

Derby City Partnership
An approach to improving community engagement
Using cost benefit information

What is it?

Derby City Partnership is the Strategic Partnership for the City, bringing together a range of partners and stakeholders to work together to deliver its Sustainable Community Strategy. There is long-standing well established, effective partnership working in Derby and the partnership was keen to learn from best practice. In the new working environment with a new government and cuts in public sector resources, a key barrier was identified - a lack of understanding of what is being spent on engagement, the range of engagement mechanisms and what they produce – what are outcomes from consultation and engagement and what has changed as a result of the activity? DCP were interested to gather evidence to review the costs across the partner agencies.

There is a wealth of engagement in Derby – e.g. geographic /neighbourhood forums, communities of interest forums, groups who look at specific service issues such as tenants groups or police liaison and more. However initial evidence pointed to some duplication and a lack of clarity about impact. The partnership was willing and open to looking at value for money and cost effectiveness. This case study focuses on the process and how other areas might learn from the exercise – changes as a result of the information are currently under consideration.

What you can do!

Make a start – if you are involved in developing a community engagement strategy, or are engaging with communities – collect this type of information at the start and get people on board with logging costs and benefits.

Be prepared - Ask partners for a green light to collect and share information – with resources being constrained these questions are vital to demonstrate the value of engaging with communities and someone soon will ask the question if you don't.

The approach and key stages of the project

The approach has four main steps – but before starting step one, a small Steering Group was set up to agree the scope, methodology, participants, the outcomes required, unblock problems and test out ideas. The work was project managed to agreed deadlines. The questionnaires and forms of enquiry used to gather information are available to view and be adapted for your own area on the EMEP Community of Practice details below.

1. Setting the vision – what do you want communities to be able to do?

In order to gather information the Empowering Authorities Framework was adapted to reflect local issues in Derby and the change in government thinking. This stage will be critical in any similar project as you will need to review and judge the information gathered against what you are trying to achieve – this means not only looking at whether the mechanism was successful in engaging the communities it set out to - but also to look at whether or not it contributes to the vision.

This was a positive approach for Derby where there was a high level of consensus on what the vision should be and asking about what practically communities should be able to do –helped focus on where there might be skills gaps or opportunities to learn from others in the city with those skills. **Derby's vision focused on communities:** that have a sense of pride, are actively involved – i.e. empowered to take action for themselves and that partners fully co-operate with communities – joint working between all local service providers, ability for communities to shape / co-design /co-produce local services.

2. Establishing the costs

This is hard to do for a number of reasons – people don't have the info to hand and it is hard to identify costs especially of officer time as work on engagement is often only a part of someone's job. It's important to enquire about what the resources allocated actually pay for and if there are any matched funding or income to consider. It's worth checking if a small group of finance officers could work with you and brief them on what you are trying to achieve. Stick at it! Derby were surprised at the level of costs identified – and were clear that they hadn't managed to quantify all the costs involved.

3. Assessing benefits

Work on assessing benefits can be even trickier – partially because the mechanisms to check what has happened as a result of the community engagement just aren't in place. For example whether or not an exercise in community engagement lead to a change in service delivery is hard to evidence – many of the benefits are indirect for example and how successful a piece of community engagement is will also depend not on the group or mechanism chosen but also on the willingness of the agency asking the question to listen and respond. How effective the engagement is and what it leads to can also depend on very practical considerations such as when the engagement took place or where or how it was communicated.

Output data e.g. numbers of people involved can be helpful and other useful questions include:

What confirmed efficiencies are there? Or reduced transaction costs? What estimated (quantifiable) savings are there? What confirmed efficiencies are there? Or reduced transaction costs? What costs would otherwise been incurred by partners / services provided by partners. More detail on the sorts of questions to ask is available –see below. Derby found information very patchy but there were some great examples of best practice.

4. Identifying efficiencies for the way forward – accepting the challenges.

This work is not a traditional cost benefit analysis where the next stage would be to calculate a monetary value for the impacts (e.g. net present value.) Due to the gaps in information and the resources available for the project, it was accepted as a work in progress. But in presenting both estimated costs and benefits side by side to partners the picture was clearly both illuminating and challenging. A key issue in discussing potential ideas around efficiencies was to bring in evidence from other cost benefit exercises – it was hard to find comparable information from other areas as everywhere is different but there is a growing body of information covering particular issues like: costs of crime and of family interventions, education interventions. This kind of information can give your area a richer picture to consider and provide different views about how to achieve efficiencies. Make any assumptions you have made clear.

What's new and different?

- Many reviews of community engagement focus on how to reach communities and best practice in relation to mechanisms required. By looking at the resources used and the benefits envisaged it has given partners a clear view of the situation and a sound basis to make decisions on community engagement in future. It can be scary to open up to such scrutiny but it can enable an honest and open debate that can shift thinking and move you on.
- The process of establishing the vision for what partners wanted communities to actually do in practice helped colleagues understand the shift required from the existing arrangements to those that would meet the new ambitions. It also then asked questions of partners e.g. if we want communities to be reliant in line with the Big Society government idea – what skills would be needed.

What are the results? – (Please note the project has been considered by the DCP partnership and at time of print is going to Derby City Council Chief Officers and Members)

The key messages for Derby were that:

- There are lots of good practice examples of engagement in Derby and lots of positives to build on.
- There is much clearer evidence of costs of engagement across DCP partners – the amount of resource deployed in the range of different engagement mechanisms was originally hidden (purely because no-one had asked the questions before – particularly in relation to staff time.)
- Resources are not always focused in the right place – particularly for the new operating environment (it will take time to shift resources away from specifically looking at the old NI4 indicator around communities influencing service delivery to the new vision described above) AND critically Derby has far too many different engagement mechanisms and this can be confusing for agencies and communities.
- There is a clear opportunity for Derby City Partnership to co-ordinate and manage engagement across the city to bring significant savings and benefits from skills of staff in different agencies with community engagement roles.

- There are efficiencies to be made in the way neighbourhood arrangements work in Derby – this is an area of significant cost but where there was an acknowledgement that it isn't working effectively across the city – some areas work had good evidence of impact /benefit others not so. Another positive result from the project is that additional support has been provided from EMEP to work with local partners to agree the most appropriate to organise things in neighbourhoods e.g. including agreements on arrangements in mixed party wards, remove waste on neighbourhood forums with low turnout and going out to communities where they are already meeting not creating new ways.
- Commissioning activity may help – Derby could review resources that are tied up in staff that you could use to commission others to do it and there is a clear opportunity to make more effective use of local VCS groups.

Lessons learned

1. Set up a small steering group to help with scoping, planning and information needs, and avoid surprises.
2. Be realistic - keep the scope of the review tight it is likely to be difficult to capture everything that is going on.
3. Remember that in making judgements about cost / effectiveness on community engagement – look at both how you hear the voices of communities and how prepared agencies are to listen.
4. Horses for courses! – make sure the mechanism for engagement is appropriate to the information you want to hear and relevant to the communities or users involved. Service specific mechanisms for particular users are likely to be more cost effective than general all purpose approaches.

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For details on the approach see EMEP Community of Practice