

Community Governance Review

Lowestoft and the surrounding un-parished area: Communications and Engagement Strategy

Background

The Lowestoft area has not been parished or reviewed since 1974, when Waveney District Council came into being. Since that time it has instead been represented by the Lowestoft Charter Trustees. The Charter Trustees are made up of the relevant District Councillors in this area and only have 'civic and ceremonial' functions within the town.

In January 2008 the Cabinet and Full Council decided that there should be a complete review of the democratic position within Lowestoft. This work was never completed however as it was superseded by the start (March 2008) of a full Boundary Commission, Local Government Review ('LGR') of Norfolk and Suffolk. The LGR work was abandoned in 2010 however the review into Lowestoft was not re-opened at that time.

In September 2014 the Council's Cabinet therefore reconsidered the issue as it was concerned that many, if not all, of the features present in 2008 that led to the Council starting such a review for Lowestoft are still present. The Cabinet resolved that "there is some merit in creating one or more new Town and / or Parish Councils in the currently un-parished areas of Lowestoft."

In 2015, the Council unanimously adopted and published its latest Business Plan. It is a specific planned action within the Business Plan to "Conduct a Community Governance Review in relation to the unparished areas of Lowestoft".

The Council's preference and intention is for the whole of its area to be parished unless strong arguments are made for not doing so. At a Full Council meeting on 23 March 2016 the Council overwhelmingly voted in favour of commencing such a review and approved the Terms of Reference for the Review.

A Community Governance Review can consider one or more of the following:

- creating, merging, altering or abolishing parishes;

- the naming of parishes and the style of new parishes;
- the electoral arrangements for parishes (the ordinary year of election; council size; the number of councillors to be elected to the council, and parish warding), and
- grouping parishes under a common parish council or de-grouping parishes.

Situation analysis

The Review area covers approximately 28,000 households in Lowestoft and the immediate surrounding area. A map of the Review area is included as Annex A to the Terms of Reference of the review. Whilst the intention of the review is to create one or more new councils in the un-parished area, there may also be some effect on the existing parish councils that lie at the boundary of the un-parished area. These parishes will be contacted and consulted as part of the process.

The Lowestoft area is recognised as an area of regeneration, requiring inward investment. A new Town/Parish Council for the area could bring in funding and would focus activities for the local area. Lowestoft has its own identity which may differ to that of the communities on the outskirts of the un-parished area, particularly in Pakefield and Oulton Broad. This situation may lend itself to the creation of more than one council area to represent the different areas of community identity.

The demographic of the communities we serve is diverse and our aim will be to ensure awareness of the process throughout all stakeholder groups, and to ensure that the benefits of the new Town/Parish Council(s) are communicated in a way which is accessible for all. In addition to engaging with the local communities in the Review area, we will need to keep other stakeholders informed and involved in the Review.

Our approach to communications should be a mixture of information giving, information gathering and establishing, where possible and appropriate, opportunities for two-way dialogue to ensure that all our communities and stakeholders feel involved in the Review process and can put forward their views to shape the formation of local government in their area. To support this activity it will be necessary to have a comprehensive communications and engagement plan.

Communications objectives

- To comprehensively publicise the start of the Review
- To ensure a strong flow of information to enable consultees to respond to each of the stages of consultation effectively
- To encourage responses to the consultations
- To keep all stakeholders and other ‘influencers’ informed and engaged with the Review
- To ensure interested community groups and / or individuals are kept informed and do not feel marginalised

General key messages

The key messages about the benefits of the parishing of Lowestoft will remain the same for all audiences and are set out below. However different stakeholders will be reached and encouraged to respond in different ways. Residents will be asked to participate directly by completing consultation forms, while other partners and ‘influencers’ will be encouraged to share information and welcomed to respond separately with their views.

- Democratic community representation
- A voice for local residents
- Decisions made locally
- Services and assets protected and delivered locally
- Greater focus on local area – power through neighbourhood plans
- Money spent locally

Audiences

The primary audience for the Review are the residents of the unparished area. However, engagement with a range of other stakeholders will be required to ensure maximum awareness of information. These include:

- Residents groups and community groups
- Local businesses and business groups
- Voluntary and Community organisations
- Other local organisations e.g. Lowestoft Rising, Lowestoft Vision
- Politicians, other councils (e.g. Suffolk County Council)
- Existing Town/Parish Councils in Waveney
- Internal – Councillors, staff, related influencing teams (e.g. Economic Regeneration, Planning Policy, Community Development, Customer Services)
- Operational partner organisations
- Media - local media and trade press.

Channels and materials

Engagement and promotional activity can be undertaken in a variety of different ways, utilising existing channels and delivery methods.

Direct mail/delivery

Initial correspondence with residents by post, explaining the scheme and encouraging participation.

Email

Initial correspondence with other stakeholders by email, explaining the scheme and welcoming participation

Website

Detailed resource of information, with memorable 'friendly URL' (web address), including FAQs.

Council publications

Articles in any impending publications providing an excellent opportunity to engage and explain.

Media advertising

Paid for newspaper and broadcast media advertising.

Social media

Repeated messages on Streetlife, Twitter and Facebook, with relevant agreed 'hashtags', always linking to website resource. Monitoring of these channels to gauge opinion and respond with information if and when required.

Media releases

News updates to all media – print and broadcast, repeating key, clear 'explain, engage and promote' messages.

Face to face events

Utilising existing council and town events and community groups to promote the Review

Customer services

Response in person, on the phone or in writing to customer questions and queries.

Evaluation and monitoring

The main indicator of a successful communications strategy will be a high level of engagement and response to the consultation phases, and a low level of complaints and instances where members of the public or other stakeholders feel marginalised or ill-informed.

Evaluation will be around:

Positives

- Media coverage and calculation of media impressions
- Number of re-tweets / positive feedback on social media
- Feedback from residents – number of responses to each stage of consultation – level of engagement
- Feedback from key stakeholders

Negatives

- Lack of media coverage or negative stories in media
- Negative comments on social media
- Complaints around lack of information
- Complaints from interested parties not contacted/advised
- Low level of responses from residents to stages of consultation

Outline action plan

EVENT: Initial contact with stakeholders publicising start of Review

WHEN: 24th March to 31st March 2016

ACTIONS:

- Press release / article in local press
- Launch of Review branding, website and FAQ's
- Social media to promote the launch
- Email/letter to Parish Clerks on review area boundary
- Email/letter to Parish Clerks in rest of district
- Emails/letters to other stakeholders

OUTCOMES:

- Widespread notification of commencement of Review
- Provision of detailed information about Review process, the aims of the Review and the consultation phases

- Provision of FAQ's giving stakeholders answers to common themes
- Website page launched as a base for future Review documentation/information

EVENT: Initial phase of public consultation

WHEN: 1st April to 13th May 2016

ACTIONS:

- Letter & leaflet to every household in the review area
- Responses from residents in the review area via online survey (e-form) available through Waveney District Council website
- Paper copy of survey form also available from Council offices or by post on request
- Submissions may also be sent in by email/post by other stakeholders
- Publication online (and anonymised) of all responses to initial consultation as soon as possible following 13 May 2016

OUTCOMES:

- Letter to every household ensures as far as possible that information has reached all directly affected properties/residents within the review area. The views and comments of residents living in the review area will carry the most weight when compiling the draft proposal
- E-form survey enables residents living in the review area to respond to consultation using a structured form, and facilitates efficient collation of responses
- All responses (e-form survey/email/post) will be anonymised and published online as soon as possible so that interested parties can view the responses. The comments/views received will be collated and analysed, and used to produce a draft proposal which will then be published and made available for the next stage of consultation.
- Email addresses (of residents that provide them) will be used to contact respondents again at later stages of the review to notify them when draft and final proposals become available for comment

EVENT: Publication of draft proposal – second phase of public consultation

WHEN: July to September 2016

ACTIONS:

- Draft proposal published:
 - In paper format – available at Marina Customer Services Centre and Riverside offices
 - Online on Waveney website
- Respondents to initial phase of consultation (who provided an email address) contacted by email to advise that draft proposal is available for comment
- Other stakeholders contacted to advise that draft proposal is available for comment
- Publicity on website, via social media and in local press
- Drop-in sessions held at 3 different venues in the north, centre and south of the town – to be widely advertised in local press, online and via social media
- Responses from residents in the review area via online survey (e-form) available through Waveney District Council website
- Submissions may also be sent in by email/post by other stakeholders
- Publication online (and anonymised) of all responses to 2nd stage consultation as soon as possible following its close

OUTCOMES:

- Draft proposal made widely available to ensure access for all. Note a separate letter will not be sent to each household again as they will have already been advised of the timetable of the Review and to expect the draft proposal in July, and at this stage we would not be able to provide adequate information by post to outline the proposal, as this will include large maps and supporting documentation that would be unfeasible to send to every household
- Drop-in sessions held across the town to ensure residents and interested parties can speak to representatives about the proposal
- E-form survey enables residents living in the review area to respond to consultation using a structured form, and facilitates efficient collation of responses

- All responses (e-form survey/email/post) will be anonymised and published online as soon as possible so that interested parties can view the responses. The comments/views received will be collated and analysed, and used to produce a final proposal which will then be published and made available for the final stage of consultation.

EVENT: Publication of final proposal – final phase of consultation

WHEN: October to November 2016

ACTIONS:

- Final proposal published:
 - In paper format – available at Marina Customer Services Centre and Riverside offices
 - Online on Waveney website
- Respondents to initial and second phase of consultation (who provided an email address) contacted by email to advise that final proposal is available for comment
- Other stakeholders contacted to advise that final proposal is available for comment
- Publicity on website, via social media and in local press
- Final comments from residents in the review area via online survey (e-form) available through Waveney District Council website
- Submissions may also be sent in by email/post by other stakeholders

OUTCOMES:

- Final proposal made widely available to ensure access for all. Will include final maps showing boundaries, and supporting documentation, to show the council's final proposal.
- E-form survey enables residents living in the review area to give final comments using a structured form, and facilitates efficient collation of responses

- Final comments (from e-form survey/email/post) will be collated and analysed, and any final adjustments made to the proposal before it is officially published
- Reorganisation Order produced and published where required