TYNE AND WEAR FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE (TWFRS)	
COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP BUILDING & ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2016-18	
COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP MANAGER	FEB 2016

COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP BUILDING & ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2016-2018

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Community Engagement and relationship building is an intrinsic element of our core vision of *'Creating the Safest Community'* – which drives our need to understand our community better, to improve links and partnerships, and to have meaningful contacts that promote wellbeing, cohesion and inclusion. We strive to make our community and within that - *communities* aware of our commitment to keeping them safe, reducing death and injury and providing a value for money service, in which employees reflect the communities we serve.

1.2 At the heart of this strategy is a need for our communities to have a real stake in how we work to support the most vulnerable individuals, to involve communities in our decision making, and to enable them to feel that they can help drive and improve the services that we deliver.

1.3 This strategy will outline how we will improve our ability to engage with our community and look at how we build relationships with vulnerable groups. This will include partnerships, internal and external communication, consultation and volunteering.

2. OVERARCHING AIM OF THE STRATEGY

To reach the most at risk in our community through improved community partnerships, relationship building, engagement, effective internal and external communications and a cohesive service wide calendar of events which seek to maximise our impact in line with our resources.

3. OBJECTIVES

3.1 To improve our engagement on all levels with the local community, using a 'Ladder of Participation' framework to ensure that we are able to strive for the most effective engagement possible.

3.2   To raise awareness of TWFRS as an 'Employer of Choice' for all community groups and ensure that the diversity of our workforce reflects the community we serve.

3.3   To enhance community safety by ensuring that TWFRS continues to build sustainable relationships with our local communities.

3.4   To use community engagement as a means to enhance and develop our existing and future partnership work at both strategic and local level to ensure we are reaching the most vulnerable and hard to reach in the community.

3.5   To improve not only how we communicate and interact with communities, stakeholders and partners - but also how we communicate internally and externally about community engagement activities.

3.6   To explore ways of involving the community in how we work, both through consultation and potentially, through volunteering.

4.   BACKGROUND

4.1   WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

4.1.1   At a conceptual level, most Community engagement models spring from 'The Ladder of Participation' (see appendix one) boiled down, the 'ladder' aims to move communities up through a number of developmental levels in terms of the way we, as an authority, interact and engage with them.

4.1.2   This hierarchy enables the organisation to see at what level our actions are, and how much we empower our communities. Each level has purpose, and sometimes we will need lower level activities, or at least, begin with lower activities, when engaging with communities – but we should aim to progress so that our work and interactions with communities becomes more engaging.

- **Level 1 - Informing:** providing communities with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding problems, alternatives, opportunities, solutions. For example our website, leaflets and promotional materials, newsletters and press releases.

- **Level 2 – Researching –** Trust building and networking, building relationships and scoping the needs of the community.

- **Level 3 - Consulting:** obtaining community feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions. For example, surveys and focus groups.

- **Level 4 - Involving:** working directly with communities to ensure that concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. For example, partnership boards, reference groups and service-users participating in policy groups – Sunderland's Independent advisory groups (IAGs)

- **Level 5 – Devolving:** working in partnership with communities in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution. Working with community based organisations such as Age UK, and carers to deliver HSCs on our behalf. Setting up a volunteering arm of the fire service could also be seen as a level 5 activity.

- **Level 6 - Empowering:** placing decision-making in the hands of the community – communities take full ownership of the decision making process and outcomes.

4.1.3 We can use this as a reference point to see how 'engaging' our work is, with the local community, and to see how we might be able to enhance the engagement to further empower the community. The action plan details in the Appendices of this report will aim to develop our engagement activities in line with this model.

4.2   Why have an Engagement Strategy?

4.2.1 TWFRS already engage with our community, our Community advocates network and link-in with many vulnerable groups in our districts, our Prevention & Education departments interact with the local community with events and HSCs, our Protection and Technical staff work with diverse businesses and we have numerous partnerships, both strategic and informal at district level which show our need to tap into our community to improve how we work.

4.2.2 It can be said that sometimes we need the level of participation to be quite low, when we simply want to inform; but a modern, community focussed organisation must strive to engage on those higher levels, not just out of a moral imperative to serve the community in the most appropriate way, but because the community itself can be a massive, scarcely tapped resource of knowledge, information and talent.

4.2.3 The development of a Community Engagement strategy is borne out of our 'Strategic Community Safety Plan' and is inextricably linked to that overarching plan. The role of the strategy is to link in to all of our current functions and assist in making our links with communities stronger, our work with community groups more focussed and sustainable.

4.2.4 Our mission, vision and values, we can see clear strategic direction which, through our goals and priorities, clearly lend themselves to a need for engagement –

- 'To prevent loss of life and injury from fires and other emergencies and promote community wellbeing' – Within this, we set the goal of *working with partners to promote community safety, social responsibility and inclusion* – this clearly demonstrates a need to engage with our

community and the Community Engagement Strategy will assist in achieving this goal.

- 'To deliver a modern effective service, ensuring value for money with staff who reflect the communities we serve' – This goal is enhanced through engagement, value for money comes through harnessing the power of the local communities and making good use of the resources within – as well as this, being seen as an employer of choice, particularly with hard to reach communities, takes a great deal of trust building and engagement.

4.2.5 Our core values also indicate a need to formalise our engagement strategy:

- *We value service to the community by working with all groups to reduce risk; treating everyone fairly and with respect; being answerable to those we serve* – all of these values, demonstrate a need for community engagement.

- *We value improvement at all levels of the service by accepting responsibility for our performance; Being open minded; Considering criticism thoughtfully; Consulting others.* – Again all high level potential actions from the 'ladder of participation'.

4.2.6 Our 'TWFRA External Communications Strategy' also has a number of agreed actions which dovetail into a potential Community Engagement Strategy, including:

- Ensuring attendance at key partnership meetings; A strategic and planned approach to proactive media relations; identifying and targeting key stakeholders including promoting TWFRA's strategy, plans and performance to stakeholders; Improving communications with 'hard to reach' groups and finally Attending key community shows and events.

It is evident that there is a need for a focussed Community Engagement Strategy which can both acknowledge the factors outlined above, and link in with our other strategies to enable us to enhance our community relationships and target those most at risk.

The significance of having a strategy around Community Engagement is that it identifies our on-going need to understand and relationship build as a fundamental element of our role in the community.

4.3 TARGETTING FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

4.3.1 Community engagement goes hand in hand with the targeting of vulnerable groups for Home safety Checks (HSCs) in each district as outlined in our 'HSC targeting strategy' the groups will change on an annual basis, depending on risk, and this strategy will be guided by those most at risk on an annual basis.

4.3.2 It should be noted that the service has now put in place a 'Vulnerable Persons Strategy' which seeks to define risk and improve our engagement with those most at risk. The Vulnerable Persons strategy' should be read alongside this document as it clearly defines where we need to focus our engagement.

4.3.3 From this targeting we have to look at how best we can support all of these communities, through a variety of engagement methods. Some of these we are already doing, but there are a lot of activities that we may be able to engage in that can help to ensure we reach the most vulnerable in all of our communities.

4.4 Hard and Soft Targeting

4.4.1 When we look at targeting mechanisms currently in use in line with other strategies, we can see a clear distinction of those targets which we can term 'Hard' - with clear routes through existing partnership boards and secondly those 'Soft' targets which don't necessarily have a clear path through formal partnership structures, but can yield significant results through improved engagement. Community engagement is relevant to both sides, and we can see below, the distinction between the two.

4.4.2 Hard Targeting – Formal partnership arrangements with public sector agencies and charities to provide information sharing, HSCs, training to have direct access to vulnerable groups. – many of our successful formal partnerships could be put into this bracket.

- Examples include

  - Local Housing companies i.e. Your Homes Newcastle
  - Police/health service partnerships
  - Social housing providers
  - Age UK
  - Carers
  - Disabled services
  - Environmental Health Services

4.4.3 Soft Targeting – Relationship and trust building with community groups and charities where the link to accessing vulnerable groups may be indirect or the 'pay off' might be longer term. Soft targets might be made through issues around age, social deprivation – possibly more based in the voluntary/social enterprise sector. These targets are more long term and we would aim to use the Community engagement framework to enable us to better engage with these organisations.

- Examples might include

  - Drug and alcohol charities – Although not exclusively, there is an established link between social deprivation and drug/alcohol abuse
  - Domestic violence – again not exclusively, but a linked factor in social deprivation
  - Mental health services public/3rd sector

- Meals on Wheels
- Sensory Support organisations
- Job centres
- Refuge and Women's Aid
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Single mothers support networks
- Support groups
- Places of worship
- Macmillan Nurses.
- BME groups and services, and businesses.

Both hard and soft targeting can yield great results when the aim is to build a better community profile and enhance community engagement.

4.5 Using the Ladder as a partnership and engagement framework

4.5.1 We can apply this model to our partnership work, how we strive to develop sustainable partnerships which achieve engagement on the following developmental levels:

4.5.2 **Informing and Researching – (Levels 1 and 2)**

- Networking

  - Attend forums and steering groups which address community interests and be proactive in offering appropriate support.
  - Identify key stakeholders, community leaders and appropriate 3rd and public sector support agencies.

- Identify and Inform

  - Identify what services we can provide and ensure that it is within our capabilities and budget to do so, before agreeing on actions.
  - Educate communities on the importance of fire safety and help them to understand the importance of the home safety check in reducing death and serious harm by fire.

- Trust building

  - Build upon positive relationships, reasonable sharing of resources, attending events, offering facilities etc
  - Open up the fire service to the community, host events and build positive associations.
  - Develop an understanding of the needs of each community, there is no such thing as a 'one size fits all' approach.
  - Identify gaps and look at a best fit for the service that we offer.
  - Also acknowledge any barriers that need to be addressed

o Cultural i.e. need for female TWFRS staff to be present on visits, additional cultural knowledge around specific festivals or customs.

o Conflict i.e. the acknowledgement that bringing some communities together could lead to difficulties where there are histrionic cultural differences.

o Technical/logistical i.e. People with disabilities/sensory difficulties may need enhanced equipment, disabled access to facilities.

o Language needs i.e. if English is not 1st language, can we facilitate a way to overcome this, using advocates, translators or in the case of deaf individuals BSL signers. Language specific information sheets might also be appropriate.

▪ To see all events and partnerships as a way of showcasing the service as an employer of choice and ensuring evaluation processes can gather qualitative and quantitative data on how effectively we convey this.

4.5.3 Consulting (Level 3)

- Using staff network groups internally and partners and stakeholders externally to enable us to engage and consult with hard to reach groups – ensuring that stakeholders have a say in our aims and objectives and can also help to evaluate the effectiveness of our service and our recruitment.

4.5.4 Involving and Devolving (Level 4 and Level 5)

- Information share with partners to ensure vulnerable individuals are covered by home safety checks and risk evaluation assessments.

▪ Educating appropriate partner agencies to carry out risk assessments and HSCs on our behalf – with built in sustainability plans to ensure that work can be maintained and resources are used with the minimum of wastage.

▪ Using volunteers from the community to help us achieve our aims and objectives.

o Maximising and standardising formal partnership activity with relevant cross district strategic arrangements.

- Where multiple partnerships are taking place with one agency, in separate districts – i.e. Age UK – explore working with Districts on replicating good practice and encouraging agreements and partnerships which span all districts with a consistent approach and shared outcomes. This is only relevant when agencies are not confined to a specific district alone.

- Explore new pan-district partnerships which engage with other 3rd sector agencies such as Mind, or Balance.

4.5.5 Empowering (Level 6)

- The most difficult from of engagement and the last step towards self sufficient community actions. This, in terms of our partnership work, would be the most difficult to achieve, as the very nature of our work requires us to work with our partners to quality assure the work they do for us. Level 6 can only be termed as 'aspirational' for TWRFS at this juncture. As community engagement enhances our work, new opportunities may come up to generate initiatives that lead to total empowerment.

5. ACTION PLAN

This document should be read alongside The 'TWFRS Vulnerable Persons Strategy' which contains an action plan for each identified vulnerability.

6. RESOURCES AND INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

6.1 In an organisation such as TWFRS, with such a community focus, the success of this Community Engagement Strategy is reliant upon all staff to view every interaction and contact with our community (and communities) to be a potential chance to engage. With 5 busy districts and a number of SHQ departments which regularly engage with our stakeholders, the implementation of the strategy must be ingrained in our procedures and will need significant buy-in with a wide variety of staff and work streams.

6.2 Outlined below is a general breakdown of where and how the strategy might feed into various work streams, based on activities that the strategy might cultivate through its inception. – The list below is not exhaustive, as the work to achieve community engagement grows, more departments and work streams may need to be involved.

- Community Safety/Service Delivery
  o Prevention & Education
  o Fire Safety
  o Operational response
  o Advocates

- Strategic Planning and Communications
  o Consultation
  o Corporate Communications
  o E Communications
  o Media resources

- Recruitment and HR
  o Selection and Retention
  o E&D

- L&D

7. MONITORING

The Strategy is the responsibility of the Community Relationship Manager in Community Safety, SHQ. It will be reviewed on an annual basis.

Appendix 1 The Ladder of Participation

THE LADDER FRAMEWORK   **TWFRS POTENTIAL ACTIONS**

Ladder Step	Description	TWFRS Potential Actions
6. Empowering	**Community-based responses & actions**	Supporting totally self sufficient community action.
5. Devolving	**Responsibility for decision making to communities** *(Allowing individuals/groups to develop and implement their own decisions)*	Empowering partner agencies to do HSCs
4. Involving	**Communities in decision making** *(Working with others to make decisions and carry through the agreed action)*	Working with Local Strategic partners, collaborating with agencies and organisations.
3. Consulting	**Communities over proposals** *(Views shared, options generated jointly, a course of action agreed upon)*	Consulting on local issues, ALPs, Changes to retained appliances in Gateshead,
2. Researching	**Needs, values, priorities & attitudes** *(Allows a choice between pre-determined options, giving no opportunity to propose alternatives)*	Trust building and Networking, fact finding, opening up the fire service, finding a 'best fit' for communities.
1. Informing	**People** *(Giving a message but don't require feedback or comment)*	The most basic engagement, Leaflets, press releases, advertising.