

Communication, Consultation & Engagement

A Strategic Framework

October 2007



Stockton-on-Tees
BOROUGH COUNCIL

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Foreword

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has a long term commitment to communicating, consulting and engaging with its residents. We recognise diversity within our communities and use a variety of approaches to make sure that all of our communities have the opportunity to participate in shaping the borough's future.

The White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities" emphasises a greater voice for the citizen and so it is a good time for Stockton to re-iterate and formalise our commitment through this Communication, Consultation and Engagement framework. This supports our core values of "communicating, engaging and listening to local people".

This framework outlines, for each of the three aspects of community involvement, what we mean, why we do it, what matters to our residents, our principles and standards, the techniques that we use and how we make sure that we are accessible. We also show the linkages between this aspect of our service with others.

We are committed to monitoring our success in this area and reviewing our approach to make sure it remains in keeping with our customer expectations and national policy.

We welcome any comments you may have on this framework. Please contact Simon Lee on 01642 524481 or simon.lee@stockton.gov.uk

Councillor Terry Laing
Cabinet Member for Corporate and Social Inclusion

Introduction to Our Approach to Communication, Consultation and Engagement in Stockton-on-Tees

Since it came into being in 1996, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has been committed to communicating with its residents, listening to their views and acting upon them. We have used a variety of techniques and ways of working to ensure that all Stockton's communities have the opportunity to participate in shaping the borough's future but also that they receive clear information about the good work the Council is doing and the services it provides, regardless of their age, race, faith or belief, sexual orientation, gender, disability, education level or area of the borough in which they live. This Communication, Consultation and Engagement framework formalises this commitment and pulls together the wide variety of work undertaken by the Council to meet our core values of "communicating, engaging with and listening to local people" and "putting the customer first".

The recent local government White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities" has further enhanced the power of the citizen. Calling on the local authority to act as the community champion and leader in their area, the White Paper makes it clear that there must be a greater voice for the citizen and communities to have a bigger say in the services they receive and the management of their communities and the facilities within them. The Council's longstanding commitment to community involvement means we are well placed to begin adapting to this agenda and in many cases are already implementing what is now seen as best practice. The recent White Paper is one of many pieces of legislation which emphasise the importance of consultation and community involvement. The Planning and Compensation Act 2004 for example included extensive statutory requirements for continuous meaningful community involvement and consultation in the production of Local Development Frameworks. The aim of which was achieving ownership and legitimacy for the Council's planning policies.

This strategy framework outlines the Council's commitment to communicating, consulting with and engaging its residents. These are three distinct activities:

- communication - how we provide quality information to our communities
- consultation - how we gather the views of our residents and turn them into action
- engagement - our activities to form long-term and durable relationships with residents to plan, deliver and monitor our services.

Communication, consultation and engagement are embedded within the Council's approach to service development and delivery; a fundamental element of our approach and not an add on. As such small advisory teams are in place to advise services on the application of this framework and on good practice, and to co-ordinate activities to ensure efficiency, effectiveness and value for money.

Our Stockton-on-Tees Context

Stockton-on-Tees is a diverse borough located in over 20,000 hectares at the heart of the Tees Valley. It comprises an urban and rural environment with a number of towns and villages, each with its own distinctive characteristics, including Billingham, Stockton, Thornaby, Ingleby Barwick and Yarm. The area has a population of 189,100 (up from 175,300 in 1991) and records the largest population increase of the Tees Valley Boroughs over the last twenty years; this rise is projected to continue and population trends suggest a total population of 209,900 by 2016. Despite having some of the most populous urban centres in the Tees Valley the population growth figures are unevenly balanced across the area; with growth being driven in the south of the borough, and particularly within the new Ingleby Barwick community. Projections show that the resident population will age sharply in the next ten years; this will be coupled with a decline in the number of children being born in households in the area. By 2029 the population of working age will account for only 58% of total population down from 64% in 2006. The overall growth disguises these significant shifts in the population structure; for the Council these changes will lead to rising demand for some public services such as housing, planning and adults' social care, and infrastructure pressures in the south of the borough where most of the growth is situated.

Across the Stockton-on-Tees' communities there is a wide social and economic mix, with areas of significant disadvantage situated alongside areas of affluence. Whilst 15% of the borough's population live within the top 20% of the most affluent areas nationally, 34% of the resident population live in the 20% of the most deprived areas nationally. Some 2.8% of the population is made up of black and minority ethnic communities (an increase of 1.2% from 1991) and the area is culturally diverse with over 70 languages spoken within the borough.

It is of the utmost importance that we communicate, consult and engage with our residents in a way which recognises and meets their individual needs. This document outlines how we will achieve this ambitious aim.

Communication:

What do we mean by communication?

Communication is the means by which the Council informs the public of its services, policies, news, duties, events, financial status and information relating to Councillors and cabinet. It is important for informing the public about key developments in their areas such as planning applications, or the development of the Local Development Framework. It also enables the public to inform the Council of their views, needs and aspirations. Audiences for communications include the general public in our diverse communities, Council Tax payers, businesses, Councillors, other public sector staff, media and national government.

Why do we communicate?

“Strong and Prosperous Communities” the Local Government White Paper makes it clear that Councils must operate in the most open and transparent manner possible, providing as much information as possible to our communities. By doing so we aim to help our communities learn more about the Council, which in turn supports them in making decisions through our consultation and engagement processes. We have some key reasons for communicating with our residents:

- to inform the public of our services, policies, news, duties, events, financial status and who the councillors are and what they do
- there is a duty to communicate certain specifics to the public some of which include budgets, Council Tax bills, Councillors’ expenses and council performance
- to generate confidence in Stockton Council and encourage understanding of, and satisfaction with, its actions
- to support and improve services

What matters to Stockton-on-Tees residents?

Surveys from Ipsos MORI and Viewpoint feedback show *Stockton News* and the *A-Z of Services* document to be very popular. Results from a Viewpoint survey show 97% of residents who responded report having seen Stockton News with 99% of respondents having read it and 90% reporting it to be a useful method for finding out about the Council and local events.

Principles and Standards

The Council adheres to the relevant codes and principles including being non-political in its communication, applying the Code of Conduct for Local Government Publicity, adhering to Freedom of Information, Data Protection and relevant media laws and follows the Chartered Institute of Public Relations code.

The Council maintains and develops proactive relationships with the media. Our Communications Unit co-ordinates and facilitates media access ensuring we maximise coverage of Council “good news” stories in the local media, celebrating our successes and achievements.

We continue developing our understanding of our communities and target our diverse media and public audiences as appropriate.

It is important that Council communications are branded accordingly so that they are correctly associated with the local authority. Brand is more than a logo – it identifies our services and helps create goodwill towards the Council as a whole. The Council follows the principles of the National Reputation Campaign to better link services with the Council which supplies them. Generally the Council will brand its services as ‘Stockton Council’ unless there is an existing, strong brand or public awareness of a service, such as Trading Standards or Care for your Area.

Communications increases the transparency and openness of the Council, key to which is performance information ensuring residents can easily see how the Council is performing. A series of key documents is produced by the Council including the Council Plan, Best Value Performance Plan and various summaries ensuring the public can easily access a variety of information about how their Council is performing.

Techniques

The Council uses the following techniques to communicate its key messages:

- Printed materials including Stockton News and A to Z.
- Websites, which are regularly updated by the relevant service providers.
- Encouraging public comment by consultation and providing contact points including Customer First and Comments, Commendations and Complaints.
- Using imaginative and bold design standards with a clear layout, active copy and the correct corporate identity (including printed documents, advertising and posters).
- Exploring the potential, and making appropriate use, of new media to communicate such as blogs, pod-casts and text alerts. The Council website is a well-used communications tool.

Accessibility

The Council is committed to making its communications accessible and ensures its communications are accessible to all audiences, including minority and traditionally hard-to-reach groups. We aim to keep our communications jargon free and use clear English at all times and where residents have difficulty understanding written English offer appropriate translation and transcription services. We test our publications with sample audiences to ensure they meet their needs.

Links

- [Style Guide for Corporate Identity](#)
- [Copywriting and Style Guide for E-media and publications](#)
- [Templates for:](#)
 - [Letters](#)
 - [Powerpoint presentations](#)
 - [Report covers](#)
 - [Merge mail](#)
- [Writing and producing guidance for:](#)
 - [Selling your story to the media](#)
 - [Handling a media enquiry](#)
 - [Planning a publicity campaign](#)
 - [Stockton News](#)
 - [Keeping You In Touch \(KYIT\)](#)
 - [The News release](#)
- [Image specification for pictures on the website](#)
- [Top Tips for PR Photography](#)

Consultation:

What do we mean by consultation?

We want our residents to be at the heart of the Council's decision-making processes. We want to ensure that residents of our borough, our services users and any other interested parties have the opportunity to be involved in the planning, prioritising and monitoring of our services. There is a link through our consultation activities with community consultation informing all levels of our planning cycle from the Sustainable Community Strategy and Council Plan down to the individual operational plans for services.

Why do we consult?

All local authorities have a statutory duty to consult on a variety of services. In Stockton we go far beyond any statutory duty and aim to consult local people on all aspects of our service planning and delivery. Consultation is crucial in helping the Council and its partners make decisions which will affect the borough, in some cases in the long term such as the Sustainable Community Strategy and the Local Development Framework. Also the Council has committed itself to setting consultation firmly at the heart of its decision making processes and activities. When consultation is effective, it can help the Council to:

- Make better decisions and improve the quality of our services
- Deliver services people want in the way they want them
- Respond to the needs of our service users
- Identify any problems caused by changes, or potential changes, to services
- Demonstrate our commitment to openness and accountability by helping people understand how we work and how we reach decisions that affect them
- Involve local people more thoroughly in the democratic process

What matters to Stockton-on-Tees residents?

One of the key ways in which we consult is via Viewpoint, our 1500 member residents panel (detailed below). Members of Viewpoint are very happy with their membership of the panel (97% praise the ease with which questionnaires could be understood and completed and 85% finding the topics interesting – Summer 2007) and feel that they are able to influence Council services as a result.

“Thank you for a very satisfying experience. It is nice to be able to voice an opinion and know it is going to get seen and taken into account.”

Viewpoint Member

Providing opportunities to participate in decision making for the Council is important to local people and within Stockton 30% of people feel they have these opportunities (MORI survey 2006/07. Note: The average across England average is 28%). The Council is committed to increasing this figure and ongoing consultation is an important aspect of this work.

Principles and Standards

There are a number of principles and standards which underpin how the Council consults its residents. We are committed to only carrying out open and useful consultation, only consulting on genuine options for the community. This ensures that any options we put to the community can be implemented and as such we are genuinely responsive to the views of local people. We involve local people as early as possible in the process, clarify the nature of the consultation exercise so people know exactly what they are being asked and what can change as a result and ensure the public have enough appropriate information to allow them to fully participate in the consultation exercise.

We are committed to consulting in the most appropriate ways and at the most appropriate times for local people. For example we try to avoid holding consultation exercises during religious festivals or in buildings which have poor accessibility, thus maximising the numbers of local people who can participate in the exercises. We are committed to ensuring that no resident will be disadvantaged by participating in Council consultation exercises and as such reasonable expenses incurred such as travelling costs will be reimbursed. All consultation activities carried out by the Council and all materials used during the process are branded appropriately to identify them as belonging to the authority.

All information collected by the Council is rigorously analysed with the results being considered as appropriate by Officers, Councillors and then being acted upon accordingly or fed into the appropriate planning cycles. Feedback to the community is vital and is provided in the most appropriate ways. This feedback is given as soon as possible after any consultation exercise.

Adherence to these principles and standards and overall coordination of the Council's consultation activities is undertaken by our cross-council Consultation Working Group. This working group act as key contacts for services across the Council to feed into the quarterly updated Council's Consultation Plan.

Techniques

Council staff are trained to use a variety of techniques in its consultation activities.

Residents Panels – Viewpoint and Youth Viewpoint are our adult and young people's residents panels. They have approximately 1,500 and 500 panel members respectively and are representative of Stockton-on-Tees communities in terms of geography and personal circumstances. Panel

members receive on average three or four detailed questionnaires a year seeking their views on a variety of issues, the results of which are analysed, fed into service planning and delivery and disseminated to senior officers and Councillors.

“Tell Us What You Think” events – Tell Us What You Think events are large public events held for members of the public to attend and express their views on particular issues. Usually taking place in the afternoon and early evening, the events take the form of a marketplace where a variety of Council and Partners services have stalls highlighting their work but also seeking ideas on how to further improve. Recent events have successfully attracted large numbers of people. The great benefit of Tell Us What You Think events are that large numbers of Council services can be present at one time, thereby minimising the numbers of consultation events both the Council and the public need to attend.

Focus Groups – Often involving members of Viewpoint and Youth Viewpoint, focus groups are informal discussions that bring together a small group of residents to discuss in detail a particular issue facing the Council. The advantage of the focus groups is that they allow a detailed and thorough exploration of the issues, but is often offset by the small numbers involved.

Residents Surveys

The Council carries out statutory and non-statutory surveys to our residents, for two years out of three years. Similar questions are asked during these surveys which enable the council to form a longitudinal study of the Council's performance. The Council uses these surveys to allow residents to set it priorities and raise opinions on a wide range of issues that affect them in every day life. These surveys also help the Council identify and address specific areas of service weakness which impact on resident satisfaction. Our surveys are carried out using a range of techniques including face to face interviews.

Other surveys may be service or priority specific, for example, the Safer Stockton Partnership carries out a 3 yearly audit and consultation process where our public identify their priorities in relation to community safety.

Bespoke Consultation Activities

The Council takes every available opportunity to gather the views of its residents and uses the most appropriate methodologies at all times. This means its bespoke activities range from the relatively simple such as customer comment / feedback cards to the more detailed and elaborate such as the consultation on the new Sustainable Community Strategy which saw all thematic and area partnerships consulted twice on the emerging strategy.

The Council takes all available opportunities to consult as widely as possible with its residents to ensure that our service planning and delivery are informed and monitored by our communities.

Accessibility

There will always be different target audiences for different consultation activities. The Council's Consultation Plan, available on the internet, outlines forthcoming consultation activities and highlights who might be most interested in the activities.

The Council is aware of the needs to support all its residents and ensure that consultation activities are undertaken in such a way as to ensure everyone in the borough has an equal opportunity to participate. There are many examples of specific events or groups including our Participation, Involvement and Consultation (PIC) Network for young people and our Disability Advisory Group. PIC membership also includes other public bodies and voluntary and community sector organisations.

A series of consultation guides focusing on areas of diversity have been developed to help officers plan and deliver better consultation exercises. These guides contain helpful hints and tips for consultation as well as more detailed recommendations such as ensuring venues and materials are accessible or avoiding wherever possible holding events on religious festivals.

Links

- Consultation Plan – available at <http://www.stockton.gov.uk/yourcouncil/38704/>
- Guide to Effective Consultation with Black and Minority Ethnic Communities
- Guide to Effective Consultation with People with Disabilities and Sensory Loss
- Guide to Effective Consultation with Children and Young People

Engagement:

What do we mean by engagement?

The Council supports local people being engaged fully in making decisions about public services and policies that affect their lives.

Engagement is the ongoing and sustained involvement of residents (either as individuals or as part of a community), local businesses, key stakeholder partners, giving them the opportunity to influence, shape and monitor the Council's services.

Why do we engage?

Stockton Council is committed to engaging with local residents in an effective and meaningful manner. We engage because we feel that local residents have an understanding at a local level of what is important and are best placed to determine their key priorities and to influence how Council services should be shaped to better plan service delivery.

Effective engagement enables the Council to better understand the needs of all communities and work with them to improve services and also helps to create a strong sense of community involvement and cohesion.

Engagement offers a number of benefits over and above traditional consultation exercises including developing a more detailed understanding of what people want from their Council; improved and better informed decision making; a greater sense of citizenship in the local community; better public understanding of local issues and finally the process should inform people how their input has affected the decision/policy.

We engage with the public:

- when considering options for a decision that will have a significant or widespread impact;
- when developing public policy which directly affects local communities;
- when we are required to do so by law; and
- to listen to feedback about our services, performance approach and to inform decisions

What matters to Stockton-on-Tees residents?

Experience has shown that our residents value feedback on how their engagement has influenced decisions or changed service delivery. We are therefore committed to building in feedback mechanisms into any engagement plans.

We also use surveys and discussions with customers to inform how we engage; some examples of this are set out below:

- Surveys of the Community Empowerment Network have informed the way we engage with them through the Network;
- Viewpoint Focus Group and extensive consultation on the Area Partnerships geographical boundaries and structure (2003) influenced the set up of our Area Partnerships, one of our key mechanisms for engaging the community.
- Working with young people to run sessions for us on how to engage young people

Principles and Standards

We are honest in our approach to engagement and it is important that there are suitable mechanisms in place to ensure appropriate feedback is undertaken.

We are committed to:

- Meaningful, open and effective engagement.
- Inclusive engagement recognising that different communities have different needs and we ensure that these needs are addressed in specific strategies.
- Co-ordinated engagement events which do not clash with other Council and community events.
- Partnership working.
- Timely engagement.

The Council, through membership of the Stockton Renaissance Partnership, has signed up to a Compact with the Voluntary and Community Sector in the borough. This sets out the principles under which we operate in our relationship with each other. The Compact was jointly written with the mandated voluntary and community sector umbrella organisation and outlines some of the ways and the spirit in which we have agreed to engage with each other. Performance against the Compact is jointly measured and reviewed annually with the sector.

Techniques

We believe that the Stockton Renaissance family of partnerships, which includes the Area Partnership Boards and the Thematic Partnerships, is one of the most appropriate avenues for effective engagement. These community led partnerships are a mandated and representative forum, providing a channel of communication and engagement from the main LSP board through to and from local residents.

We are committed to using new and innovative techniques for engagement that go beyond traditional methods i.e. online engagement tools, texting, electronic voting, gaming software etc. We are committed to working with local residents, umbrella voluntary and community sector organisations and key stakeholders to continue to review and develop effective engagement mechanisms. Using appropriate techniques also involves ensuring that our approach is proportionate to the scale and impact of the issue or decision and is carried out in the most sustainable and inclusive way possible and at reasonable cost.

We also engage with local residents at a neighbourhood and individual level through a variety of other mechanisms, including through user groups, resident associations/community partnerships, voluntary/community umbrella organisations and councillor ward surgeries which take place in the community. The Council also supports Councillors with their community leader role of engaging with the public through working with groups of people who traditionally have low levels of participation and engagement in the democratic process.

Accessibility

We recognise that different communities have different needs. In order to ensure that our engagement is inclusive, we amend our engagement techniques and tools for each audience.

Effective engagement includes the use of information in a plain and accessible format and the use of the right media at the right time. Where appropriate, translation, interpretation and transcription services are offered.

We recognise that sometimes other organisations, particularly the voluntary sector, may be better placed to engage on our behalf. We therefore ensure that our advertising and procurement for engagement services is appropriate.

In planning public engagement, we ensure that we take account of the impact of any decision or issue on the public, service users, and all stakeholders and partners. Furthermore, we are sensitive to meet the needs of the community by ensuring that we consider factors such as the suitability of the venue, timing, accessibility needs for different members of the community, communication method etc.

Links

The following documents/sources may be of use to Officers when carrying out engagement activities –

- Engagement Plan for the Sustainable Community Strategy 2008 – 2021
- Compact between Stockton Renaissance and the Third Sector
- A guide to Stockton Renaissance, Local Strategic Partnership leaflet

- <http://www.stockton.gov.uk/renaissance/>
- Statement of Community Involvement
<http://sbcinternet/resources/environment/BldgControl/planning/sciadopt/adoptsci.pdf>
- A Concordat for Communication and Consultation with Members

Monitoring and Review

The success of this framework will be reviewed on a regular basis through a variety of methods. Ongoing resident satisfaction is measured through our BVPI and residents surveys and from these we can draw inferences as to the success of our communication, consultation and engagement and therefore the success of this framework. In addition we carry out regular bespoke consultation exercises with our communities to seek their views on our activities. We have for example already used Viewpoint to assess satisfaction with Stockton News and will seek to repeat this exercise across all our consultation, communication and engagement work.

This framework will also be monitored by the success of its supporting documentation. For example, this framework is supported by the development of a new Compact between Stockton Renaissance and the third sector which outlines how Renaissance will work and communicate with the group, including for example the need for 12 week consultation on any significant strategies.

The ongoing monitoring and review of this framework will be coordinated by the Policy Officers Group to ensure its ongoing effectiveness and that following its principles allows the Council to continue its excellent progress in ensuring community involvement.