
**A NEW APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A BIGGER SAY AND A
BETTER DEAL FOR OUR COMMUNITIES**

Responsible Cabinet Member – Cllr John Williams, Leader of the Council,

Responsible Director – Ada Burns, Chief Executive

Purpose of Report

1. This report summarises the Council’s planned approach to community engagement in the context of recent developments in our thinking about Leading Edge and the corporate approach to customer focus. A draft Community Engagement Strategy is appended. It suggests ways of building on our existing good practice.

Summary

2. The Council has a desire to become excellent in its approach to engaging with its communities and using the knowledge gained from this engagement to re-focus its business on the needs of its customers. The White Paper (Strong and Prosperous Communities) and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill to which it gave rise are powerful new drivers in the Council’s approach to community engagement. It requires councils to have a clear view on how they work at neighbourhood or locality level. Our approaches to community engagement, customer focus and localities will be tested in the forthcoming CPA assessment in March 2008.
3. Examples of good practice on which the strategy will build are summarised. Some new ideas are proposed as ways of further developing the Council’s approach to this agenda, with practical actions identified. The importance of this work to the delivery of Leading Edge is underlined and the conclusion highlights six key priorities for the future.

Information and Analysis:

4. The Council’s Leading Edge initiative clearly states our desire as an organisation to improve community engagement, building on the areas of good practice that already exist. The appended strategy suggests changes to respond to both legislative and local drivers. Through the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill¹ the government has raised the bar on community engagement. The Bill goes further than the existing best value duty “to consult” and, significantly, it draws out a distinction between different types of participation², which supports the Council’s use of the “ladder of engagement” in the appended strategy.

¹ Which received its first reading in the House of Commons on 12th December, 2006.

² Informing, consulting and involving.

5. The Council is proud of the good practice it has already developed on each rung of the ladder:

Information sharing (simple, direct, one-way communication)

- (a) The design of the Pedestrian Heart project was widely published using local media, the Council website and a busy public exhibition in Queen Street Arcade. Facts were given and opinion sought on a range of details right down to the colour and type of materials used for paving.
- (b) Community engagement was identified as a specific part of Team Leaders' job descriptions for The Street Scene design project. Effective information sharing took a range of forms from LSP meetings to individual interviews with members of the public; from an open-door policy for a highly visible town center office to evening meetings with neighbourhood forums and parish councils.

Consultation (a dialogue involving listening and response)

- (c) We listened to over 1,000 people in order to structure a two-year programme of work to improve the standard of dozens of roads and footpaths in Darlington through the Let's Get Cracking project.
- (d) We involved involved senior managers in face-to-face consultation with members of the public in each of Darlington's wards about the proposed Tesco development.

Capacity building (helping people to help themselves)

- (e) The development of Darlington's Social Inclusion Strategy 2005, included work with all thirteen social inclusion priority groups who gained insight into the Council's strategy development process. These local people also developed knowledge about who in each department had an understanding of the issues that their community faces. This helped people to become better able to help themselves to access services.

Empowerment (giving power or authority)

- (f) The Council provided training, support and advice to disabled people to facilitate the development of the Disability Equality Scheme. "Live" editing sessions were held. Importantly, the Scheme steering group comprised disabled people with a broad range of learning, physical and sensory impairments. The chair of the group was a disabled person from the voluntary and community sector.

Executive Summary of the Strategy

6. The aim of the strategy is to secure a bigger say and a better deal for communities. It is premised on the idea that much of what we need to do involves building on, applying more widely or extending our existing practice. Section 1 provides a framework for how this can be achieved, using a "ladder of engagement". The strategy suggests ways to improve performance on each rung of the ladder. Standing on different rungs of the ladder will be appropriate at different times. It is important to emphasise that the strategy is not about moving the Council towards ever-increasing levels of empowerment.

7. In section 2, the strategy describes some principles that should be followed during engagement activity. These will be tested with stakeholders in the coming months. Section 3 outlines the national and local policy contexts, paying particular attention to the aforementioned White Paper. Locality working is explored in more detail in section 4, which is a key part of the strategy. It shows the advantages of the Council formalising its approach to this area in the future.
8. Section 5 offers a self-assessment using the Audit Commission's "Knowing Your Communities" toolkit and suggests some of the things that the Council needs to do to be able to demonstrate that it is becoming more focused on the needs of the public. In section 6 there is an exploration of what the Council needs to do to get ready to take this area of work forward, whilst section 7 looks ahead to some new opportunities and areas for development. The strategy concludes by noting six key areas that will help the Council to ensure a bigger say and a better deal for its communities. These recommendations are:
 - (a) Taking a deliberate, planned approach to engagement, which means analysing future developments and planning in advance a programme of engagement activity relating to these.
 - (b) Linking the outcomes of this engagement activity directly into the Council's business planning process so that it is possible to prove what difference engagement is making to service provision.
 - (c) Defining localities and when locality working is appropriate.
 - (d) Modernising communications vehicles so that the "virtual space" for engagement is improved.
 - (e) Commencing capacity building/training work with officers, elected members and stakeholders.
 - (f) Developing a programme of medium-term actions, which will be put forward for Council approval in summer 2007.
9. A short-term action plan shows what the Council needs to do in the period March to July 07 in order to build a foundation for securing outcomes in the six key areas.

Re-focusing Council services

10. The above actions will be expedited with the formation of a new team (working title: Connecting with Communities) within the Chief Executive's Office. This team will draw together for the first time a number of linked workstreams that are essential for the delivery of improved community engagement performance across the Council:
 - (a) community development
 - (b) neighbourhood renewal
 - (c) social inclusion
 - (d) equalities
 - (e) welfare rights
 - (f) voluntary and community sector liaison
 - (g) customer focus, consultation and community engagement.

11. The team will be led by the existing Head of Community Partnerships and Performance Development. It will comprise many existing staff from the Community Partnerships and Performance Development Team within Community Services, the Policy Advisor (Social Inclusion) from the Policy Unit. A set of work priorities, “quick wins” and performance measures for the new team is being drafted. From these will flow further proposals about job roles and responsibilities within the new team, which will be agreed by Corporate Management Team before being subject to job evaluation. The team’s aim will be to improve community engagement performance across the Council with the aim of ensuring that residents are central to our business.

Outcome of Consultation

12. Consultation with stakeholders and scrutiny committees will follow Cabinet’s approval of the draft Community Engagement Strategy. To date, there have been exploratory discussions with representatives from the voluntary and community sector. Input from staff in a diagonal slice of the organisation has been secured through the Community Engagement Strategy Steering Group.

Legal Implications

13. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

14. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. The contents of this report may have the effect of reducing crime and disorder because better engagement with communities should allow the Council to target its influence and resources more effectively in this area.

Council Policy Framework

15. At this stage, the issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council’s policy framework.

Decision Deadline

16. For the purpose of the ‘call-in’ procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

Conclusion

17. Agreeing a strategy for the delivery of improved community engagement performance is an essential part of our organisational development strategy. Statute, government guidance and CPA are additional strong drivers for the agenda. The Council has an opportunity to deliver on its Leading Edge commitments to focus on customers and lead the local government field by adopting an innovative strategy. A new unit in the Chief Executive's Office will ensure that this work is driven forward.
18. The next step is to consult with all scrutiny committees and other relevant stakeholders in order to develop a medium-term plan. This will be brought before Council for approval in summer 2007. This plan will complete the Community Engagement Strategy.

Recommendation

19. It is recommended that:
 - (a) the Council identifies consultation arrangements for future development within the Corporate Plan.
 - (b) the outcomes of such engagement activity be linked directly into the Council's planning process so that it is possible to prove what difference engagement is making to service provision.
 - (c) the Council develops an effective definition of localities and when locality working is appropriate.
 - (d) we develop communications channels to support community engagement, including better use of the internet.
 - (e) the Council commences capacity building/training work with officers, elected members and stakeholders.
 - (f) a programme of medium term actions be presented to Council in summer 2007.

Reason

20. The recommended actions are needed to continue improving the Council's approach to community engagement.

Ada Burns
Chief Executive

Background Papers

Please see **attached** report.

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DP