



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Assessment 2

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Reflective evaluation of Sutton Councils' community involvement standards and procedures

Participating in civic life and educating oneself about societal problems raises consciousness and encourages us to consider alternative perspectives on the interplay of roles and relationships that shape our society. For an understanding of how the things that most often impact our participation in the society we have now might affect us, we need to be aware and concerned about the society in which we live.

“Engagement is a multidimensional and relational concept with cognitive, affective, and behavioural attributes that lead to connection, participation, and involvement” (Johnston, 2010). Through involvement, community engagement tries to address socially located challenges affecting varied community groups and environments.

As outlined in the “Principles of community engagement” report (ATSDR, 2015), there are nine principles to the successful involvement of stakeholders:

- Clarify the purposes or objectives of the engagement initiative and the communities you wish to engage.

Those looking for community involvement should explain the benefits of doing so, be ready for a range of responses, and compensate people fairly for their time. Intentions for community involvement might range from addressing a specific problem to fostering general progress in the area. Leaders of community engagement initiatives should be very clear on their goals, such as gathering data, information, advice, and feedback or forming partnerships and dividing responsibilities. They should also be particular about the target audience, whether that be by age range, institution type, economic bracket, race/ethnicity, or some other criterion. The parameters of the engagement endeavour will be established by the responses to these questions.

- Get to know your community.

Acquire an understanding of the community's culture, economic situation, social networks, governmental and authority structures, norms and values, demographic patterns, history, and past engagement with various programmes by external organisations. Determine how the community perceives those who are initiating engagement activities.

- Establishing a relationship

Visit the community, establish relationships, cultivate trust, work together with both professional and informal authority, and solicit the commitment of community organisations and leaders in order to develop processes for engaging the community.

- Acknowledge that mutual autonomy is the duty and privilege of all members of a community. An external institution should not assume it has the ability to grant a community the authority to act in its own self-interest.

When individuals care about the problems being solved in their community, have some say in the matter, and believe they can make a difference, they are more inclined to get engaged. When individuals perceive that the advantages of participation surpass its expenses (e.g., time, energy, money), and when they have faith in the openness and support of the participation process and the surrounding organisational atmosphere, they are more likely to get involved.

- Collaborate with the community.

Participants in a collaboration should be able to offer a meaningful contribution to the pursuit of development. They should know the opportunity for co-learning. Parties involved in such a relationship carry a significant responsibility for the outcome of an endeavour.

- Recognize and respect the diversity of the community.

Variations in a community's culture, language, race, ethnicity, age, gender, mobility, literacy, and spheres of interest can all contribute to its diversity. Strategies for community involvement should be sensitive to and supportive of existing cultural norms, as well as conscious of the many contributions made by individuals and groups to the community at large.

- Identify and mobilize community resources.

The knowledge, expertise, and connections of individuals and groups within a community are considered valuable resources. Mobilising infrastructure, resources, skills, and economic power from individuals and institutions is essential for decision-making and action.

- Share control over actions and be prepared to meet changing needs.

In order to be effective, community action must be both long-lasting and controllable. Relationships will shift, as will the ways in which various organisations and people display

their ability to take action. Those leading the charge must be flexible enough to foresee and accommodate these shifts.

- Long-term commitment between the involved parties

Community partnerships have various stages of development. It takes time to build trust and assist communities in developing the ability and foundation to execute effective community action. Continuous technical support and training may be required for allies to create an organisation, acquire resources, organise coalitions, engage in partnerships, and handle disputes.

To establish successful community collaboration, all parties must attempt to comprehend the perspectives of participants - members of a neighbourhood, religious organisation, health institution or community organisation.

This essay will reflect on principles, standards and strategies currently implemented by Sutton Council in relation to engaging the local community and looks into ways to improve communication and involvement methods in order to enhance stakeholders' participation in community affairs.

Being a resident of the council for over two years, it wasn't until I had to research the local council with regards to writing my first assignment in Community Engagement that I found how my local council engages its residents and how local residents can influence the councils' affairs. My research involved information on how community involvement principles and standards are implemented in the councils' policies and how their execution is observed.

As stated in the "London Borough of Sutton Community engagement strategy 2008 – 2011", "The Council's vision is to 'build a community in which all can take part and all can take pride'". The council's vision is set on the foundation of core values such as partnership, respect, innovation, diversity and empowerment. Local authorities aim to work in partnership with local residents; make services open and accessible and ensure everyone is treated with respect; develop innovative approaches for improving services; understand the diversity of the local area and treat residents fairly and equally; empower the residents in taking the opportunity to make decisions for the area they live in.

Sutton councils' inclusion standards are outlined in their Equality, diversity and inclusion framework and is overseen by the Equality, diversity and inclusion steering group and Sutton Fairness Commission. Their core objectives include encouraging tolerance, mutual understanding and respect between community members and groups; targeting and challenging social isolation experienced mainly by people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and people with long-term conditions; encouraging residents' involvement and taking into

account their opinion on public services; empowering key stakeholders by monitoring and publishing equality and diversity information and outcomes to help them justify Councils' decisions and challenge decisions that they find unjustified.

Information on local affairs is shared via various methods, with main point of contact being the councils' website. There residents can find information about development projects, area-specific issues and many more. Surveys are frequently published on the website for residents to share their opinion on development and improvement matters. Results and decisions can also be found on the website.

Alternative methods for reaching out to the community include information stalls on high streets, leaflets and response forms, "Information corners" in libraries of the council building premises, local newspapers announcements, e-mails and letters (using a database of interested stakeholders), referendums, site notices, community workshops and meetings staffed exhibitions and committee meetings, social media and hotlines.

Consultation methods can be chosen based on the nature of the enquiry. For example, residents' opinion on ULEZ expansion, propositions for a 20 mph speed limit in certain areas, policy updates etc. were requested through a web survey. New building developments can be initially announced through site notices, publications in local newspapers and social media. After raising awareness and informing residents of the relevant details, online surveys can be conducted, or the matter can be discussed at a local committee meeting. Face-to-face consultation will allow residents to share their views and ask questions directly. To share my personal experience, I was interested in finding information regarding a local site where the former Victoria House was demolished over a year ago. I wanted to find information on the progress of this development, unfortunately, the available information on Sutton Council was close to none – just a draft for a discussion on planning from over 10 years ago. Some information was available through developers' websites where development projects have been made and offered and few residents comments disapproving the propositions. This made me think about how informative and accessible the council's website is. Furthermore, data on community engagement policies was scarce. My search would mostly result in out-of-date papers on the subject, agendas and consultation scripts with no follow-up on the suggested discussion matters. Some of the papers found suggested further information was available in linked documents which were unavailable or non-existent.

Looking into the rival Conservative Party website I found a report scrutinising the leadership quality of the leading Liberal Democrats party over Sutton Council. In this report (Sutton Conservatives, 2022), Sutton Lib Dems are accused of failing to deliver on many points of their 2018 manifesto, for example failing on their ambition to make Sutton one of the top

boroughs in recycling and composting and ranking 118th in the England league table of local authorities for percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling or composting. Failure of the Sutton Decentralised Energy Network project which led to households facing above-average bills, heating and hot water blackouts, fraud accusations and formal investigation into its business model. Lib Dems are further accused of failing to support local businesses, instead penalising them with increased parking charges discouraging local people and visitors to use local shops and services and investing funds into purchasing high street buildings (ST Nicholas Shopping Centre) with no clear insight on its development. A “London Borough Of Sutton Survey” from 2017 shows that since 2015 there has been a decrease in the percentage that feel informed about how their council tax is spent, from 65% in 2015 to 53%. This is also reflected in those that feel informed about the services and benefits provided, which has decreased from 64% in 2015 to 48% in 2017. There are also low levels of awareness in relation to the Council’s various initiatives, programmes and plans. In 2017, whilst slightly fewer residents already access services online, there is an increased appetite for doing so. More residents are aware of how they can use the Sutton Council Website than those who actually use it.

Not having been involved in local consultation prevents me from commenting on the success of the council’s community engagement procedures, however, my personal contact as a resident has left me with mixed feelings about their efficacy. E-mails are typically responded to with a delay if at all and contacting the council via telephone requires some patience. My experience using the Sutton Council website is not entirely positive as it is difficult and confusing to navigate. Having been a resident of the borough for over two years I have not received a single leaflet in the post. Council’s social media page is not regularly updated. On the positive side, I have seen improvement in local amenities (roads and playgrounds).

In conclusion, Sutton Council should reflect on the abundant diversity of the borough and ensure the information they provide is accessible to everyone. Restructuring their website making it easier to navigate, possibly through categorising different aspects of their services more clearly and adding the option of switching languages could encourage more residents from abroad to use it. Sending households and businesses information on services relevant to them would also be considered a good practice. As a resident, I would have appreciated information on opportunities to engage with my community in my first council tax bill. Informing residents about available services is more likely to encourage them to participate as opposed to expecting residents to look for services they don’t know about. Creating and maintaining an up-to-date comprehensive Community Engagement Strategy and observing its implementation is essential to the successful involvement of residents in the local authorities’ affairs.

References

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