

## **SMTF Learning Notes**

### **Visit to Okehampton for Devon Heartlands Community Forum, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept 2009**

36<sup>th</sup> meeting of Community Forum. Matt Day and Carol Goodall of SMTF attended. Facilitated by Devon Heartlands Community Development Trust.

The Devon Heartlands Community Development Trust (DHCDT) predated the MCTi in Okehampton and area and was a key partner in delivering it. Three years ago their MCTi Partnership decided to dissolve, and at the same time they decided to create an open Community Forum that would hopefully become an engagement mechanism for local people to raise issues, and also improve liaison between the various groups working in the area (some working on issues identified in the Community Plan, some not).

The Community Forums started off as quarterly meetings but quickly became monthly. Town and District Councils were disinterested in the beginning, but slowly Councillors have started attending. The two Community Forums in Okehampton and Tavistock have a joint representative on the District LSP Management Board.

At the Forum we attended, there were present;

- Police (Sergeant and 2 PCSO's)
- Fire and Rescue rep
- Senior Council of Devon reps
- District and Parish Councillors (2)
- Rep from Tavistock Community Forum (also a District Councillor)
- Rep from a neighbouring Parish Plan group
- Youth Worker
- Residents (5) inc a restaurateur, ex-Cllrs, U3A member
- Rev Philip Wagstaff (Chair of the meeting)
- Ewan Rae (Secretary for the Forum, DHCDT)
- Steve (DHCDT)
- Paul Delahoy (DHCDT and Devon Towns Forum)

Issues discussed included;

- Police Youth liaison Officer – when replacement was coming
- Sustainable Communities Act – explanation of timescales and limitations
- Idea to have General Election 'Question Time' style events in the run-up to the election – one general, one aimed at young people. U3A had held previous debates; Community Forum would be 'supporting the democratic process' and trying to get young people engaged in it
- Youth Homelessness in Okehampton – Youth Worker raised this, debate over who could get involved, the best solutions and parents responsibilities
- Planning – an ex-Cllr presented his concerns over the LDF housing allocations and draft plan for Okey. Debate over whether LDF consultation process flawed, promoting alternative development proposals, validity of housing allocations, fact that Cornish Towns are legally challenging the Regional Spatial Strategy, and that possible Tory Govt may change regional planning policy. Interesting input from Policeman – if housing numbers rose by that many (900 homes?) he'd want an additional Officer – perhaps the Community Forum could apply some pressure on his superior?

Health Issues – review of all health issues raised at the Forum since Jan 08  
Senior Council have produced a Dementia Handbook that can be ‘localised’ by other areas

### **Actions agreed**

Question Time events – working group created to deliver this  
Youth Homelessness – the Forum would gather together the relevant agencies for a meeting on this issue

### **Observations**

MD – the use of an independent community anchor organisation such as DHCDT in this model, with a fair, respected and amiable Chair in Philip Wagstaff created an opportunity for residents, groups and Councillors to discuss issues. Philip gave an encouraging, inclusive tone to the meeting and there was a good deal of experience in the room that could explain complex issues to novices. Issues not resolved remained on the following agenda.

Of course, it has no formal power (and therefore has the potential to just be ‘a talking shop’) but could be viewed as a useful addition **alongside** Parish and Town Councils. I felt that overall it was a good opportunity to raise issues and help people feel ‘empowered’- perhaps the kind of participatory democratic tool that Communities and Local Government would like to see more of (shame they are not clearer about it or fund them!).

CG – not sure what was achieved by the meeting. Could see benefits of DHCDT meeting partners - such as Tavistock Forum and Parish Plan groups.

Comment from Paul Delahoy, Devon Towns Forum (not verbatim) – ‘if it were just a meeting, that’s all it would be, and anyone could organise it, but as the Dev Trust has the capacity to act on some actions and be the secretariat for the meetings, and feed up issues to the LSP, it’s much more than just a meeting’. (apologies Paul!)

Many thanks to Devon Towns Forum and the Devon Heartlands Community Development Trust for the invite. DHCDT has offered to come to Somerset if our members would like to hear more.

Matt Day  
8<sup>th</sup> Sept 2009