

FORTH AND INVERLEITH VOLUNTARY SECTOR FORUM

MEETING NOTES 23RD NOV 2018

Animate Consulting was asked to facilitate a meeting of the Forth and Inverleith Voluntary Sector Forum. The aim of the session was to consider the current and potential working of the Forum and how it could best serve its members and the community it represents.

The facilitated meeting involved 15 people. Using the idea of fictional workers (one new to an area and one long-established) attendees considered what a local forum 'at its best' would offer such workers and offer the local community. They then considered their experience (pros and cons) of attending the Forum (or other fora), before comparing the current Forum with 'a forum at its best'.

The meeting concluded by considering what format and agenda would be of benefit in the coming months for the Forum, to cater for new and established workers and for the local community.

1. A forum at its best offers members:

- support, commonality, solidarity – a chance for people to share concerns but also to be encouraged and to reconnect with their purpose
- knowledge, contacts and the perspective of local groups on the area itself, of needs and common issues and of changes in the local landscape
- considers cross-cutting themes where everyone's perspective is heard from diverse organisations
- sharing of good practice
- sharing ideas on the best use of resources
- opportunities to help and be helped
- collaborative working
- out of the box thinking
- clarity on why it is there and how it works
- inclusivity and accessibility (in terms of meeting locations and times)
- time spent that is worthwhile and relevant
- a varied format that leaves people feeling stimulated and positive

2. A forum at its best offers the community:

- the right services working at their best
- more integrated services
- organisations and services working better together
- accessibility to services improved for all
- security – a responsive group that is looking out for the community
- an avenue for concerns / a voice
- an opportunity to be listened to / to be consulted with
- a way of influencing community planning

3. Diversity in a forum

Attendees considered the fact that a forum has diverse members, concluding that whilst diversity can bring competing agendas and leave people feeling that they could be in the wrong place, wasting time, there was recognition that diversity also brings many positives:

- there are interlinking themes between organisations
- there are shared issues (lifelong learning, community centres were two recent examples)
- it allows broader horizons / wider thinking / cross fertilisation of ideas
- offers information on other groups and their interests

4. Pros and cons of the Forum

This discussion considered the current pros and cons of the Forum (or if people had not attended before, then their experience of similar meetings)

Pros	Cons
Sharing info / resources	Lacks focus and purpose
Relevant and helpful especially in moments of crisis	Lacks clarity in terms of aims and objectives
Kept relationships alive despite pressures	Not well attended
Good things happening outside of meetings as a result of networking	Can be distracted by Locality Agenda
Real examples for others to be aware of and motivated by	Turnover of support
The forum is supported by EVOC	Supposed to be 'voice of sector' for Community Planning but consultation is low so hard to be representative
Agenda and minutes are distributed	Lack of community representation
	Could just be a tick-box exercise and tokenistic
	Uncertainty about who is listening to the forum and what its influence is
	3 rd sector is a 'junior partner' in partnerships
	Talking about the same things – more action needed
	Shorter more frequent meetings would be better

5. What needs to change in the Forum?

This discussion considered how far the Forum is from 'a forum at its best' and identified where it needed to change:

- gain perspective from more community members
- find ways where service users can contribute (directly attending or through projects communicating with them about meeting topics) to topics being discussed i.e. 'ask users before meeting' or 'invite users for their perspective'
- look for ways of Board members of organisations to be invited
- be clearer about the outcomes / knock on effects of the Forum's discussions
- better communication with EVOG
- less corporate format and less driven by Locality Agenda
- being resourceful and imaginative / sharing stories and overcoming issues / looking for collaborative opportunities (more likely with regular attendees)
- consider practical community issues regularly e.g. Christmas, summer closures – who is open / what resources are there locally?
- simple networking tools - 'did you know', Directory, acronym help

6. Conclusions and recommendations

There is clear understanding of what a Forum could give to members and to the community. The bullet points on page 1 resulting from the first two discussions offer a simple list which could be used in two ways:

- what the Forum could aspire to be from now on and how it communicates its purpose
- a 'checklist' for evaluation on an ongoing basis, to look at whether it is on track or not with its purpose.

6.1 Membership

There was a strong desire for a larger more inclusive membership. This may come if meetings are more appealing and helpful, but will also require some specific targeting of invitations. This needs to be talked through at a forthcoming meeting. There was also the suggestion of developing 'Welcome' information for new members.

6.2 Collaborative working

There appears to be an appetite for collaboration but as this is untested at the moment, beginning with a small scale project with a relatively short timescale might be the best first step. There is also appetite for networking and information sharing and therefore one suggestion could be that the task of developing a local directory could form an initial project (it made be that previous models are there to be used/updated to avoid this being too onerous).

Part of the next meeting could explore:

- the purpose of a directory / who it is for / what it should contain
- the format that will make it easy to compile, easy to use and easy to update?
- who will be involved in information gathering / how this work can be shared and done as collaboratively as possible
- timeline (this could be a project that can be done relatively quickly so that the forum sees a practical development of its work and is encouraged by this)

Another relatively simple task would be a 'Welcome Pack' for new members as some of the information for this could be the directory and the aspirations set out on page1 of this document, if the Forum agree these to be how it wants to represent itself.

6.3 Future Meetings – one suggestion for a structure

Attendees agreed that meetings should be:

- stimulating and positive
- dynamic / range of formats
- more frequent and shorter
- cyclical and answerable

One way to ensure that the broad areas which are seen as important are covered would be to have 'Cross-cutting issue', 'Working together', and 'Networking' as standing items e.g.

Mins	The Forum – Working Together for a Closer Stronger Community
10	Welcome
55	Cross-cutting issue: e.g. Universal Credit
25	Working together: e.g. Purpose, Membership, Directory
10	Networking: Did you know? (events, news, opportunities) Who is the new what? (coming and going of staff)
5	Looking ahead: to content of next meeting
1hr 45min	
15	Opportunity to stay and network

Other potential agenda items listed by attendees are shown overleaf.

6.4 Communication

There are a number of areas relating to communication which need to be considered in the coming months, and regularly reviewed. These include:

- how the content of future meetings is conveyed in a way to attract attendees
- spreading the word to ensure greater and more inclusive membership
- the profile of the Forum in terms of social media / newsletter etc.
- communication with EVOC
- communication in terms of influence of the Forum being a voice for the community

6.5 Potential agenda items (identified by attendees)

a) Themes / local issues

- Universal credit – a collective community response
 - How do we provide advice support to people claiming UC?
 - How can we mitigate the worst excesses through using all of the community's assets (people buildings, staff, services)
- Fuel security (Changeworks etc)
- Food poverty in local areas
- Homelessness in local areas (2)
- Community Centre changes / plans for support
- Tackling current, relevant issues. Even just a “term” to be explore as fully as possible (i.e. ‘how to support people in poverty...’)

b) Invited speakers

- CEC Managers attending / guest speakers (neighbourhood partnership, housing, safer families, health / local surgeries, benefits)
- EVOC – senior manager Q+A

c) Planning / Programming

- Annual / regular ones – planning of resources of support – coordinated approach e.g. food, community meals, useful phone numbers, who is open/closed, what is available for example end of year / new year closures
- Summer programming / winter programming – so events don't overlap or can be done joined up
- Plans: sharing our individual voluntary organisation plans with the Forum to see if others are having the same and so to not repeat/clash rather pull resources, talents, skills together and work in partnership

d) Evidence / Collaboration / Funding:

- Evidence: what evidence do we all have about what's needed in the community?
How do we best use it to get more resources in the area?
- Identify opportunities for collaborative funding applications – maybe 2 in 2019? Can we make new stuff happen together?
- Collaborative working and visit from Big Lottery
- Working towards a joint project – what, who, where to benefit the community and leading to an application for shared funding
- Organisations who can work together
- Identify gaps in provision / thematic
- Identify what difference we are making as a forum (or want to make)
- Joint funding / collaborative working

e) Networking:

- Networking time / Information sharing
- A Did You Know session....local events planning, good practice stories, input needed
- An updated (dynamic?) directory of who does what, when, where, how to contact (perhaps updated annually) to include voluntary as well as 3rd sector groups (so that our community can benefit from the range of services better)
- How to get local groups networking and sharing information / problems etc.
- Community Directory (pilot project?) (student / Edinburgh College?)
- A list of acronyms to help people understand who is who
- Children, young people and families sub group

f) Structures / Voice

- How to feedback to the council on the effects of cuts on the local community
- Future development support for the VSF

g) Practice:

- Steps that can be taken in case of funding withdrawal (contingencies)

h) Membership:

- Opening up: organise a part business / part social event to encourage projects to invite their Board / Management Committee members along
- Community member attendance
- how to involve people from the local community
- Children, young people and families sub group

i) Communication / Profile

- Boosting our profile: newsletter, social media presence (communications could be improved)
- Blog / Social Media / Newsletter
- Welcome Pack
- Community events to focus and highlight what we do

j) Other

- A first new agenda that is welcoming and fun – drawing people in!
- Did you know? (round table chance to highlight events, issues, pieces of work)
- Who is the new what? (current job vacancies, news about staff changes)

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