



# Ask, listen...act.

Gateshead Council's  
Community Consultation & Involvement  
Strategy

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## **Introduction**

'Ask, listen....act.' Gateshead Council's Community Involvement Strategy was produced in August 2002 with the following aim: 'to provide a way of asking for, listening to and acting on the views and opinions of local people to influence the way the Council makes decisions.' The following paragraphs review the Strategy in the light of experience and changing circumstances within the council and local government.

The purpose of this strategy is to set out the corporate framework for Gateshead Council's approach to consultation and involvement.

## **Management Requirements**

Gateshead Council has acknowledged the need for effective community consultation and involvement in order to deliver continuous service improvements. As a result of this, consultation and involvement has been integrated into the Corporate Performance Action Plan to ensure development of this area in the future.

## **Background**

When decision-making involves the well being and future of local people it is crucial to get it right the first time. That's why Gateshead Council has developed its strategy for working in partnership with local people to allow them to play their part in planning and developing its services.

This strategy complements and supports the role that Councillors have within communities, ensuring that individual and community views on specific issues help inform council decisions. Effective consultation can help Councillors achieve a greater understanding of the views of the residents they represent, on a wide range of issues. This in turn can help them to decide how to respond to conflicting views of consultees. It is the Councillors role to take into account the views of residents along with other factors such as resources, statutory requirements and the views of partner organisations when facing decision making situations.

The revised Community Consultation and Involvement Strategy will provide a way of asking for, listening to and acting on the views and opinions of local people to influence

the way the council makes decisions and carries out its business.

This approach is an integral part of the council's main policy document 'Towards 2010', which clearly states that:

"Individuals, service users and communities;

- are well informed about the council, its work and the issues which affect their lives;
- are actively involved in the planning and development of the services that affect them;
- feel able to influence and shape the services they receive and what happens in their local areas."

The Community Consultation and Involvement Strategy will work towards providing a culture where participation and involvement across the community is encouraged, recognised and used where possible in delivering future improvements to services.

## Policy Context

This consultation and involvement strategy is linked to and supports a number of other objectives and strategies developed within the council. The purpose of this is to provide a base for a unified and strategic approach to consultation and involvement across the authority.

[Towards 2010](#) states six medium term objectives to enable the council's vision for Gateshead to be delivered. Consultation and involvement are essential factors in the process of working towards all of these objectives. This strategy will work towards achieving these objectives and ultimately the council's vision for Gateshead.

**Building a better future**, the performance plan summary 2004/05 talks about plans to improve services and quality of life in the future. One aspect of this is 'involving local people'. The plan states that 'local people will play a more active role in planning and developing accessible services that meet their needs first time'. Consultation will play a key role in informing the council as to what services are required by the community as well as ensuring that

further developments meet their needs.

#### [Gateshead Community Strategy](#)

identified a key challenge: to 'continue to reduce fear of crime and increase public confidence and reassurance,' along with 'finding innovative ways of engaging and consulting with communities and developing collective responsibility involving communities and partners'. This strategy will support the Gateshead Community Strategy in achieving these goals.

#### [Improvement Plan 2003/04:](#)

Following the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) where it was confirmed that we are still an 'excellent' authority, the council set a challenging programme of actions to improve services further. One particular action is to 'increase the number of people and businesses we reach through our consultation and engagement process, with particular emphasis on hard to reach groups and businesses'. The community consultation and involvement strategy will be critical in ensuring that this action is taken to a satisfactory level.

### **The Charter of Local Decision**

#### **Making and Voting** is Gateshead

Councils commitment to delivering the services in relation to local decision making and voting. One aim of the Charter is 'to encourage people to give their views on matters that affect them and take their opinions into account'. Consultation and involvement will give the community the opportunity to participate in decision making and voting across the authority.

In January 2004 Gateshead Council established The Gateshead Housing Company. They are responsible for the day to day management and maintenance of council housing. Gateshead Council still owns the housing and remains the landlord. The new company supports Gateshead Council to deliver its Community Involvement Strategy, explaining how it will do this in The Tenant Involvement Strategy. For a copy of this document please contact Gev Pringle 0191 433 2337.

### **Statutory Requirements**

The Governments modernising agenda for local government strives to build councils that are in touch with their local people and get the best for them. Along with this, The

Local Government Act (2000) highlights consultation as being an essential factor in the drive towards a modern local government. To ensure Gateshead Council continues to work towards becoming a modern local government, consultation and engagement with the community is of utmost importance. Gateshead Council should display an ethos of openness and accountability, especially where decision-making is concerned, along with involving and responding to local people and local interests. There is a duty to consult, with the Government wishing to see consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all councils. Consultation should therefore be an integral part of any project plan, with a view to strengthening relationships with key public, private and voluntary sector organisations in our area. It is up to Gateshead Council to ensure that the appropriate methods are used to consult and engage the community at the most appropriate times.

The council is required to develop a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) which sets out how the council intend to involve local communities, businesses and other interested parties in the

production of the Local Development Framework and matters relating to development in their area. It will also help to ensure community ownership of the Local Development Framework. This strategy will sit beneath the SCI and will provide a useful guide to the principles of good consultation.

### **What do we envisage this strategy achieving?**

By implementing and using the core principles, which are set out in the following sections, across the authority we envisage a more co-ordinated and inclusive approach to consultation and involvement. In turn we foresee that this will have a positive impact on the Council, local people and other stakeholders.

Benefits could include:

- **Improved decision-making** - the opportunity for decisions to be more informed through consultation and involvement results.
- **Improved Council Services** - the prospect of services improving because the views of local people will be taken into account, enabling services to be targeted more closely to what the community wants and avoiding what they do not want.

- **Increased public confidence** - by enabling local people to become more involved in the decision-making process they will gain knowledge of the council's aims and how we can help each other to achieve them.
  - **Improved local democracy** - Local people will have the opportunity to obtain a greater understanding of what the Council does along with developing the skills needed to become actively involved in the growth and development of service that impact on their lives.
4. Cost-effective consultation and involvement.
  5. Improved links with partner organisations to minimise consultation fatigue across the community.
  6. The capacity to consult consistently with the local community and other stakeholders to a high standard.
  7. Services planned and developed with the local community to ensure the needs of the local community are met.
  8. Identification of new priorities for the council and its partners.
  9. An environment where good practice and learning is shared.

## **Aims of the Strategy**

By implementing this Community Consultation and Involvement Strategy we hope to achieve the following:

1. A co-ordinated approach to consultation and involvement within the council.
2. An inclusive approach to consultation and involvement where all sections of the community have the opportunity to participate.
3. A two-way process with the local community, listening to their views and providing them with appropriate and timely feedback.

## Making Community Consultation and Involvement Work

The increase in consultation and involvement over the past few years has brought about the need for a move towards a more co-ordinated approach. In order to achieve this within the council and with partner organisations we need to be clear about what we are working towards, how we are going to achieve our goals and how we will evaluate our progress. The subsequent paragraphs provide the basis of this strategy

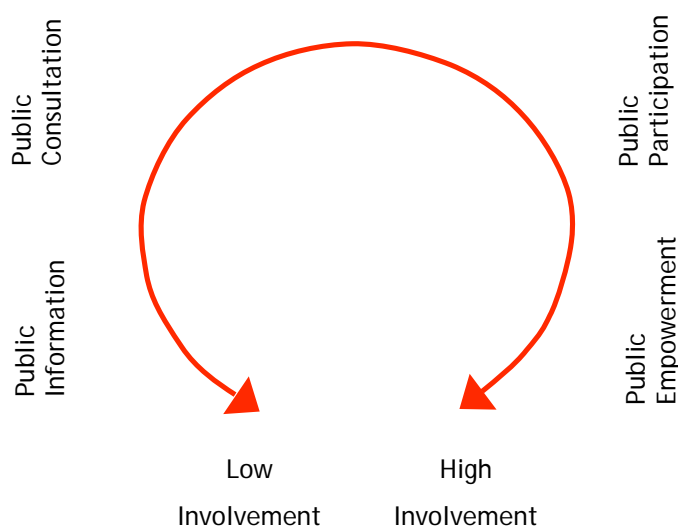
### What do we mean by Community Consultation and Involvement?

“The act of consulting or conferring; deliberation of two or more persons on some matter, with a view to a decision.”

Consultation and involvement is not just about informing the community, it is about working with the community to encourage a feeling of responsibility and ownership to develop.

The degree to which people are involved will be different for each consultation activity.

Some of the things that could influence the level of involvement are; the topic of interest; how much time it will demand of participants along with the time it will take for officers to carry it out; the reason the consultation is being carried out e.g. statutory or service improvement. The diagram below shows the differing levels of involvement that can occur:



- **Public Information:** Notifying people of what you intend to do or have already done. Informing the public of events and paving the way for further involvement. E.g. press release and publications.
- **Public Consultation:** Asking people what they think about something you intend to do with the Council acting on the findings. E.g. citizen panels, surveys and public meetings.

- **Public Participation:** Asking people to help you decide what to do and encouraging them to take part in carrying the decisions out. E.g. scrutiny partnerships.
- **Public Empowerment:** Giving people direct control of the decisions, and supporting them to develop and carry out their own plans. E.g. funding independent groups or forums.
- Any consultation/involvement exercise can be designed to inform the decision;
- it is clear to participants what they can change by being involved;
- clear feedback can be given to participants on how their views were useful.

## Consultation and Involvement Principles

The Audit Commission has identified four main principles of good practice for consultation and involvement.

**Consultation and involvement should be related to a decision that the authority intends to take;**

- It is recommended that consultation and involvement should be planned with the 'decision principle' in mind. The Decision Principle: All public consultation and involvement should relate to a decision that needs to be made, and that can be influenced by the result of that consultation. This principle ensures that:

**Consultation and involvement should be competently carried out;**

- Careful consideration needs to be given to how an exercise is designed, carried out and how intended consultees can be encouraged to participate. All techniques have advantages and disadvantages, so the important thing is to select the right one or combination for each individual exercise.

**Consultation and involvement should be inclusive;**

- There is a risk that consultation/involvement can centre around unrepresentative minorities when poorly planned or carried out. It can also often be easier to consult some groups rather than others. In reality it is our job to ensure that any exercises are fully inclusive. It is extremely important as different sections of the

community may have needs or views that are different from the majority, if these groups are not included then these needs may remain invisible.

### **Consultation and involvement should be used in practice.**

- It has often been the case that a consultation/involvement exercise that has been carried out has not been used effectively. The main way we can improve this is to take consultees views into account when making decisions and planning for this from the beginning. It is necessary to understand from the beginning how the exercise fits into the bigger picture. It is vital to provide feedback. Explaining what the overall findings of the exercise were and explaining how they have been taken into account does not have to be costly. Existing mechanisms should be used.

Guidelines to help officers carry out efficient and effective consultation and involvement activities will be designed on the basis of these principles. The toolkit 'A Guide to effective consultation and involvement for Gateshead Council'

will look more closely at good practice when carrying out consultation and involvement exercises and will offer help and advice to those looking to engage with the community.

As well as adopting these principles it is necessary to evaluate consultation and involvement activities. It is only by evaluating what is happening now that we can learn and improve for the future. A self-assessment toolkit will be designed as a result of this strategy.

### **Developing capacity and resources**

It is important that those responsible for carrying out consultation and facilitating involvement have the knowledge and skills to do so correctly. When there is a lack of skill mistakes can be made which will undermine the credibility of the results. Problems such as using the wrong method, phrasing questions in such a way that they are likely to influence the answers or using a sample that is too small to give reliable results are easy to make.

There is a need to develop the capacity of the authority to conduct effective consultation and involvement. Key staff must have

access to advice and support as well as having the necessary skills to conduct effective consultation and involvement.

The council will look to assessing skills across all Groups with a view to producing a training programme for improvement and development. Alongside this Groups can develop their own consultation and involvement in line with this strategy.

## Evaluating and reviewing the Strategy

This strategy is a working document, which will be reviewed every 2 years. In order to evaluate the impact of this strategy the following indicators will be used.

1	% of consultation exercises where results are fed back to participants
2	% of consultation exercises where results are reported to Chief Executive's
3	% of consultation exercises where results are reported to Members
4	% of consultation exercises which directly influence a Council decision
5	% of people who agree that the council 'consults residents about issues which affect them'. (BVPI Survey)
6	% of people who agree that the council 'listens to residents' views. (BVPI Survey)
7	Number of Consultation Network Officer meetings per year
8	Number of consultation exercises conducted by each group per year
9	Number of hits on the Intranet consultation pages (F)
10	Number of Officers receiving consultation training (F)
11	% of consultation exercises evaluated (F)
12	Number of hits on Viewpoint Website (F)

### Who to contact?

To make comments on this document or for more information about the Strategy or Action Plan please contact:

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For copies of any of the documents or policies mentioned in this strategy please visit the council website or ring Sarah O'Neill (details above).