

Report of the Chief Executive

RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT1. Purpose of Report

To invite Councillors to consider future options for engaging residents on issues of local concern.

2. Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to CONSIDER the options and RESOLVE accordingly.

3. Detail

For many years the Council has operated a community engagement system called “community action teams” or “CAT” s. Originally there was one in each Borough ward, and a number of dedicated officers within the Community Development team supported community engagement work. Capital budgets were available and improvement plans were developed for implementation in areas to respond to ideas put forward by the public. Police representatives or Community Support Officers would regularly come to the meetings. Over time changes have occurred as summarised in the appendix.

There is a need to review the operation and support of CAT meetings. The Community Development team are over committed in their time and capacity so if CATs are to continue, more resource will be necessary to maintain this system. Resident engagement is more important than it has ever been. However, it is considered the current system is no longer considered fit for purpose in its current form. The options are:

- (a) Maintain the current system of CATs and request that the Chief Executive bring forward a report on the additional resources required to support this.
- (b) Allocate each ward or each Councillor a small budget (say £100- £200) to support community engagement by Councillors in the form of local surgeries. Using this option Councillors could if they wish continue with their CAT meetings and use the money for room hire or to pay a small amount to a minute taker.
- (c) Decide that there is no longer a need for CATs in the light of changing ways of engaging residents.

4. Financial Implications

The comments from the Head of Finance Services were as follows:

There is currently a nominal budget of £500 for the servicing of Community Action Teams. If the preferred option requires any additional 'cash' funding this would have to be met from the General Fund Revenue Contingency budget of which £13,000 remains available in 2023/24. It should also be noted that some of the proposed options are resource intensive in terms of officer support to service the CATS and could incur additional employee costs.

5. Legal Implications

The comments from the Monitoring Officer / Head of Legal Services were as follows:

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

6. Human Resources Implications

More resources will be needed to maintain the current system of CATs as the Community development and democratic services teams are overstretched.

7. Union Comments

Not applicable

8. Climate Change Implications

The comments were as follows:
Not applicable

9. Data Protection Compliance Implications

This report does not contain any OFFICIAL (SENSITIVE information and there are no Data Protection issues in relation to this report.

10. Equality Impact Assessment

Minority groups, younger people and people with disabilities are currently underrepresented at CATs. Consequently, ceasing Cats is unlikely to be disadvantageous to protected characteristic groups.

11. Background Papers

Nil

APPENDIX**Changes observed to the Community Action Team (CAT) system over time**

Methods of engaging the public have changed considerably over the last twenty years. Digital methods of engagement are much more common now than they were when CATs were first created. Some CATs have disbanded, either because they were poorly attended or because Parish Councils have seen themselves as undertaking the regular community conversation role. Fewer people are willing to come out in the evening to a public meeting. Those attending CATs are not representative of the Borough profile in their age or ethnicity. Although CATs were never intended to be places where planning issues are discussed these issues are often raised, but well informed and balanced discussions on planning matters cannot take place because the relevant applicants and planning experts are not present.

The Community Development team which mostly services CATs is much smaller than it was when CATs were in their heyday, and the team's work is broadly focused on improving health and wellbeing, and delivering a wide range of community safety and safeguarding actions, most of which already involve a considerable amount of community engagement. When CATs were first created the Council only had one Communications Officer, whereas now it has three, with a Communications strategy and a digital engagement strategy with action plans to reach out and engage widely with the public. Community engagement is also much more widely dispersed within the Council, with all sections of the Council having community engagement integrated into their day to day activities; from the work of Environment in running green festivals, green rewards, and running parks and open spaces surveys; to the housing team which uses Resident Involvement groups and Facebook groups to engage more tenants than they ever have before, to large scale discussions with the community on regeneration plans within economic development; creative virtual ways of engaging the public on strategic planning matters (thousands of people were engaged in the Toton masterplan consultation in this way); and action plans and activities to reach minority groups through the electoral registration and communications teams. Our budget consultations and regular community surveys are getting more responses on line and face to face than they have ever had. The Council's social media presence has generated a lot of engagement with the public in ways that were never foreseen when CATs were originally created.