

**SOUTH DERBYSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY
2013/2016**

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Council has a statutory duty to consult on various matters affecting the community. The Government is increasingly focusing on effective consultation and empowering the public. The new Localism Act came into effect on 11 November 2011. The Act seeks to ensure that people have greater opportunities to have their say and aspires to embed a culture of engagement and empowerment in our public services.
- 1.2 This means that the Council must consider as a matter of course the possible information provision, consultation and involvement opportunities they need to provide across all of their functions.
- 1.3 The previous Corporate Consultation Strategy was approved in 2007. Since then there has been significant change in the approach for seeking the public's views, and a move from 'consultation' towards a more comprehensive process of 'engagement'. This strategy has been refreshed to ensure that it recognises the changing environment.
- 1.4 This Consultation and Engagement Strategy will help the Council meet the new duty by ensuring that all levels of community engagement are carried out in the most appropriate way with different methods of engagement used relevant to the activity and circumstances. The strategy will be refreshed every 3 years and the Action Plan will be updated every year.

2.0 Purpose of the strategy

- 2.1 This Consultation and Engagement Strategy aims to support strong, active and inclusive communities, who are informed and involved in decision-making and enable us to improve public services to enhance the quality of life across South Derbyshire.
- 2.2 This strategy should be viewed as a 'living document' that will need to change to reflect the current environment that the Council works within.

3.0 Corporate context

- 3.1 This strategy supports the Council's vision of *making South Derbyshire a better place to live, work and visit*. It provides a focus for all engagement activities, policies and processes to align with one of the Council's key themes, which is providing value for money.
- 3.2 The Council's Corporate Plan 2009 – 2014 highlights the importance of involving the Community and gives the following corporate commitment to carry out '*effective consultation and communication with the community, business and other organisations.*'
- 3.3 Through the Localism Act 2011 there are new opportunities and rights for citizens to have access to more information and increasing influence over the local decisions. We will be looking at how we are able, through consultation

and engagement, to involve residents and, where they choose, to give them more opportunity to get directly involved in managing and shaping how local services are delivered.

- 3.4 The Equality Act 2010 has clarified over 20 pieces of equality legislation and covers Race, Religion and Belief, Gender, Disability, Sexual Orientation and Socio Economic Status. It highlights the need for local authorities to consult and involve its service users in their decision-making processes. This places a heavy emphasis on the need for the Council to consult and demonstrate how we have consulted with different sections of the community, in particular seldom heard groups. Furthermore, we have gained the "Achieving" status for the Equality Framework for Local Government. The framework means that we have been externally assessed as providing fair and equitable services to our diverse communities.
- 3.5 The Council's Corporate Plan 2009 – 2014 highlights the importance of delivering 'Value for Money' and gives a commitment to '*increasing efficiency*' and '*high performing services*.' To assist with delivering on these commitments, a review of all customer service channels is being undertaken which, will inform us of the most efficient and effective methods for our future customer engagement. This strategy will reflect the findings of that report by shaping the way in which we engage with local people.

4.0 Why we engage

- 4.1 Community engagement gives individuals, communities and partners a range of very important benefits:
- Meeting requirements to carry out statutory consultation.
 - Developing a better understanding of and relationship with communities through genuine dialogue.
 - Involving residents in public services and ensuring their knowledge, experience and priorities help us shape our services.
 - Encouraging more voluntary and community groups to become involved in planning and delivering local services.
 - Helping people to establish an improved sense of neighbourhood and more cohesive communities.
 - Engaging more people in local democracy.

5.0 What we mean by Community Engagement

- 5.1 Communities can be:
- Communities of place - people within a defined geographical area such as a town, village, neighbourhood or housing estate.
 - Communities of interest - people who share a particular experience, interest or characteristics, such as young people, faith groups, older people, disabled people, ethnic groups, or lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

5.2 Communities may define themselves and definitions of community do change. People often belong to more than one community and communities are nearly always very diverse.

5.3 Community Engagement can mean different things to different people, different communities and different services and situations. We have designed our Consultation and Engagement Strategy to ensure that we can provide the most appropriate means for communities and customers to be involved and to give feedback.

5.4 Based on David Wilcox’s ‘*Guide to Effective Participation*’ (see diagram below¹), this involvement can vary from simply providing information on a particular subject, to asking for views or opinions on an issue or process, to actually involving members of the public and others in the decision making process itself.

5.5 The various means of community engagement are:

- **Information** supports all types of community engagement and keeps people informed about such things as decisions, services and local events.
- **Consultation** can be used when there is a decision to make about something or when there are a number of choices about the details.
- **Deciding together.** This is when local people are involved in deciding which options to choose, but it is the Council that will act on the decisions.
- **Acting together.** This is when decisions are made by partnerships between local people or agencies and the Council. The people involved in making the decisions also take part in carrying them out.
- **Supporting independent community initiatives.** This is when independent groups get help to develop and carry out their own plans.

DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT				
LOW				HIGH
<p>Information You tell people what is planned so that they are informed about what is happening.</p>	<p>Consultation You provide information and use the feedback to inform the subsequent decision</p>	<p>Deciding together You encourage people to provide some additional ideas and options, and to decide with you the best way forward.</p>	<p>Acting together Not only do different interests decide together what is best, but also they form a partnership to carry it out.</p>	<p>Supporting others You help others do what they want - perhaps within a framework of grants, advice and support provided by the resource holder</p>

¹ Adapted from the Guide to Effective Participation by David Wilcox (1994)

5.6 A high level of involvement is not necessarily better than a low level of involvement and each level of activity is valuable in its own right. The Council will use the appropriate level of involvement to meet the needs of each situation and will always define an appropriate level of consultation at the outset of each consultation exercise

6.0 Principles and Standards

6.1 The Council is a member of the Derbyshire Community Engagement Group (DCEG), which brings together public sector organisations in Derbyshire that engage the public. We will work to the principles and standards outlined by DCEG to ensure that we support the continuous improvement of public services through effective engagement with users and potential users of our services.

6.2 As a Council we will work to the standards overleaf to ensure robust methods of community engagement are adhered to:

Clarity of purpose - before beginning any engagement activity, we will be clear about why it is happening, which engagement activity we will use, what the community can and cannot influence, and how we will use the information gathered through the engagement activity.

Timing - we will allow sufficient time to design and carry out engagement activities. We will also allow sufficient time to ensure that the results of the engagement activities can shape our policies, plans and services to meet the needs of our communities.

Evidence base - we will use available research, knowledge and community intelligence including qualitative information to help us plan engagement activities. We will not carry out engagement activities if the information we need is already available.

Efficient - we will use utilise existing structures, forums and groups to make the most efficient use of resources and to build on existing contacts and networks.

Quality - we will work to ensure that staff responsible for engagement have the skills and capacity to achieve high quality engagement. We will ensure that they are aware of the barriers there can be to engagement and how they can be overcome.

Communication - we will always be open, honest and accountable when sharing information and responding to contributions from all participants. We will communicate a minimum level of information to the community so that they are informed of the process and how they can get involved.

Partnership working - we will build on and strengthen our approach to joint working by encouraging further collaboration and partnership working, with particular recognition of the knowledge and expertise of the voluntary and community sector. This will include promoting opportunities for shared communications and consultation activities where appropriate.

Inclusion - we will use a mixture of appropriate methods tailored to different audiences to help to reach as wide a range of stakeholders as possible, including those communities defined as 'seldom heard'. We will recognise the complexity of engaging with seldom-heard groups and understand the additional barriers to engagement, such as accessibility and transport issues.

Feedback - we will provide feedback to the community about the engagement activities we carry out and will explain how the community's input contributed to the decision-making process. We will explain how and when we will provide feedback to the community at the same time as we carry out the community engagement exercise. We will also make the feedback as widely available as possible.

Monitoring and review - we will monitor and review the engagement activities we carry out to ensure that all sections of the community have the opportunity to engage should they chose to, particularly those whose voices are often not heard, and change our practices accordingly. We will evaluate effectiveness and share learning.

7.0 Framework for coordination

- 7.1 **Consultation and Engagement Strategy** – this sets out the framework for public and service user consultation and engagement.
- 7.2 **Derbyshire Consultation and Engagement Group (DCEG)** – the Derbyshire Community Engagement Group brings together public sector organisations in Derbyshire that engage the public. We look for opportunities to work jointly to share best practice and resources and to produce a joint Consultation Programme.
- 7.3 **Consultation calendar** – The calendar on our website is a key tool for co-ordinating our activities and was developed to increase awareness, minimise duplication, and promote joint consultation where appropriate and practical. We need to continue to promote its effective use so that it can be the prime source of information when planning a consultation to access good practice and avoid duplication of effort.

8.0 Key mechanisms for implementing Community Engagement

- 8.1 The Citizens' Panel is a mechanism for residents of South Derbyshire to regularly give their opinions and comments on a range of Council issues.
- 8.2 The Council works with South Derbyshire Partnership to make sure “there is a strong sense of community”. Through this we work to improve consultation methods so that all groups can participate.
- 8.3 Six Area Forums/Safer Neighbourhood meetings are held quarterly across the District so that residents can get involved in the decision-making process and receive information about our services.
- 8.4 The South Derbyshire Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) highlights the Council's guiding principals to encourage people to become involved in the planning process.
- 8.5 Media relations and communications play an important role in community engagement and ensure that residents are kept up to date with services and are informed about all Council consultations and community engagement events. The Communications Strategy ensures that a coordinated and strategic approach is given to all communications activity. The Council's Communications Team is involved in supporting consultation activity.
- 8.6 The Council's Constitution describes our mechanism for considering and responding to petitions as a means of engaging more meaningfully with local communities, enabling the public to let us know about their concerns and as a mechanism for generating service improvements.
- 8.7 Tenant participation encourages and supports all tenants and residents to become more involved with the services the Council provides for them. The

service works with tenants and residents to find the best forms of participation for particular service issues using a variety of methods and techniques.

- 8.8 The Council's Communities and Equalities Group chaired by a Member Champion consists of representatives from across the communities of South Derbyshire. The forum meets quarterly and provides the Council with an external reference and peer challenge for reviewing and discussing aspects relating to equality, community feedback and social inclusion.

9.0 Responsibilities

- 9.1 Information about community engagement will be coordinated by *Policy & Communications*. The purpose of this will be to establish the nature and purpose of the activity, to identify the corporate resources required and the extent of involvement. This will also reveal how the activity fits within the Council's and partners bigger programme of consultation so that areas of duplication/cross-over can be identified and joint working proposed. This will help the Council to streamline its consultation activity and to avoid consultation fatigue, which occurs when the same people are consulted time and time again.
- 9.2 In practice, this will mean that all service areas will identify the key pieces of consultation they will undertake in the next financial year as part of the service planning process. An annual plan of proposed consultation activity will be compiled from Service Plans and planned consultation. Using this information, a timetable of key consultations for each year (i.e. the consultation calendar) will be made available on the Council's website. This will ensure that an overview of the complete range of the Council's community engagement activity will be easily accessible to the public, the Council's partners, Members and Officers.
- 9.3 **Members** – as representatives of their constituents, have a key community leadership role. We will continue to support this role through our Area Forums/Safer Neighbourhood Meetings. The Finance and Management Committee will receive the Consultation Annual Report and Action Plan.
- 9.4 **Service areas** – are responsible for identifying consultation activity planned and any gaps in consultation activity that will need to be undertaken in future years for inclusion in the Service Plan.
- 9.5 **Partners** – to co-ordinate consultation and look for opportunities for joint working. Sharing knowledge of different groups of stakeholders and locality issues and sharing best practice.

10.0 Inclusion and engagement

- 10.1 The range of groups with which the Council might consult is extensive. It includes service users, potential service users, interest groups, partners, business and industry and other stakeholders.

- 10.2 It is important to ensure that consultation is inclusive and recognises that some people may be less accessible to consult with than others, termed as 'seldom heard', e.g. young people in care, adults with learning disabilities or ethnic minorities.
- 10.3 We will use a variety of different methods to ensure that the people of South Derbyshire have an opportunity to have their say and to ensure that their different voices are heard. There are various mechanisms through which individuals and groups can engage with and help to influence services provided by the Council and other public services, for example, Youth Councils, Health Watch Derbyshire, Voluntary Sector Forum and service-user involvement mechanisms. We will adapt and develop forums in line with community wishes and business needs.

11.0 Sharing results

- 11.1 Providing feedback is vital both internally and externally. Feedback can help strengthen the credibility of consultation work and also helps to ensure that respondents feel valued in the process. It builds a trusting relationship, increasing the likelihood that consultees will respond to future exercises.
- 11.2 Internally the results will be shared on the consultation intranet pages and via the staff magazines (where appropriate), to ensure that all staff involved in consultation are able to learn from each other and share best practice. Key messages will also be reported on an annual basis to the Finance and Management Committee.
- 11.3 Externally, it is important to be specific from the outset about the potential audiences who need to know the results and use an appropriate mechanism to provide feedback. We will be open and transparent when sharing results and make clear links to actions taken as a result of public feedback, which have led to policy development and service improvement. Results and outcomes will be posted on the Council's website and will be communicated through local and online media as appropriate.