

Community Engagement - a protocol for contacting community groups

Introduction

1. Glasgow Community Planning Partnership (GCPP) commissioned Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector (GCVS) to develop a community engagement database to help Community Planning Partners engage with appropriate communities and groups.
2. This Protocol for Community Engagement has been developed, to provide an agreed approach to co-ordinating engagement activities and any subsequent development and/or support needs identified through these activities. It is intended as a positive support for continuous improvement in Community Engagement practice in the city.
3. The protocol draws on existing models in use in Inverclyde and Aberdeen, and takes account of the key supports for Community Engagement already in place in Glasgow, as noted below.

Background

4. Placing genuine community engagement activity central within community planning processes is made clear from The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 through to Glasgow's Community Plan 2005 – 2010.
5. National Standards for Community Engagement have been published by Scottish Government, and have been adopted by GCPP and key public bodies across Scotland.
6. The Glasgow Community Planning partnership contracts support staff, whose remit includes promoting coordinated approaches, and helping maximise expertise in Community Engagement across Glasgow's Community Planning Partners.
7. The 5 area based Community Planning support teams develop Community Engagement Plans and associated Action Plans. These Plans are based on agreed area priorities and illustrate a collective understanding that public services can be improved by engaging with the community and involving people who receive public services in planning processes.
8. In June 2007, as part of this collective understanding, GCVS were invited by GCPP to set out the scope for the development and delivery of a city-wide Community Engagement Database.
9. The completion of the Community Engagement Database, which went live in November 2007, brings with it the need for a Protocol to be in place, to inform appropriate use of the Database by Community Planning partners.
10. The Database was launched as 'Engage' and can be accessed via www.engageglasgow.org
Further information on 'Engage' can be obtained via the Infobase Team at GCVS, engage@gcvs.org.uk.
11. Appropriate use of the Database involves three key aspects:
 - respecting communities as independent and having their own priorities
 - recognising the agencies and officers supporting communities;
 - having a coordinated approach across Community Planning partners.

These aspects are considered further in the following sections.

Respecting communities

12. Partners should remember that community groups are set up to work for the benefit of their communities, as part of this they have their own priorities and objectives, and are accountable to their respective communities for progressing these. Community Engagement is defined as a 'relationship' between public bodies and community groups, what this means in practice is that engagement should to some extent meet the needs of community groups as well as those that want to engage with them.
13. Community groups by definition are run on a voluntary basis by members of those communities, who may have a number of commitments in the community in addition to their home and work lives. Usually community groups' main consumable resource is the time and energy of their committee or members. The increased commitment of public bodies to community engagement means that community groups can be overloaded by requests for engagement, with an 'opportunity cost' for community groups' own priorities.
14. Partners using 'Engage' are asked to work in ways that make best use of community groups' time, and add value to their own work. An example of this might be tying the engagement in with one of the group's events, and contributing some resources to this.
15. Partners should assess and take into consideration that the communities experiencing greatest disadvantage may also have the greatest demands on them.

Respecting the people supporting community groups

16. The National Standards for Community Engagement identify the need for community development support. This means specialist support for communities to form groups, develop capacity, and consider how public bodies' services and proposals might affect their community.
17. A number of Community Planning partners commit resources to this, including in some cases, employment of teams of specialist staff. This helps support an infrastructure of effective community groups that can engage with Community Planning partners.
18. Community development is a time-intensive activity, with a single community group potentially receiving significant staff investment over a period of years. This may involve supporting the formation of the group, helping them reach out to their wider community, collectively identify priorities and develop plans in response.
19. Just as community groups are accountable to their respective communities, the staff that support them are accountable not just to those groups but to the wider communities, and are likely to have invested a great deal of professional time and assistance towards raising awareness of the issues and aspirations of the wider community.
20. In numerous professions there is an agreed protocol that obliges members of that profession to contact a colleague if they are looking at working in each other's geographical area and/or field of expertise, or engaging with individuals and/or groups living or operating in that area or field.
21. This Protocol proposes that when an Officer is known to be working within an area or with a group, colleagues should respect this key role and, in the first instance, introduce themselves and/or discuss with the key worker any proposed engagement or additional development input that could be offered, prior to any independent contact being made with the community group.
22. This self-regulation can minimise professional conflicts, which can arise from time to time and ensure the most effective use of resources. In addition it will minimise the pressures put on individuals and/or groups to provide feedback on an ad hoc basis in response to uncoordinated multi-agency engagement activities.
23. This acknowledgement of agencies investing in community development support is not intended to take away from the self-determination of the group, but to support groups in prioritising their agreed roles, for which they are accountable to the wider community.

A coordinated approach to Engagement

24. This Protocol proposes a planned and co-ordinated approach to Community Engagement, and the Community Engagement support staff and structures that GCPP has put in place can support this process, including consideration of the following issues.
25. A clear reason should be sought for **why** community engagement activity is to be undertaken. Consideration and reasonable research should identify whether existing data can provide the information wanted. Have the target communities already been asked for this information by other parties? Have checks been done with equalities networks if information on marginalised groups already exists? If information already exists does it satisfy the reason to engage or does it indicate the need to limit engagement to supplementing what is already available?
26. Before going ahead, it needs to be clear at **what** level Community Engagement activities should be pitched. It is crucial to the credibility and sustainability of engagement activities and intended outcomes that the level of influence on offer is not exaggerated.
27. **When** engagement activities are being developed they should be timed to take into account other activities. This is to avoid clashing with and/or duplicating activities or it can highlight potential to integrate activities to maximise impact. It should not be acceptable to allow insufficient time for engagement activities. If working with an inflexible deadline then the scope and level of engagement should be determined appropriately.
28. Having a clear purpose for engagement should make it clear in turn **who** it is you have to engage with. This will also inform the decisions around the level of engagement and the time required. The critical aim here is to ensure that all stakeholders groups in the community are included in the activities and it may prove prudent to cast the proposed engagement net over a wider area to provide the means for opting out rather than miss critical stakeholders.
29. Timescales for engagement activities should take account of:
 - time required for community and/or voluntary groups to canvass members and users.
 - the range of competing demands on community groups.
 - Board and Committee meeting timetables.
 - deadlines and/or dates for reporting back to third party.

Key Questions

30. It is proposed that a summary of key questions be prominently placed on the 'Engage' web pages.
 - Have you discussed and/or notified your proposal for engagement with the relevant support staff and structures?
 - Is there existing information available from previous engagement activities and if so how does this affect the need for, or focus of, any future engagement?
 - If communities have been previously engaged around these issues, have you prepared feedback on progress since the previous engagement?
 - Have you targeted the key communities that are most likely to have an interest in this engagement?
 - Have you considered ways the engagement can add value to the work of community groups?
 - Have you considered what support may be needed, and how you can provide it to help community groups in this engagement?
 - Have you made contact with any workers providing community development support to the communities/groups in question?
 - Have you considered opportunities for working together with other partners in joined-up approaches to engagement?
 - Have you considered the National Standards for Community Engagement most applicable to the proposed engagement?
 - Have you considered how you will respond to and feedback findings from the engagement?