

AREA COMMUNITY FORUMS

Annual report to Council, June 2009

Introduction by the Leader of the Council

The District Council's Area Community Forums have developed since their establishment in 1999 into an excellent channel of communication at which all sections of the community and other stakeholders are engaged and given the opportunity to have their say on local matters, helping to identify priorities that shape our service delivery.

Public participation is positively encouraged, the format is informal, and the Forums are also a good example of partnership working with colleagues from other public and voluntary bodies.

The Forums are used for consultation and also to raise awareness of new initiatives and legislation. One example is the introduction of Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE), where the District Council and its partners were able to explain the new system, prior to its implementation.

It is important that we continue to listen to residents, act on their concerns and keep them informed through avenues such as the Forums.

Community leadership and working with our partners

The Forums enable direct communication between the local community, stakeholders and local authorities. As well as representation from Derbyshire Dales District Council and Derbyshire County Council, regular contributors include Derbyshire Constabulary, the Peak District National Park Authority and Derbyshire Fire and Rescue. These bodies also have an input into the agenda.

This multi-agency approach often enables swift action when problem solving or answers are required, and demonstrates the District Council's commitment to partnership working.

An example is the Southern Forum in March 2009, at which the District Council facilitated dialogue between the local community, the Environment Agency, Severn Trent Water and the District and County councils on the progress of the Ashbourne Flood Alleviation Scheme. Although announced at a previous Southern Forum in November 2008, the Scheme had attracted criticism from local residents concerned that no progress appeared to have been made. The March Forum addressed these concerns and residents appreciated the District Council's intervention.

A progress report on the Central Area Leisure Centre at the July Central Forum in Matlock attracted many representatives from local sports groups keen to ask questions and make comments.

Derbyshire Fire & Rescue Service demonstrated, at the July Northern Forum, how they work in partnership with agencies such as Severn Trent Water, the National Trust, local landowners & residents and the Peak District National Park Authority to protect the local environment.

Voluntary organisations also play a proactive role in the Forums. The July 2008 Southern Forum included a presentation by members of the Ashbourne Partnership outlining its aims and objectives. Derbyshire LINK, which represents the public on health and social care matters, has attended several Forums to promote its work and forge links with the local community.

2008/09 Summary

In 2008/09 over 200 members of the public - including representatives from town and parish councils, the voluntary sector, chambers of trade, youth, community transport, sports and environmental groups - participated in the Forums, along with representatives from Derbyshire Police Authority, the Environment Agency, Severn Trent Water, recyclers Vital Earth Ltd and regular stakeholder contributors.

Forums were held in July and November 2008 and March 2009. Host venues were Ashbourne, Bakewell, Cubley, Darley Dale, Matlock and Tansley, and the subject matter was wide ranging, reflecting the priorities of the communities concerned.

On the agenda at the July 2008 Forums was the upcoming Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) measure, and the County Council presented a positive update at the March 2009 Forums following the introduction of CPE in February, reporting that streets were safer and congestion had eased.

The July 2008 Forums included a presentation by Derbyshire Fire and Rescue featuring home and fire safety advice and explaining the way the service works with partners.

At the November Forums, Derbyshire Constabulary presented on Safer Neighbourhoods and gave crime prevention advice, including recommendations of some simple deterrents.

Local spending plans and priorities also featured in November, with attendees encouraged to identify and influence their local priorities. Feedback and action from this exercise was presented at the March 2009 Forums.

At the final round of Forums in the 2008/09 civic year, Derbyshire County Council provided information on the range of services that can be accessed at local libraries. Feedback was encouraged on initiatives that could lead to increased use of the service.

A presentation on what measures the District Council is taking to help sustain the local economy also featured in the March Forums, including input from the Peak District National Park Authority's Chief Executive at the Northern Forum. District Council housing initiatives, to help local residents and local businesses in the economic downturn were included in this presentation.

The Question Time sessions were always popular, enabling attendees to raise any issues and questions with the participating authorities. Question Time topics have ranged in 2008/09 from concerns over 4x4 vehicle activity and provision of public conveniences to the District Council's top priority - affordable housing. The Forums have proved an ideal communication channel at which to announce new housing schemes.

The year ahead

Feedback from Community Forums has influenced the District Council's Corporate Plan, priorities and service provision, and will continue to do so.

The Forums complement the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, acting as an important consultation tool on planned Reviews and Key Challenges.

Additionally, issues raised or suggestions made at Forums may prompt an Overview Review or Key Challenge.

The Forum format that has developed successfully since 1999 will again be adopted in 2009/10, with the built-in flexibility that encourages local feedback on topical issues. It is hoped to increase the attendance of local residents and community representatives in a valuable communication process that is available to all sections of our communities.