



COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Committee Report

Public

Date of Meeting: 5th June 2003

Title: DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT BEST VALUE REVIEW: UPDATE

Report of: Review Team

Report reference: SP12/03

Summary:

This report provides an update on progress with the Democratic Engagement Best Value Review Team. Specifically, the following are included:

- A project plan and timetable;
- A draft outline of a new consultation strategy for the authority.

Recommendations:

Members are asked to:

- consider and comment on progress with the review;
- give detailed consideration to the draft outline consultation strategy for the authority so that their comments can be incorporated in its development;
- Consider Members' involvement in this review, with particular regard to Members of Community O&S Committee and the Executive.

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1. Introduction

Following on from the agreed scoping of the Democratic Engagement Best Value Review (included as Appendix 1 for reference), work has commenced on the Review. Progress has been a little slower than anticipated, largely due to members of the review team being drawn into work for the authority's Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

However, we have now completed:

- The project plan and project task list (Appendix 2);
- A draft outline for a new consultation strategy for the authority (Appendix 3);
- The initial 'compare' work for the elements of the review (not completed in time for circulation for this meeting – this will be brought to the next Community O&S Meeting);
- Preparatory work with journalism students at the Cumbria Institute of the Arts. The students will provide much of the early 'challenge' for the review by attending public meetings in the council, talking to Councillors about their work and writing articles on subjects to be tackled by the review.

Clearly, democratic engagement is an area in which Members are pre-eminent and the project team is particularly concerned that Member involvement in this review is sustained. Ideally, this will comprise close oversight and involvement from the Community O&S Committee but also input and involvement from Members of the Executive. The team believe that by involving the Executive at an early stage and throughout the review, that the recommendations arising will be more robust and have a greater chance of being successfully implemented following the review.

Appendix 1

The following is a list of the questions which form the scope of the review, divided up into six areas:

(i) Access and opportunity in official meetings of the Council

Find out *why* people do not attend meetings – is it the content? The time at which meetings take place? Do they consider them relevant? What about the style of meeting?

What do people who have attended meetings think of them?

What changes can be made to the format of meetings to make them more relevant to the public? Should there be a facility for the public to ask questions?

Could new types of meeting be used to stimulate greater interest in the business of the council?

How can we be more welcoming when the public do attend?

What mechanisms do the public use, or want to use, when they are concerned about an issue?

Should we target particular subjects/meetings and use the Communications Unit to ensure that people know about these meetings?

What have other authorities done to increase the interaction with the public at official meetings?

What role could the website play? How effective is the *Focus* magazine? Is the content and frequency appropriate?

Are there any legal restraints which prevent the Council from doing things differently eg disclosure of confidential information?

(ii) Policy aspects

Are we fulfilling our responsibility to consult?

Are people getting a genuine opportunity to comment on and influence policy? Are we being sufficiently imaginative in the methods we use? What other methods are available?

Should we have different scales and methods of consultation depending on the importance of the issue?

Have other authorities used referenda? Could this be appropriate for Carlisle?

Do those people who are currently consulted feel that their views are important and help to shape policy?

Are we fulfilling the “Plain English” requirements?

What criteria are used for consultation?

(iii) Interaction between Members and the public and the mechanisms used

Do the public believe that they have good access to their Councillors? Would they prefer other/different mechanisms?

Is area working of relevance here? Can we link with the review going on in Corporate Resources O&S Committee?

Which are the most effective mechanisms for Councillors to communicate with people? Newsletters? Regular public meetings?

What are the most effective ways that the public communicate with Councillors?

How can we as officers make better use of the information which Councillors (particularly back-bench) gain by talking to their constituents?

Is there a suitable mechanism to enhance the role that back-bench Members currently fulfil?

What are the most effective ways that officers interact with the public?

(iv) Youth Engagement

Evidence shows that (nationally) levels of youth voting and engagement with politics generally are low. Why?

How can young people be encouraged to register and vote?

How can the workings of the council be made more relevant to young people?

How can younger people be encouraged to take greater interest in local politics?

How can young people's views be reached and used to shape policy? Youth Council?

What role can we play in the 'citizenship' teaching at schools, thereby engaging people *before* they are entitled to vote?

How do we audit current consultation with young people eg do we make use of partner organisations?

Would a newsletter aimed at young people be effective? Or a special section in *Focus*?

As a minor authority should we seek to formalise our arrangements with local schools?

(v) Engagement with other groups

Which other groups are we particularly failing to engage with? Older people? Some ethnic groups? Those living in rural areas?

Are there other types of group (particular issue-groups or community groups) that are not fully engaged?

How do we engage with these groups?

(vi) Electoral aspects

Find out *why* people are/are not voting.

How can we ensure that people *know* there is an election going on (recent MORI work shows around ¼ of people didn't know last May (across the country))?

How can we encourage more people (particularly young people) to register to vote?

What would be the effect of introducing different mechanisms to vote?

What things have other authorities done to raise registration and turnout?

Are we doing all we can through our relationships with other agencies to identify those who have difficulty voting?

Appendix 2: Project Plan and Task List

This task list should be read in conjunction with the project diagram which shows the timetable for the entire project.

Scoping

Develop the questions that the review will aim to answer and refine these through discussions with Management O&S Committee, CMT, JMT.

Gather Initial Base Data

Elements:

- Gather 'internal' data to establish the position of Carlisle City Council and flesh out the scoping paper
- Start to examine research, national trends and begin to work out which authorities may be setting best practice in the areas identified by scoping
- Team brainstorm to develop any ideas for the review before we're all too familiar with all of it
- Define 'other groups' as early as possible

Also, set up 'reference group'. Critical to brief them on providing challenge to the process.

Reference group should probably include Member of O&S, Press, Young people, Schools, other groups?

Initial Compare Work

Mostly desk-based: best practice research, benchmarking work. Need to examine what we do, compared with other authorities for the different sections of the review.

Detailed Compare Work

Using the initial work, select some authorities to talk to in more detail.

Analyse Results of Compare Work

Consult with Members

For all consultation, need to establish people's views of what we are doing now and how this could be improved.

Need to be clear about purpose and methods.

Probably need a variety of different approaches here. For example:

- Workshop with Community O&S Committee
- One-on-one with group leaders and a selection of back-bench Members
- Other groups of Members?

Analyse Results of Consulting with Members

Consult with Others

Once again, critical that we are clear about purpose and methods.

Staff, citizens' panel, community groups, key partners, interest groups, press, young people, schools, MPs, other sections of community.

For those who are already consulted about policy (staff, citizens panel etc), important to find out what they think about the consultation to date.

Analyse Results of Consulting with Others

Competitiveness Issues

Probably confined to the electoral aspects of the Council's work.

Could someone other than the council provide the registration and/or voting services?

Analyse Results of Competitiveness Issues

Consolidate Information and Develop Options for Improvement

Should be relatively straightforward – will probably evolve during the process.

Consult on Options for Improvement

Would need to include group leaders, other members and citizens panel as a start.

Assess Options

Action Plan Development

Develop related performance indicators.

Meetings

It is the intention that an update is given to every Community Overview and Scrutiny meeting so as to keep the committee informed and involved.

It is also the intention that matters of substance are taken to both the Community O&S Committee and the reference group for comments and guidance.

Appendix 3: Consultation Strategy: Draft Outline

Introduction

Note the modern emphasis on consultation by local authorities. Stress problems of consultation fatigue etc but also the benefits of effective, well-defined consultation.

The intention is that this document should enable you to decide whether or not consultation is appropriate and give you some idea of the format it could take and who you may wish to consult.

This document is not intended to be a stand-alone guide through the consultation process - it is only a starting point and the next step should be to talk to Lynne Wild.

Corporate Approach to Consultation

Stress that the public's perception of the authority is shaped by how we consult. It is, therefore, important that there is a corporate approach to consultation. This is not to say that individual business units should not undertake consultation, just that this should be carried out after seeking advice from the Strategic and Performance Services Unit.

It is particularly important that consultation is only undertaken after due consideration and planning. It is vital that each Business Unit plans well ahead for when it wishes to consult, includes details in the annual Business Unit Plan and sets aside funds from its budget to undertake the consultation.

Other planned developments:

- We will be exploring the development of a consultation/research database. This will help eliminate unnecessary consultation and should also help structure the timetable for consultation throughout the year;
- Once established, the database could be linked to a page on the website which includes details of past, current and future consultations. In addition to being able to explore the results of previous consultations, it would also be possible for members of the public to register their interest in upcoming consultations.

Why Consult?

Government White Paper “Modern Local Government – In Touch with the People” stresses the need for local authorities to consult more:

“The Government wishes to see consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all councils...”

Beyond the Government’s wishes, good consultation on important aspects of policy and service delivery will ensure that the Council is responding to the needs of the public which it serves.

Consultation is useful when considering some broad aspect of policy (e.g. City Vision) but will often also be appropriate when reviewing specific aspects of the services the Council provides (e.g. the refuse collection).

It is important to ask yourself the question “What will we learn by consulting?” and to ensure that you are not pre-judging the outcome of the consultation. Work through the checklist at the end of this document to make sure that consultation will be a useful step. Here are a few examples of when **not** to consult:

- When the policy development process cannot be modified;
- When there is only one option open to the council;
- When we already have the recent views of people from an earlier consultation process (eg in City Vision);
- When the aims of the consultation are not well defined.

Who to Consult?

It is important to consult all those who might be affected. Remember that some groups may have already been consulted on a similar matter and you may be able to use the results from this work.

How to Consult?

Huge range of different consultation methods. Selection of one or more methods will depend on the purpose of the consultation and the people/organisations being consulted.

For example, different types of consultation would be used to carry out the following:

- To explore a particular policy area to determine people's views before deciding whether or not to develop a policy initiative;
- To help select a particular option from a number determined by previous research;
- To determine what people think of a policy document which is not yet finalised.

There are a variety of different research methods that can be used for consultation purposes. Research can be constant, as in the process of producing performance indicator information, or it can be a one-off research exercise to help shape policy or highlight improvements or changes to services. The most appropriate research methods should be matched to each research problem, by selecting from a range of quantitative or qualitative research practices and, for some consultation purposes, using a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Some of the quantitative methods that are available are:

- Citizens Panel (self-completion and telephone questionnaires)
- User satisfaction surveys
- Employee surveys

Some of the more qualitative research methods include:

- Focus Group discussions
- Workshops
- Forums
- In-depth interviewing
- Mystery shopping

The method and type of consultation is best decided in conjunction with Lynne.

Other things to consider

Proportionality : We have already noted the problems of fatigue on behalf of those consulted. This is important. As an authority, we must be careful to consult only when it is appropriate. Beyond this, the scale of the consultation must be suitable to the task in hand. For example, revising the Community Strategy will require widespread and extensive consultation with the different stakeholders in the community. However, considering a change in the delivery of a particular service can be dealt with in a simpler way, perhaps through a question to the Citizen's Panel.

Resources : Consulting always has a cost – usually both a direct financial one and an indirect one of officer time. It is also worth remembering that you are using other people’s resources – their time and effort – when you consult them.

You should set aside resources for the consultation part of the process. As noted earlier, the most effective way to do this is through considering what consultations may be required as part of your Business Unit Planning process.

What to do next

Work through the checklist below, thinking carefully about just what you want to achieve by consulting.

Checklist

Question	Answer
What are you consulting people about?	
Who are you consulting – who is likely to be affected by or have a direct interest in the issue?	
Have they recently been consulted about a similar issue?	
How and when will they be consulted?	
What will be the outcomes of consultation - how will it affect Council policy or practice?	
How will we continue to communicate with those we have consulted, and inform them about the results and action taken?	

	Period											
	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	
Activity												
Scoping												
Gather Initial Data												
Finalise Review Plan												
Initial Compare Work												
Detailed Compare Work												
Analyse results of compare work												
Consult with Members												
Analyse results of consulting with members												
Consult with Others												
Analyse results of consulting with others												
Deal with Competitiveness Issues												
Consolidate information and Develop Options for Improvement												
Consult on Options for Improvement												
Assess Options												
Action Plan Development												
Note: Competitiveness issues - electoral services only												
Key Meetings												
O&S Committee (Management)												
O&S Committee (Community)												
Reference Group												