

People, Performance and Development Committee
21 July 2014

Review of the “Working together” Workshops and future plans

Purpose of the report:

The “Working Together” workshops were endorsed by the People, Performance and Development Committee (PPDC) and championed by the Local Committee Chairman’s Group. This report is being brought to People, Performance and Development Committee to update on the progress of the “Working Together” workshops so far and outline the next steps, as agreed with the Leader and supported by the Local Committee Chairman’s Group.

This report is being brought to People, Performance and Development Committee because the Committee will promote organisational development and promote equalities and diversity, according to the Scheme of Delegation.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

- note the outcomes from the “Working Together” workshops that have already taken place
- endorse the next steps as agreed with the Leader
- champion the wider aims of the “Working Together” programme throughout the organisation
- support the additional “Working Together” sessions as a way for Members to find out more about the benefits of a coaching offer for Members
- introduce an extra module for officers on "Looking at my role through the Member Lens - getting better outcomes for residents"

Introduction

1. Working towards the vision of a “Think Councillor, Think Resident” culture, the aim of these workshops is to build working relationships between officers and Members. Effective working relationships between officers and Members are essential to achieving the best results for our residents. This includes understanding the complimentary roles of officers and Members, the barriers to working together and what officers and Members can do to support each other to overcome issues and barriers.

Workshop delivery and attendance

2. A series of "Working Together" workshops were conducted from June 2013 to April 2014. In total 7 workshops were held. Sessions were held at various locations around the County to make it easier for local Members to attend.
3. A pilot workshop was conducted with Local Committee Chairmen and selected Members. A further two workshops were conducted with Members and highways and Community Partnership staff. Attendance at the workshops was later extended to include all Local Committee Members and also officers from other services who worked regularly with Members.
4. The workshops were developed in consultation with the Local Committee Chairman's group and Pat Frost (the Chairman of this group) championed and attended many of the sessions. The workshops were structured in the following way:
 - Introductions/Ice breaker
 - Individual and team successes from the past year
 - Individual and team concerns for the year ahead
 - What each delegate found helpful about their working relationship with officers/Members
 - What each delegate found unhelpful about their working relationship with officers/Members
 - Group discussion to build on the helpful aspects and reduce/remove the unhelpful aspects of working together
 - Group discussion to agree personal and group actions to take away
5. The workshops were well attended by County Councillors and Borough/District co-opted members. Almost 150 officers and Members attended the 7 sessions (with roughly equal attendance from officers and Members) and of these, 20 Borough/District co-opted members attended.

Feedback

6. At the end of each workshop, delegates were asked to provide their feedback on the session. A summary of the responses is provided in Annex 1.
7. The majority of officers and Members found the sessions to be, good, very good, or excellent (over 92%) with the exception of workshop 5.
8. It was not possible to run workshop 5 as planned. Instead we ran an open group discussion on improving communication in response to the dynamics in the room. A key lesson identified from this workshop, was the need to ensure that all Members and officers involved in a Working Together workshop clearly understood and endorsed the stated aims of the session prior to its commencement.
9. The majority found the workshops to be helpful for the following reasons:
 - having the opportunity to meet elected Members/staff and listen to what people consider helpful/unhelpful
 - having open and honest discussions with officers and Members
 - building better understanding and relationships between officers and Members

Key issues

10. The majority of officers and Members felt that they worked well together and the workshops allowed the opportunity for delegates to share ideas on how to improve their working relationship:

10.1 What they found helpful in their officer/member relationships

- Honesty, trust, respect and informal dialogue
- Partnership working/working together
- Understanding each other's roles
- Building relationships with officers/Members
- Gathering member input at an early stage
- Making use of member's local knowledge and networks
- Officers who are responsive and provide relevant information

10.2 What they found unhelpful in their officer/member relationships

- Lack of respect and making assumptions about each other's roles
- Members who do not manage resident expectations
- Lack of response to e-mails and calls
- Members not being given all the information
- Officers not explaining the reasons for their decisions
- Difficult relationships between County and Borough/District Members in some areas
- Not keeping each other informed
- Members not knowing who to contact
- Officers using technical jargon
- IT issues were identified as hindering responsiveness
- Officers should always look at what they are doing through the eyes of the Member
- Officers could make more of the relationship with Members for the benefit of the residents.

These key issues have been grouped into three areas; building trust and respect; improving communication; providing training and support and the relevant actions supporting these areas are outlined below (see 14)

Building on the Working Together sessions – Future Plans

11. It is proposed that two larger Working Together workshops are held over the next year, with a focus on, "Working together for our communities, how we can be more effective for our residents". The first workshop is planned to take place in the autumn of 2014 and to be Surrey wide in scope. The Leader will attend and introduce the workshops which will involve Borough/District Councillors, County Councillors, Officers and other key stakeholders.
12. The format of the events will differ from those sessions provided to date, with a larger attendance and round table discussions. This will facilitate a two-way exchange between officers and Members and also between County and Borough. RSVP invitations will be dispatched ahead of the event and a seating plan and name badges provided on the day. Refreshments will also be provided.

13. To enable the largest number of invited people to attend, both a day and evening session will be offered. Potential venues include the Ashcombe Suite at County Hall and Dorking Halls.
14. The “Working Together” workshops are only one part of this process. It is important that the workshops are supported by additional efforts to continually improve officer/member relationships as identified in the previous workshops. This will be achieved by the actions outlined below:

Build trust and respect

- Identify contacts from Members and services to take forward key actions. The Local Committee Chairman’s Group were keen that Local Committee Chairmen should take on this role for Members.
- Involve a County Councillor as part of the planning group for any future events. The current Chairman of the Local Committee Chairman’s Group, Pat Frost, will fulfil this role.
- Provide networking opportunities going forward
- Service leads to promote informal member visits to meet staff and improve knowledge and relationships

Improve communication

- Identify with each Member their preferred option for communication and dissemination of reports, in place of the current practise of utilising multiple channels which can be inefficient and be a source of unintended confusion
- Provide further guidance to officers on best practice for report writing (e.g. using plain English, appropriate use of technical terms, being concise) and the requirement for these to be submitted by the required deadlines.
- Improve information sharing
- Promote face-to face or telephone conversations rather than e-mail contact
- Provide clear guidance for Members on the most effective way to contact each service
- Introduce a module for officers on “Looking at my role through the Member Lens – getting better outcomes for residents”

Provide training and support:

- Review current training available and ensure that the key issues identified in the workshops are incorporated
- Promote the existing training courses available to officers to raise understanding of Member roles
- Provide officers with guidance on how to manage member expectations
- Provide Members with guidance on how to manage resident expectations

Promoting coaching skills

- Promote coaching skills to build trust and improve officer and member relationships
- The Head of HR & OD and the Head of Democratic Services will hold sessions with Members to discuss The Coaching Programme and identify the benefits of introducing a coaching offer for Members. These sessions will explore how member coaching could support them in their roles as elected representatives

15. The Community Partnership Team will be responsible for monitoring and promoting these actions which will also include circulating them to all workshop attendees. A follow up questionnaire will be sent to participants to assess the longer term impact of the sessions.

Financial and value for money implications

16. Additional resources will need to be identified to meet the cost of future sessions.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

17. The “Think Councillor, Think Resident” culture will embed the values of Equality and Diversity to support the residents of Surrey.

Risk Management Implications

18. None identified

Implications for the Council’s Priorities or Community Strategy

19. This programme supports the commitment in the Corporate Strategy ‘One County, One Team’ to develop our officers and Members to deliver high quality services for the benefit of our residents.

Next steps

- Deliver the actions identified from the Working Together workshops
- Take forward delivery of the workshops in Autumn 2014 to embed the learning from the previous workshops
- Provide updates to the Committee as required

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Annex 1: Summary of quotes from Members and officers

What did you find the most useful?

"Open discussions on good ways of building relationships"

"The opportunity to discuss and share views with Members in an informal setting"

"I found the opportunity to talk face to face and informally with officers and other elected Members to be very useful"

"The opportunity to talk face to face and informally with officers and other elected Members was very useful. It confirmed some of my views and made me think about others"

"It made me think about the achievements as well as difficulties of working together"

"Talking openly and honestly between officers and Members"

"Meeting officers from Directorates not covered by select committees. Chance to think of the 'other person's' point of view"

"Very useful opportunity to share issues with Members"

"Sharing problems, best practice and meeting new county officer"

What was the least useful?

"The session was overshadowed by ongoing disagreements between Country Councillors and Borough Councillors"

"Too much time perhaps on local issues. Needed to move on"

"It was a shame that there weren't more officers to provide 'other' views. If there were more officers, we could have sold our successes a bit more"

What would you do differently as a result of the workshop?

"Continually remember that honesty is the best policy"

"Make more time for Members; understand their motivations a bit more"

"Be more reasonable and understanding of officer problems"

"Build relationships and proactively share information (e.g. contact details)"

"Make more effort to liaise with officers"

"Ensure Members are updated, ensure my voicemail is up to date and look for opportunities to link up more"

"Organise targeted training"

"Highlight councillor e-mails in Lotus Notes to ensure a prompt response"

"Over the 5 years I've developed a Modus Operandi; meet or liaise with officers and build up trust, respect and humility. In this way we will do our best for our residents"

"Try to be more patient about timescales"

"Talk to officers more"

"Have a better understanding of SCC officers and ability to make contacts"

"Be more responsive and answer e-mails quicker"

"Invite Members to visit the services I am accountable for"

"I will proactively update the councillors with future work, successes with funding"

"More face to face meetings with officers"

Other comments

"If all actions are followed up, this session addressed all my concerns"

"Demand this should be an annual event"

"Suggest doing this on a local basis as well as on a county basis to bring together different directorates with councillors to promote local networks"

"This is not so much training rather a good networking opportunity. Might be useful as a regular, ongoing fixture"

"The messages that came out of this meeting need to be broadcast to all councillors (county and district)"

"The people who would benefit the most did not volunteer to attend this meeting"

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