

Public Involvement and Information – some reflections from the Chair of the OSP

Background

The Oxford Strategic Partnership Information and Networking Event was held on 30th March 2010. This was the first time we had provided information on ALL our work at a single event, though public participation in some of the flagship issues has been a feature of some of our work. The format for the evening included informal networking time and a series of short presentations on the flagship issues from our strategy. Invitations had been sent widely through a range of networks, including OCVA links with voluntary and community sector organisations. There were approximately 30 attendees from the general public, some of whom represented specific groups. Everyone who attended was invited to leave their contact details and they were sent an e-mail after the event, thanking them for coming and inviting further dialogue.

The presentations at the event were followed by a Question and Answer session. Questions covered a range of issues, from specific observations on the content of the presentation to more general points e.g. the relationship between the Core Strategy and our OSP strategy. There were several questions about representation of particular community or interest groups on the OSP Steering Group and some calls for wider representation to be considered.

As a result of further e-mail dialogue a meeting has been set up in June to explore the concerns and ideas put forward by several people who came to the networking event. These include people from Residents' Associations, faith groups and some local councillors.

The current position

As Chair of the LSP I am increasingly aware that we could be doing more to inform and involve a wider group of people in our work. The idea of the networking event was a first step to improving this. I would now like a discussion on where we go from here. There are several areas I would like to explore:

1. Membership of the Steering Group

Last year we reviewed and revised our terms of reference and made a decision to maintain membership of the steering group at 15 members. We agreed the principle “that the group is focused on the agreed strategic intention rather than aiming for representation of particular groups or interests.” We said that we “may also co-opt other individuals from time to time to fill identified gaps” and can “review Steering Group membership on an ongoing basis, which may alter according to specific priorities.”

We also agreed that delivery groups for each area of our work could invite people to help with the work who “may be drawn from partner organisations or other places, according to the needs of the group and the focus of the work”.

This was the principle I cited at the public meeting as a means by which we seek wider involvement.

Discussion question: Is it time to review our membership again and strive for more representation?

Issues for this discussion:

- Our strategic priorities haven't changed in the last year, so this may not be a trigger for this action.
- Members of the public at the meeting specifically enquired about representation of faith communities, black and minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, "ordinary" citizens (my paraphrase). If others had been there then the list could easily be longer.
- Some delivery groups are more active than others in involving more stakeholders / the public in their work

2. Better communication and information giving

It is clear that the OSP is not well known by the general public and our work together is not recognised under the name of OSP. Local Strategic Partnerships can be difficult to promote and there may be mixed views on whether a higher profile would be desirable. There may be a view that anonymity is inevitable and different opinions on whether rectifying this is a priority. However, I would like to make sure that, at the very least, the partnership and the work we do is not misunderstood. More positively, I feel we have some good stories to tell and some successes to report as our work is proving to deliver more than the sum of the parts.

Current promotion of our work is through the website and an occasional article in the City newspaper that is distributed to each household. Some of the flagship issues attract more media and public attention but there are inconsistencies in how we show OSP involvement. We have no communication plan.

Discussion question: Can we promote our work together more effectively?

Suggestions include:

- An annual conference for stakeholders – including an opportunity to present our work to a wide audience and to seek feedback, ideas and involvement in our work (through themed workshops, consultation on our next strategy, inviting ideas on how to involve people more)
- Each flagship issue should have one public event or public communication each year. This could be consultative, informative and / or participatory. Ideally these would be spread out during the year and be targeted to interested members of the public and stakeholders, according to the issue being addressed.

3. Stakeholder involvement

There is a case for building and maintaining more structured networks of stakeholders in our efforts to be more communicative about our work. We could learn from other LSPs who have actual or virtual "stakeholder" fora. For example, the newly re-launched Cherwell LSP has a Stakeholder Forum

which meets once a year. Members are from a range of organisations or are interested individuals. They receive newsletter updates between meetings and are able to contact the LSP coordinator with comments or suggestions at any time.

There are several existing fora which we could tap in to and build relationships with, offering information and inviting comment. These include the VCS Forum in Oxford City which holds regular meetings, the Oxfordshire Racial Equality and Human Rights Council, Tenants and Residents Groups, Churches Together or other structures of various denominations and faith groups etc. More research would soon result in extensive information on networks in the City who might be interested in two-way communication.

Discussion question: Should we develop better two-way communication with a range of stakeholder groups?

Suggestions include:

- A regular news bulletin (twice a year?) on our work, probably electronic
- Attendance at meetings of various fora to provide information on the work of the OSP. This might present difficulties for the Partnership officer in terms of the time he has available – are members of the Steering Group prepared to share this work?
- Consultation and participation in the review of our current strategy and preparation of our new strategy (due to be implemented from 2012).
- A “directory” of existing groups or individuals who can be involved in the work of any of the flagship issues and contacted by Champions on specific topics. This would develop from more regular contact with the OSP as a whole.

Next steps

I hope that discussion on these issues will lead to some decisions on a way forward to improve the information we give to the general public and to help us develop more public participation and involvement in our work.

Jackie Wilderspin, Chair, OSP. May 2010