



Community Engagement and Involvement Strategy (2007- 2011)

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Introduction

Putting our customers at the heart of all that we do is crucial. Only if we do this can we provide excellent services that meet the needs of our customers. There are some great examples of where we have achieved success through involving our local people including the Borough Councils new youth website developed by young people for young people.

It is important that we continue this work and increase the opportunities we provide for our communities to engage with us, encouraging and empowering more people to grasp these opportunities and take an active part in democratic life and improving service delivery. The future success of our Council largely depends upon our ability to work with and support local people, providing them with the confidence they need to pursue their needs and wishes, ensuring they get the services they need.

We want to have a society where all our citizens possess the skills and confidence and have the opportunities to participate in shaping their future. And by this we do mean all our citizens, residents, businesses, community groups, voluntary groups and all hard to hear groups. It is important to us that all have an equal voice in shaping the future.

This strategy explains where we are now, our vision for where we want to be in five years time and our plan of how we can get there. We understand that we have some tough challenges ahead of us and with limited resources we will need to work with our local partners to maximise the opportunities for empowerment that we can provide.

We recognise that there are some challenges ahead and will be depending on the Council and the support of all our local partners and every member of our community to become interested and involved in the work that we do to achieve our aims. It will not be easy but with your support we can achieve success

What is it about?

Newcastle Borough Council recognise that good, inclusive community engagement can help bring about first class services that meet the needs and aspirations of local residents, community groups, businesses and interest group. In response to this, the Councils Community Engagement and Involvement Strategy outlines the Borough approach to providing good, inclusive engagement over the next five years.

The strategy also recognises national and local guidance, policies, strategies and approaches to engagement and where appropriate, these have been built into the core of the community engagement and involvement strategy.

Opportunities for involvement of local residents, community groups, businesses and interest groups are set out in the strategy which also documents both how we will raise awareness of these opportunities and how we will encourage people to take part. The strategy also includes our aspirations for developing opportunities for engagement and empowerment over the next five years.

The national context

Community involvement has been at the heart of the governments' modernisation agenda. This was first demonstrated in its White Paper 'Modernising Local Government: In Touch with the People' (1998) where the government made their intention to see 'consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all Councils. Over the last ten years this intention has been strengthened, through the Department for Local Government and Communities publication 'Together we Can' (2005) and the Governments most recent White paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' (2006). The recent government white paper on 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' supports consulting and involving local people in running their own services, providing better information to people about the quality of their services and providing mechanisms to allow members of the public to call the Council to account, when they fail to meet the needs of the local community.

Developing neighbourhood charters and setting out local standards and local priorities as well as encouraging management of services at the neighbourhood level will be important. Working more closely with neighbourhood policing teams and giving Councillors small budgets to tackle local issues are all measures which will give more power and control to local communities will also become increasingly important.

The local context

Newcastle Borough Council understands the importance of building and maintaining long term relationships with local people and this is demonstrated by the Borough Councils commitment to a programme of public involvement over the last ten years.

The Council understands that asking people what they think of Council services sets up a positive dialogue with local people and doing this regularly and effectively enhances people's perceptions of those services. As well as keeping us in touch with local people, listening to residents on the ground helps us to identify where we can improve services, which services are the most important to local people and how we can develop or adapt services to better meet residents' needs.

We also understand that providing feedback to people who have given their views and acting on issues that are priorities to people and providing sound reasons where we cannot is crucial to maintaining long term involvement with local residents.

Statement of Community Involvement (SCI)

Newcastle Borough Council was the first local Council to adopt a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). The SCI is a statutory policy document that sets out the Council's approach to involving the public, community and interest groups, developers, landowners and statutory consultees in consultations on both planning policy and planning applications.

The statement reflects who should be involved, how people will be made aware of opportunities for involvement and how people can become involved. It is based on engagement through consultation and contains statutory response times for consultations.

The statement recognises a range of consultation mechanisms including the Council's website, by letter, through the Reporter, parish councils, consultees, through the Council's Business Panel, the People's Panel, the LSP, exhibitions, focus groups and workshops. The variety of mechanisms are available to be used as appropriate. The Community Involvement and Engagement Strategy recognises that these methods should also be applied as appropriate in all other Council departments.

COMPACT

The COMPACT is a national policy document, providing a flexible framework, which can be adapted to fit local circumstances. It aims to improve working between statutory agencies and the voluntary and community sector relationships by setting a framework for forging partnerships.

The Borough COMPACT comprises key principles which relate directly to engaging local people through consultation. The COMPACT recognises that 'working in partnership towards common aims and objectives maximises the value and effectiveness of services to the community and that meaningful consultation builds relationships, improves policy development and enhances the design and delivery of services'. Through building partnerships, a better understanding of how the Council operates and better two way communications should lead to better services for residents across the Borough. The Community Engagement and Involvement Strategy is actively supporting the COMPACT in its aims by setting up partnerships with local, voluntary and community sectors.

The Community Strategy

The Community Strategy is a statutory document produced by the Local Strategic Partnership which outlines how the Council and its partners can work together to promote and improve the economic, social and environmental well being of the Newcastle Borough. It looks strategically at how the area should look in 10 years time and identifies six priorities, one of which relates directly to community engagement.

The strategy vision is for communities that are fully involved in decision making and the development and delivery of services. It provides a framework which includes performance indicators, outcomes and targets of how this will be achieved, measured and evaluated over time by public services, businesses, the voluntary and community sectors and complements the aims and outcomes of this strategy.

Corporate Best Value and Performance Plan 06/07

The Council Best Value and Performance Plan focuses on the key issues that we know are important in bringing about improvements in the quality of life for everyone in the Borough. The Plan identifies four priorities for the Council; Community Safety, Regeneration, Stronger Communities and the Environment. These reflect both national priorities set by government and local priorities identified by the LSP through extensive consultation. Community needs shape the Councils priorities and these may change from time to time as direction from consultation, inspections or central government dictates this.

Local Area Agreements

Local Area Agreements (LAAs) set out the priorities for a local area agreed between central government and a local area (the local authority and the Local Strategic Partnership) as well as other key partners at the local level.

LAA's simplify some central funding, help join up public services more effectively and allow greater flexibility for local solutions to local circumstances. Through these means LAAs will help to reduce bureaucracy and devolve decision making away from Whitehall and into the local area. Newcastle's Local Area Agreement (LAA) which will be completed by April 2007 will include a statement of community involvement and we will work in partnership to ensure a joined up approach in relation to community engagement.

Equalities Policy and Equality Impact Assessments

Newcastle Borough Council will endeavour to provide a variety of engagement opportunities that are inclusive and meet the needs of people from different backgrounds including people of different ages, ethnic groups, people with disabilities and residents living in both urban and rural areas.

The Council's Equality Scheme ensures all service functions and policies have equality impact assessments carried out on them and these demonstrate that equalities and inclusion issues are fully embedded into policy development and service provision.

A full equalities impact assessment was carried out on the Council's Corporate Engagement service in November 2005. The impact assessment is designed to ask questions that will ensure that the Borough Council have fully considered equalities issues and are taking action to promote equal opportunities and inclusiveness. The consultation service has been monitored to ensure equality of opportunity and equal access to allow people who want to be involved, the opportunity to be included. Equality of opportunity has been built into the service provision and every community engagement activity is monitored for its inclusiveness.

It is acknowledged that some sections of the community are particularly difficult to engage with and may be unrepresented in engagement processes. In response to this, particular initiatives will be pursued to ensure the involvement of people who may be underrepresented such as hard to hear groups including young people, older people, people with disabilities, people living in rural areas, lesbian/gay/bisexual people, ethnic minorities, religious groups, people with low basic skills and people whose first language is not English.

Young people

One fifth of Borough residents are under the age of 18 and consequently ensuring inclusive opportunities for involvement with young people is essential. Involvement occurs largely through citizenship activities in schools.

Recently these have included mock elections, debates and meet your local councillor events. Schools are also engaged through consultation. In 2006 over 2000 primary and secondary school children gave their views on how leisure services should be developed in the future. More recently, secondary school children helped develop and pilot test the Borough Council's youth website designed by young people, for young people.

As well as building relationships through schools, an agreement with the County Council District Youth and Community Section ensures that the Newcastle Young People's (a group of young people from all areas in the Borough) also have regular opportunities to participate.

Older people

36% of the local adult population are over the age of 55 and consequently older people are represented by an equal proportion through the People's Panel. Following an agreement with Age Concern in 2003, members of Age Concerns, Fifty and Counting Team (FACT) are regularly invited to share their views. Newly established groups such as the Over Fifties Forum have been encouraged to participate and do so on a regular basis. The Council also provides written materials in large print and offers and offers one to one support to encourage older people to take part in engagement activities. The Borough Council also offer to make information and opportunities for involvement available in any other way that will ensure inclusiveness for local people.

Ethnic minority groups

Just over 2% of the Borough population are from ethnic minorities and 2% of panel members are also from ethnic minorities. Ethnic populations have increased locally in recent years and English is not always the first language spoken. Extra effort is taken to encourage inclusion of ethnic minority groups. Translated text offering opportunities for involvement are circulated in the locally spoken languages of Urdu, Bengali, Polish and Cantonese. Take up of this service is starting to occur and full translations are provided by the Taleem translation service upon request.

The Council also has a formal agreement with language line which offers telephone interpreters in over 100 languages within 90 seconds, face to face interpreters and translations of written documents.

Disabled groups

21% of the adult population have a disability or limiting long term illness and a similar number of panel members also have a disability or limiting long term illness to reflect this. Large font sizes and personal support for people who want to complete questionnaires are offered and focus groups are carried out with a local company 'Letting in the Light' who have a long term relationship with a range of disabled groups, mental health groups and learning disabilities groups.

Gender

48% of the Borough population are male and 52% female and the make up of the People's Panel is similar to reflect this. In addition, focus groups with 'at risk' females staying at the Elizabeth Trust, a refuge for victims of domestic violence and abuse have been held with 'Letting in the Light' to ensure harder to hear groups have opportunities for involvement.

Consultees

Consultees representing community groups, religious groups, urban and rural groups, parish councils businesses and disability groups have registered their interest to take part in engagement activities with the Borough Council to ensure the views of community and minority groups are represented.

Section 2: Community engagement

The levels of community engagement

There are many different terms and definitions which describe the levels of public participation from the traditional view of sharing information with people to helping people transform their lives and bring about change in their communities. These include:

- **Informing:** Providing public information about what is going on.
- **Consulting:** Asking for public feedback about services and policies.
- **Involving and Collaborating:** Involving the public throughout the process, understanding and taking on board considerations and concerns and collaborating with residents in every aspect of the decision-making process.
- **Empowerment:** helping people to develop the skills that will enable them to take control of their own communities and services.

Where are we now?

Informing

When we need to inform local residents about our services there are a number of mechanisms we have in place to do this. Examples of where information is provided to the public include the Civic Newspaper the Reporter, the Borough Guide, the Business Guide, the Visitor Guide and information leaflets promoting both corporate and service-specific issues. Corporate leaflets include "Know Your Councillor" and "How to Make a Complaint" and service leaflets include local walks and leisure services guide. We also provide a yearly council tax leaflet and corporate and best value performance plan. In addition, there is a wealth of service information on the Borough Council website, kiosk and plasma screen located in the Civic Offices, Newcastle and the kiosk in Kidsgrove Payment Hall.

Consulting

There are a variety of mechanisms that we use to consult local people about Council policies and services where feedback is needed to help make service decisions and these are outlined below.

People's Panel

The People's Panel, is the principal method that the Council uses to involve local residents. The People's Panel is a representative group of 600 local residents who give their views about Council services and policies three to four times a year. The Panel is representative by age, gender, ethnicity, disability, ward, housing tenure and occupation.

Consultees

Over 200 consultees including local community, business and voluntary organisations have registered their interest to take part in consultations. Consultees are representative of a range of local community and voluntary groups. They are encouraged to take part three to four times a year.

Business Panel

The Council runs a business panel. As part of the Panel around eight to ten local business meet up with Council representatives every couple of months to work through issues of importance.

Reporter

The Reporter is delivered to all households and businesses in the Borough and is used to send short questionnaires to all residents and businesses, to initiate debates and to request letters from residents.

Electronic involvement

Electronic and emailed surveys are used as well as forums on the Borough Council website. Text services are available as well as a free standing opinionmeter which can be moved from one location to another to gauge views of Council services electronically.

Focus groups

Focus groups are used when qualitative feedback is required. It can be used to develop the components to be included in a large scale survey, to provide depth of information, to ask further questions and to involve discrete groups of people when there is a need to tackle a particular issue or topic in depth.

Home interviews

Home interviews are used to provide a depth of information and to enable explanation and one to one support with residents. 300 home interviews are carried out yearly to ascertain residents' budget priorities for the year ahead.

Consultations will occur early in the decision-making process and only when a decision has not already been taken. Results will be fed back to managers and into the decision-making process and feedback on results and actions taken will be provided to participants.

Involving and collaborating

This is a method which is only appropriate where no pre-determined decisions have been made. The Borough Council have some examples of where local people have been engaged through involvement including the development of the Borough Council's youth website designed by young people for young people. The site which was also pilot tested by young people is also reviewed annually through focus groups with young people.

In addition over 2000 young people have been involved in the development of future leisure services identifying what they want to use and having the services provided in the way that they want to use them.

More recently, the Panel have been involved in the redevelopment of the waste and recycling services, choosing preferred future options for delivery. Recycling of plastics has recently been added to the community recycling facilities in response to demand shown in this survey.

Empowerment

Local residents in Knutton and Cross Heath have become empowered as part of the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder. The Pathfinder work with local residents and aims to improve the quality of life of residents by creating a safe neighbourhood where people are happy and proud to live and work and where good quality services are provided that meet the needs of the community. So far the team have worked with residents to meet their needs by providing community police support officers, neighbourhood wardens, a youth link scheme and college courses.

Newcastle Borough Council are experienced in the most traditional means of engagement. We have many good examples of providing public information and we also have good examples of where we have successfully consulted with local residents. We are getting better at involving and empowering residents and this reflects the shift we are making towards involving, collaborating and empowering people in the long term but we need to develop more sustained examples of where this has been achieved successfully and this is the area where we need to develop over the next five years.

Where do we want to be?

Over the next five years our aim is for:

'greater participation and empowerment by people in the decisions that affect them locally, leading to services which better match the needs and preferences of communities'

We need to:

- Put service users and citizens at the heart of public service improvement
- Demonstrate their positive impact on the quality of life of local communities
- Provide access to high-quality, cost-effective services for everyone

Aims, objectives and standards to help us get there

Improving our understanding of the needs and aspirations of local communities.

We have access to a range of secondary data about the Borough as a whole as well as the composition of our local wards. We also have research data on a range of services including budget priorities, waste and recycling services, parks and open spaces and crime and safety for the Borough as a whole. We need to develop the understanding we already have of our Borough residents by focusing on needs and aspirations within local communities.

Developing a co-ordinated approach to community engagement across the Council

Engagement activities are co-ordinated corporately at Newcastle Borough Council. The corporate research team provide advice, training and support to staff and also run quarterly meetings of the consultation advisory group focusing on best practice, sharing of current research and future plans as well as exploring opportunities for joint working. The team comprises members from all departments who carry out research as part of their job. The LSP also sit on the research group meetings sharing information with the group and local partner agencies.

Partnership working

Across Staffordshire

A county wide research group, containing members from local Councils from across the County is co-ordinated by Staffordshire County Council. The group share best practice, work plans and explore opportunities for joint working with one another.

Across Newcastle Borough

Through partnership working with the LSP, the Borough Council have developed a community engagement partnership with local organisations including Beth Johnson, Aspire Housing, the Primary Care Trust, the Newcastle CVS, the Communities Forum, Staffordshire Fire Authority, the Community Safety Partnership, the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder and Sure Start. The partnership are sharing best practice, current research and future plans and exploring opportunities for joint working.

The role of members

Councillors are the people who can provide a key link between local people, community groups and public service providers. It will be important to encourage Councillors in their role as community leaders, ensuring that peoples concerns are listened to and addressed by the appropriate authority. Councillors will have a particularly important role to play in ensuring that vulnerable people and those least able to speak out for themselves can do so through their Councillor. Councillors will also need to have the role of ensuring that frivolous or vexatious complaints are not taken forward. These can only be achieved by supporting and training members in their role to allow them to carry out their role effectively.

Empowering more people

We have many good examples of where we have encouraged the involvement of local people e.g. the People's Panel, local consultees, through leisure and parks forums and hard to hear groups. We will continue to encourage and promote opportunities for involvement to give local people the confidence and skills to be able to.

We will continue to develop engagement mechanisms to involve hard-to-hear groups, targeting the regular involvement of young, old, ethnic groups and disabled groups and encourage more to take part every year.

Building skills

We are continually building research skills across the Council, working with staff and providing advice and training in relation to their community engagement activities. We need to build on these skills by developing a staff toolkit based on areas where staff have identified that they need more training and support.

We will also work with our local Councillors, supporting them in their roles as community leaders, encouraging them to become involved in community engagement work within their local areas helping them to empower people within their own communities.

Making it happen

The budget and resources implications for engagement through information sharing, and consultation can be met through using existing staff and budgets and the budget for involving and collaborating can also be met largely in the same way. But, empowering people to provide them with the skills they need to develop services in the way that they want them will require dedicated staff time and money. This will need to be accounted for from the Councils improvement plan.

Every year, a yearly action plan with timescales, milestones and targets along with resource implications will be developed to take forward the ideas in the Community Engagement and Involvement Strategy and to make them happen. These will be published yearly on the Borough Councils website.

Consultation standards

We have endorsed the Cabinet Office Code of Practice on Consultation including the six consultation criteria

- Engaging widely throughout the process, allowing a minimum of 12 weeks for written consultations.
- Being clear about our proposals, who may be affected, the questions we are asking and the timescale for responses.
- Ensuring that consultations are clear, concise and widely accessible.
- Giving feedback regarding the responses received and how the consultation process influenced the policy.
- Co-ordinating and monitoring our effectiveness and ensuring we follow best practice.