

Scope and application of the code

The Code of Practice is not a legally binding document. It is an enabling mechanism to enhance the relationship between the Council and the voluntary and community sector. Its authority is derived from its endorsement by the Council and the sector itself through its consultation process. The code covers all Council functions and applies to the range of organisations in the voluntary and community sector.

The Compact partners will actively encourage the extension of this code to other local public bodies, who will be invited to adopt and adapt the Compact and its associated Codes of Practice.

The development of action plans to implement the good practice guidance in this code will be the responsibility of individual agencies such as the Council and the range of organisations in the voluntary and community sector. Where they do not follow this good practice, they must satisfy themselves that, if asked, they have good reasons for not doing so.

As part of the process of making the Compact work, there will be an annual review by the Council and the sector to review the development and operation of the Compact, including this Code of Practice. A monitoring report will be presented to Gateshead Voluntary Organisations Council's AGM and the relevant committee of the Council in October of each year.



Community Participation, Consultation and Communication

**A voluntary sector
Code of Practice**

Working together for change

Introduction

This booklet sets out a Code of Practice agreed by Gateshead Council and the voluntary and community sector in relation to community participation, consultation and communication. It describes:

- what is meant by community participation, consultation and communication;
- what it involves, and
- what the council and voluntary and community sector will undertake to do as part of their commitment to this area of work.

This is one of a series of booklets on good practice produced by Gateshead Council and GVOG (Gateshead Voluntary Organisation Council) - the others are:

Finance and Funding
Black and Minority Ethnic Voluntary and Community Organisations
Valuing Volunteers

If you would like more information on this or any of the other codes of practice please contact:

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- play an enabling role which supports the voluntary and community sector;
- ask the voluntary and community sector before responding to invitations for representation on partnership bodies and other local structures;
- be responsive to the information, involvement, practical support and training and conference sponsorship needs of community groups and count this as a service priority;
- seek the views of voluntary and community groups in organisational forward planning and to include their views when being evaluated by funders;
- use their infrastructure to encourage participation in Council consultations (commensurate with their available resources), including co-operating with each other through intermediary bodies and national, regional and local networks to streamline the consultation process;
- define and demonstrate how they represent their stated constituency, by stating who they are, what groups or causes in society they represent and how they involved those interests in forming their policies and positions, and in responding to the consultation itself;
- wherever possible to consult their constituency directly, including service users, volunteers, members and supporters; where this is not practicable or appropriate, to indicate that they are responding on the basis of their accumulated knowledge and experience of working with the groups concerned;
- take account positively of the specific needs, interests and contributions of women, minority groups and the socially excluded;
- ensure that the information they present to the Council is accurate and that any research has been conducted in an objective and unbiased manner;
- respect the confidentiality of Council information, when given access to it on that basis;
- give their constituency feedback on the outcome of consultation;
- have regard to the regulatory framework that governs their organisation when representing their constituents, for example, the Charity Commission issues guidance for charities on what they should and should not do in relation to their representational and campaigning work;
- promote good practice among their members (in the case of intermediary bodies) by issuing guidance on effective representation for voluntary and community organisations, and include consultation performance in quality systems and self-evaluation reports.

- ensure fair treatment for all voluntary and community groups including faith groups;
- tackle racism and other forms of discrimination;
- be prepared to take risks to support innovation and enterprise within communities, within the limits of proper accountability for public money;
- ensure there is practical learning and development support for voluntary and community groups and community activists, including the encouragement and promotion of maximising the use of suitable community buildings;
- recognise, in both policy and practice, the independence of the voluntary and community sector and the imbalance in the relationship between the Council and the sector;
- identify and provide appropriate resources to enable partnership working and participation, including joint public and voluntary and community sector training.

Undertakings by the Voluntary and Community Sector

The Voluntary and Community sector undertake to:

- accept that funding brings with it the necessity for proportionate monitoring evaluation and research where applicable;
- operate on a basis of user participation and/or control as appropriate;
- tackle racism and other forms of discrimination;
- comply with the basis requirements of voluntary and community groups as directly representative of a local community, whether of locality or of issue, or a legitimate strand of community interest contained within that community;
- fulfil minimum basic community expectations for social accountability as agreed through consultation and to help facilitate community ownership of partnership work;
- be clear and open as to the extent to which it is a sectional or a representative voice;
- take appropriate steps to ensure that views, and promotion of them, are made known to the community, and that appropriate feedback and comment from the community, to the group and to the Council, are to that extent facilitated;

Aim of code

To make a positive impact on the relationship between the Council and the voluntary and community sector and on the way the Council consults and appraises its policies in respect of the sector by:

- providing a framework for mutual trust and acceptance of respective roles and responsibilities of the Council and the sector;
- achieving recognition of the diversity and contribution of the sector;
- helping to secure policies, funding and support that the sector needs to enable it to play an effective role in developing local communities;
- boosting access by the sector to the local Compact;
- enabling the sector to fulfil its strategic role;
- supporting the work of the sector and promoting volunteering.

Joint Undertakings

Together Gateshead Council and the voluntary and community sector undertake to:

- adhere to the Compact and other Codes of Practice as they apply to the sector and the Council.
- make suitable mention of this Code of Practice in all appropriate Council documentation and voluntary and community sector publications.
- develop a partnership approach to carry forward the Council's strategies for communities, including promoting and sharing good practice and celebrating success.
- explore jointly, and periodically review, ways to assist working between communities and national and local state administrative structures.
- adopt and put into practice the following definition of community development:

“Community development is about building active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect. It is about changing power structures to remove the barriers that prevent people from participating in the issues that affect their lives. It promotes the active involvement of people through sharing power, skills, knowledge and expertise.”

- ensure that all consultation and involvement is inclusive, effective and clear.

Undertakings by the Council

The Council undertakes to:

- consult the sector on issues that are likely to affect it, or that it expresses an interest in;
- build consultation with the sector into plans for policy development;
- appraise new policies and procedures, particularly at the developmental stage, identifying as far as possible any implications for the sector;
- consult early, and, where possible, involve the sector at a sufficiently early stage of policy development (subject to considerations of urgency, sensitivity or confidentiality);
- be sensitive on a case by case basis to any additional resource implications for the sector in disseminating consultations, and to the most appropriate methods of consultation to encourage responses from the sector, including timescales, making consultation materials available in accessible formats and giving advance notice of, and publicising, consultations;
- prepare consultation documents that are concise, clearly laid out and written in simple language that will be understood by the intended audience;
- take account positively of the specific needs, interests and contributions of those parts of the sector which represent women, minority groups and the socially excluded;
- respect the confidentiality of information provided by the sector, within the constraints of the law and the proper performance of public duties, when given access to it on that basis;
- analyse carefully the results of its consultation exercises;
- provide feedback on the results of consultation to all individuals and groups affected by any changes or improvements in Council services;
- evaluate its consultations with a view to developing and spreading best practice;
- ensure that policies towards communities recognise communities of interest or issue as well as communities of place;
- involve people with first-hand experience of particular problems in developing solutions (for example, poverty, discrimination, disability, etc. through self-help or user-led organisations);