

Durham Community Engagement Review

Presentation of Headline Findings

January 2023

Introduction

ERS Ltd. commissioned in June 2022 to undertake a comprehensive review of community engagement process delivered by Durham County Council. The inclusive approach involved:

- Attendance at each AAP Board to observe activity, highlight the review and listen to perspectives of Board Members. At each meeting, the option for Board Members to contact ERS and arrange a one-to-one meeting was offered.
- One to one and small group meetings with a wider range of DCC staff, including Senior Managers, Heads of Service, AAP staff at all levels and role, and Towns & Villages support staff.
- Engagement with a number of County Councillors via one to one meetings alongside a session with informal Cabinet.
- One to one and small group interviews with wider partners including Durham Community Partnership, Durham Police, OPCC, Fire Service, Heath partners, and a number of voluntary sector partners that have accessed funding.
- Online workshops from representatives from Town and Parish Councils.
- Circulation and analysis of a stakeholder e-survey that generated 267 responses.
- Desk based review of local documentation and data alongside a review of national policy and good practice.

Strengths of the Current AAP Approach

The existing model of community engagement offer a number of positives to communities and wider partners:

- The AAPs are well established and provide a focus for informing, enabling, and monitoring activity in response on identified community priorities.
- AAP Board meetings largely operate well in prioritising and managing a range of funding streams.
- The process for developing, appraising and agreeing projects is robust.
- AAP Boards provide a space for DCC and partners to consult on key strategies.
- Task and Finish Groups are effective in developing ideas and solutions to local issues.
- AAP capacity is invaluable during times of crisis, including the pandemic and the response to Storm Arwen.
- AAP Staff Team are exceptionally well regarded and are open to looking at new approaches to delivering positive change for communities.

Rationale for revising the current approach

The existing model of community engagement offer a number of positives to communities and wider partners:

- The diversity and effectiveness of community outreach and engagement has reduced over recent years, in part due to resource pressures across the team.
- Regular and direct community involvement in AAP Boards is limited to a relatively small number of individuals per AAP, although some areas do perform better in this regard.
- AAP approach has become too focussed upon managing funding and not sufficiently focussed on the wider initial AAP objectives of engagement, empowerment and performance review.
- Significant potential exists to involve many more people via enhanced community engagement and community development.
- Opportunities to shape policy or include the voice of diverse communities in partner consultations channelled via the AAP Board are limited.
- AAP Board meetings routinely spend too much time discussing and agreeing funding proposals rather than enabling open and meaningful consideration of community issues.

Rationale for revising the current approach

The existing model of community engagement offer a number of positives to communities and wider partners:

- AAP Board meetings routinely spend too much time discussing and agreeing funding proposals rather than enabling open and meaningful consideration of community issues.
- It is not always clear how the AAPs' identification of local needs is considered in the development of wider strategy and policy by wider partners.
- Funding priorities are driven by community priorities and not sufficiently informed by quantitative data.
- Whilst the process of agreeing individual projects is robust, it draws considerable staff resource that should be utilised engaging directly with communities.
- The funding approval process is intensive for applicants, especially those repeating the process year on year for the same type of intervention. Some organisations do not apply for funding due to process barriers.
- There are inconsistencies in how some AAPs operate and some AAP Boards do not function consistently well. The potential for political conflict in some AAPs reduces the effectiveness of partnership working by making Board Meetings more combative in tone. This can act as a disincentive for non-politically motivated people to participate.

Recommended Changes

Our review includes a number of significant changes in how DCC lead and manage community engagement, community development and community capacity building:

- A hyper-local community engagement network is important if DCC is to understand and respond to local needs effectively and involve community partners in creating local action. This is especially relevant in times of crisis, such as the pandemic or storms that cause significant disruption.
- Cessation of the current AAP process and associated Boards, to be replaced by more flexible Community Networks that place greater emphasis on community engagement, community development and community capacity building. The new system, twinned with streamlining funding allocation processes, will enable staff resources to focus more on community development activity.
- The Community Networks approach will enhance opportunities for all communities to better engage in issues that impact their lives. They will operate to identify local assets and needs, create opportunities for local action, partnership collaboration, volunteering and co-production of services more comprehensively.
- Propose 14 Community Networks. Option to retain current boundaries or amend to reflect the Primary Care Networks (Derwentside PCN split into two), albeit rounded to align with the new electoral ward boundaries due to come into effect in 2025. This latter point would improve alignment with Neighbourhood Budget delivery. Community Networks would have no decision-making role for funding.

Recommended Changes

Our review includes a number of significant changes in how funding is determined:

- Streamline the project approval process, enabling staff to allocate more time to working with communities.
- Replace the Area Budget with a Strategic Grant process that allocates funding on a four-year funding cycle, enabling larger and more strategic projects to be funded that enhance opportunities to attract match-funding. Projects will be developed by DCC Senior Community Coordinators, informed by Community Networks and agreed by a sub-group of the County Durham Partnership.
- The Neighbourhood Budget would largely remain as present. There would be no requirement for County Councillors to report funding priorities to Community Networks.
- Prioritisation of funding would be improved by increased analysis of data; wider and more targeted engagement with all communities to inform priorities; greater collaboration across Community Network areas to coordinate interventions over a longer time period and over a wider geographical area; enhanced monitoring of impact and value for money; and remove the perception that funding decisions are made on the views of a relatively limited number of community representatives who often benefit directly from funding.
- Community Development Workers would have access to a flexible Community Chest pot to allocate small amounts of funding to kickstart new initiatives. Community Network staff would be based in local community venues.