how it was created and evidence used in support. At the same time, it was confirmed that none of the wards in the rural group (see paragraph 6 above) have an action plan in place. The Head of Neighbourhood Management confirmed she had met with the parish councils in those wards, to learn how they currently engage with their community on issues within their parish, and to encourage the introduction of action plans. However the general consensus of Parish Councils was that they already had a good understanding of the challenges within their parishes, and therefore could see no benefit to producing an action plan. The Task Group acknowledged their view.

25. However, the Task Group recognised the benefit of improving community involvement in ward action planning and service monitoring, and agreed that over time it could lead to an increase in the number of residents who felt they could influence decisions in their local area, thereby improving the figures in the BYS findings shown in paragraph 9 above.
26. Ward Budgets  
At a national level, the Coalition Government's promotion of the "Big Society" idea is leading them to take an interest in many aspects of local activism, local self help and community engagement and so there is a strong governmental interest in participatory budgeting, which York has a successful track record in.
27. Each year the wards in York are given a budget to fund initiatives and projects which will support their ward priorities and lead to improvements in their local area. In 2012-13, to make sure that budget made a real difference in the wards, CYC launched an online survey for residents to identify their ward concerns. This was also made available through community builds in a hard copy format. This together with statistics and feedback from service providers will help shape ward priorities for their ward for 2013-14.
28. The Task Group queried whether all Parish Councils and Residents Associations had a clear understanding of how Ward processes worked within their ward, in relation to setting ward priorities, working collectively on the community contract and identifying relevant resources.
29. Ward Team Meetings  
The Task Group learnt that the Communities and Equalities Team was currently developing a number of documents to support Councillors in their ward team meetings e.g.:
- A generic list of interested parties, from which Ward Councillors could tailor their invitees to a meeting based on the issues to be discussed. The list should include all the appropriate individuals/organisations to support ward councillors in their consideration of the issues around the priorities they have set as part of their ward action plan, including representatives from any local Parish Councils and Residents Associations where they exist within the ward
  - An information sheet on each ward and its Ward Councillors for new attendees/interested parties at ward team meetings.
30. Overall, the Task Group recognised that across all wards, Parish Councils, Residents Associations, and other local bodies such as Neighbourhood

Watch Groups, Gardening Clubs, Planning Panels etc (any organisations that bring together groups of residents), had much to offer in the way of community liaison. And, that they were a source of local information that could be better utilised to inform discussions around Community Contracts and local priorities etc. They therefore agreed it would be useful for representatives from those bodies to participate in ward team meetings and/or ward meetings to contribute to those discussions.

## **ii – CYC Customer Services**

### **31. CYC Customer Contact Centre**

To ensure a fair comparison of the information provided in support of this review, the same ward groupings shown in paragraph 6 above were used when considering statistical information from CYC's Contact Centre.

32. In January 2013 the Task Group received information on the number and type of issues being reported via the Contact Centre, showing the level of community engagement across the relevant wards during 2012 – see Annex B. They recognised the need for the Contact Centre to be able to access up to date information on council services to allow them to respond accurately and thoroughly to enquiries at first contact stage.
33. Having considered the channels used and the number of CRM interactions in 2012, the Task Group queried the use of fax as a first point of contact. They learnt that residents often fax their documents in support of their benefit claims. The majority of the fax interactions reported were for CIS Checks (73%) and change of circumstances (24%). In many cases, a resident may call first but then be asked to fax their documents, which creates 2 contacts. The Contact Centre do not promote that access channel as a first point of contact choice, however they do need to keep it especially as some of the older people in the deaf community still prefer to use that method over mini-com or Type-talk.
34. In regard to the Council's website, the Task Group recognised the need to increase the options for self serve, and encourage more residents to register for online accounts. They agreed the look and feel of the council's website needed improving and suggested lessons could be learnt from the Family Information Service website.
35. **CYC Community Services**  
The Task Group were interested to learn whether residents ever seek information/advice on council services via other routes (other than the Customer Contact Centre). In particular, they questioned whether users of the following mobile community services ever sought information (other than Youth Services information) from the following service providers:

36. URBIE – The Task Group learnt that information received from ward team meetings, PCSO's, local members of the community and other CYC Services was being used to determine the group(s) targeted by URBIE.
37. In the north of the city, the URBIE bus goes out three times a week:
- Tuesday 4.00pm till 6.30pm at Orchard Park. It then moves onto Strensall from 6.30pm until 9.00pm
  - Wednesday 6.00pm – Haxby/Wiggington (no end time as yet due to being a new session)
  - Thursday 6.30pm – Tang Hall (no end time as yet due to being a new session)
38. In the south of the city, the URBIE bus is currently limited due to staffing issues, and only goes out twice a week (Thursday 4:00- 6:00pm and 7:00- 9:00pm). The early session can vary in where it goes but the later session goes into Foxwood.
39. Feedback on requests made to URBIE officers for information on other Council services is being gathered, and will be tabled at this meeting.
40. Mobile Library Services - The Task Group received information on the mobile library service which provides a range of books for adults and children, including large print books, audio books and language courses. Many of the same services offered through local libraries are also offered through the mobile library service, such as access to community information and children's activities e.g. Summer Reading Challenge. The vehicle also has disabled access. Timetables for each ward indicating where and when the mobile library is in the area, can be accessed via the council's website – see:  
<http://www.york.gov.uk/info/200428/libraries-location-and-opening-hours/475/libraries-location-and-opening-hours/14>
41. Feedback on requests for information about other council services, made to the Mobile Library Services Team, will also be provided at this meeting.
42. Toy Bus - The Task Group learnt there had been no requests for other council services via the Toy Bus, which is a friendly and fun mobile toy library service visiting communities in and around York. The purpose built bus is used by childminders, playgroups, nurseries and other groups that involve children. It offers a range of good quality toys, books and play equipment (age range from 0 to 5 years), and advice and information on play and toys. The Toy Bus visits areas around the city and surrounding



area - see timetable on the council's website:  
<http://www.yorkchildrenscentres.org.uk/toybus>

### **iii – Financial Inclusion**

43. In regard to forthcoming benefit changes i.e. the introduction of Universal Credits, the Task Group were pleased to note the pro-active approach being taken by CYC's Contact Centre to contact residents ahead of those changes taking affect, to help them understand its affect on the benefits they would receive in the future. The Contact Centre hoped it would reduce the number of residents who were unaware of the forthcoming changes and allow them to direct affected residents to the appropriate support and guidance.
44. The Task Group also received information on a recent community based project offering financial support to residents in the Heworth Ward area:

#### York Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) – Prosperous Communities Project

The aims of the project was to provide the advice people need for the problems they face and to improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives. The mission was to empower clients by giving them the information they needed, so they could decide how to resolve their own problems.

The project (funded through Community York Grant -CYC voluntary sector funding)\_created an Advice Hub at Tang Hall Community Centre to pilot an innovative, multi-disciplinary approach to providing the advice residents need, under one roof. Led by CAB but with workers from Housing Options, North Yorkshire Credit Union, Future Prospects and an experienced CAB adviser, the project provided advice on claiming in and out of work benefits, prepared residents to meet the challenges and opportunities of Universal Credits, helped resolve debt problems and provided money management advice including budgeting, financial planning and making informed decisions.

Tang Hall Community Centre was chosen as the venue for the drop-in sessions, as it complimented plans to establish a Health and Wellbeing Centre on the site with York Mind, and a whole series of sport and social activities located at the Centre.

45. The Task Group were pleased to learn that since the Hub started in September 2012, there had been 11 x 2.5hr sessions and a total of 33 clients had been seen and assisted with their problems. They also

acknowledged the success of the Hub, which up to December 2012 had identified and assisted with the claiming of £21,043.36 of previously unclaimed benefits, and helped clients to deal with £42,062.19 worth of personal debt. The Task Group questioned whether there would be opportunities in the future to extend the project to cover other areas in the city, and it was confirmed that Community York Grant would be available again in the next financial year.

### **Concluding the Review**

46. To conclude the work on this review, and to address the objectives shown in paragraph 10, it is suggested that the Task Group meet with the Parish Council Liaison Group and the Residents Association Federation to discuss the review findings to date, and to:
- Share information on how ward processes work in relation to setting ward priorities, working collectively on the community contract and identifying relevant resources, and how they might participate in that process
  - Gather their views on what if any, are the barriers preventing their organisation and residents in general, from influencing decisions affecting their local area
  - Discuss how best to improve communications between their organisation and Ward Councillors, by agreeing some principals around understanding individual roles; behaviour; engagement and communication
47. The next informal meeting of the Residents Association Federation is on Thursday 7 March at 11am. And, the next meeting of the Parish Council Liaison Group is on Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> March at 2.00pm.
48. The review findings together with the feedback from those meetings will inform the recommendations arising from this review.

### **Options**

49. Members may:
- i) Choose whether or not they wish to meet with the Parish Council Liaison Group and the Residents Association Federation to gather their views, as outlined in paragraph 46 above
  - ii) Agree revisions and/or additions to the review findings to date as shown in paragraphs 11-45 above

- iii) Identify and agree the draft recommendations arising from this review

## **Implications**

- 46. Implications associated with the recommendations arising from this review will be identified and included in this report, once the Task Group have agreed the recommendations they wish to propose to the Corporate & Scrutiny Management Committee.

## **Council Plan 2012-15**

- 47. A core capability of the Council Plan is for the Council to be completely in touch with its communities. To achieve this, and be a city of active and self reliant communities, the Council is introducing new ways for residents to interact with the Council and improving communications. The aim of this review is to identify ways of optimising that communication and improving levels of engagement with local communities across both rural and suburban areas of the city.

## **Risk Management**

- 48. Without full and proper engagement of local communities across the city, there is a risk that the services provided by the Council will not fully reflect the needs of those communities. Any improvement to ways of engaging with residents identified as a result this review will assist in mitigating that risk.

## **Recommendations**

- 49. Members are recommended to:
  - i) Meet with the Parish Council Liaison Group and the Residents Association Federation to gather their views (as outlined in paragraph 46 above)
  - ii) Agree any changes required to this report so that it may form the final report arising from this review.

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Report Approved  **Date** 10 February 2013

**Wards Affected:**

All

**Annexes:**

**Annex A** – Information on Residents Associations

**Annex B** – Statistical Data from Customer Contact Centre for 2012