



Staffordshire County Council

Helping Communities to Help Themselves – a guide for action



Introduction

Staffordshire County Council recognises the need for new relationships with citizens and communities to deliver its vision of a connected Staffordshire where everyone has the opportunity to prosper, be healthy and happy.

To help achieve this, the Council is seeking new approaches to shaping customer demand and developing community capacity through using digital solutions and taking a more commercial outlook. Together, these approaches are designed to help communities play a greater role in public life.

Staffordshire’s pilot focused on obtaining learning in support these new approaches from two planned programmes of public consultation and engagement:

- A programme of pilot initiatives to support vulnerable children and families
- Consultation on priorities to be included in Staffordshire’s Police and Crime Strategy and Plan



The following summarises some of the learning from the pilot work so far.

1. Developing Community Capacity to do more to support vulnerable families

The council has embarked on an ambitious programme to develop new approaches to prevent vulnerable children and families at lower level risk progressing to acute need, focusing on community based solutions. Some of the challenges and opportunities that under-pin our “People Helping People” strategy are set out later in this guide by Andrew Donaldson, Staffordshire County Council’s Head of Strategic Policy and Partnerships.

As part of developing this programme of work the council was keen to embed the principle that community engagement is ‘everybody’s business’. It cannot be the responsibility of an individual or small team alone but must involve agencies, partners, stakeholders and communities working together. In each local area a multi-agency approach has been taken involving schools, councils, police, health, the voluntary sector and local businesses to share intelligence on the work with communities and specifically at risk families. By overcoming challenges around data sharing, richer information has become available through community engagement to better target activity, increased capacity through volunteering, improved pathways to support. To achieve this significant time was put into developing the memorandum of understanding for the intelligence ‘hub’ so that all partners felt comfortable sharing individual data as well as consultation findings and other business data.

Lessons learned include that the development of effective community based support arrangements takes time, not only to secure awareness, trust and confidence in communities but for agencies and partners to learn to work in different ways. Collaborative partnership able to develop sustainability as well as meet immediate challenges has been the focus in order to reduce long term demands on the children’s system.

2. Increasing community voice in local policing priorities

As well as testing the potential for local communities to directly support service priorities, this pilot was also used to see if there is potential to involve more and different people in conversations about key decisions for Staffordshire. A project was developed to use existing infrastructure and some new opportunities to reach a wider range of citizens than previously involved in public consultation on policing priorities. A number of approaches were trialled to see if this could be achieved:

Commit to making every contact count

- a) Staffordshire Police and Stafford Borough Council are already in contact with high volumes of services users and residents, therefore the challenge was how to use these contact points to capture feedback on policing priorities. Based on feedback from Contact Centre staff a short, easy to use questionnaire was created which could be used at the end of incoming and outgoing calls. After being reassured about the small amount of time needed the majority of callers agreed to participate, quickly proving that existing contact points could be used

to deliver public engagement. The measurement of the effectiveness of this approach is ongoing so that its full potential and feasibility can be assessed.

Never miss out on the opportunity of a captured audience

b) Stafford Borough Council regularly hosts public meetings on its premises. An approach was tested where visitors were asked to complete the same questionnaire as used in the Contact Centre whilst waiting for meetings to start. Levels of participation are still to be evaluated to see whether this should be rolled out to other locations.

Don't rely on people to come to you

c) In order to engage with those who may not ordinarily come into contact with public sector services, Staffordshire Police has developed an innovation called a Citizen Contact Record (CCR). This is a short form accessed via mobile devices used by police staff to approach citizens to obtain their views on local issues. Almost 2000 contacts have been made during the pilot period, involving over 100 police staff. To follow up on these contacts a short questionnaire on policing priorities was sent to email addresses captured via CCR reaching a broad cross-section of residents. The response rates are currently being evaluated in order to assess whether this approach should be extended to other agencies to help achieve representative public engagement.

Think about where people are having the conversations you need to hear

d) Going beyond traditional public sector methods of engagement, local services industries such as barbers and

hairdresser were approached to see if they would be willing to engage with their client about policing priorities. To deliver this the method had to be appropriate and convenient (for example, a short questionnaire that did not interrupt staff working); staff had to have a clear brief so that they could reassure clients; there had to be something in it for the businesses such as appropriate recognition and results that could be readily shared with clients. Participation will be monitored to ascertain potential for meaningful ongoing community engagement. Early signs show that take up has been limited however further work will be undertaken to review if this approach is worth pursuing.

Don't overlook the obvious channels, but double check they are appropriate

e) While websites and networks are now established as channels via which to engage citizens and stakeholders, their power and value in supporting ongoing interactions with the public should not be underestimated. As such, online networks have been used as part of a mix of channels to obtain feedback on policing priorities. That said, just because a network has an online presence it is still important to recognise that the reach and representativeness of the group may be limited. For example, although online police 'watch' schemes engaged substantial numbers early in the pilot the demographic profile of respondents was narrow. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and online forums are also being used to engage with a wider audience and each of these channels will be separately evaluated to understand the volume and type of people they can be expected to reach. Where possible, postcode and demographic details make it possible to identify the type/s of respondent who use each channel.

Make it easy to engage by using formats people trust

- f)** Recent research by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Staffordshire suggests that up to 94 per cent of people aged between 16 and 44 go online every day, or nearly every day, and most use smartphones to do so. Therefore, a digital first approach was adopted to engage young people using their own technology. A school was identified by Stafford Borough Council where a group of young people would provide feedback on policing priorities using their own smartphones. This method will be expanded subject to feedback from participants. However, this approach needs to be handled sensitively and in a way which enables young people without their own smartphone to participate.

Don't forget the tried and tested routes

- g)** The short questionnaire on policing priorities was included at the end of Staffordshire's long standing 'Feeling the Difference' public opinion survey securing feedback from a representative sample of 1650 Staffordshire residents. This reaffirmed that the survey can be used dynamically through combining standard and ad hoc question sets. By securing a representative response rate the data can also be used with other segmentation models (for example MOSAIC) to reveal how different types of people respond.

Summary and next steps

This is a small step on the road to building new arrangements for community engagement in Staffordshire. However, it is a useful example of the kind of activities and opportunities that can be developed to increase citizen participation in public life. Bringing these engagement routes together into a coherent framework for Staffordshire would require little financial investment but could transform public influence in local and strategic decision making.

Further development will now be considered in the context of Staffordshire County Council's 'People Helping People' strategy, which sets out a systematic approach to developing new relationships with our communities.

3. Three steps to getting started

Here is some practical guidance for you to consider if you wanted to use community-based approaches to develop effective engagement yourself. They focus on three key elements that underpinned this pilot:

- A.** Successful collaboration with local partners
- B.** Mapping your community assets
- C.** Leadership

A. Successful collaboration with local partners

Local public services have shared objectives in common which effective partnership-working can help achieve. These include:

- Creating economic prosperity and opportunity for local people
- Making local people both healthier and safer in their homes and communities
- Protecting and enhancing local environments
- Engaging local people in greater collaboration and coproduction of services

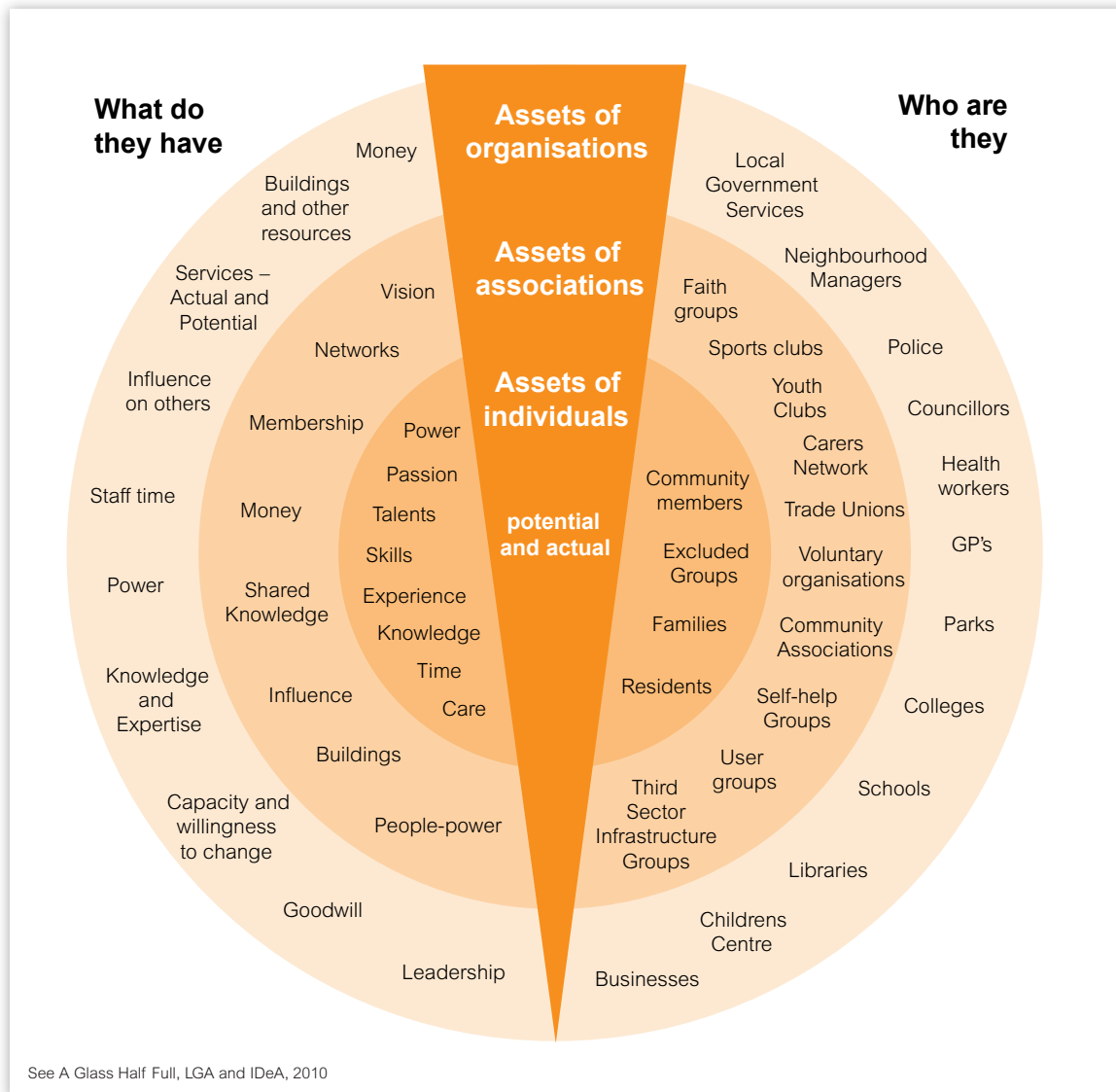
In Staffordshire, one of the first activities involved in this was getting local partners (including police, fire and emergency rescue, voluntary services, public health, district councils) working together to co-produce an engagement strategy and plan that would:

- make best use of their existing resources
- allow them to engage with and build relationships with new audiences
- allow authentic insight to be captured to improve a service outcome

The key learning when embarking on this was to identify the level of collaboration that each partner would bring to the engagement activity. The recently published [GCS/ LGA Collaboration Toolkit](#) can help you in this. This identifies four levels of collaboration in a partnership.

Working out in advance what each partner may be able offer, and what you can offer in return, will help you decide the appropriate level of collaboration.





B. Mapping your community assets

There are many local circumstances where an asset mapping exercise can help stimulate change and improve engagement. These include when:

- there are people who are not engaged with their local public services and are isolated and cut off from the wider community
- a community is fractured, has no sense of its own abilities and no belief that it can change
- agencies only see the community as a source of problems and needs and cannot see where solutions can come from

Because asset-mapping focuses on what's good within a community, it can be used as an 'enabling' tool and not just an auditing tool. Once you are clear about the aim and scope of your 'engagement campaign' you can categorise the assets in the communities you are engaging in, at different levels: individual assets; associations or networks; and organisation assets. The diagram below is a guide to help you figure out who your assets are and what they may have to offer.

C. Leadership – Staffordshire’s reflections

Through its ‘People Helping People’ strategy, Staffordshire’s leadership is committed to putting citizens and communities at the heart of everything they do. The leadership’s reflections on the number of opportunities emerging at the council as they look to the future are outlined below – in the words of Andrew Donaldson, Head of Strategic Policy and Partnerships. You can read about them at the original source by clicking [here](#).

- **CO-PRODUCTION** – “This is now commonplace in the public service lexicon, but rarely do we put it into practice. This is our greatest challenge and opportunity – we need to be brave and challenge our traditional approach to engaging with residents if we genuinely want sustainable and prosperous communities.”
- **COLLABORATION** – “The complexity of the public service landscape can stifle the integration that we all know is the right thing to do. Only we as leaders can make the change, and as a wise colleague from a London borough said to me recently: ‘progress happens at the pace of trust’.”
- **ASSETS NOT DEFICITS** – “We are hard-wired to think about challenges and problems rather than opportunities and solutions. Our mindset matters. We need to see the glass as half-full and inspire citizens to work with us to make our great communities even better.”
- **DIGITAL** – “This revolution is happening so quickly, local government is struggling to keep up. As technology fundamentally changes how we live our lives, we need to make sure it underpins how we transform public services.”
- **VOLUNTARY SECTOR** – “It is easy to forget about the latent capacity and value of the voluntary sector and see them as just another provider. They need to be our equal partner, who, in my experience, bring the insight, expertise, and capacity that can make the difference. Keep talking (and, more importantly, listening) to your local voluntary sector.”
- **SYSTEM LEADERSHIP** – “This is very much the order of the day and rightly so, but we often talk about the system in the abstract. We are the system, and if we want to change it, we need to change too. We need to challenge ourselves every day and ask: ‘does this help the system provider better outcomes for citizens and communities?’”
- **PLACE** – “People live in communities and this is where they feel the impact of our strategies the most. Inevitably, strategic leaders can be very remote from our communities. Spend time in communities talking to people, members, and front-line colleagues. This is where the most valuable wisdom will be found.’ Leaders at all levels from across Staffordshire have shaped our thinking and there is a culpable sense of excitement about our vision for the future. To deliver our vision, we need to go way beyond a traditional leadership programme. We need to unleash a wave of optimism, creativity, and responsibility at every level of the system.”