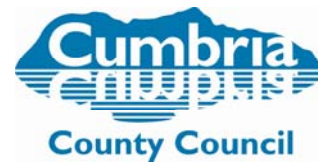


Cumbria County Council

## Consultation Strategy 2006



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## **Cumbria County Council Consultation Strategy 2006**

### **1. Introduction**

Cumbria County Council is committed to putting the public first. Consultation has a key role in achieving this aim. But it is clearly important that the council's consultation activity also puts this principle centre stage. This strategy lays out both the council's continuing commitment to consulting with communities and the ways by which we will ensure that putting the public first is central to how we consult.

To do this it will be necessary to improve the council's performance in 3 key areas:

1. Improving co-ordination of activity across the council
2. Providing clear corporate standards for consultation activity
3. Mainstreaming performance monitoring and evaluation of consultation activity

Achieving improvement in these areas will not be easy. Effective, meaningful consultation presents many challenges, not only in terms of how we conduct consultation, but in how we feedback to participants, how we evidence consultation's effect on decisions, and how we learn from our own practice. While this strategy provides the basic framework, putting it into action will require effort and commitment from all council directorates and officers.

### **2. Why we consult**

While ultimately decision-making rests with council, we believe that information from effective consultation has the potential to significantly improve the quality of that decision making and therefore improve the outcomes for Cumbria. Consultation provides an opportunity for communities to learn more about what the council does and to add their voices into the decision making process; it gives the council the opportunity to learn from those best placed to comment on our services and plans.

Hence the council has consulted, and will continue to consult, for 3 main reasons:

- to determine service and spending priorities;
- to monitor and improve service performance;
- to generate or test new ideas and proposals.

In addition effective consultation has other benefits:

- services can be targeted more closely on providing what people want, and avoiding what people do not want;
- take-up of services can be improved, making unit costs lower, especially where there is a charge;
- local people can be involved more in decision-making, rejuvenating the local democratic process; and
- authorities, particularly councils, can strengthen their role in community leadership.

("Listen Up! Effective community consultation", Audit Commission)

While in some cases the council has statutory obligations to consult on particular issues, consultation cannot be viewed as an imposition or a "bolt-on". Rather it must be seen as central to the effective and efficient management of our business and to our ability to meet the needs of the diverse communities that we serve. A 2004 survey of the council's citizens' panel showed barely 40 per cent of the public believes that the council takes the views of local people into account before it makes decisions that affect them.

### 3. How this strategy is organised

The council's consultation strategy rests on three main pillars.

- **The Strategy – this document:** makes clear the reasons for the council's commitment to effective consultation with the range of Cumbria's many communities, and lays out the key principles that should inform our practice.
- **The Toolkit:** This will provide "nuts and bolts" information on consultation methods, how to engage different groups, legal considerations, how to feedback to participants, how to evaluate your activity and more.
- **The online consultation database:** This is the lynchpin for our consultation activity. It will provide a centrally accessible store of information on what consultation is happening where, when and with whom. It will allow us to improve the co-ordination of our many projects and provide a single point of reference for the public.

Taken together and used consistently across the council these three provide the opportunity to improve the ways in which we consult, the use we make of the resulting information and the public's perception of the council as a listening organisation.

### 4. Key messages

This strategy can be distilled to three key messages. These are fundamental to carrying out quality consultation that has meaning both for consultees and those who must make decisions.

1. **Apply the principles for good public consultation (appendix 1):** Do you really need to consult? Have you made clear what can be influenced and by the consultation and what cannot? Have you considered how you will make the process accessible and fair? Applying the principles will go a long way to ensuring a consistently high quality experience for those we consult and confidence in those who use make use if the results.
2. **You've asked them, now tell them!:** Consultation is not a one way street. If we are to build our relationship with the community and evidence our commitment to listening to and acting on their views we have to give feedback. Feedback not just in terms of the consultation findings but also in terms of what decisions have been taken as a result and what will or won't change. Failure to do so results in disengagement and makes gathering views in future more difficult. Any consultation project fails if it at the outset it has not considered how it will do this.
3. **Recognise the role of members:** Members are a valuable resource. They are ambassadors for the Council, channels of communication to and advocates for local communities. Their role as community leaders gives Members a major input into the consultation process. Members will play a key role in the implementation of this Strategy through:
  - instigating consultation initiatives;
  - Cabinet Members with Responsibility approving the consultation process for major strategic exercises;
  - providing feedback from their involvement in local groups, partnerships and forums, and through their unique relationship with local residents.Managers must ensure when planning consultation that there are no surprises for local Members and that for strategic and potentially contentious

consultation exercises that Cabinet Members with responsibility are involved early in the process and that Cabinet has signed off the proposals before you start

## **5. Consultation and Community Engagement**

The council's Community Engagement Strategy provides the overarching context within which this strategy sits. By its nature consultation is limited in the degree to which those we consult can influence outcomes. At its most basic, when we consult we ask for opinions on options that we determine; about decisions that we will make. Community engagement may go beyond this to explore shared or devolved decision-making. This increasing level of "citizen participation" is not inherently better but may be more appropriate for particular projects, in particular contexts or with particular groups. For different levels of participation different methods of engagement might be appropriate.

We should be aware that the ways we engage is not limited to consultation and that this may not in fact be the most appropriate approach. The council's guide to community engagement, Local Matters, will help you make this decision.

## **6. Who we will consult**

The range of groups with which the council might consult is extensive. It includes service users, potential service users, interest groups, partners, representative organisations, business and industry and more.

It is important at the outset that the target audience for a consultation exercise is identified. In cases of performance monitoring this may simply be service users. On wider issues of council policy the range of consultees may be far larger. We must ensure that the methods we use to engage with different groups are appropriate to them. Only by understanding and responding to their differing needs can we hope to generate useful and accurate feedback from them.

Additionally and significantly, we must consider not just who will have an interest in the issue but also those who will be most affected by our decisions and who can genuinely offer the greatest insight. This will inevitably include groups often termed "hard to reach", for example young people in care, adults with learning disabilities or ethnic minority service users. When considering who to consult we must ensure that we do not limit ourselves to the "usual suspects".

We need to consider how unintentionally our methods can exclude and how we are prone to overlook the views of those we find it difficult to engage. By doing so we can fail to understand the diversity of experience of Cumbria's communities and risk failing to meet their needs. Being inclusive is at the core of "Putting the public first".

The toolkit provides more information on identifying who to consult with and also guidance on engaging with so-called "hard to reach" groups.

## **7. Consulting with staff**

Consultation with council staff should not be overlooked. Their role is twofold; firstly as deliverers of council services and secondly as employees. In the first of these roles they will have valuable insight into how services can be developed and improved. Secondly as employees the council must understand what's working and what's not, what motivates them and what key issues need addressed.

In relation to the latter the council is committed to:

- Biennial survey of all employees
- Online discussion forums where employees can air views
- Regular employee forums across the county where issues can be raised and debated with senior management.

## **8. The role of Members**

Members are often very active in many spheres of the community, and can play a vital role in the council's efforts to involve the public. This could be through attending parish councils or neighbourhood forums, representing the Council on special interest groups, or bringing new ideas from elsewhere through contacts with other councils.

Where local consultation is planned it is the responsibility of managers to ensure that Members are kept informed and become part of the process.

Where strategic or potentially contentious consultation exercises are planned the Cabinet Member with Responsibility needs to be involved in the early planning stages - before the consultation starts. The Lead Member needs to be aware of, and have input to, the purpose of the exercise, the project plan, and the key messages that the Council intends to communicate about this consultation. For strategic consultations Cabinet should approve the proposals before the consultation is undertaken. Following the project plan will ensure that appropriate feedback is provided to Members and participants to identify the main findings and any changes to the proposals that may be made in response to the consultation. If Cabinet have approved your consultation process they will certainly want to know the results – so that these can be weighed alongside other factors in the decision making process.

## **9. The role of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

Through their involvement in Overview and Scrutiny, Vice-Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny panels will have an additional role in acting as member champions for consultation. They will act as a critical friend asking questions such as:

- is consultation necessary?
- is consultation happening early enough?
- are we asking the right people the right questions?
- is it accessible, robust and cost effective?
- will it make a difference to services and policies?
- did we listen and take on board valid points?
- did we feed back the outcomes to people who participated?

More specifically Scrutiny Vice-Chairs will have a role in:

- Promoting and developing inclusive dialogue with local communities.

- Helping build community leadership capacity.
- Acting as member champions for consultation generally by ensuring that:
  - the corporate standards for consultation are applied where consultation is taking place, and
  - consultation relevant to a particular theme is co-ordinated

These are critical tasks in ensuring that the council's consultation activity is both fit for purpose and making a difference to the council's decision making and the way it conducts its business.

## 10. What we will consult about

The council provides a large range of services and functions. For many of these services consultation is a regular aspect of their work. As stated previously these will tend be covered by the following themes.

- to determine service and spending priorities;
- to monitor and improve service performance;
- to generate or test new ideas and proposals.

Generally consultation should be linked to a decision that the Council intends to take. Although there will be exceptions to this it is important to be clear about the purpose of the exercise – and how the results will be used.

Given the council's size and diversity it is sometimes a challenge to understand the entirety of our consultation activity. Improving the co-ordination of projects and hence our ability to learn from our experiences is an aim of this strategy. The following measures will be implemented to address this issue:

- **Development of directorate consultation plans:** Each directorate will identify consultation exercises planned over the next 12 months in its Directorate Service Plan (DSP). This will include information about the purpose of the consultation, when the exercise will take place, and what is the decision making timetable that will follow from the exercise.
- **Uploading of information to online consultation database:** This information will be extracted from DSPs and the contact officer will be expected to ensure that this exercise is entered on the online consultation database. The database will enable you to identify if there are already planned consultations with a similar themes or timescales to which you could link, rather than start a separate consultation exercise. It will also identify already planned consultative meetings / forums which could be used for consulting on topics outside their usual remit.

## 11. How we will consult

How we will consult will depend on the issues and groups in questions. However, corporately the council already has in place a range of established consultation mechanisms, in most cases their use could be expanded:

- **Community Voice:** This is the council's citizens' panel. It is made up of a representative cross section of the Cumbrian public who have expressed a willingness to respond to consultation exercises. It is available for use to all council directorates. The council has three opportunities to use it each year.
- **Neighbourhood Forums:** The council runs over 60 local Neighbourhood Forums across the county. These provide an opportunity for local people to get together to discuss issues of concern with local members, responsible officers and representatives from partner organisations. They are a potentially valuable way to debate issues and find out views.
- **Online discussion forums:** Discussion forums can be created for particular topics. Properly managed and promoted they can provide a valuable space for debate and an insight into local opinion.
- **Online surveys and polls:** The council has the facility to easily host surveys and polls via its website. Using these methods may be not always be appropriate as a sole consultation mechanism but can add a different dimension to projects.
- **Annual Best Value General survey:** This provides an opportunity to gather key Best Value performance indicator data on an annual basis. However, there is scope to include questions on other topic areas.
- **Cumbria Consultation Steering Group:** This multi-agency group meets quarterly to share experiences and improve co-ordination of consultation activity.
- **Existing statutory and service user surveys:** Many directorates have statutory and service requirements to survey service users. We should be aware of the potential to "piggy back" related topics on to these.

In general existing mechanisms should be considered before new methods are used, failing to do so runs the risk of "re-inventing the wheel", wasting time and money and confusing the public.

Through following the principles of good public consultation we will ensure that the consultation methods we use ensure all groups, including "hard to reach" groups, are able to respond. We recognise that to gather all relevant views will often require multiple consultation methods designed to take account of the needs of different respondents.

## **12. How we will communicate results from consultation**

The rationale behind public consultation is positive change and improved services. We will ensure that results and outcomes from consultation are communicated. We will be clear at the outset about the potential audiences who need to know the results, and use an appropriate mechanism to provide feedback.

We will ensure that the range of responses that we have received is reflected in the feedback that we provide. If respondents to consultation exercises believe that the results of the process have not been fairly reported they do have recourse to our corporate complaints procedure.

The toolkit provides further detail on the sorts of audiences to consider and the sorts of methods that could be used but as standard use of the following should be considered:

- **Your Cumbria residents' magazine:** Produced three times a year this magazine is distributed to all households in the county. If your consultation findings have relevance to a general audience this may be an appropriate channel.
- **www.cumbria.gov.uk:** All council services should have presence on its website. This provides a simple low cost way to publish results.
- **Online consultation database:** Consultation exercises logged into the database will be required to provide feedback at an appropriate point. Feedback will be included along with all other documentation relevant to the exercise.

### **13. How we will ensure that consultation is effective and co-ordinated**

The toolkit provides all the information that is needed to plan, run, analyse, feedback, and evaluate effective consultation exercises. The toolkit provides information about the methods of consultation and involvement available, their relative strengths and weaknesses, how to use the appropriate method for the issue involved.

Advice is also included about adherence to the Data Protection Act, and other relevant legal frameworks.

Those carrying out consultation will be required to complete a Consultation Project Planning form. This will take the form of a series of questions relevant to each stage of the consultation process.

It is expected that anyone planning consultation will make use of the Toolkit, thereby ensuring that high quality public consultation is achieved.

Directorates have a duty to consider their forthcoming consultation activity and report this annually in their Directorate Service Plans. This information will be collated centrally and form the basis of the council's annual consultation plan. It is recognised that not all activity will be known so far in advance, but that which can must be included.

Planned public consultation exercises, and any subsequent exercises that arise unplanned during the year, will be logged on the online consultation database. It is the lead officer's responsibility to ensure that they are registered, once registered they will move through the planned, open, complete cycle.

This will enable us to ensure that:

- Opportunities for "joining up" planned consultation exercises are identified
- We are not duplicating or repeating requests for information
- Results of consultation exercises are shared with colleagues and with the public
- A link is made between consultation and decisions
- Interests in future consultations can be registered.

We will carry out an annual "spot check" on the database to check that it is being used across the Council. We will also audit one or two exercises from each directorate to check that the advice provided by the toolkit has been used in practice.

Within Social Services all research and consultation meeting the Department of Health's definition of research and involving Social Services employees, service users, carers and their families are ethically reviewed by the Research and Consultation Governance Group.

#### **14. How we will evaluate the success of this strategy**

The criteria by which the success of this strategy should be judged are twofold.

Firstly, as stated previously, when asked only 40% of the public felt that the council took their views into account before it made decisions that affect them. We can use this figure as a baseline indicator by which to judge success. By the end of 2006 we aim for this figure to have increased to 50%.

Secondly, by the end of 2006 100% of all consultation exercises that are undertaken with the public will be identified in Directorate Service Plans and logged into the Online consultation database.

## **Appendix 1: Principles of good quality public consultation**

The principles that the County Council has adopted to ensure that our public consultation is of the highest quality are set out below. The toolkit follows each principle and provides you with everything you need to know to put the principles into practice.

### **Principle One - Consultation should be appropriate and add value**

Before any new consultation begins, a thorough search will be made to find out whether relevant questions have already been asked of the public. We will avoid unnecessary repetition and duplication. Consultation will aim to seek informed public opinion and not just instant reaction. Whenever possible, the council's communication mechanisms will be used alongside consultation to inform and stimulate public interest, particularly in relation to major strategic and County wide issues.

### **Principle Two - Purpose should be clear – the decision principle**

Any consultation will contain a clear statement describing why it is being carried out and how the results will be used. It will be clear to consultees what can be changed by responding to the consultation – and what cannot. Consultation will usually be related to a decision that the Council is intending to make, and that can be influenced by the result of that consultation. This principle will be intelligently applied, as there may be circumstances in which consultation not linked to a decision is appropriate.

### **Principle Three - Consultation should be inclusive**

Consultation should aim to seek a representative cross-section of views. It is widely documented that some sections of the community are harder to engage in consultation than others. Therefore, appropriate action should be taken to ensure that the views of these individuals and groups are not excluded or overlooked.

The toolkit provides practical suggestions and contacts that enable this to be achieved.

### **Principle Four - Consultation should be well planned and timely**

Major consultations will be identified in advance through the Council's business planning process.

Consultees will be given adequate time to prepare their response. It is recognised that the length of time will vary depending on the time of year and the level of response that is being sought. Sufficient time will be allowed for the results of consultation to be collated, analysed and considered, so that the results of consultation feed directly into the decision making process.

**Principle Five - Methods should be appropriate and well managed**

The council will use a wide range of public consultation methods. They will be used appropriately, reflecting the strengths and weaknesses of each method and will be managed with a clear understanding of the particular skills, knowledge and resources that consultation requires. The toolkit will assist with this.

**Principle Six - Results should be acknowledged and fully considered**

The full range of views expressed during consultation will be acknowledged and attention drawn to areas of agreement and disagreement. The results of public consultation will be weighed carefully together with other evidence and considerations before decisions are made.

**Principle Seven - Accessible feedback should be given**

Accessible feedback will be provided both on the results of consultation and on how they have been used, in order to encourage greater public participation in the future.

**Principle Eight - Effectiveness should be evaluated**

The effectiveness of major public consultation will be evaluated and the results shared to encourage broader lessons to be learned. Evaluation will consider not only the number of responses received but also the quality, cost and timeliness of the consultation and the overall usefulness of the results in helping to inform decisions.

Good practice principles adapted from Bristol City Council Consultation Strategy