

Interlink and Voluntary Sector Response to Community Strategy

1.0 Introduction

Interlink have consulted the Children and Young Peoples Network, Health and Social Care and Well-being Network, Social Enterprise Forum, Communities First, Interlink Executive Committee and Executive Policy Committee and the Equalities and Social Justice Group in RCT.

2.0 Consultation and Engagement

The Community Strategy describes a number of strategic partnerships, and it suggests these partnership's strategies form the basis of the document. The Health, Social Care and Well-Being and Fframwaith have a well developed process of community / voluntary sector and service user involvement, but we are not aware of how this has been achieved in other areas.

Many partnerships either have no effective engagement processes or do not even hold meetings (in reality, they do not exist). It is not clear how the priorities have been developed or decided upon, with whom and when and therefore their legitimacy or efficacy. Considering the lack of engagement of community and voluntary groups in addition to the wider public, it is clear the Community Strategy is not in a position to fully take into account many voices in the community let alone minority and excluded groups.

One example of where this is a cause for concern is regeneration where there is a lack of collaboration, engagement, discussion, process, partnership meetings and information sharing. This has led to confusion over the HARP process. While in other local authorities in the Heads of the Valley area there has been community consultation and engagement, this has not happened in RCT. The result is a lower level of applications for funding to community and voluntary sector groups from the HoV programme. Interlink has been looking to improve play provision in the north of the Borough, and have been informed an application can only proceed if the project is included within the HARP priorities. To our knowledge, there does not seem to be a process for this to happen.

3.0 Issues for the Community and Voluntary Sector in RCT

The lack of engagement is probably the reason there is no mention of several priority issues for communities in RCT, for example, community development, Communities First, community regeneration and social enterprise.

For example, the focus is almost entirely on town centre regeneration, with no discussion around the role of town centres in relation to their surrounding catchment and communities. This would highlight the need for improved transport between communities for people to travel to work.

4.0 Children and Young People

There is a concern around the natural tendency to prioritise those things that can be controlled and measured. The Community Strategy puts too narrow an emphasis on formal

education and the statutory sector. A key issues for our communities is to address the needs of children and young people in their communities, of which provision in school is one element, though an important one. There is no evidence as yet that E3+ is meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged children, older children or those that do not engage in school. This is not a criticism but a comment on the need to continue to develop and support the programme to become more community focussed.

We welcome the new emphasis from the Youth Service on addressing these issues and progress against meeting the needs of children not engaged in formal learning needs to be monitored and assessed. Any further reductions in youth service provision (whether provided by the statutory or voluntary sector) will put vulnerable young people at risk and should be prevented.

In general there needs to be greater emphasis on addressing the needs of the most vulnerable children and young people irrespective of their age and providing support, advice and information within their communities. We welcome the emphasis on cluster based working but need to ensure this engages the community and voluntary sector at a strategic level and does not lead to a dilution in the influence of the sector as a whole. There are gaps in service for vulnerable children between 2 and 8 years gaps at transition points that should be further investigated and acted upon.

5.0 Communication and Transparency

The role and performance of partnerships needs to be reviewed, taking account for the need of collaboration between partnerships to ensure we avoid working in silos. Partnerships could provide better added value through collaboration to meet shared challenges. We believe some central coordination and professional support is required for the effective management and performance of strategic partnerships. A better, common performance management framework, with the opportunity for challenge and audit, linked to the LSB, would be of benefit. However, this needs to build on the success of the best performing partnerships, Fframwaith being the most mature in terms of partnership working, challenge and community and service user engagement. A note should be made of the role of the Chairs of partnerships. Often Councillors are often put in an unfair position, often with no previous knowledge of the area of work, and this leads to ineffective work load. Councillors from Cabinet should be a key player in all partnerships in terms of challenge and the democratic process, they cannot fulfil this role as Chair Person.

Any review needs to take into account the views of the community and voluntary sector, which has the ability to provide a different more holistic perspective on performance and can introduce constructive challenge into the system. The community and voluntary sector can help to champion prevention and early intervention, and are key providers of local services delivered within communities. The value of these services and developing capacity and skills within communities can be lost in a target driven culture. There is a danger that services are commissioned on the basis of targets we are able to measure rather than addressing local needs and priorities. It is easier to measure outputs rather than outcomes for citizens.

The communication and coordination of community planning could be improved. Considering the large sums of public money invested in strategic partnership decision making, there is a lack of openness, transparency and information related to the structures, processes and decisions made that affect citizens and communities in RCT. We also

acknowledge their is room for streamlining processes which naturally grow in size and complexity over time.

6.0 Strategic Approach to Collaboration with the Voluntary Sector

While the voluntary sector is well supported in RCT and relations with the statutory sector, on the whole, are excellent, there is an opportunity to work more productively and effectively with the Sector, through Interlink and other agencies, including Communities First Partnerships. Currently, the lack of a clear strategic approach to working with the community and voluntary sector is a missed opportunity and resources could be used more effectively.

If the people and communities within RCT are to have a successful future, they must be supported to take action themselves to address local priorities. They should seek the support of the statutory sector but not rely on it. Prevention needs to be a much higher priority if we aim to improve community well-being and are able to afford in the future acceptable levels of support to the most vulnerable groups in RCT. Resources need to be targeted at priority outcomes with a full review of voluntary sector funding, probably best achieved in a staged process, addressing first areas that are currently poorly developed, for example regeneration.

7.0 Recommendations:

1. The final version of the Community Strategy is updated in terms of its accuracy related to current strategic partnerships and their plans, as it is confusing and misleading to suggest environment and regeneration partnerships exist.
2. The Strategy is assessed for gaps in terms of the existing consultation and engagement process and measures taken to address these gaps, possibly under the umbrella of an Equalities Impact Assessment.
3. The Community Strategy specifically mentions making progress on community consultation and engagement as a bedrock of community planning. The Community Strategy is used as an opportunity to engage citizens and communities now and in the future. There needs to be clarity and opportunity for further engagement and involvement of citizens and communities in community planning on a number of levels through different processes and agencies. Citizens and communities are invited to be involved in this process through a Consultation and Participation Strategy.
4. Those priorities identified by partnerships that have not met, not engaged with the wider public and are not agreed by partners are revisited and a process put in place to give those priorities some form of legitimacy.
5. The Strategy needs to highlights the essential role of community development and community regeneration in order to address the need for communities to develop the skills and capacities to address their own priorities. For example, the Strategy should specifically mention the need to develop and support local community economic development through developing social enterprises and community asset transfer.
6. The Strategy puts a greater emphasis on prevention and early intervention, and mentions developing 'active communities' and encouraging volunteering, with individual citizens and communities able and supported to take action for

themselves. This can be acted upon through the community and voluntary sector, cluster working and a strategic approach to Communities First.

7. The Strategy making specific reference to meeting the needs of children and young people in their communities outside of the school environment.
8. There is a review of strategic partnerships and their performance, and the voluntary sector is engaged, , through Interlink, is integral to any review.
9. Better use is made of the good relationships between sectors in RCT by reviewing the strategic role of the voluntary sector. The community and voluntary sector can better address the needs and priorities in RCT through improved collaboration and commissioning of services. Interlink should be requested to take this forward with the statutory sector through a Compact agreement, reporting directly to the Local Service Board.