

LISTENING AND INVOLVING STRATEGY

November 2007

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The County Council is committed to consulting with and engaging local people in the planning and delivery of its services. This document sets out the Council's approach to consultation and user involvement and offers guidance to staff about how to use consultation to support the decision-making process. The Council already consults extensively and this document is designed to ensure a consistent approach is adopted and that the information collected is used to good effect.
- 1.2 One of the County Council's core values is 'equity' and, in terms of consultation and engagement, it is important that we enable the diverse communities of Cambridgeshire to have their say in the planning and reviewing of the services provided for them.
- 1.3 Consultation and the involvement of service users in decision making is not new, for many years the Council has had a duty and a commitment to consult the public on many aspects of its work. Recent changes in Government policy have broadened the way local authorities engage with communities and have placed increasing importance on this aspect of our work. This, the Council's third 'Listening & Involving Strategy', seeks to reflect these changes.

2.0 STRATEGY PURPOSE AND AIMS

- 2.1 There is already extensive involvement of service users and members of the public in the Council's decision making process and many examples of good practice exist. For all of the authority's consultation and involvement to be effective however, a consistent and co-ordinated approach to engagement with local people must be adopted. There is also a need to share effort and resources effectively between Directorates and with partner agencies to gain 'best value' from involvement and consultation activities.
- 2.2 This strategy is designed to ensure that all consultation and involvement exercises carried out by the authority are of a consistently high standard and, where possible, that the results feed into the decision-making process. In the longer term it will ensure that the organisation identifies opportunities to work with partners and continues to adopt new and innovative methods for involving local people. This document:
 - sets out the principles that should apply to all of the Council's consultation work
 - sets out Cambridgeshire County Council's policy on consultation and involvement
 - focuses on specific areas for improvement and sets out a strategy for achieving these improvements over the coming year.
 - summarises best practice in consultation and provides guidance on carrying out this activity effectively.

3.0 WHY CONSULT?

3.1 To ensure that, as far as possible, the Council provides the services that people want in the way they want them. Where the Council has carried out a successful consultation and involvement programme it has been found that:

- Services can be targeted more closely by providing what better reflect people's needs;
- The take up of services can be improved;
- User satisfaction can be monitored and improved over time;
- The quality of services can be improved;
- Issues arising from proposed changes to services can be addressed;
- Involving local people more in decision making helps to stimulate the local democratic process;
- The community leadership role of the council is strengthened through the continuous involvement of the public in the decision-making process.
- There is no perception of duplication or repetition.

3.2 The County Council now has a wider and more extensive duty to consult local people on the way services are delivered overall, not just on specific issues. The Government's modernisation agenda stresses the importance of delivering the services that we know are those that the public want.

3.3 More generally consultation and community engagement are at the heart of local government's role in championing the needs of its communities and democratic renewal. It is important that stakeholders are involved in influencing the policy direction of the organisation as well as the services it provides. The Government's emphasis on social inclusion sets a tough agenda for organisations in widening their approaches to consultation. There is clear direction that local service providers must make greater efforts to reach beyond community group leaders and into the communities themselves.

4.0 STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

4.1 The County Council's Corporate Communications Strategy sets out the Council's commitment to consult with and engage service users, the public and other stakeholders in the planning and delivery of its services. By setting out the principles of good practice in relation to consultation and involvement we are emphasising the strong link between the Council's aim of providing high quality services and the effective involvement of the public in decision-making.

4.2 It is the aim of this strategy that all consultation and involvement exercises carried out by the Council, or on behalf of the Council by external bodies, should adhere to the following principles. By adhering to these principles

we can move towards ensuring that members of the public feel that this organisation treats them and their views with respect.

A. Consultation and involvement will be clearly linked to decision-making and take place as early as possible in the decision-making process.

- 4.3 It should be clearly explained to those with whom we consult how their views will be used, and where and when their views will be considered as part of the Council's decision-making process. We need to be clear from the outset on exactly what we are consulting on. Those we consult with should be informed of any limitations and expectations should not be raised beyond the Council's ability to deliver. Feedback should be given to consultees on how their views were taken into account and what changes to services or other activities are planned.

B. Consultation and involvement will be carried out to a high standard.

- 4.4 Consultation and involvement should be carried out to appropriate timescales that will give consultees plenty of notice and time to participate. Involvement should be targeted to make sure that the right people are involved and that others are not bothered unnecessarily. The method of consultation or involvement should be appropriate and members of staff should be competent in using these consultation methods. Whenever possible, innovative consultation methods based on national 'good practice' will be encouraged and the Council is developing a toolkit for officers to support this.

C. Consultation and involvement will be inclusive

- 4.5 Different sections of the community in Cambridgeshire have different needs and views. In order to meet the Council's core value of 'Equity' every effort will be made to involve a representative cross-section of the community in decision-making. The Council will actively seek ways of engaging with communities who have not had a voice in the past, for example, people with a disability, people from ethnic minority communities, travellers, young people, people from rural areas, and the elderly.

D. Consultation and involvement will be coordinated

- 4.6 Where appropriate, the authority will seek to work in partnership with other agencies to ensure that consultation is cost effective and is not repetitive and confusing for the people who are consulted. Where opportunities exist, consultation and involvement should be carried out in partnership with other local service providers. Within the Council new processes will allow all staff to be more aware of what involvement exercises have taken place and with whom in order to avoid problems of consultation 'fatigue' and 'overload'.

- 4.7 Through the strategy the Council will put in place an action plan to ensure that the organisation works according to these principles. Sharing information and ensuring our database of consultation activity is fully up-to-date will be a requirement of all staff.

5.0 WHO DOES THE COUNTY COUNCIL CONSULT WITH?

- 5.1 Those people who the Council is committed to consulting with regularly fall into four distinct groups.

- Council-Tax payers and the public overall.
- Local Business & Commerce users and potential service users.
- Those with an interest in the service area (including partner agencies and voluntary bodies).

Council-Tax Payers and the Public Overall

Council-Tax payers contribute to the funding of the County Council's services and they have elected representatives (County Councillors) making day-to-day decisions on their behalf. Both generic issues such as crime and disorder, quality of the environment and the long-term growth of the County, and service specific issues affect them. Methods used to consult with members of the public during the last year include questionnaires, roadshows, focus groups, open meetings, member surgeries and telephone surveys.

Local Business & Commerce

Local Business and Commerce (through the business rating system) also contribute to the funding of services that the Council provides and have an interest in a variety of subject areas. For instance the Council under trading standards and other legislation regulates local businesses. The County Council also has influence over issues that affect the long-term economic growth of industry and commerce such as education, transportation and the availability of land for development. Current methods for consulting the business community include surveys, breakfast seminars and special interest meetings.

Service users, potential service users, families and carers of service users

These are the groups of people that the County Council understandably spends considerable time consulting and involving in decision-making. Across Directorates, the long-term involvement of service users is key to providing efficient and effective services. Methods used to involve service users include user feedback forms, quality surveys or setting up regular service user groups.

Partner agencies and voluntary bodies

For many years the County Council has built strong partnerships with other local service providers and interest groups. The recent establishment of Local Strategic Partnerships in each of the district areas of the County and the emergence of the LAA increases further the emphasis on regularly involving partners in County Council decision-

making. Methods for involving partners include workshops, seminar sessions and joint forums.

6.0 INVOLVING ALL GROUPS IN DECISION MAKING

6.1 It is important to ensure that certain groups in the population are not excluded when carrying out consultation and other involvement exercises.

6.2 Groups that do not always respond well to traditional consultation methods such as postal surveys have been categorised as being 'hard to reach'. However, it is better to think about these groups as those where a bit more time and thought is needed on the best way to establish and maintain contact.

6.3 The County Council aims to target these groups and ensure that they have an equal opportunity to participate in decision-making. Such groups include:

- Minority Ethnic Communities including Migrant Workers
- People at risk of social exclusion
- People living in isolated rural areas
- Older people
- Teenagers
- Travellers
- Those with a disability.

6.4 For some of these groups there are particular barriers to communication such as language, visual impairment or mental health and for others there are potential problems with the style of consultation. The Research Manager (Listening and Involving) located within the Research Group will be happy to offer advice on how to take forward work in this area.

7.0 WHAT DO WE CONSULT ABOUT

7.1 Public consultation has always been fundamental to the Government's modernisation programme and the Local Government Act (2000) highlights consultation as an important building block in the process of reinvigorating local democracy. There is a detailed legislative framework for consultation and this has increased in recent years.

7.2 There is now a general requirement to consult on most major council decisions and the need to involve service users and non-users in service development.

Statutory Consultations

As mentioned previously the number of Statutory Consultations has grown in the last few years. The County Council is committed to meeting the statutory consultation requirements placed upon it and, where possible, exceeding these requirements.

Consultation for Best Value and Scrutiny

The Council's approach to both Best Value and Scrutiny aims to deliver high quality, cost effective services that the people of Cambridgeshire need and want. Every Council is expected to continually improve its services, involve local people in the process and make use of challenging performance measures and targets.

- 7.3 When undertaking a 'Best Value or Scrutiny Review' there is usually an expectation that we will consult with service users, potential service users, carers and all other major stake-holders in the service. Guidance on implementing best value interprets this duty as being to consult a wide-ranging number of stakeholders and local interest groups in such away as to help to attain the goal of achieving 'best value' for the service. The County Council has rolling Best Value and Scrutiny Review programmes and the Research Group supports consultation activities for these reviews.

Local Strategic Partnerships and the LAA

The County and District Councils have a relatively new duty to work with other organisations, statutory, voluntary and private to prepare a community strategy. The strategy's purpose is to improve the social, economic and environmental well being of the local area, and contribute to sustainable development. In order to meet this goal, local agencies have come together to form Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) and Cambridgeshire Together (the LAA).

Continuous Service Improvement

The authority is committed to the on going review and improvement of services. In order to achieve improvement it is important to listen to the views of services users. This can be done through the use of user satisfaction surveys and complaints procedures. However, there is a shifting emphasis towards establishing a longer-term relationship with users through involvement groups who can regularly comment on services and receive feedback.

8.0 THE ACTION PLAN

- 8.1 To meet the purpose of this strategy, three priorities for improvement have been identified for the year 2007/08. This section of the strategy will be reviewed annually and include further action plans for improvement.

8.2 Priorities for improvement 2007/8

- To improve the co-ordination of consultation across the County Council
- To improve the quality and effectiveness of all consultations
- To improve the communication of the outcomes of all consultations.

8.3 Improving co-ordination

	ACTION POINT	Lead Officer	By When
1.	A 'network' of County Council officers will be established to spread best practice and share information about current consultation exercises taking place across the County Council. The network will build upon established groups and networks currently operating within departments (will subsequently be rolled out to include partners).	Senior Research Officer (Surveys and Projects), Research Group	Nov 2007
2.	A consultation database will be developed on the CCC intranet to record all consultations and the stakeholder groups involved. Support will be given to all Directorates to help them use it effectively.	Senior Research Officer (Surveys and Projects), Research Group	October 2007
3.	A 'Joint Framework Contract' with a private consultation-services provider will be established in partnership with District Councils, the PCT and Cambridgeshire Constabulary. The contract will provide cost savings and facilitate the joint commissioning of consultation activities. Details of the contract will be communicated across the Council.	Director of Communications	September 2007

8.4 Improving consultation quality and effectiveness

	ACTION POINT	Lead Officer	By When
4.	A new Listening & Involving Strategy will be produced.	Director of Communications	September 2007
5.	The Listening and Involving Strategy will be actively promoted across the County Council.	Director of Communications	October 2007
6.	National and local best practice will be collated and shared within the organisation via the Consultation Network and CCC Intranet and supported by a toolkit.	Senior Research Officer (Surveys and Projects), Research Group	Ongoing
7.	Guidance for all officers carrying out consultation will be made available on the intranet, including information on methods of consultation, pitfalls to avoid and useful contacts.	Senior Research Officer (Surveys and Projects), Research Group	Nov 2007

8.5 Improving the communication of outcomes

	ACTION POINT	Lead Officer	By When
8.	Guidance on giving feedback – considerations, methods etc – will be provided on the intranet as part of the consultation guidance package	Research Group	Nov 2007
9.	A follow up study to test the feedback given to consultees will be carried out on a sample of consultation exercises.	Research Group	March 2008
10.	Standards for dissemination of consultation activities to be revised and publicised.	Research Group	March 2008

8.6 The County Council's Communities Policy Development Group will oversee the implementation of this strategy and will receive an annual review of progress and agree targets for the year ahead. The day-to-day monitoring of the strategy will be the responsibility of the Research Manager (Listening & Involving).

9.0 GUIDELINES FOR CARRYING OUT LISTENING & INVOLVING ACTIVITIES

9.1 There are many different techniques for involving service users and members of the public in decision-making. Each of these techniques has its advantages and disadvantages depending on who we wish to consult with, the outcome sought and the resources available. This section of the County Council's Listening & Involving Strategy outlines the considerations to be taken into account when initiating consultation.

9.2 Getting the Process Right

It is important to be clear from the outset of the aims of your consultation and to have a full understanding of your consultation and involvement processes. Before commencing work you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you really considered consultation and involvement from the outset?
Token consultation at the end of a process can cause annoyance.
- Have you allowed enough time for consultation in your project plan?
Activities that are rushed give a poor impression and are often ineffective.
- Have you agreed the objectives for your consultation?
Vague or un-targeted work wastes time and resources.

- Have you checked to see if the information already exists? (You may not necessarily need to carry out a survey.)
Repeating similar exercises wastes resources and can cause consultation fatigue.
- Have you identified the decision-making process and how the results of consultation will be used?
If the results are not properly considered people will be less likely to help next time.
- Are you clear about the purpose of the consultation and can you give people clear information on the reasons for involving them and inform them clearly how their involvement can make a difference?
During a good quality involvement exercise people should be aware of why we are talking to them, what we will use the information for and how they will be told of the results of the exercise.
- Is there any other planned consultation with which your proposal could be combined?

9.3 Talking to the right people

As previously highlighted, the County Council is committed to involve all sections of the community in consultation exercises. Consideration needs to be given to who we are going to involve and what are the best ways to reach them.

- Have you identified all of the groups of people who should be involved?
Carry out a 'stakeholder' analysis to ensure everyone is involved. If you find that you will need to frequently consult with a group of people try to establish longer-term consultation arrangements such as a 'service user group'.
- Have you thought about how you will include non-users?
Talking to people who have used a service and stopped or who can't currently use a service can be as important as consulting current service users.
- Have you thought about how you will make your consultation inclusive so you can get the views of hard to reach groups?
Activities should be designed so it is easy for all sections of the community to take part. Issues of ethnicity, disability and background should be considered when undertaking involvement activities.
- Have you addressed issues of confidentiality?
Those taking part should understand how their views would be used and the limits to confidentiality.
- Have you thought about whose views will be most influential and how you will weigh up the views of various groups?

Some groups in the community are well organised and vocal yet may not represent the majority view. Make sure you give due weight to all opinions.

9.4 **Choosing the right method**

After establishing what you wish to consult about and with whom, you can begin to match this with possible consultation methods. There are many different consultation and involvement methods, some well established and some comparatively new. These methods generally fall into one of two groups, qualitative or quantitative.

9.5 **Quantitative Research Methods**

These methods are used to establish facts and answer questions such as how many? Or what proportion? The most common quantitative method is the survey (carried out face-to-face, by post or electronically). Other newer methods include the establishment of panels and deliberative polling.

The key features of quantitative research are:

- Asking standardised questions;
- Selecting samples of a defined 'population';
- Assuming that opinions, perceptions and behaviours of the sample are representative of the population as a whole;
- Quantifying sample error.

The benefits of quantitative research are:

- If the sample is properly constructed, findings can be considered to be representative and therefore applicable to the population as a whole;
- It produces results which are easier to summarise and analyse;
- It allows comparisons to be made over time and between places if the same questions have been asked.

The limitations of quantitative research are:

- The questions are determined by the researcher so that any issues falling outside the framework of the questions will be missed;
- Samples may need to be large and therefore costly before results can be considered to be reliable and therefore representative of the population they refer to.

9.6 **Qualitative Research**

These methods do not necessarily produce a statistically representative picture of the population as a whole, but they do allow for the exploration of particular issues in depth. Qualitative methods can be used to understand people's attitudes to a service and get in-depth information about behaviour or motives. These methods are generally open ended, and therefore time consuming, and usually involve small numbers. Common qualitative research methods include focus groups, in-depth interviewing and workshops.

The key features of qualitative research are:

- Exploring issues in greater depth with a relatively small number of

- people;
- Ability to clarify opinions and test reactions;
- Ability to explore sensitive subjects;
- Exploring issues when people need help to extract their views or need to be 'facilitated' to open up.

The benefits of qualitative research are:

- The open-ended nature of answers to questions is more likely than standard questions to capture what is important to people in the research;
- It lends itself to a wide variety of techniques that enhance people's active participation and researchers' understanding of the issues in question.
- Qualitative techniques are particularly suitable for consultation with 'hard to reach' groups.

The limitations of qualitative research are:

- It cannot be assumed that those taking part are representative of different population groups although it is possible to get an overall balance (e.g. by gender, age, socio-economic group etc) in selecting participants;
- The data generated is more time-consuming to process and less straightforward to analyse.

10.0 FEEDING BACK

- 10.1 The key to Cambridgeshire County Council's commitment to carrying out effective consultation is that we listen to the messages we are receiving and respond. To achieve this objective we must feedback the results of consultation and involvement.
- 10.2 The results and any action arising from the consultation should be reported to the people who took part. Equally, if the Council chooses not to act on some or all of the ideas arising from consultation then we need to clearly explain the reasons for this. There can be very good reasons for not taking forward work after a consultation and people will understand these if clearly explained.
- 10.3 The process can be slow so people need to be kept informed between stages about what is happening and have a realistic idea about how quickly things will happen.
- 10.4 Feedback to stakeholders on consultation should be:
- Provided in a suitable format for the service user;
 - Simple and comprehensive. No jargon;
 - Short and to the point;
 - Presented clearly;
 - Interesting and relevant;

- Honest and explain why a certain course of action has been chosen or is recommended;
- Distributed before a chosen course of action is implemented to allow stakeholders time to comment;

10.5 For very small scale consultations, feedback can be done in person. Normally, it will be easier to use publications, such as leaflets, or council newsletters. A press release can also be effective as local newspapers are a widely used source of information. Other specialist media should be considered, for example most parish councils receive the Cambridgeshire Association of Local Councils newsletter and many parish councils have their own parish newsletter.

11.0 MOVING FROM CONSULTATION TO INVOLVEMENT

11.1 There will be occasions when the same groups of people are being regularly consulted. If this is the case then it may be more suitable to set up an involvement group. This is a group of people (usually service users) who have a common interest and who meet regularly with Council officers to discuss issues that affect them. Some of the key points to remember when establishing such groups are:

- Agree a proper written terms of reference with members of the group.
- Arrange a suitable meeting style and location to suit the group.
- Make sure there are sufficient resources available to fund and service the group over a medium to long period of time.
- Agree how the groups views will be considered and taken into account. Establish clearly what commitment there is to take action on these views.
- Have arrangements for feeding back regularly to the group.
- Agree arrangements for refreshing the group's membership at regular intervals.

11.2 Further advice on consultation methods is available to Council staff on the County Council Intranet site or from the Research Group in Corporate Services.

12.0 CONTACTS

12.1 If you would like further details about this document or advice on how to consult or involve members of the public then please contact the County Council's Research Manager (Consultation), Trevor.Baker@cambridgeshire.gov.uk.

12.2 You can also be put in contact with someone from your own department who is experienced in carrying out user involvement exercises.