

Consultation Strategy

2006

Derby City Council

This discussion paper is a response to a review of the 2002 Consultation Strategy. It provides an overview of current consultation activities, proposes a number of key strategic objectives and key actions required to deliver a new corporate consultation strategy.

The Strategy is to go to Cabinet in June 2006. Comments and suggestions made to this discussion paper will be considered before the final version is presented to Cabinet.

The revised strategy is not a major departure from the previous one that was the subject of much consultation. The main change is to suggest that the strategy is brought 'in-house' to the council and loses its DCP partnership approach. Other changes cover reporting structures, embracing new technologies, enhanced supporting of participation and alignment with the Communications and Consultation Strategy.

1. BACKGROUND

The Local Government Acts of 1999 and 2000 set down a new and specific requirement for local authorities to consult with a range of stakeholders on proposals for new constitutional arrangements, community planning and to inform continuous improvement in services. In 2002 the Council, along with other key partners in Derby City Partnership (DCP), developed and adopted the first city-wide Consultation Strategy to guide all consultation activities undertaken across Derby.

The 2002 strategy set out to support consistent good practice in consultation, allow more co-ordination of consultation and systematic contact with harder to reach groups, store results and reports so that the findings of research and consultation are accessible, provide technical and practical support, develop in-house expertise and resources and develop public trust in consultation.

In 2005, the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Community Regeneration Commission undertook a review of community involvement and consultation. It found that whilst there is generally a good standard of consultation across the Council, there was a need to;

- limit the strategy to the Council, continue to develop the strategy internally before reconsidering a broader DCP membership
- raise awareness of the consultation strategy among council officers
- improve the planning and co-ordination of consultation exercises
- adopt greater innovation in its approach to reach a wider range of groups and stakeholders
- improve its standards of communication and feedback on consultation

The revised strategy also responds to the Audit Commission's new criteria for judging community engagement in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and to e-government targets on e-consultation.

2. INTRODUCTION – where we are now

This revised strategy will complement the Communications and Consultation Strategy and supports the communications principle:

‘All Council communications play a part in developing positive and effective dialogue and relationship with stakeholders’.

The Council’s **Vision**, as expressed in the DCP Community Strategy is:

Derby - a city for all ages.

‘People from all walks of life will feel they belong to Derby and that Derby offers them every thing they need – for work, education, housing, leisure, and a safe, healthy lifestyle’.

Derby City Council is committed to conducting effective consultation to help the Council deliver it’s vision and a key element of the Community Strategy is to engage and involve local communities in its development.

The Council has a range of activities to support community engagement and participation. The existing Area Panels and developing neighbourhood-working arrangements enable residents, businesses and local groups to raise their needs and priorities direct with the Council and other service providers. The Council also helps stakeholders and individuals engage through its community development work.

Box 1	
Inform	Providing the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding issues, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions
Research	Seeking information without directly involving the participants in the decision making process
Consult	Obtaining public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions
Involve	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered
Collaborate	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution
Empower	To place final decision making in the hands of the public

Consultation is a crucial part of the Council’s approach to community participation. The term consultation has been defined as ‘a process of

dialogue that leads to a decision'¹. Box 1² defines different levels of participation from receiving information to being fully involved in decision making. The scope of this strategy is to guide those activities defined here as Inform, Research, Consult and Involve. Other council service providers, those who work directly with communities or community groups, will also work at the 'involve' level and are more qualified to support collaboration and empowering activities. There needs to be a link between this strategy and the developing 'Enabling Community Engagement' strategy and 'Children and Young Peoples Participation Strategy'.

The Consultation Support Team

The Consultation Support Team (CST) was established to develop and implement the Consultation Strategy. The team is a corporate resource providing expertise, advice and support on consultation methodologies and best practice. The CST is located in the Communication and Consultation Unit within Democratic Services in the Corporate and Adult Social Services Department.

The CST has established a range of mechanisms to support consultation activities including;

- the Derby Pointer Panel - a representative citizen's panel
- Derby Viewpoint - a user panel
- Advisory Committees for women, minority ethnic communities and disabled people
- Derby Seniors' Forum
- Derby Youth Forum and a dedicated website for young people 'youthlinkderby'
- a web-based database of consultation exercises, the Consultation Finder
- on-line questionnaires/forms generation
- advice and support service for people undertaking consultation
- quality standards
- method guides and training.

In addition to the CST, there are at least 30 practitioners across the Council who are members of a city-wide Consultation Network and who are involved on a regular or ad hoc basis in managing consultation activities. The Consultation Network, was established to share information on consultation exercises, best practice and expertise.

¹ Listen Up - Effective Community Consultation (1999), www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/

² Adapted from: People and Participation: How to put citizens at the heart of decision-making (2005), www.involving.org

In Autumn 2005, a series of reviews and surveys were carried out to assess these consultation mechanisms and to compare the council's strategic approach to consultation with other Local Authorities. A description of each of the mechanisms and a summary of the reviews' findings are in Appendix 1.

3. STRATEGIC AIMS: where do we want to be.

This revised strategy seeks to build on the good practice in consultation already established in Derby. It provides the overarching consultation framework for other statutory documents.

The strategy aims to:

1. strengthen strategic planning and co-ordination of consultation activities and demonstrate how consultation fits into the Council's decision-making processes
2. ensure the effective use of consultation to improve services and policy by supporting officers and members to help them make informed choices on appropriate consultation methods and delivery
3. improve equality of opportunity in consultation using a wide range of methods and technologies to enable participation in consultation especially from 'harder to engage' groups
4. make our consultation processes more meaningful for stakeholders and citizens through better communication about the purpose, topics and outcomes of consultation
5. support the management of collected data and results to avoid repetition and build an 'information bank' by area and population group.

These aims will be achieved under the following strategic objectives.

Strategic Objective 1: Produce and implement an annual corporate consultation plan

The CST will produce a corporate consultation plan that will be updated on a quarterly basis. It will contain as a minimum, consultations;

- that support the overview and scrutiny functions
- on customer service reviews
- on statutory corporate planning activities such as the annual budget
- regarding statutory planning requirements
- related to legislative developments impacting on local communities.

Delivery of the plan will be monitored and reported. The plan will be used to co-ordinate consultation exercises, build on synergy and avoid repetition. It will also be used for monitoring and evaluation purposes. The plan will inform

the Consultation Finder which will be a publicly available on-line database of consultation activity made available through the Council's website.

The Consultation Finder will also show the results and outcomes of finished consultation to show transparency of process.

Strategic Objective 2: Support officers and members to help them make informed choices on appropriate consultation methods and delivery

The CST will continue to provide advice and support to help colleagues to plan and deliver appropriate consultation that is effective, efficient and informed.

The team will introduce a consultation quality standard to:

- help service managers understand what is good practice in consultation
- achieve consistent high quality consultation practice across the Council
- benchmark and measure our performance in this area of work
- communicate to the public what they can and should expect from our consultation exercises.

The CST will develop process evaluation as a core component of every consultation exercise. On a corporate basis, the team will evaluate the effectiveness of consultation and community involvement to demonstrate to the public the impact their participation has had on the Council's decision-making.

The team will work to improve people's understanding of the Derby Pointer as a consultative mechanism that is representative of Derby citizens and will also work with the contractor to increase response rates.

The CST will develop our e-consultation capacity to support developments under the e-democracy initiative, in particular the ability to participate in live consultation electronically. The team will promote the use of the Council's website and e-resources to facilitate consultation processes and increase participation. This will be an important approach for consulting with young people and others who prefer this method. In addition to form based online questionnaires, we will seek to adopt a wider range of consultation technologies to increase participation in local neighbourhoods.

Strategic Objective 3: Improve equality of opportunity in consultation using a wide range of methods and technologies to enable participation.

Through modernisation of the Advisory Committees, and through the Derby Seniors Forum and the Derby Youth Forum, the CST will continue to provide a consultation process with equality target groups.

The Youth Forum will work closely with the Children's and Young People's Strategic Partnership and the Seniors Forum will work closely with the Derby Older People's Strategic Planning Partnership.

In addition the CST will continue to develop innovative methods to enable participation and engage with harder to reach groups. The team will work with colleagues in areas that support community participation, such as the Area and Neighbourhood Unit and the Youth Service, to develop synergy in working on community issues.

Strategic Objective 4: Establish a corporate standard for communication and feedback on consultation activities

We will raise the standard of communication and feedback on consultation activities to three main audience groups:

- internally across the Council
- to stakeholders directly affected by the consultation
- to the general public.

At the start of each consultation exercise we will define and communicate, using appropriate channels, the level of public and stakeholder participation. This will make clear how the information gained from the consultation will be used in the decision-making and if there are any limitations such as legislative or financial restrictions.

The CST will develop and implement a promotional and marketing plan linked to the Council's consultation plan to raise awareness and to provide feedback on the results and outcomes of individual consultations.

The CST will develop a consultation hub on the Derby City Council website and utilise appropriate e-tools to provide information on consultations, results and feedback.

Strategic Objective 5: Support the management of collected data and results

The CST will help colleagues collect data in an ethical and consistent way to help feed and build comparative information in the data warehouse. This will help the council to create data sets by population and area and to compare differences in responses that could lead to a better understanding of equality and locality issues.

The data warehouse will deliver better quality, local information to support monitoring, research and strategy development.

4. HOW THE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES WILL BE DELIVERED.

Delivering strategic objective 1: Produce and Implement an annual corporate consultation plan

The Communication and Engagement Board, sub group of Building on Excellence (BoE), will take responsibility for endorsing the council consultation plan and maintaining a strategic overview of planned consultations. They will have a quality assessment role both for individual consultation exercises and for the Council's consultation activities as a whole.

The CST will take a lead role in developing, maintaining and monitoring the plan, reporting to the BoE sub group. The plan will be the key process for monitoring, co-ordination and evaluation. Appropriate consultation information from the plan will be added to the public Consultation Finder

The Consultation Finder, an internet database resource will be enhanced to detail planned, current and completed consultation. Consultation results and outcomes will be published through the Finder. Finder users will be able to register for 'alerts', by preferred subject areas, for newly opened consultation, available results and the eventual outcomes.

Strategic Objective 2: Support officers and members to help them make informed choices on appropriate consultation methods and delivery

The CST will continue as a corporate resource providing expertise, advice and support on consultation methodologies and best practice. This service will be promoted within the Council. The intranet will be developed as a corporate consultation resource where officers can access practical materials and guides produced by the team.

The CST will develop a business agreement for use with colleagues. This will describe the level of CST support in consultation projects and guide colleagues through the corporate process and quality standards. The CST will seek feedback from its internal customers and continue to develop a valued service.

The CST will develop process evaluation procedures to manage risk and to ensure that consultation exercises meet corporate quality standards.

Process evaluation will be monitored through performance indicators such as, the number of responses received, how representative these are of the population of interest, the cost and timeliness of any consultation and the extent to which the results are able to influence ongoing service provision. Collated indicators will be used to measure the collective performance of the Council and reported on a regular basis to the BoE sub group.

The CST will identify areas for improvement and develop, source and implement appropriate training and support programmes to encourage improved consultation practice.

The Derby Consultation Network will be revived and resumed to improve communication and networking between consultation practitioners. The Network will be invaluable in generating the consultation plan and in identifying resources for joint projects. Technology will be used for networking to maximise sharing of information while keeping meetings to a minimum.

The proposed corporate consultation standards are included in Appendix 2.

Strategic Objective 3: Improve equality of opportunity in consultation using a wide range of methods and technologies to ensure that we enable participation.

The CST will modernise the role of the Advisory Committees to ensure the Council meets its requirements to consult with a range of equality dimension groups. In particular the role of quality assurance will be enhanced so that members of these committees have a role in endorsing the quality of consultation with equality target groups.

The CST will continue to develop Derby's Seniors' Forum and the Youth Forum to increase involvement and participation in service development. The team will continue to provide expertise and advice to colleagues seeking to consult with these groups. These two Forums will work closely with their appropriate strategic planning partnerships and consultation officers will support involvement at this level.

CST will seek to raise awareness and understanding of the role of the Derby Pointer Panel as one of the Council's significant mechanisms for consulting with residents. CST will work with the contractor to increase response rates by consulting with the Panel in different ways to ensure a more thorough representation of the whole population.

CST will help to pilot new consultation approaches and methods. It will collect and share information about innovative ways to consult with 'hard to engage' groups. CST will develop an expertise in appropriate methods of reaching people and groups who may have difficulties in reading and writing, whose first language is not English or who have a mental or physical disability. In local neighbourhoods, CST will work with service managers to identify the use of other appropriate methods such as road shows and exhibitions.

The adoption of technology will be used to increase participation with some hard to engage groups.

Strategic Objective 4: Establish a corporate standard for communication and feedback on consultation activities

The CST will develop its communication with internal customers by implementing an awareness-raising programme, including promotion of this strategy and the quality standards. The CST will do more to promote the service they provide and their contribution towards enabling a dialogue with citizens which is continuous, open, inclusive, clear, secure and reliable.

CST and the corporate communications team will develop and promote communication quality standards and provide training and support on communication and public relations during consultation including providing information and feedback. There will be a clear synergy between the Council's communications and consultation strategies.

The team will develop a consultation hub on the Council's website to support and improve communication. The CST will pilot the use of other methods, such as SMS texting, to support consultation exercises and will link with the e-democracy initiative to support this objective. The Consultation Finder will be used to communicate current consultation and the results and outcomes of completed consultation. A system of 'alerting' registered users of the Finder to consultation topics in which they have a declared interest will be further developed.

Strategic Objective 5: Support the management of collected data and results.

The CST will develop the use of the Finder as the principle public tool for presenting the results of consultation and indicating the outcomes of the process.

The CST will also work with colleagues to ensure data compatibility with the data warehouse and other comparative opportunities and will promote the use of the data warehouse as a tool for delivering better quality, local information to support monitoring, research and strategy development.

The CST will promote good practice in data protection.

APPENDIX 1

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM REVIEWS

1. Comparative analysis of strategic approaches to consultation

Derby City Council is similar to the other Local Authorities surveyed, having a central team responsible for managing the consultation strategy. Activities typically include:

- Advice, guidance and support
- Consultation Database Management / Planning
- Citizens' Panel Management
- Sharing and disseminating good practice information - through guides / training / seminars and through networks,
- Quality Assurance.

The number of staff within teams responsible for consultation varies between one and seven, as do some of the services they provide.

Some of the authorities have formally adopted additional processes to support their consultation strategy. These enable senior officers and Councillors to have a strategic overview of consultation work, to comment on planned consultation and to oversee a quality assurance process. Additional processes also exist to support the exchange of information about consultation between service departments and the corporate consultation team within some authorities, which supports consultation planning and identifies a potential need for advice and support. Our survey found increasing use of web-based databases for managing and recording information on planned, current and completed consultation across authorities.

To date information on planned consultation in Derby has been collected by the Consultation Team through the consultation network. However this has been undertaken on an informal basis and there is no involvement of senior officers or members. This was identified as a weakness in the Community Regeneration Commission's review of community involvement and consultation, with little understanding or buy in to a corporate consultation strategy and limited capacity to influence consultation activities across the partnership.

The Derby Consultation Finder, a web-based resource available through the Council website which holds details of planned consultation is also managed by the consultation support team and has the potential to be developed to have a greater interactive functionality. This would provide better information on consultation for partners across the city and could be linked to an e-mail and text alert system to encourage greater participation in consultation activities.

Compared with Derby, other authorities surveyed made greater use of local performance indicators. Currently Derby asks residents if:

- they feel that they can influence decisions affecting their local area; and
- if they feel the Council keeps them informed.

The use of additional local indicators would allow us to assess if our consultation activities are making a difference and whether consultation across the Council is being carried out to the agreed standard.

2. Consultation Advice and Guidance Service

The survey of service managers to establish the level of awareness and use of the Consultation Support Team's services found that most officers know about and use the various consultation vehicles set up by the Council such as the Pointer Panel and the Advisory Committees. Officers are less aware of the tools designed and developed by the team such as the good practice guides, the training courses, and the website, and there was a low level of awareness of the DCP consultation strategy. This concurs with the findings from the CRC review. We conclude that there is a need to promote awareness and understanding of the new consultation strategy. This will be essential if the proposed new corporate standards for consultation are to be achieved. A greater understanding of the strategy will result in better understanding of the role of the CST in supporting consultation and lead to greater use of the consultation tools and resources developed and managed by the CST.

3. Consultation Network Review

The Consultation Network was set up in 1998 to address the requirements in the Derby City Partnership Consultation Strategy to set up a group for consultation practitioners to share consultation best practice and co-ordinate consultation within the Partnership. The review found that the network has been effective at sharing best practice in consultation but does not have the strategic focus required to effectively co-ordinate consultation within the city.

We conclude that the current network should be retained as a practitioners group but its main focus should be on sharing best practice consultation and training. However, in order to improve co-ordination of consultation across the city, a more strategic group is required. The main responsibility of this group will be to co-ordinate consultation across the city, make decisions and allocate resources for joint consultation projects and agree the Annual Consultation Plan. This concurs with the findings from the Community Regeneration Commission.

4. Derby Pointer Panel

The Panel was set up in 1998 to meet the Council's duty under Best Value to consult with its citizens on its general direction and issues relating to specific services. The review found that there is continued support from service managers to maintain the Panel. It provides a cost-effective way of consulting with a representative sample of citizens and the results offer an indication of the way the service is viewed/used by members of the public in general, rather than people who are already interested parties or stakeholders.

The alternative, an annual residents survey carried out by face to face interviews, would cost at least the same of the current Panel and would not allow for more than one survey per year.

Whilst we conclude that the Panel continues to be a useful consultation tool, other methods of engagement should be used to consult certain groups and communities where appropriate.

5. Advisory Committee Review

The Council's main corporate consultation mechanism for consulting with equality groups is through its three advisory committees; these are for Disabled People, Minority Ethnic communities and Women. The review involves surveying Advisory Committee members, Pointer Panel members through questionnaires, community organisations, Councillors and Council officers. This will be complete by March 2006. In addition to this research has been carried out with nine other local authorities to gauge other best practice.

APPENDIX 2

DERBY CITY COUNCIL'S CORPORATE CONSULTATION STANDARDS.

In order to ensure our consultation processes are meaningful and effective we will:

- avoid consultation duplication by checking that the information sought is not already available
- ensure that consultation is well designed
- explain to participants why the consultation is being carried out and how the results will be used
- follow corporate process to make sure consultation and its outcomes are transparent
- use appropriate and innovative consultation processes to encourage a good response rate to enable participation
- allow time for the issues to be considered and responses to be submitted
- provide feedback to participants
- make sure that consultation is conducted ethically
- evaluate the effectiveness of consultation and regularly assess how well we are meeting these standards.