

Big Local “Getting Started” – Initial Consultation Phase - Executive Summary

Introduction

Between May and August 2013 Hastings Voluntary Action (HVA) led a consortium of Community Engagement specialists from HVA, Nick Wates Associates and Hastings Trust to undertake an in-depth engagement exercise with the residents of North East Hastings. The area has a population of approximately 8,000 people and comprises parts of three electoral wards – (Ore, Baird and Tressell) including the neighbourhoods of Broomgrove, Farley Bank, Halton, Red Lake and Down’s Farm.

The aim of this work was to provide intelligence to enable the North East Hastings Big Local Partnership invest £1million over the next 10 years to make a massive and lasting positive difference to their communities. Getting Started is about starting the conversation and empowering local residents – spreading the word about Big Local, making sure people locally know how they can get involved, creating a profile of the area and gathering ideas about how they feel the area could become an even better place to live now, and in the future.

The Process

A series of events, road-shows, on-line and leaflet surveys were undertaken together with on-line and social media opportunities for residents to comment and give their ideas. Recognising that some young people may be less likely to participate, a programme of detached youth work was also commissioned which resulted in a small video project which enabled the voices of young people to be presented to the Big Local Partnership.

A “literature review” was also compiled reviewing previous consultation and engagement results.

In all, interactions with over 750 people were concluded providing ‘reach’ into all parts of the Big Local area. Considerable interest was shown in the initiative with 81 people wishing to become more involved in running Big Local. A total of 41 individuals came forward to volunteer in the local area.

Key Issues

A Sense of Community

The Big Local Area was regarded as having a sense of community but with a general feeling that there was not enough to do and that there should be more opportunities for learning, training and acquiring skills. It was felt that there should be more events to facilitate interaction between different parts of the Big Local area and opportunities to meet other people. Crucially information available within the local community should be extended so that residents knew “what was going on” and the services they could access in the local area.

Affordability was a big issue with a sense that those on low incomes could easily be “priced out” emphasising a need for low cost access to sports and leisure opportunities. Community Centres were regarded as important resources which were running – or had the potential to run - a programme of activities. But more joining up and investment in these buildings was often raised as an important issue. Community Development support to enable groups to develop, publicise their activities and play a role was felt to be important. A strong network of community groups exists in the area providing vital services activities and support. However it was felt that more could be done to improve networking and collaboration so that best use was made of resources. The “Gateway Event” for organisations working in the area – run at the beginning of the consultation – was felt to be a useful way of “getting everyone together” who was active in their community and should be repeated. Celebrating self-help and voluntary effort was also felt to be important.

Across North East Hastings there was a general consensus that the area was a nice environment to live in and had what was often referred to as having a ‘community feel’ about it. Some people have lived within their communities their entire lives, building up a network of friends, who also ‘come together’ for support when needed and Big Local could then “help us who want to help ourselves and others”. There was a lot of support shown for more community events to happen within the area, encouraging residents to get out more and allowing for new friendships to develop, because the residents “are kind and caring”. There was a sense that “community events bring everyone together and troubles can be forgotten for the day”.

Young People

Young People’s needs came across strongly in the consultation with frequent requests for leisure opportunities, a safe place to meet and ‘hang-out’ and designated space and facilities for skate-boarding. It was also felt that more could be done to provide young people with greater opportunities to get involved with their local community in interesting

and useful ways. Strengthening links between schools/academies and local communities was regarded as important.

Transport and Access

Transport was regarded as generally poor – particularly during evenings and Sundays. The limitations of Ore Station in terms of access for those with mobility issues, its location and sense of safety was also raised. The conditions of roads and pavements were highlighted as areas of concern and the implications of the Bexhill to Hastings Link Road were raised in terms of potential traffic increase and congestion.

The Look and Feel of the Area

A sense of community and neighbourhood featured in the consultation quite strongly with the area regarded as OK to live in but sometimes cut off and in the case of Downs Farm “on the edge” of the Town in more ways than one. One resident described the area as “a place to pass through rather than stop”.

The public realm was felt to be in need of improvement with fly-tipping, dog-mess, some anti-social behaviour, and litter perceived as problems. Where shop units were empty the need to fill these spaces to prevent the area feeling dilapidated was identified. The need to “art up” the area was emphasized with local initiatives like Ore in Bloom cited as examples of something which could be done to positively contribute to the feel of the local neighbourhood. De-cluttering signage to improve the look of the area together with clean-ups and prompt responses to littering and low level nuisance were also raised.

The importance of access to local shops was identified repeatedly with concern being raised about the issues faced by “independent” long-standing traders faced with increased competition from super-markets, on-line shopping and more corporate retailers.

Access to green space was regarded as significant across all areas and age groups. The need to protect existing green space such as Speckled Wood and the Village Green, safe areas for dog-walkers and places to enjoy the open air came across strongly from all ages.

Taking it all forward

The consultation exercise captured a wide range of perspectives and in the words of Jim Boot, the Big Local rep for North East Hastings, “has produced an excellent and very thorough community profile which will move the area a long way forward”.

It was presented to the Interim Steering Group in September who endorsed its contents and findings. A programme of work is being planned which will take forward the recommendations which have been made in order to:-

- Provide a community chest of funding to enable a programme of Quick Wins – small projects to take forward some of the issues identified by local people.
- A community development worker is to be employed to help groups networking, improve communication about services and continue working with local people on the issues which have been identified.
- The Big Local Partnership (with a majority of residents) is being established which will create a plan to invest the £1m the area will receive.
- Dialogues with service providers will be strengthened with the first “priority area” being around issues relating to young people. Steps will also be taken to involve young people in the decisions which will affect them throughout the programme.

Conclusion

The gathering of residents’ views forms a vital part of the Big Local process and the consultation phase has highlighted a range of issues and priorities which will be of immense value to those who will take the spending decisions forward. We would like to thank all those who came forward, discussed their experiences of the area and gave their views about how they would like the future in North East Hastings to develop.