Wiltshire Council
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SOUTH WEST WILTSHIRE AREA BOARD
(13 June 2012)

Feedback on Area Board Meetings

Purpose of the Report

To provide an update from a recent consultation held with members of the South West Wiltshire Community Area Network, including all Parish Councils, where comments were invited on how Area Board meetings run.

Introduction

At the Area Board meeting on 29 February 2012, the Area Board requested that anybody who wished to do so provide feedback on Area Board meetings. An email was subsequently sent out to the South West Wiltshire Community Area Network, with a deadline for responses set at the end of March 2012.

Responses were received from members of the public in a total of seven parishes and these have been summarised below, grouping responses together where appropriate. The feedback has been arranged under three headings:

- What works well?
- What could be improved?
- Suggested actions for the future

It is important to note that the responses detailed below are the opinions of those who took part in the consultation. As a result of this feedback, the Area Board has listed action points at the end of the report.

Summary of feedback

What works well?

- The Area Board is much better than what was there before.
- On the whole SWWAB is working well. Problems, views and a good assortment of matters are raised and discussed in an open and frank manner. In my 25 years on Parish Councils there has not been this forum available before. The meetings are well attended (that suggests people believe it works), money is awarded to local projects and I enjoy the informal way the chair allows differing opinions on the subjects.
- The meetings have vastly improved over the last 6 months or so. The agenda is kept to time (more or less). The Area Board Meetings are such a useful thing to attend to keep the Parishes well informed as well as the public.

- The Area Boards in 2010/11 were surprisingly well-attended by the general public, normally due to a controversial subject being on the Agenda or a local grant application up for consideration.
- Sometimes it goes on longer than planned but that is part of our democratic system, it is not perfect, but it is working.

What could be improved?

- The agenda gets very easily bogged down at the start with comments and queries and alterations on agenda items.
- The only issue we have raised in the past is the time spent on grant applications after a long meeting.
- The Agenda indicated the time a particular item would come up but, as the evening progressed with items presented by various ' partners ', the timings drifted and one evening the item we were waiting for was 90 minutes behind schedule. This occurrence was occasionally on evenings where people had travelled a long way and weather conditions not entirely favourable. I appreciate that, if you arrange it the other way round, i.e. popular matters first, the hall will probably clear halfway through - so a happy medium is called for.
- The quality of submissions for funds is declining seriously. This was demonstrated clearly at the most recent Board meeting. It is an old truism that if you want money, you have got to work for it. Surely the Board should reject ill prepared cases out of hand? If they are actually valid, then the applicant will eventually demonstrate it. In these stringent times, such discipline is important to demonstrate proper safeguards for our money, which should not be spent unless there is good reason for doing so. Equally important, it maintains gravity for the Board so it is not regarded as a pushover, and encourages those who are prepared to make a good case for a good cause.
- I do understand that timekeeping is a delicate area involving personal style as well as the weight of business. Nevertheless, too many Area Board meetings seem to overrun, and to be punctuated by the exodus of the audience.
- The Area Board has built up a large number of contacts since it started to the extent that too many people are getting too much information. Much of this information is of, at best, peripheral value to those who receive it: too often the dross obscures important things.

Suggested actions for the future:

- Topics should be raised in advance if not on the agenda.
- Can I suggest that the Board re-iterates its Code, and steels itself to shut up those doing business the wrong way? In the long run, this does a better service for local democracy than "always letting everybody have their say."
- If someone thinks the previous minutes are wrong, then they should say when they receive the minutes not at the meeting.
- Could the issue system be better used?

- Can I suggest that an email is sent to all Clerks telling them when the Area Board Minutes have been published (and highlighting if action is needed) so that they can scan them for anything relevant to their parish? This should apply to any "central" website issuance which is not sent to individual Clerks.
- As done with the Youth Project Funding workshops, grant applications could be held at 6.30 – 7.00 pm and give everyone the option to attend at 6.30pm or at 7.00 pm onwards.
- It would be helpful to ensure the screen is positioned in the centre behind the members rather than to the side.
- It would be interesting to know how many public attend in relation to parish councils and clerks.
- At Area Board level, things need hustling along a bit, and sticking firmly to the point. Business would also be hastened by summarising decisions at the end of each agenda item.
- The answer is surely a layer approach to your contacts, with the legal democratic framework at its heart i.e. the Town & Parish Councils, and a rigorous classification of information by its source and nature.

Action points for the Area Board

As a result of this consultation, the South West Wiltshire Area Board is committed to the following:

- It is the desire of the Area Board that issues are raised in advance rather than at the meeting, so that appropriate time and/or preparation can ensure a helpful debate. It will be at the Chairman's discretion as to whether to allow an issue to be raised on the evening.
- The Area Board is under obligation to check the minutes of the previous meeting in public, to ensure everybody has an opportunity to raise a query or suggest an amendment from the floor. However, all are encouraged to raise such concerns before the meeting itself.
- Advice on when to use the issues system and how it operates was sent to all members of Community Area Network on 15 May 2012 to remind them of issues system and how to use it. There has been a notable increase in the number of issues referred since this time.
- Notification to all is provided once a draft copy of the minutes from an Area Board meeting is available. The Community Area Manager will contact Parish Councils specifically in future if any actions requiring their input are agreed during a meeting.
- The order of standing items at Area Board meetings will continue to be reviewed. However, we want to encourage members of the community to engage in the work of the Area Board, and there is a concern that hearing Community Area Grant applications before the meeting itself would counter this aim.
- The position of the screen is carefully considered at each venue.

- Figures on the number of residents (i.e. not members of Parish Councils or organisations) who have attended Area Board meetings in the last year will be provided at the next Area Board meeting, on 15 August 2012. A record of attendance is provided in the minutes for each meeting; details are taken from the signing in sheet available to all who attend. A total attendance figure is provided and all Parish Council clerks/Councillors are listed by name if they have signed in.
- A consultation has started with those Parish Councils and Parish Meetings who have not had representation at an Area Board meeting in the last year, to explore whether there are any particular barriers to them attending.
- It is already practice for any decisions to be summarised at the end of each agenda item, and this will continue to happen.
- The Community Area Manager will work closely with future Community Area Grant applicants to ensure their projects are more clearly explained in papers submitted for Area Board meetings.
- The list of names on the Community Area Network will continue to be reviewed on an ongoing basis. Information distributed by the Community Area Manager will be targeted as much as possible, without removing the opportunity for members of the public to receive updates directly.

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