



## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

### *Committee Report*

Public

Date of Meeting: 17<sup>th</sup> December 2002

Title: DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT BEST VALUE REVIEW: SCOPING  
REPORT

Report of: Town Clerk and Chief Executive

Report reference: ME 03/02

#### **Summary:**

This report provides the initial scoping for the Democratic Engagement Best Value Review. Members are asked to consider whether the scoping is complete and appropriate. In particular, the Committee is asked to examine whether the areas and questions detailed in Section 4 of the report provide an appropriate starting point for the review.

#### **Recommendation:**

That the Committee approve the scoping paper, subject to any comments, suggestions and amendments proposed .

Contact Officer: Carolyn Taylor / Karen Hook

Ext: 7534/7015

Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers: None

## **1. What is the Problem?**

The problem is the perceived low level of engagement between Carlisle City Council and the citizens of the district.

The problem of disengagement between local councils and their communities is by no means unique to Carlisle – it is perceived to be a problem across much of the UK. In Carlisle, the limited level of engagement is apparent from turnouts of around 30% at local elections, low public attendance at meetings of the Council and limited engagement in policy consultation. There is some evidence at both national and local level that the problem of disengagement is particularly acute for young people.

In practical terms, this means that the democratic accountability of the authority is reduced. If few people understand or are interested in the council's activities then its accountability is diminished. Further, if few people are engaging with the policies pursued then there is little guarantee that those policies are in line with the wishes of the citizens of Carlisle.

## **2. The National Policy Background**

Concern over this issue formed part of the focus of the Government's White Paper *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* which was published in 1998. The paper was framed around the need for stronger links between councils and the communities they serve – to provide a 'bigger say' and a 'better deal' for local people. The document also established the community leadership role of local authorities and specifically brought the new duty on councils to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas.

Following the publication of the White Paper in 1998, the Government produced *Local Leadership, Local Choice* which provided a more detailed vision of this area and also included a draft bill. This draft bill was refined and ultimately introduced as legislation to form the *Local Government Act 2000*. The Act incorporates the various strands of Government policy including establishing new constitutions for councils to make them more accountable.

With the thrust of national policy well established, there have been a number of research projects aimed at improving the level of engagement between citizens and their local councils. For example, some studies have focused on how to engage young people whilst

others have examined innovative ways of consulting residents on policy initiatives. The Government has also enabled a number of pilots for alternative methods of voting – findings from the most recent elections in May 2001 are now available. It is the intention that this Best Value Review will make full use of the research findings and pilot work to assist in tackling the situation in Carlisle.

Beyond national policy on the role of local government, it is also worth noting the development of the National Curriculum, within which the subject of Citizenship has been introduced – this incorporates a number of different concepts but amongst them is an understanding of, and an engagement with, local councils. This review will aim to work with local schools and assist in developing the local Citizenship curriculum.

### **3. The Corporate Policy Background**

This Best Value Review reflects the aims of the City Vision plan and also the Corporate Plan 2002-2005.

The *City Vision* plan defines the agreed community vision for Carlisle for the next ten years, up to 2012. This was drawn up following extensive consultation with the public and partners. Under the 'Communities' section of the document, the vision for Carlisle is described as "A safe, clean, attractive place to live where people feel included and their needs recognised." Of specific relevance to this Best Value Review, the key priority for Carlisle City Council is "To ensure we effectively act upon the views of the people of Carlisle, involve our communities more actively in decision making in the city area and improve voter turnout at elections." This Best Value Review aims to deliver this key priority.

In terms of increasing voter turnout, it must be acknowledged that there is a limit to what Carlisle City Council, as a local authority, can do. This point has been explicitly recognised in the withdrawal of 'Percentage Turnout for local elections' from the list of Best Value Performance Indicators, with the explanation that "the Government is not of the opinion that it is sufficiently within local authority power to increase voter numbers palpably."

The *City Vision* also includes one useful measure to help define the aims of the review: an indicator which establishes the 'percentage of people who felt involved in decision making in the city' is to be introduced.

Carlisle City Council sets out how it will deliver the *City Vision*, along with partners, in the Corporate Plan. The Corporate Plan for 2002-2005 sets out a number of objectives and some of these can be considered to be directly relevant to this Best Value review:

- CO1: Encourage community participation and inclusion in the Carlisle area**
- CM3: To develop our community planning process to ensure it addresses the aspirations and needs of our local communities**
- CM4: To reinvigorate democracy and improve voter turn-out at elections**

For each objective, the Corporate Plan lists a number of detailed actions which the Council intends to pursue (see Appendix 1 for more detail on the Corporate Plan). The Best Value review will use these as a starting point in developing an action plan.

There are several other strands of work which the Council has carried out, or is currently undertaking, to which this review must relate. Amongst the more important of these are:

- Customer Contact Best Value Review – recently completed review, some of the findings of which may be helpful background for the democratic engagement review.
- Communications Best Value Review – this review was completed and inspected in 2001.
- Supporting Communities Best Value Review – this review is aiming to engage with specific neighbourhoods.
- Consultation with citizens – the Council already consults the public on various matters and makes use of a Citizens' Panel to test opinion and shape policy.
- Electoral campaigns: regular campaigns are planned which will aim to encourage people to vote. Some campaigns are targeted solely at young people and these aim to increase the proportion registering to vote and also the numbers which actually make use of that vote.
- Young people work – the Council is already engaged in a number of projects which aim to involve young people more in the work of the council. It is also exploring working with local schools, and particularly assisting in the development of the Citizenship subject of the national curriculum
- Implementing Electronic Government – democratic engagement will consider the channels of communication as well as the content and will need to be involved in the development of the IEG initiative.

- Area working – the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny committee is currently examining the concept of area working and may come up with proposals for its introduction.
- *Access to information in local government* (consultation paper) which deals with how the Freedom of Information Act 2000 should be implemented in local govt. Under the law, councils are required to produce a publication scheme by February 2003, detailing what information they intend to make publicly available.

The review team will ensure that the review is carried out with full engagement with, and knowledge of, these other initiatives.

#### **4. What can we do about the problem?**

From initial discussions within the review team, the five key areas have been outlined below. Across all of the areas, two key aspects must be considered. Firstly, we need to get to the bottom of why the public is not more involved at present. Only with this information can we hope to tackle the problem effectively. Secondly, wherever we are looking to increase engagement, this will be a two-way process – we need to communicate with the public better and we need to ensure that the channels are available for the public to communicate with us.

##### **(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?

**(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?

**(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?

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?

**(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?

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

**(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?

**(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?

## **5. Terms of Reference**

The proposed terms of reference for this review arise from the detailed points above and can be summarised in the form of essential questions as follows:

How can the Council engage better with its citizens?

What can we do to improve the turnout at local elections?

What can we do to engage young people? And other groups sections of society that are particularly disengaged or hard to reach?

How can we make Council meetings and the decision-making process more interesting and attractive for people?

How can we consult more effectively on policy matters?

## **6. Measuring the Outcomes of the Review**

The Council already monitors a number of indicators which can be used to assess the effectiveness of the review. The headline measures of success for this review could be the following:

- *City Vision* indicator which establishes the 'percentage of people who felt involved in decision making in the city' is to be introduced.
- Voter turn-out: there already exists a target of increasing this from 31% to 38% by 2004

It may be possible to use other, more detailed, measures such as the voter turnout for young people, the attendance of the public at Council meetings etc. These will be fleshed out in the early stages of the review. Other aspects of the review will be more difficult to measure but, wherever possible, the review will set targets for improving performance within the final action plan.

## **7. Who in the authority is involved?**

By its nature, a Best Value review of such a cross-cutting area will ultimately impact upon the work of almost all within the authority. Members and officers alike will be affected.

The body of the review work will focus on three business units within the organisation:

- Legal and Democratic Services;
- Strategic and Performance Services (Communications / Policy and Performance);
- Member Support and Employee Services;



- Economic and Community Development

To a lesser extent, there will also be some consideration of the work carried out by the Customer and Information Services Business Unit.

#### **8. Who from outside the authority is involved?**

Clearly, the focus of the review is on bringing the authority closer to the community it serves. In doing so, the review will need to engage with the public in individual, group and community group form.

Other players will be key and one of the early ideas of the review team is to set up a 'reference group' comprised of people from various groups including Members, local students, the local press and perhaps some representatives of other groups. This reference group would be used by the review team to ensure that the review maintains its focus – at key stages, the reference group would be consulted on the review and its proposed direction. This will help to ensure that a 'sense check' is maintained on the review. Also, as part of the essential 'compare' part of the review, we will work with other local authorities to try and learn from best practice.

## Appendix 1: Links to *City Vision* and the Corporate Plan

The following objectives and targets are set in the Corporate Plan.

Quality of Life Objective:

### “CO1: Encourage community participation and inclusion in the Carlisle area”

Priorities for Action	Year 1 Targets	Year 2/3 Targets	Responsibilities (Subject to Organisational Review)
Involve more of our communities in consultation to aid decision making	Increase membership of citizens panel by 25%	Increase response rate to 1000 respondents per questionnaire	Strategic and Performance Services
Develop a Young People's Council as a voice for them in decision making	Steering group established by Feb 2003	Council established Sept 2003	Economic and Community Development Services
Develop a programme of events with supporting resource material for schools and community groups on the concept of citizenship	Develop a programme of events based around the Anne Frank exhibition Oct 2002	Participate in the North West Museums and Galleries Education programme phase 2 Citizenship initiative 2003	Culture, Leisure and Sport services

### “CM4: To reinvigorate democracy and improve voter turn-out at local elections”

Key Indicators	Year 1 Targets	Year 2/3 Targets	Responsibilities (Subject to Organisational Review)
Increase Voter turn-out	31.7% (actual)	38% in May 2004	Legal and Democratic Services
Percentage of people who feel involved in decision-making in	Undertake survey and establish targets		Legal and Democratic Services

the city			
----------	--	--	--

<b>Priorities for Action</b>	<b>Year 1 Targets</b>	<b>Year 2/3 Targets</b>	<b>Responsibilities (Subject to Organisational Review)</b>
Develop initiatives to make polling stations more appealing to encourage voters		Pilot in 2 wards (depending on pilot results) roll out to 10 in 2004	Strategy and Performance Services
Marketing campaign to encourage voting		1 campaign in April 2003  1 campaign in April 2004, 1 in Sept 2004	Strategy and Performance Services
Marketing campaign targeting first time voters		1 campaign in April 2003  1 campaign in April 2004, 1 in Sept 2004	Strategy and Performance Services
Develop the 'citizenship package' with local schools	Trial packs with one primary and one secondary	Roll out to 100% of schools (dependent on trial)	Strategy and Performance Services
Local events for local democracy week	4 events	5 events in 2003/2004 6 events in 2004/2005	Strategy and Performance Services
Access Committee reports and papers via the internet	See Objective CM9		Legal and Democratic Services
Promote public involvement in council meetings	Trial themed Q&A sessions at full November council  Survey levels of satisfaction and participants involvement in November 2002	Include Q&A in other appropriate meetings from June 2003 (dependent on trial)	Strategy and Performance Services
Broadcast meetings via webcam	Trial with full council by March 2003	Include other meetings from June 2003, dependent on trial	Strategy and Performance Services

		Include outside events from July 2004	
Examine extending the Citizens Panel to incorporate more views of young people and other hard to reach groups	Undertake research into best practice by March 2003	To ensure the views of young people are appropriately represented in decision making	Strategy and Performance Services

**CM8: To ensure our services can be accessed electronically by 2005**

<b>Priorities for Action</b>	<b>Year 1 Targets</b>	<b>Year 2/3 Targets</b>	<b>Responsibilities (Subject to Organisational Review)</b>
Ensure all Council Minutes and Reports can be accessed by the public on-line	Develop internal web service by March 2003	Develop external web service by March 2004	Legal and Democratic Services
Extend community consultation to include using the web, e-mail and mobile telephones		Review best practice and assess appropriateness for service March 2004  Implement review findings by March 2005	Strategy and Performance Services
Implement the Freedom of Information Act	Define scheme of publication by March 2003	Implement scheme by March 2005	Legal and Democratic Services in conjunction with Customer and Information Services