Community Engagement Framework

Introduction

As a new council now is our opportunity to define how we will do things differently. One of these things is about how we engage with our communities and include them more in decisions that impact on them.

Our Council Plan outlines our vision for community engagement:

"We believe that our communities are best placed to determine their needs and aspirations. For us engagement isn't just listening, it is doing things together. We value their views and ideas and so we will work alongside residents to jointly create and design services that impact on their lives. We want our residents to be involved and feel understood at every opportunity.

We will work hard to remove as many barriers, differences, and inequalities as possible to ensure that everyone in our community can engage with us. We also recognise that when we do ask people to engage with us, it has to be meaningful.

We want to meet local needs and have services shaped by local people. To do this effectively we need to work closely with our communities. We want to be a council with a presence throughout Cumberland. Where services can be delivered locally that will be our default. We will use our assets to act as bases for a range of council and partner services."

……………………………………………………………………………………………

We need to create a whole council approach to community engagement – embedding a set of principles and procedures across the whole organisation to create a culture of working alongside all of our communities to encompass a range of voices and lived experiences, and to see this reflected in our decision making, leadership and planning.

Through improved community participation we can build trust and understanding, which can help better shape services and improve decision-making.

There is a wealth of research that shows how working more closely with communities to involve and enable them can benefit both councils and the communities they serve.

Getting a better understanding of what people need, what could be done together or what communities could do for themselves means councils can work better with

communities and be more efficient. Being more involved and empowered has been shown to improve outcomes for communities.

The area has faced some challenges in the past and the response by communities has demonstrated the power and capabilities they have – we need to work with communities to harness and build on those strengths.

Purpose of the Framework

The Community Engagement Framework sets out the principles and standards for how the council will work in this area to make sure we create a more consistent and inclusive approach across the organisation. It provides guidance to officers and Members to work together effectively - building clear, shared expectations that focus on what can be achieved. The Framework outlines what we aim to do to improve the way we engage, involve, and empower local people across the area.

The Framework encourages good practice, outlining ways of working across a range of activity and describes some of the ways we will ensure that we deliver our vision and principles.

This Framework details the approach to engaging with communities in order to:

- reach more people to help give everyone a voice, especially people we seldom hear from
- strengthen existing connections and establish new ones with communities and stakeholders to support ongoing conversations
- proactively seek out community and stakeholder views, concerns, and aspirations to gather a rich source of insight
- incorporate that insight into decision-making processes, confident that it is representative
- establish an ongoing partnership with the community to ensure that the community's priorities and values continue to shape services
- increase levels of trust and ownership among our communities.

The framework forms a basis for how we will work to get better at all forms of engaging, from the basics - such as being much clearer in the language we use and the communications we produce (e.g. emails and information on the website) through to new ways to work with communities on redesigning services and taking decisions (using methods such as co-design).

The Framework is supported by more detailed guidance and toolkit which include examples of good practice and techniques which can be used.

What do we mean by community?

Communities are usually defined as groups of people who share common characteristics. This could include individuals, groups, organisations, and businesses. Broadly we tend to talk about:

- Communities of Place: communities defined by a local geographical area.
- Communities of interest: shared interest or experience which might include tenants and resident groups, allotment holders, people involved in environmental projects, or people who come together to use services.
- Communities of identity: people who share a particular experience, interest or stake in an issue, or characteristics such as young people, older people, disabled people, ethnic groups, or lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender people or other common bonds such as student or business communities.

A sense of community can be a fluid thing, meaning members can feel part of several communities at the same time.

What do we mean by community engagement and empowerment?

The term community engagement can mean different things to different people and encompasses a range of approaches.

Community engagement is a process, not an event (although we do often talk about 'community engagement activity' being a defined series of activities or events). It is about ongoing interactions, something that happens every day, at every level as we carry out our day-to-day business. It can involve a range of activities and different levels of public involvement.

Put simply, community engagement is about relationships and dialogue, it's about involving people.

Community empowerment is about enabling confidence, skills, and knowledge to become involved, shape and influence the planning, development, and delivery of services. Empowered communities are able to challenge, able to participate, knowledgeable about processes and rights, well informed and more confident.

Consultation is the systematic collection of community views on a range of options, solutions, alternatives and potential decisions. Consultations tend to be quantitative using techniques like surveys. In some cases, the council will have a statutory duty and be bound by legislation to consult before making changes to policy or service provision. Consultations have a clear remit and start and end points. However, consultation still forms a distinct part of an ongoing period of engagement and is part of a formal decision-making process. More details and guidance about formal consultation requirements that the council must adhere to can be found in the toolkit.

What is good engagement?

Relationships are a driving force of the new approach, and we need to continually invest in these to be able to engage well, reach those we have yet to engage with, and collaborate with different communities and partners. This will encourage better decision making and problem-solving by hearing more ideas and voices as early as possible.

Many parts of the council have existing relationships with community and stakeholder groups which they nurture over time. This enables us to better

understand the impact of our services, find out about how changes might affect communities and develop solutions to local issues.

We need to share this good practice across other parts of the organisation to achieve a more consistent approach.

The expectation set out in this Framework is that the council will move towards more regular, deeper interactions with our communities in a way that allows them to become more involved in the design and delivery of services and recognises the power that communities have to transform themselves.

Effective engagement requires a variety of approaches – there is no one size fits all. We need to try out new ways of engaging people, testing different methods to see what works. Communities, residents, and businesses all have different needs and prefer to engage using different methods and at different levels. Giving useful, accessible and timely information to communities is very important in this process.

This means early engagement, and ongoing conversations with communities. It means ensuring we are using accessible methods to allow communities to engage with us in a way that best suits them. It means using the council's Community Engagement toolkit to upskill staff and elected members across the council ensuring they have the tools required to engage with communities effectively. The council's Community Development Team can support engagement activity, including links into the Community Networks.

Our principles

- Inclusive
- Coordinated
- Collaborative
- Meaningful

Inclusive

………………………………………………………………………….……………….

Making sure we engage in diverse ways and in a variety of accessible spaces and formats. This makes it easier for people to take part, encouraging and enabling everyone to be involved. Thinking about seldom heard voices and those with lived experience and how we can engage with them.

What this means in practice………………

- Having conversations in the places and spaces where people already meet

- Understanding that 'one size does not fit all' – each community's unique strengths and resources need to be considered and approaches and techniques might need to be adapted to different/changing needs.
- Using clear, informative, jargon-free language and making sure that we don't create overly formal or complicated processes for people to navigate.
- Working with internal and external partners to identify community organisations and individuals to help us improve our reach.
- Developing ongoing relationships with different organisations that are already connected to the seldom heard so that we can call on them to foster participation.
- Identifying stakeholders and ensuring engagement meets their needs.
- Gathering information and intelligence from engagement activity to help us understand how effective it is.
- Monitoring who is and is not taking part so that we can adjust our engagement programme to ensure that all relevant points of view contribute to our decision making.
- Getting advice from the Community Development Team about existing networks and community links.
- Getting advice from the equality and diversity lead and others who may have specific knowledge about different sections of the community.

Example:

Community Panel priority engagement

Community Development officers spent 3 months engaging on draft priorities for the 8 Community Panels. The team engaged in various formats such as attending existing groups, workshops, and surveys.

Considerations which were made:

- Officers visited community organisations to engage with some less often heard voices
- A child friendly version of the survey was created in some areas where young people were a particular focus
- Printed copies of the surveys were available for those without internet access
- Engagement as run over a 3-month period to ensure time for people to have their say
- Different styles of engagement events were run across Cumberland, at various times of the day to meet the needs of the local community and ensure inclusivity.

Coordinated

……………………………………………………………………………..……………

Working across the organisation and with relevant agencies or community organisations to make sure that activity is coordinated, and that information and intelligence is shared effectively.

It is important that we plan engagement activity in ways that avoids duplication of effort both within and outside the organisation. That way we can make the best use of everyone's resources, avoiding duplication and over or under engagement in our communities.

What this means in practice………………

- Ensuring we co-ordinate our activity so people have time, opportunity and space to have a say.
- Making sure there are 'no surprises' – keeping communities and elected members well informed about what is going on.
- Talking to colleagues and partner organisations about upcoming issues/projects to identify any areas of potential joint engagement and make sure we avoid duplication.
- Developing a forward planning process to promote better coordination.
- Talking to the Community Development and Communications teams early on to get advice and guidance and check for duplication.
- Finding out about activity taking place through the Community Panels and Networks.
- Taking learning from previous engagement activity - sharing good practice and checking what has been done recently to avoid repetition.
- Sharing information and intelligence coming from engagement with communities or service users with the Performance and Intelligence team so that it can be built into community profiles.

Example:

Family Hub project in Aspatria

Aspatria Library has been extended to create a Family Hub which also houses the Childrens Centre. During the engagement it was key that the local elected member was kept up to date on the project so they could answer any questions locally on the changes to the services and the temporary library offer while the building was closed.

During public engagement, along with details of the project, the project team co-ordinated with internal and external partners such as the Library Service, SEND team, Adult Learning and the Childrens Centre provider who joined the events to speak to the public about services they provide and what people would like to see in the area.

Considerations which were made:

- The library will be closing, and a smaller library will run from an alternative location. Ensure library users are aware. Ensure the local member is aware.
- Are there any internal or external organisations who also want to engage this the residents of Aspatria? Is it appropriate to include these conversations at the engagement events?
- Reviewed previous engagement undertaken by the library service on what users would like and fed this into discussions.

Collaborative

……………………………………………………………………………….…………….

Providing flexible and innovative involvement opportunities for communities to help shape the development and delivery of quality services and relevant policies that reflect local needs. Developing more collaborative decision-making processes and sharing skills. Developing community capacity, confidence, skills, and knowledge so they can get involved, shape and influence the planning, development, and delivery of services.

Building relationships is central to delivering the council's ambitions for engagement. To do this we will need to work closely with communities and community organisations to create and nurture these relationships.

What this means in practice………………

- Developing ongoing relationships with key people and groups.
- Working with internal and external partners to identify community organisations and individuals to help us improve our reach.
- Supporting the community in organising/facilitating community-based action where appropriate.
- Supporting spaces where groups and organisations can meet and grow.
- Exploring co-design and co-production options in as many areas as possible - opening up more of our work to our communities, enabling them to design and produce policies and services with us.
- Community Development Officers taking a lead role in developing more asset-based approaches and providing support and training to other teams in this area.

Example:

Support during COVID lockdowns
Cumberland has experienced significant flooding and other emergencies over the years and through this local emergency response groups have formed. The Community Development Team have supported a number of these groups to

become established and have kept in touch over the years. These relationships became vital to the council during COVID as groups, along with support from officers where required, altered their response, and stepped up to support the local community.

Community Development Officers set up cluster groups and held regular tele-conferences to enable the flow of information in and out of the council. They also mapped where there were gaps in support and were able to use their knowledge of local organisations to co-ordinate conversations and set up new support groups.

Considerations which were made:

- How can the council work safely with community organisations?
- What communities have emergency response groups?
- Are the existing groups able to support during lockdown periods?
- Are there any geographical areas without a response group?
- Where there are gaps, which other organisations are we aware of? And can we work with these organisations to form a group?
- What support and advice do groups need to safely support their communities during the lockdown periods?
- How can the council create effective two-way flow of information with groups and the community?

Meaningful

……………………………………………………………………………………

Working openly, honestly and with integrity with communities. Ensuring our language is clear and information is easy to find. Making sure that engagement activity is timely, well planned, well designed, and proportionate so that it can feed into decision making processes. People engaging with us need to be able to see how their involvement has made a difference.

What this means in practice………………

Timely

- Engagement should take place at a formative stage in the process of developing policy, reviewing a service, or making plans for our places to enable quality conversations and real community involvement or influence.
- Developing engagement plans that set out the end-to-end engagement so that is clear about when people will be able to collaborate with the council, and influence decisions and when they will know how they have had an impact on the project.

- The length of any defined engagement period needs to allow sufficient time for people to find out about the opportunity to be involved, consider the issues, and take part.

Well planned and proportionate

This is about using the right tools and techniques at the right times. There should be an engagement plan and it should consider:

- Being clear on why we are engaging and what we are engaging on.
- Who will be affected and who has an interest in the project/issue.
- Consider when and where we need to engage to ensure we capture the target audience.
- What are the activities we need to do to encourage participation.
- Consider the size of the project and the scale of the impact. For complex issues/topics we might need to consider more sophisticated approaches such as Citizens Jurys.
- Consider any wider implications for the project, such as the complexity of the issue.

Transparent

People need to be kept informed about the impact of their contribution so that we can create a culture of involvement and build trust.

- Making sure that engagement plans include how we intend to keep people informed of the decisions we make.
- Making clear to those taking part how their involvement has had an impact on what is going to happen next, and where things cannot be changed.
- Making sure that information and insight from local communities is clearly reflected in the decisions we make.
- Providing feedback on the result of our engagement activities in simple, accessible, clear and concise ways such as a 'you said, we did' style.
- Explaining why we have not included suggestions and feedback from people in the final project.
- Providing updates where progress is delayed, keeping people connected to the process.
- Telling people where to find any future updates.

Informed

- Carrying out background research (both local and national) to inform any engagement planning e.g. socio-economic data, best practice.
- Using local intelligence e.g. what we know about local service use and service need, what local people and local organisations have told us already.
- Gaining an understanding of circumstances, inequalities, outcomes etc as they pertain to a given group.
- Finding out what tools and techniques have and haven't worked in the past.

Example:

Millom and Haverigg Flood Defense scheme

The Millom and Haverigg Flood Defense scheme required targeted engagement in the Millom area. Prior to the scheme being developed, local intelligence and intelligence from partner agencies was gathered to understand the flooding issue in Millom. Regular meetings were held with residents throughout the scheme to ensure they were kept up to date with what was planned progress along the way and what the outcome would be for the local area.

Considerations which were made:

- Who can provide local intelligence?
- What agencies are involved?
- Who has been directly affected by past flooding?
- Who has been indirectly affected by flooding?
- How can people stay in contact throughout the scheme?
- Formation of an engagement plan
- What information do people want to know?
- What information is confidential?

Role of Elected Members

Our elected members have an important role to play as community leaders within their local communities. Members can create a climate for better engagement between public sector, voluntary sector and community leaders, bringing local activity together and acting as a bridge between the Council and local communities. They know the enablers and community leaders locally and can help to ensure that these community enablers have the right help and support to be successful in their activities.

Our members can:

- Facilitate the flow of information and intelligence between local communities and the Council, both in identifying the issues and opportunities within their wards, and in providing the intelligence local communities need in order to get involved.
- Engage with and represent their communities with other organisations.
- Manage the expectations of communities.
- Act as a link between community groups and public services to build real grassroots partnerships to meet local identified need.

Role of Council Officers

Our officers have a huge role to play in improving the way we involve and interact with our communities. They need to be able to challenge historical patterns and conventions and establish new standards and approaches.

This means being able to identify when and how to involve people, planning involvement effectively and having access to the right tools, skills, knowledge, and information.

Our officers will need to:

- Develop ongoing relationships with colleagues, partners, communities, and service users.
- Consider when engagement will be required when shaping services.
- Follow the principles set out in this Framework and the toolkit.
- Use toolkits, guidance and information provided.
- Attend training to improve skills in community engagement and involvement.
- Make time to consider how to engage with communities and service users early in any process and avoid going straight to consultation on firmed up proposals.

Officers should use the toolkit for initial support and guidance. If further advice is required, the Community Development Team can assist.

Role of the Community Development Team

The council has a designated Community Development Team that uses engagement as one of its tools. To provide a consistent standard across the council the Community Development Team will:

- Provide advice and guidance to colleagues across the council.
- Encourage teams to develop appropriate engagement plans, considering relevant stakeholders who will be impacted by any proposal.
- Publish an engagement toolkit and offer training to Council teams, as well as direct support where engagement is likely to be more complex ensuring that those facilitating engagement activity have the relevant knowledge, skills, and training to do the work.

Summary

The council wants to improve how we engage with, listen to, involve, and empower communities, working together to create, influence, design and deliver services, and supporting strong, active, and inclusive communities.

The Framework provides an overview of the council's aspirations to create a more consistent and inclusive approach to community engagement. It aims to build a common understanding of how we can improve engagement by setting principles

and standards - building clear, shared expectations that focus on what can be achieved and outlining a new approach and culture across the organisation.

The Engagement Toolkit provides information on best practice and a variety of ways of working to support this new approach.