

Area Board Good practice

“Wiltshire’s Area Boards have been around for just over two years. I’m delighted that satisfaction with the Boards has improved by 12% over that period. These improvements have been achieved because of a willingness to experiment and try new and innovative ways of working.

“The Area Board Chairmen and the Community Area Managers met together on 27 June 2011 to review how things are going, we talked about what has worked well and how further improvements can be made. This Good practice guide is the product of that meeting

“The guide is intended to be used by Area Boards and Community Area Managers to identify ways of improving participation, inclusion and public satisfaction with the Boards. It is intended to be used along with the annual Area Board satisfaction survey – to identify where improvements are most needed and what approaches might help.

“Of course, this list is not exhaustive and Area Boards will continue to experiment with new and innovative approaches as we move forward into the future.”

Councillor Chris Williams
Portfolio Holder

Meetings, meetings, meetings...

Experience shows that the biggest influence on attendance is the content of the agenda. Ensuring that the agenda is focused on important local, rather than ‘corporate’ presentations will make people more likely to turn up.



“I hope this bullhorn will make this meeting a little less boring.”

3 Zoom-in...
Consider thematic or single issue meetings that target ‘hot topic’ issues. This can encourage participation from people interested in the issue but who might not otherwise attend a meeting.

4 Keep it simple...
Use clear friendly language on the agenda – avoid jargon and meaningless headings. For example, it is better to have a heading: ‘Building homes and jobs for the future’ rather than ‘Consultation on the Core Strategy and Development Plan Document.’

1 Engage & consult...
Find out what the community wants to talk about. Ask the Community Area Network to suggest items, conduct local surveys, talk to different groups about their issues. Test out the agenda in advance; consult on the Forward Plan to ensure that it is addressing things that matter in the area.

2 Focus...
Experience shows that the biggest influence on attendance is the content of the agenda. Ensuring that the agenda is focused on important local, rather than ‘corporate’ items will make people more likely to turn up. Don’t shy away from contentious issues.

5 Respond...
Showcase achievements, highlight issues that have been resolved, allow people to ‘report back’ - such as local Community Speedwatch groups. This shows that the board is making a difference and taking action to address local concerns.

6 Manage...
Avoid ‘marathon meeting syndrome.’ It is better to have fewer agenda items handled well than too many items that are rushed as this can stifle debate leaving people angry and frustrated. Get the ‘hot topics’ up to the front of the agenda.

Point of order...

We have just looked at ways of getting people to turn up, but keeping them happy is often down to the way the meeting is managed.



“Thank you all for coming along this evening...”

3 Death by...
Nothing destroys the energy of meeting more than a long, dull Powerpoint presentation. Ask to see the presentation in advance and if it’s no good bin it. Q&A should be included at the end and a paper and electronic summary provided (not the slides). Make sure speakers can be seen at the front.

4 Beat the clock...
Be realistic about timings and prepare to be flexible. It is better to overrun on the ‘hot topic’ than curtail debate. Be prepared to juggle and have a strategy to deal with a long overrun (i.e. items that can be axed). If you run behind, ask the audience if they are happy to continue for a set period.

1 Welcome...
A friendly welcome will put people at ease and help break the ice. Make sure people are welcomed at the door; that they can have a cup of tea and a chance to mingle. For first timers it can be a bit scary - it is important that things are explained to them to put them at ease. Be on hand to provide a friendly word. Why not some music?

2 Chair or compère?
A good chair will introduce and describe the purpose of each item; encourage participation (but not monopolisation by one or two voices). Listen to the range of views expressed and summarise discussions fairly as they go.

5 Show of hands...
Nothing gives people more of a sense of involvement than having a vote – either by show of hands or with handheld voting units. Encourage participation; get a sense of the feeling in the room before formal votes are taken. Don’t over formalise the vote.

6 Talk, talk...
Consider breaking up meetings into segments using round table discussions, multimedia presentations, votes, demonstrations and activities. Allow different groups or members to lead on some items and allow space at the end for people to raise issues with the Board.

It's not just meetings...

Area Boards are the place where the Council does business in the community. However, the success of the Boards depends upon how well they are connected to all sections of the wider community. Encouraging and widening participation is essential if the Boards are to reflect the needs of everyone in the area.



4 **Votes...**
Nothing demonstrates our willingness to involve more than giving participants the vote. Ask for a 'show of hands' and use the handheld voting system (but don't overdo it!). Use participatory voting to give people *real power* to decide how the money is spent.

1 **It's as easy as ABC...**
The Area Board Chair's meeting (ABC) is a place where the performance of the Board can be discussed. It helps if these meetings are inclusive – think of inviting the CAP and the local Town Council. Make sure your service director is attending regularly and ensure time is spent discussing ways of increasing participation

2 **Remove barriers...**
Allow people to mingle before meetings and ensure that officers and members are available to talk to people 1-2-1. Pre-meeting activities – such as pin boards, information stands, and adverts on screen can give a sense of purpose.

3 **Round tables...**
people tell us that they like to be part of the decision making process. This can be encouraged by picking items that can be discussed 'around the table' and feedback given by the audience.

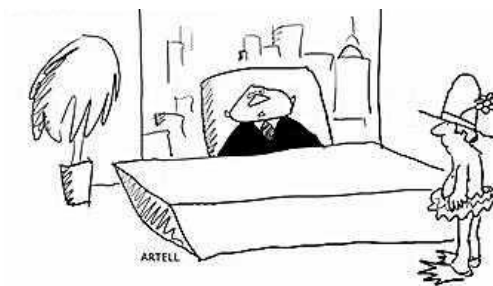
5 **Keep in touch...**
Over 10,000 people are now signed up to receive information from the Boards. Ensure you are making the most of the CAN through monthly online newsletters (JaM). Make sure that you are using social networking and local polls to get people involved in the issues

6 **Reach out...**
There are some people who find it difficult to participate – maybe they cannot attend meetings. It is our job to go out and reach these people. Consider 'tea and chat' sessions for particular target groups. Business breakfasts, parish forums and 'fun' activities can all be useful.

7 **Get personal...**
Why should people come along? It makes a huge difference if people receive a personal invitation from the Chair of the Board, setting out why their views are important and the difference this will make. This approach really works.

What works...?

Finding things that work in the locality will depend on all sorts of factors. This is a list of things that have been tried and found to work, but do experiment with new ideas so that we can expand this list. Avoid falling into the trap of formulaic approaches – mix it up, try new things and make it work for you.



1 **Councillors leading...**
Some Boards have given individual councillors lead roles – either thematic or task and finish. Both approaches can work well and put local councillors at the heart of the Board's work

2 **Problem solving...**
Issues that seem intractable can often be resolved by getting the right people round a table. Usually some compromise can be found when the facts are laid out and discussed respectfully. Round table problem solving has yielded some very positive results.

3 **You decide...**
Participatory budgeting – you can agree to set aside a budget and let the community decide how it is spent. We have seen how this really works and increases satisfaction with decisions. There is no more tangible example of our commitment to empowerment.

4 **Talking therapy...**
Getting to hear peoples' take on local issues can be really helpful – it can balance out the noisy voices. In Warminster, ordinary everyday folk are interviewed before meetings and the recordings played before issues are debated. It is a cheap and effective approach.

5 **Map it...**
Several Area Boards have started to use Google Maps to show where grants have been awarded, where Speedwatch has been deployed and where Payback schemes have taken place. There is no limit to the way this can be used. Are you using this technology to show how your Board is making an impact?

6 **Camera, lights...**
On a good night over 100 people might turn up at the Board, but how many more might be interested in that key presentation? Some Boards have now recorded key presentations and posted them on Youtube where many hundreds of people can view them and comment.

7 **Priorities...**
Several Boards have allowed the community to select priorities for the Board. The Board has responded by: setting aside money, calling for projects, starting campaigns and holding local events. At the end of the year the Board reports back to the community on what it has achieved.

8 **I'd like to thank...**
Two Area Boards sponsor community awards evenings and reward volunteers at an Area Board meeting. This shows that we want to recognise others, rather than focus continually on 'the business.'

9 **Your idea here...**
Area Boards can experiment. All of these examples were developed by the Area Boards, so why not use your own idea and the ideas of those in your own local community to find what works best for you.