

## **Reading between the lines – mainstreaming empowerment across Brighton and Hove**

**Residents' involvement in the design of a small branch library on the outskirts of Brighton, has been an inspiration for the Local Strategic Partnership. We find out how the council, along with other partners across the city, have developed a city wide approach to engagement activities.**

**This example highlights best practice against the 'mainstreaming empowerment' pillar of the IDeA's 'Framework for an Ideal Empowering Authority'.**

When Brighton and Hove City Council announced plans to build a new branch library, it should have been welcomed with open arms by the local community. The existing library was housed in a cramped, single story building with an asbestos roof. But instead of celebrating the news many of the residents were unhappy about the plans.

"This small community had already experienced a lot of disruption due to major building work in the area for the previous year. Also there was real concern that the single storey library was to be replaced by a much taller building to house more flats. The community had had enough," says Jenny Moore who at the time worked for the Trust for Developing Communities.

The council received many objections to the proposed library that was to be funded by Hanover Housing as part of an agreement to build affordable flats. Sue Harris was one such objector. "While the old library had its problem we liked the look of it – it looked a bit like a small Swiss chalet. It was hard to tell from the initial design what the new building would be like but it certainly looked very large compared to the old one. Also I live right opposite the library and the new building looked right over my house and gardens and I felt I would lose a lot of privacy," she says.

### **Consultation steering group**

As a community development worker for the area, Jenny teamed up with the council's library service to find a way of working with local people about the proposal. "We decided to form a consultation steering group, particularly ensuring people opposed to the new library development were involved. They would get to see all the plans and be able to express any concerns they might have, as well as have the opportunity to talk directly to library staff and the housing association. All their fears could be channelled through the steering group," says Jenny.

Sue Harris took up the offer. She had always been active in the community and saw the steering group as an opportunity to influence the plans for the library. “It helped us understand the plans in detail and also gave us an opportunity to put our ideas forward. The council and Hanover Housing really bent over backwards to take on board our thoughts, we didn’t feel that the plans were just forced on us. As the steering group developed it really wasn’t a case of them and us – it was all of us working together to get the most for the community,” she says.

What was also important was the degree of honesty from the council and housing association. “They always explained what was possible and what wasn’t, so we felt we were always kept in the loop and knew where we stood. What’s more senior staff also came and met us – they took it all very seriously,” Sue adds.

Jenny Moore not only helped work with the residents on the steering group but also ensured the wider community had a say in the development of the library. “While the steering group represented a lot of people in the community, there were still others in outlying areas that needed a voice. So a volunteer and I knocked on over 300 people’s doors to carry out a survey as well as speaking to people at a number of other events including a community festival.”

### **Community ideas**

As a result of all this activity, the council had a wealth of suggestions of what people would like to see in a new library. They included tea and coffee facilities, an area where people can relax and read the newspapers and a special area for children where they can display artwork. The result of all the community engagement was a library that is now truly loved by the local residents – none more so than Sue Harris even though the building still overlooks her home.

“I would never have believed I would be saying this but the library is really beautiful – we all love it. So many people use it now compared with before. Parents pop in after they drop their children off at school or older people can sit and read a newspaper in a comfy chair. There is also a computer suite which we have used to produce a community website as well as having our regular residents’ meetings here. It has helped give the community a focus and I don’t think it would have been as good without the steering group and residents’ involvement. I have nothing but praise for the way this whole process was handled,” she says.

Angie Greany works for the communities and equality team at Brighton and Hove Council. “The Coldean library is a great example of organisations working collaboratively with local people. The council and Hanover Housing were clear from the outset what was possible for the community to influence and what was not. There was no wish list that never materialised and local people appreciated this.”

The story of Coldean library features in Brighton and Hove's Community Engagement Framework produced by the Brighton and Hove Strategic Partnership. "The framework is a policy document that sets out the local strategic partnership's commitment to and understanding of community engagement in Brighton and Hove. However, it is also a practical tool as it helps define community engagement as well as sets up standards that partners should adhere to. Additionally, it sets out a series of priority actions that must be taken to improve community engagement in the city," says Angie.

**Lack of coordination**

The framework was developed after the council undertook a piece of research into community engagement in the city and found out that although there was lots of activity, much of it was ad hoc. There were plenty of examples of both good and bad practice, but just as importantly organisations weren't learning from these experiences. There was also confusion over language and what organisations meant by a range of community engagement terms. However, the biggest issue was the lack of coordination.

"The reality was that residents were being bombarded with a variety of engagement activities by all the local agencies including health service, police and the local authority," says Roger French who chairs the local strategic partnership (LSP). "In addition, there were also a range of partnership organisations that were carrying out research with local people. But despite the fact that much of the public sector wanted to know similar information, there was no coordination of efforts."

He adds, "We felt it was important for the public that we coordinated community engagement activities. At the same time this would mean a much more efficient use of resources. If an engagement event is to be held within a community it makes sense to ensure that all the agencies are aware of it happening and to share information. For example, I run Brighton and Hove busses and if such an event is going on in one of the communities, it could be a helpful way to also find out what they think of their bus service."

One of the actions coming out of the framework is a website consultation portal. This will enable all the LSP members to share information about consultation activities as well as see results. The portal enables users to search by topic, geography or organisation to see what consultations have taken place. In addition, the LSP has developed an e-learning package on community engagement that has been popular with organisations across the city.

"The consultation portal, and other learning and development activities, has helped raise awareness of the framework," says Angie. "The support has been vital to ensure that the

framework is understood and viewed as positive and helpful rather than just a new set of rules that people are frustrated by.”

## **Key lessons**

Angie Greany says she has learnt four key lessons from the process:

1 It is critical to engage all members of the LSP in the development of the framework. A working group was established with representation from all LSP members who could advise on how best to consult with their organisation, partnership or sector. This process is fairly intensive and it is important to leave enough time to get it right. The working group was supported by a small project team headed up by the council that also included the third sector, to drive the development of the framework.

2 The duty to involve is highly significant in getting senior council staff signed up to the process. Before this was introduced not all of them would have seen community engagement as relevant to them. The difficult financial outlook for the public sector has also helped focus the mind of senior managers to help ensure data, intelligence, relationships and opportunities for dialogue are maximized.

3 While the engagement process with the community and voluntary sector was very positive, it was not so smooth within the council. There was high level support from the cabinet member for communities affairs, inclusion and internal relations, and from some senior managers. However there was an assumption that if senior managers supported the framework this would be carried throughout the directorates. This was not always the case as the channels for dissemination were not as effective as assumed. In hindsight more engagement work should have been carried out within the council as it was with other partners.

4 The involvement of the council’s scrutiny committee will be key to developing the framework. It has the role of monitoring how the framework is used and will receive twice yearly updates to feed into the LSP. This will include calling to account any organisations that are not consistently working to the framework standards.

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