

Participation and Communication Review

Prepared for Forest Row Parish Council PR committee

Brad Scott

version 0.3: 9 November 2008

1. Introduction

This document assumes the following objective for the FRPC PR committee:

To facilitate and support the engagement of the entire community of Forest Row parish to make it an ever-thriving, vibrant and supportive place to be

By reviewing current activities and those of other parishes, towns and community groups, we can identify a number of different sorts of activities that could help enhance community engagement in Forest Row. This is an ongoing, never-ending process, but one that is central to our activities.

Not all community engagement/participation activity is mediated by the Parish Council, and nor need it be. However, it is important to build up, develop and maintain a culture of engagement within and across the community; with a continually engaged community it is easier to solicit opinion, get feedback and support. In this way we can develop a virtuous circle of communications and participation.

2. Current activities

Forest Row Parish Council is already doing a great deal to support community engagement:

- Noticeboards
- Newslink
- FRPC website
- Community Liaison Group
- Facebook page
- Press releases to:
 - East Grinstead Courier and Observer
 - Forest Row News
 - Parish News
 - forestrow.org
- Awards:
 - Citizen of the Year award
 - Best Kept Garden and related awards
 - Best Kept Allotment
 - Best Dressed Christmas Window

In addition, the Parish Council runs the following occasional community activities:

- public meetings relating to specific topics
- questionnaire-based surveys
- community vision-building/planning (Parish Plan)

3. Potential activities

One can imagine a wide range of different sorts of activities to engage a community, and there is a wide spectrum of what community engagement activity might look like. The following table is taken from the document 'Models of Community Engagement' from the Scottish Community Development Centre [5], and summarises the different kinds of approaches that are possible.

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Strategic level – setting priorities</i>	<i>Delivery – decisions on implementation</i>	<i>Community control over resources</i>
1. Passive, one way People are informed about what has been decided: information shared between professionals only	Community and user groups, newsletters	Community and user groups, newsletters	Information made available to community on opportunities for resource control (eg grants or awards schemes)
2. Reactive ‘community consultation’ People are consulted or answer questions – the process does not concede any share in decision-making. Professionals under no obligation to take on board peoples’ views	Questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, panels and juries	Community groups and forums respond to service proposals. Users in the minority on management committees	Meetings with groups and community interests to explore opportunities for resource transfer
3. Proactive ‘community participation’ Communities influence priorities, resource use and service provision to be provided through the Community Planning Partnership	Joint planning groups and forums. Some cooptions to statutory committees	Joint management arrangements over specific projects and activities	Local service development on a franchise basis: terms and conditions set by the ‘purchaser’
4. Interactive or Partnership working People participate in joint analysis, development of action plans and the strengthening of local groups and institutions. Learning methodologies are used to seek multiple perspectives, and groups decide how resources are used.	Support is provided for community to have equivalent access to expertise, advice and training	Users / community has management control of specified services	Local service provision with joint community / public sector control, or negotiated contracts
5. Community mobilisation / empowerment People participate by taking initiatives independently to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for the resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how those resources are used.	Pressure group and campaign activity to influence policy	Complete community authority for management of services	Service provision independently funded and managed by the community

Approach	Strategic level – setting priorities	Delivery – decisions on implementation	Community control over resources
6. Entrusted community control As above, but community also influences prioritisation and control of service provision or associated budgets	Community has leading voice in determining priorities in policy	Community has leading voice in delivery of public services	Community making decisions over public budget allocation

At present, the Parish Council primarily adopts the first three community engagement methods. These can be extended, and opportunities for other activities can be reviewed.

The following objectives of FRPC communications and participation activities can be proposed (derived from those of Offerton Park Parish Council [1]):

- To effectively inform residents and stakeholders of the aims, objectives and activity of the Parish Council;
- To build the capacity and motivation of residents and stakeholders to be involved with the Parish Council or any other community-based group in Forest Row;
- To use a variety of communication and participation methods to ensure that the whole community is engaged, listened to and informed; and
- To build trust by being open and transparent.

Participation by residents of Forest Row is a desirable action, not only in Parish Council business, but throughout the community. Forest Row already is a lively engaged community, but there may be more activity that could be developed over time.

The Parish Council already adopts important participatory methods, including public meetings, questionnaires, the Community Liaison Group, or even informal chats with residents over a cup of tea. All are invaluable means of finding out and disseminating information, and building community.

A number of sources describe a range of participatory methods that can be considered: Dundee City Council's *Community Engagement Toolkit* [3]; the guide *How to Consult your Users* [4]; and the book *Participation Works!* [7].

Not all methods are suitable for all locations and all sectors of the population. However, depending on the objective of the research, several of the techniques should be tried out in the coming years. Some activities may be able to be tied in with others; for example, one-to-one conversations with some of the older residents may be the most effective means of gathering information from that group. That process could be effectively tied with an oral history project, either from the schools or other parts of the community.

4. Initial recommendations

This list of recommendations for ongoing communication and participation activity focusses more on the communication end of the spectrum at the present time. However, more participatory methods should be reviewed and included among the range of Parish Council activities as our community engagement activities develop.

Initially, pushing out regular small news items through a variety of different routes is an effective way of increasing the general visibility of the Parish Council and its activities.

New information channels

1. Write monthly half page 'News from the Parish Council' for *Forest Row News*
 - Keeps current activities of the Parish Council in residents' consciousness
2. Write (half)-termly 'News from the Parish Council' for community publications with a wide distribution (eg Michael Hall Friday Flier, Parish Magazine)
 - To include items of Parish Council activity that are of relevance to that group (eg double yellow lines on Priory Road, 30mph speed limit etc)
3. Support the development of a community email list on forestrow.org
 - Could easily have over 1000 contacts on the list within 2-3 years
 - A weekly email could include a link to the What's On in Forest Row news sheet, which will be the initial incentive for signing up
 - Over time, it could include other occasional news items, including those from the Parish Council
 - Effective means of quickly communicating with a large part of the village
 - Recommend that any email addresses received from the current questionnaire are used to seed the database
4. Use the calendar on forestrow.org to promote all Parish Council events
 - including all Parish Council meetings (since public questions are allowed)
 - will then be listed in What's On in Forest Row newsheet, and will increase visibility of events
5. Financially support the What's On in Forest Row newsheet
 - This is an excellent community-based listing, making available in print the data from forestrow.org
 - Supports community participation and extends information availability to those who do not have internet access
 - Parish Council support should be visible on the print-out

This committee

6. Change the name of the PR committee to Participation and Communication Committee
 - Is a more accurate descriptor of what the committee does
 - Removes the sense of 'spin' that PR implies
7. Develop a mission for Forest Row Parish Council (see Hawkwell, Essex: "To develop and sustain a sense of community within the parish of Hawkwell by addressing environmental, economic and social issues and delivering quality services to our parishioners")
 - Informs terms of reference of committees and provides summary benchmark of what we are aiming to do

Website

8. Add page on website describing the role, function and responsibilities of the Parish Council
 - Could also include summary information about where responsibility resides for other areas
9. Conduct review of other good parish council websites for useful features to add to ours:
 - add information about the Burial ground
 - add a search box
 - include data feed of events from forestrow.org
 - add members interests forms as other PCs already do (see Offerton Park, Greater Manchester: <http://tinyurl.com/6lsd72>)
 - add standing orders, code of conduct, committees' terms of reference, accounts etc (see <http://www.hawkwellparishcouncil.gov.uk/governance.asp>)
 - Statement of Freedom of Information policy (see Aldenham, Herts, <http://www.aldenham.gov.uk/foia.shtm>)
10. Incorporate a blog into the Parish Council website to replace the current News page (see example on <http://forestrowfilmsociety.org/news> which uses a Wordpress blog)
 - Very easy to maintain
 - Allows users to add comments to individual news items (needs light moderation)
 - Serve as a repository for Parish Council Press Releases
 - Automatically produces Parish Council news items as RSS feed, so can be incorporated into other web sites (eg forestrow.org) or people can add them to their own home page, or via an RSS reader
 - Could be used for: announcing publication of meeting minutes, with one or two key points; items about visible Parish Council activities (bus shelters, questionnaire, flood forum, presence at Fun Day, public meetings etc).
11. Conduct accessibility and usability review of website
 - Legal requirement not to discriminate against any users (Disability Discrimination Act)
 - Ensure site works with text-to-speech browsers and can be easily enlarged
 - Change left-hand navigation buttons from images to text
 - Ensure documents posted to the website are in pdf format not Word
 - Retains font and formatting of the original and is better accessibility practice on the web

Medium to longer term

12. Use text messaging for communicating with certain groups or specific message types

- The Clickatell service allows for cheap bulk text messaging
 - Would need to set up a means of collecting mobile phone data
 - Could be used for, eg flood alerting, community markets
13. Utilise online survey methods for short surveys alongside Newslink
- Will generate higher response rates from the community as a whole
14. Utilise simple online polls (eg Holme Valley:
<http://www.holmevalleyparishcouncil.gov.uk/polls.htm>)
- Not especially scientific but can be useful for less important issues
 - Encourages participation

5. Sources

Parish Council Blogs

- Lickey and Blackwell (Worcestershire) blog: <http://www.parishblog.org/>
- Denmead (Hampshire) has news pages (http://www.denmeadparishcouncil.co.uk/news_main.php?page=1&m=10) and a blog <http://westofwaterlooville.wordpress.com/>
- Little Wenlock blog <http://www.littlewenlock.org/blog/>

Parish Council websites

- Hawkwell (Essex): <http://www.hawkwellparishcouncil.gov.uk/>
- Lancing: <http://www.lancingparishcouncil.gov.uk/>
- Offerton Park: <http://www.offertonparkparishcouncil.gov.uk/>
- Denmead (Hants): <http://www.denmeadparishcouncil.co.uk/>
- Lindfield: <http://www.lindfieldparishcouncil.org.uk/survey.htm> (includes summary information about recent survey)

References

1. 'Communications Strategy' (2006) Offerton Park Parish Council
2. 'Communications Strategy 2005-8' (2005) Mid-Devon District Council
3. 'Community Engagement Toolkit' (2004) Dundee City Council. <http://tinyurl.com/573fz5> [pdf]
4. 'How to Consult your Users' Service First <http://tinyurl.com/57cjes> [pdf]
5. 'Models of Community Engagement' (2002) Scottish Community Development Centre. <http://tinyurl.com/6nbau5> [pdf]
6. 'Options Fenland Communications Strategy' (2004) Fenland District Council
7. 'Participation Works! 21 techniques of community participation for the 21st century' (1998) New Economics Foundation. <http://tinyurl.com/5hksrk> [pdf]
8. 'Tidworth Community Area Communications Strategy' (2004)