

Meeting: Customer and Central Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 27 February 2012

Report of Cllr David Hopkin Deputy Executive Member for Corporate Resources (Localism)

Subject: Review of the Let's Talk Together (LTT) meetings

Summary: This report summarises the Member task force review of the Let's Talk Together meetings, which are run by the Central Bedfordshire Together Partnership. The report looks at actual delivery, attendance levels and outcomes to date. It analyses the role of Let's Talk Together meetings in the context of local and national policy as well as feedback from partners. The report concludes with a number of options as well as a specific recommendation for future delivery frequency and format for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Central Bedfordshire Together.

Advising Officer: Peter Fraser, Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement

Contact Officer: Sarah Hughes, Community Engagement Manager

Public/Exempt: Public

Wards Affected: All

Function of: Council and partner organisations through the Central Bedfordshire Together Partnership

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

1. The Let's Talk Together (LTT) meetings have implications for all of the Council's priorities, providing a valuable forum to seek views and receive feedback on priorities and services.

Financial:

2. There was a £2,000 operational budget in 2011/12 of which £1,053 has been spent. Funding is provided by the Central Bedfordshire Together Partnership. Costs are mainly associated with venue hire and refreshments. Staffing costs are met within existing resources.

Legal:

3. There are no specific legal implications. However, Let's Talk Together will help the Council to meet emerging responsibilities relating to the Localism Act.

Risk Management:

4. There are no specific issues. However, a risk assessment was undertaken as part of the LTT Development Plan using Council procedures.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

5. Staff time to carry out the planning and operation of the meetings is equivalent to approx. 0.15 fte which is paid for by the Central Bedfordshire Together Partnership. Officer time to attend the meetings has been met within existing resources and has not incurred overtime.

Equalities/Human Rights:

7. Public Authorities must ensure that decisions are made in a way which minimises unfairness and without a disproportionately negative impact on people from different ethnic groups, disabled people, women and men.
8. The Let's Talk Together meetings are a key component of the Community Engagement Strategy, which ensures the Council adopts a variety of inclusive and appropriate engagement practises to ensure all groups are heard and treated with dignity and respect.

Community Safety:

9. Let's Talk Together meetings build on the previous Community Safety Forums and provide a partnership input to address a wider set of issues. They are an important opportunity for the police and residents to discuss community safety and policing priorities with local communities.

Sustainability:

10. Not applicable.

Procurement:

11. Not applicable.

RECOMMENDATION(S):**The Committee is asked to:**

1. **Review the feedback from the Task Force and consider the options set out in paragraphs 32 - 38.**

Role of the Task Force review

12. The Task Force was set up to review the role and delivery of the Let's Talk Together meetings. Over two meetings the Task Force looked at attendance figures, location and venues, the geography of the seven LTT / Local Policing Areas as well as the resources used to set up and deliver the meetings.

13. The Task Force looked at the role of LTT meetings in the context of new and emerging legislation such as Localism, the Open Public Services White paper and the local Community Engagement Strategy; in particular the emphasis on enabling communities to do more for themselves. The Task Force also reviewed feedback from the survey of stakeholders and considered options for the future.
14. Let's Talk Together meetings were created by the Central Bedfordshire Together Partnership as a new approach to community engagement. LTT is based on wider partnership working and making better use of available resources and was developed and agreed by Central Bedfordshire Together in September 2010. The agreed model supported Bedfordshire Police in reducing its 33 quarterly meetings to seven in the revised Safer Neighbourhood Areas, whilst providing new opportunities for the Council and other partners, e.g Fire & Rescue Service and the NHS, to engage directly with the community on a range of issues.
15. The Let's Talk Together model was developed in partnership drawing on good practice from elsewhere (Newcastle); together with the experience of running the Community Safety Forums and the desire to achieve a joined up approach to engagement (including consultation) with communities.
16. Each meeting is chaired by an Executive Member and is in two parts. The first part is a 'drop in' and lasts for approximately one hour and is where residents can visit market stalls hosted by the services / partner organisations mentioned above. The second part of the meeting is more formal and specifically designed to gather feedback on local policing priorities. After the pilot series of meetings this was extended to provide an opportunity for residents to raise and discuss local issues of concern, identify future action and for the Council and its partners to update residents on important matters such as the recent Budget Strategy consultation.

Key Findings

17. During 2011, 21 LTT meetings have been organised; taking place three times each in each of the Police's Safer Neighbourhood Areas.
18. The Task Force recognised that LTT meetings are a unique opportunity for communities to engage face to face with their local Councillors (Parish and Ward) as well as a host of public services provided by the Council, Police, Fire, NHS, Town and Parish Councils and voluntary sector organisations.
19. The Task Force recognised the partnership nature of the Let's Talk Together meetings (they are not Council meetings) and the value of face to face communication, but were concerned about the low attendance by local residents. Appendix 1 sets out how many people attended each meeting whilst Appendix 2 details the delivery of the meetings
20. It was agreed that Let's Talk Together meetings provide a valuable platform for local communities to influence how services are delivered and raise and discuss local issues of concern; stimulating and enthusing community action to do more for themselves e.g. in response to a particular issue such as speeding, inconsiderate parking or anti social behaviour.

Stakeholder feedback

21. As part of the review the Task force considered feedback from a survey of LTT

stakeholders, partner organisations, Town and Parish Councils, Ward Councillors and attendees. From the feedback it was able to draw conclusions and shape some options for discussion. The table in Appendix 3 summarises the feedback received from stakeholders.

22. **Attendees (public)**

The feedback from attendees is varied. Some clearly like the format and found the meetings to be valuable opportunities for face to face discussion. Some felt that there was too much talking from 'officials' and expressed preference for a specific topic based discussion. Concern was frequently expressed at the lack of residents in attendance, supported by a comment that 'public participation is important'. The majority of residents said that they found out about the meetings from local newspapers and parish newsletters. The majority said they would attend future meetings.

23. **Partners and Town and Parish Councils**

Overall, partners were positive about the LTT events. There was a feeling that there were several things that could be changed or amended to make them better, such as introducing different times and going to where the people are rather than expecting them to come to us, but generally partners liked the LTT concept.

24. **Councillors**

Councillors felt the meetings were a good opportunity to listen to the views of residents, understand local issues better and have an exchange of information. Their main concern was the need to get more members of the public to attend.

25. **Venue / Location / LTT Geography**

Where the meeting is being held is important and should determine the nature of the meeting, topics discussed and the range of market stalls.

26. Consideration should be given to introducing smaller road show events at popular venues such as Libraries / Children's Centres / Supermarkets etc. or existing community events such as fetes.

27. All were concerned at the LTT geography which is based on the Local Policing Teams and felt that the map should be redrawn.

28. **Format**

This should remain broadly the same but with more time for two way discussion.

29. **Marketing**

The Town and Parish Council newsletters and press releases were suggested as key communication tools to publicise and promote the meetings.

30. **Attendance**

Lack of attendance by residents is the main issue for all stakeholders. This could be improved with earlier and proactive marketing in the locality where the meeting is to be held, introduction of smaller roadshow type events and an agenda determined by local people via the Parish or Town Council.

31. **Branding and partnership**

The feedback shows there is a misconception that LTT meetings are Council meetings. This is in part because of the lead role of the Ward Councillor as the Chairman of each meeting. Let's Talk Together is a partnership brand for community engagement and was developed to support the Community Engagement Strategy principle of having a co-ordinated approach to community engagement. This needs to be reinforced with partners and the Council. More effort is needed to encourage partner input at each meeting

Future Delivery Options

32. The task force considered a number of options for future delivery recognising that face to face communication is important.

33. **Frequency**

It is recommended that the frequency of the formal round of meetings should be reduced to one per year and timed to coincide with major events/issues such as Budget Strategy and Business Planning cycles

34. There was support for a *mini / light version of Let's Talk Together*, which would concentrate on the market stall component, be strongly linked to local issues and focus on a few key partner services e.g. Police, align with Pride In Community Safety days and other local events such as village fetes

35. There was also support for a *rapid response style of LTT meeting* to respond to a particular local community issue and to support communities and colleagues to find solutions to local problems

36. **Format**

It is recommended that the current format for the formal LTT meetings should be kept, but ensure more time is allocated for two way discussion by reducing the market stall time. More should be done to enable residents to be involved in deciding what they would like to discuss at each meeting. The 'light' version would need to adopt a roadshow format.

37. **Branding and Partnership**

The LTT brand is well known by partners and the community but partners should be encouraged to input more to the organisation of meetings and ensure they use them more proactively as a communication and engagement tool.

Outcomes from the task force

38. The task force stated a preference for LTT meetings to "piggyback" existing community events, such as the Amptill Festival, Woburn Oyster Festival, Linslade Canal Festival, Aragon Fun Day, Farmers markets, etc, and supported a "rapid response" team to deliver ad hoc meetings when important and topical local issues arise.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - LTT Attendance

Appendix 2 - LTT Delivery

Appendix 3 - LTT Stakeholder feedback