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## What do we mean by Community Engagement?

Community engagement is not an additional service that can be costed and delivered. Neither is it a department or single plan.

For us as The Council, it is a commitment to involving communities across Stockton-on-Tees Borough in everything we do. It is about creating a relationship between Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and the communities in which we work in partnership to:

- Plan and deliver our services;
- Identify and share in the successes;
- Have confidence that we are tackling local issues, based on priorities set locally;
- Make sure that we are identifying and setting in place agreed plans which go to the heart of individual neighbourhoods and communities and will improve the quality of people's lives.

The success of our approach will also rely on the skill levels and commitment of our staff and elected members and so our plans will reflect our intention to use appropriate support and guidance, including the values outlined in the National Standards of Community Development.

The strategy will be set against a set of principles which should be respected and reflect the work and contact we have with the communities we serve. We will work to ensure that the strategy and the corporate message accompanying it underpins all aspects of service delivery and is reflected in our action plans.

## Why have a Community Engagement Strategy?

The fact that we are a borough of contrasts is well documented. We have areas with high unemployment, economic and social problems sharing the borough with areas of relative affluence and stability. The Council must have the ability to relate to and understand all communities; to identify and respond to their problems and their values; to strengthen them and to enable them to drive the future from within the community using the support; guidance and expertise Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and its partners offer.

Above all we, as The Council, must aim to make this borough a place where people are safe, healthy and happy. We want residents to wake up each morning and feel comfortable in the knowledge that they are living in a borough in which The Council is trying its very best working in partnership with other public services, the private & voluntary sectors and the community to improve their lives in every possible way. We want to encourage all members of the community to take an active role in improving their own lives and those of their loved ones and neighbours and it is the role and responsibility of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council to help and support those communities who are willing to take up the challenge of working with The Council on planning; developing and delivering a better future.

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is rightly proud of its achievements. As our resident population has grown so has our ability to deliver first class services and in recent years our successful approach has been recognised with a number of our services awarded Beacon Status (now the Local Innovation Award), and the Council as a whole achieving the Government standard in Customer Service Excellence.

Our positive engagement with communities has continuously been recognised and acknowledged through external and independent scrutiny and inspection.

Key to our success is our ability to understand and respond to the needs and wishes of our residents and to do that The Council needs passionate committed members and staff who are respected and valued for their commitment and dedication to improving the lives of our communities.



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We recognise that communities are not static, they change, grow and develop and as one of the key public service organisations working across Stockton-on-Tees Borough we are continuously looking at how we work with, help and support our local communities. 'Communities' is a term that does not always best reflect the complexity of how our local communities are made up. For example there are communities based around where people live, where they work, where they socialise and also communities who share similar interests, circumstances or backgrounds. We want to be in a position where everyone who chooses to can clearly see the ways in which they can engage with Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council.

We aim to use this Community Engagement Strategy as the vehicle to set out how we intend to achieve our ambitions. It is written in a way that tries to ensure that whoever picks it up finds it interesting and easy to read and, having read it, can clearly understand and support the direction we have taken.



The strategy takes account of recognised national and local guidance including:

- The government's approach to devolving central government power and control to local people in local neighbourhoods, encouraging and empowering them to influence and control public services, and encourage volunteering, social enterprises and voluntary and community groups to do more to make our society stronger;
- The Ideal Empowering Authority - published by the Improvement & Development Agency (I & DEA) which identifies the development framework for an ideal relationship between local authorities and communities, especially in these times of financial austerity;
- The Community Development National Occupational Standards which outline the skills, values and processes required for effective community development. Applying the standards 'will ensure that community development impacts on poverty, racism and social exclusion in a way that empowers, enables and encourages participation';
- The COMPACT arrangements of Renaissance- our Local Strategic Partnership.

We want our elected members, officers, residents and partners to recognise this as a personalised strategy; one that could not be mistaken for anywhere else other than the Borough of Stockton-on-Tees. It sets out its purpose and what 'engagement' actually means in terms of council services and is based on a set of principles which will act as a guide and reflect on what has been achieved to date. The strategy concludes with an agreed set of objectives against which our action plans will be developed. These plans will be designed and agreed in consultation with partners including organisations representing the Voluntary and Community sector.

## AIM

An internal review of Communication, Consultation and Engagement suggested that the council's culture of engagement and partnership working should be further strengthened to ensure that there is a consistent level of support and opportunity available in relation to engaging effectively with people, and that the pathways to engagement are clearer.

In simpler language this means we, as a council, must work harder to deliver better services which strengthen the confidence and the ability of our communities to not only influence but take greater control of what we actually do for them. This, in turn, will increase their confidence and trust in us as a council and improve their own lives and those of future generations.

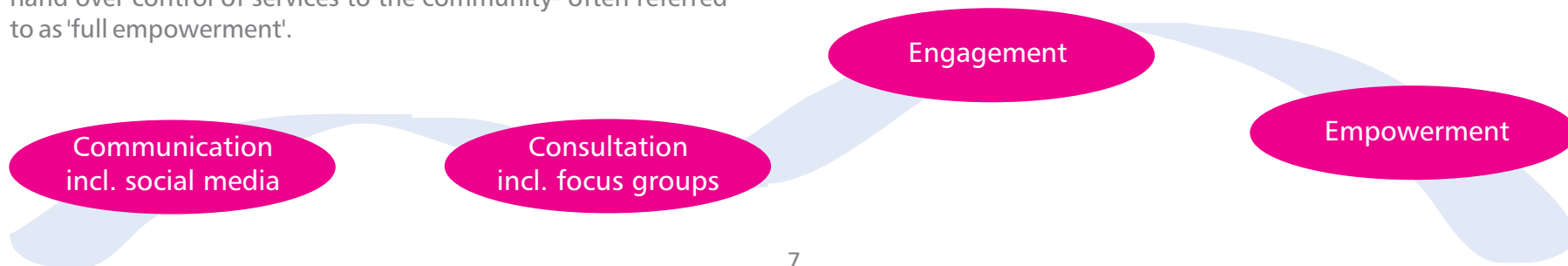
It also means we should have better knowledge of the factors and obstacles that can adversely affect the relationship between The Council and residents, taking appropriate measures to ensure 'hard to reach groups' do not feel excluded.

The 'engagement path' is not an easy one to take for public services. At one end we have basic communications between the service and the public- i.e. informing local people what we do and why and how we do it. However, at the other end there is the more challenging and difficult task of being prepared to hand over control of services to the community- often referred to as 'full empowerment'.

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is on its journey along the path and will continue to determine to what extent and at what pace it wishes to attain the agreed position for the borough.

However, progress has already been made. We currently already have a strong and effective system of communication in place and we consult widely on all potential key decisions which will affect the future of our borough. The Council also has some experience of local community empowerment through its approach to neighbourhood working. But taking nothing for granted we intend to use this strategy to strengthen our relationship and understanding of communities in all areas of the borough and in turn to make our strong and vibrant communities even stronger.

This Community Engagement Strategy reflects and supports the principles and approach we have taken in two other key strategies which are very closely linked. Our Consultation Strategy provides information on our approach to consultation and provides details of how our residents, service users and partners will be given the opportunity to be involved in how we plan, prioritise and deliver our services. The Council's Communication Strategy sets out our approach to communicating with local people. Collectively these reflect the 'Passionate About' theme which identifies one of the core values of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council.



## OUR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

For this strategy to receive the confidence of our residents, Council members and staff and our partners it must be based on a clear set of guiding principles. We will use these principles in every aspect of our relationship with partners and the community.

It is Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's intention to share these with our key partners through the borough's Local Strategic Partnership known locally as 'Renaissance' and encourage our partners to join us, because applying them in partnership will serve to strengthen and improve services to, and relationships with, our communities.



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Our principles are:

### Co-ordination and Partnership

- *We will avoid duplication of effort* and what has been described as 'consultation fatigue' by co-ordinating our community engagement activities with our partners as far as possible.
- *We will share best practice with our partners* and be honest and robust enough to share with our partners details of lessons learned when our community engagement activities do not deliver the outcome we seek.
- *Will we ensure that the direction and nature of our engagement and consultation activities influence our services and plans,* through clear and active leadership.

### Inclusivity

- *We will use all of our skill and experience to do our best to ensure that there is equal access to services* and that the services we offer meet the needs of all communities.
- *We will reach out to all communities* and identify and try to engage with those who do not feel that they have a voice, working closely with our voluntary and community sector organisations to achieve this.
- *We will include work to support residents and hard to reach groups* so that they are able to actively contribute to engagement activities.

### Clarity of Purpose

- *We will ensure that our everyday activities stand firmly on all of these principles.*
- *We will only implement specific community engagement and consultation processes when there is a real opportunity for people to influence and change what we do and how we do it.* This is in recognition that in some of the statutory service areas the levels of regulation and prescription provide little opportunity for influence or change. Where this is the case we will be clear in how we communicate this.
- *We will be open and honest* about the aims of our community engagement activity and what it hopes to achieve. Where realistic options to change or introduce new ways of service delivery become apparent either before or during our engagement activity we will share our thoughts with the community as soon as we can.
- When we do consult *we will not pre-judge our intended actions.* To do so will undermine the trust between us and the community. We will not deliberately raise community expectations that have little or no chance of success.
- Where we are consulting on a range of options *we will be clear about why the options have been selected.*

## Integrity and confidentiality

- *All community participation in our engagement activities will be valued and nurtured by The Council* but we recognise that they are voluntary acts. Participants must be totally confident that they can withdraw at any time without feeling they have let their community colleagues or the council down.
- *We will honestly interpret any information we receive* and ensure that people's rights and dignity are upheld at all times.
- *We will respect the rights of our residents and others* participating in community engagement activity *to decide how much they want to reveal about themselves* and ensure that we avoid undertaking any activity or seek information that could knowingly cause offence, distress or embarrassment.
- *We will ensure that in respecting confidentiality we are taking into account relevant legislation (Freedom of Information Act and Human Rights legislation).*



## Communication

- *We will make effective use of our Communication Strategy* so it is clear to people and organisations how they can engage with The Council.
- *We will ensure that measures are taken to not only encourage residents to respond to council proposals with their views but to ensure that doing so is easy and clear.*
- *We will reduce the number of occasions when residents feel under pressure to respond with undue haste to surveys and other consultation activities.* Our consultation strategy includes recommended timescales for allowing people sufficient time to respond. The guidance will be shared with our partner organisations as part of a co-ordinated approach to community engagement.
- *We will ensure that our written communication is checked to ensure it is easy to read and understand* - recognising that the use of acronyms and jargon can make it difficult for community members and partners to understand what message is actually being communicated or what information is being sought. A Glossary of Terms will be used where it is felt appropriate.
- *We will have clear and strong feedback processes in place* which will inform residents what views were expressed during the engagement activity or consultation and give reasons if we are unable to deliver on their expectations.
- *We will explain what has been done as a result of consultation and engagement activity.*

## WHAT HAVE WE ACHIEVED SO FAR?

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has consistently recognised the role of its residents in helping to identify need and shape the way services are delivered. There are lots of examples of where people have been actively involved in shaping services. A few are highlighted below:-

### Neighbourhood Working

Our experience of implementing a local Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder in the Parkfield/Mill Lane neighbourhood in Stockton in 2002 (and the work of St Ann's Development Board, which followed in 2006), serve to illustrate that robust and influential community participation can produce significant and long term improvements for residents.

Both have been proven to be landmarks in the borough's experience of service delivery by the local authority and other publicly accountable organisations and produced impressive cross-cutting work and wide ranging interventions.

### Thornaby Central Library & Customer Services

Community engagement played a large role in the development of Thornaby Library and Customer Services centre. Through a range of events, consultations with children and young people, over 50's groups and the Disability Advisory Group.

People had the opportunity to look at and comment on proposed designs for the new facility, resulting in alterations to the layout and design, influencing the choice of furniture and opening times. They could also test out the new self-service technology that was to be used which helped inform how we introduced it.



## Community Safety

Our Community Safety Plan is based on what local people tell us through the Community Safety Survey what their priorities are. The proposals for reshaping The Councils Concierge Security Service were changed following consultation with local residents.

## Housing

The Housing Futures Customer Group, established from a group of council tenants, considered options on future council housing, landlord selection and the production of the 'offer document'. The outcome was an agreement to transfer to a new style 'Tristar Homes Ltd' following one of the highest positive tenants ballots in the country.

Following a grant to develop the gypsy and traveller site, staff actively engaged with the local travellers in relation to upgrading the utility blocks. The local traveller community discussed plans and progress with technical staff and trades people resulting in the development of positive relationships with people working on site and the completion of a successful refurbishment programme.

The local residents group in Mandale (MARS) worked with The Council to develop the £100m Mandale Redevelopment Programme. The residents influenced and shaped everything from the local lettings policy, the design of their new neighbourhood to the selection of the house builder. The involvement of residents has continued beyond the completion of the building work.





### Services for Children and Young People

Over 2,500 young people were engaged in designing aspects of the sexual health service. As a result the services are provided from venues easily accessible to, and welcoming for, young people and at times that meet their identified needs.

The Parkfield Hall supported housing service for young people leaving care or homeless was designed and developed by young people working alongside local residents and service providers. Local residents and young people continue to be involved in the running of the service through representation on the steering group.



### Stockton Heritage in Partnership (SHiP)

A range of activities took place to identify a number of volunteers with a keen interest in the heritage of Stockton Town Centre. 10 of those volunteers are part of the SHiP Forum which acts as an independent check and review in relation to decisions on the use of the Heritage Grant and on how the programme is shaped.

## Other strategies

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has developed a number of key strategies and plans which have served to determine and improve our relationship with residents. These include a Consultation Strategy; a Communications Strategy and a Community Cohesion Strategy which includes recently published Marketing Plan.

## Consultation Strategy

Our consultation strategy sets out:

- What we mean by consultation;
- The principles and standards that we will apply to our consultation activity;
- The different ways in which the Council currently consults with local communities;
- Our commitment to continue to develop the way we consult;
- Our promise to work as closely as possible with other public sector organisations, to minimise the risk of 'consultation overload' on our communities.



## Communications Strategy

Our Communications Strategy sets out:

- Our communications methods and the audiences we want to reach;
- Our key messages and campaigns;
- How we work with partners to deliver public messages together;
- The use of new media and technology to communicate better;
- How we evaluate the effectiveness of our communications activity.



## Community Cohesion Strategy

Our Community Cohesion Strategy outlines how we will:

- Work with our partners across Stockton Renaissance to tackle inequality and discrimination;
- Promote cohesion and integration to make sure the borough remains a place where residents feel people from different backgrounds get on well together;
- Ensure people from different communities and backgrounds have the same life chances and opportunities to fulfil their potential;
- Support a sense of community, ownership, belonging and pride in the area ;
- Ensure services meet the needs of different communities;
- Celebrate diversity in an inclusive way and engaging and involving communities in positive interactions;
- Be clear that racism, hatred, and any form of discrimination and prejudice will not be tolerated;
- Identify ways to monitor and resolve conflicts and tensions between and within our communities;
- Break down myths and misconceptions of different communities.



## Our relationship with the Voluntary & Community Sector

Our voluntary and community sector across the borough has a very strong and experienced base. Locally based social enterprises are complemented by other groups and organisations with strong and active borough wide links to resident groups including those of special interest and what is often described as 'hard to reach'.

CATALYST acts as the strategic organisation for supporting and developing the voluntary and community sector, while Stockton Community Groups and Residents Association (SCRGA) is an example of one of the delivery vehicles. Their links through representative bodies such as the Community Empowerment Network (CEN) have proven the value of voluntary and community sector organisations in forging and strengthening the links between public services and the community.

In addition we have recently strengthened our relationship with the Tees Valley Rural Community Council as we seek to improve community engagement activities with our rural communities.

The Council actively participated in the development of the Third Sector Strategy.



*picture to be added*



## CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITIES TO ENGAGE WITH COUNCIL

People who live and work in the borough can engage with both the Council and its partners in a variety of different ways including;

- At a Borough level this can be through Stockton Renaissance, a strategic partnership that includes elected community representatives, councillors, business people, police, health, Fire and Rescue Service, Jobcentre Plus;
- At a local level through the four area partnerships in the Borough who champion better services for their neighbourhoods and through the thematic partnerships;
- Residents groups, parish councils and community partnerships can join a borough wide Community Empowerment Network and elect representatives onto the area partnerships;
- Local people can contact their ward councillor or attend ward surgeries in local community centres;
- People with disabilities, young people, the over 50s, faith, black minority ethnic community can join groups that advise the council on our services and challenge us on how well we do;
- Many of our local community centres have active Management Committees that it may be possible to join and/or support;
- Through Viewpoint – the Council's consultation panels for adults and for children and young people;
- Using our Twitter and our Facebook sites;
- Through the range of friends and user groups;
- Becoming a School Governor;
- Becoming a local Councillor;
- By responding to specific consultations.



Details of all of these can be found at [www.stockton.gov.uk/mycommunity](http://www.stockton.gov.uk/mycommunity) or by contacting The Partnerships and Engagement Team on **01642 393939**

## WHAT MORE DO WE WANT TO ACHIEVE?

### To strengthen, develop and build capacity into our local communities

- Our plans will be prepared to work and support local people using the lessons learned from our engagement experiences so far ensuring we continue to involve people in decision making, so that local people have the confidence and ability to influence what happens in their communities, whether those communities are based on geography or special interest;
- Our capacity building measures will build on the established 'Third Sector Strategy' and framework across the borough and use appropriate commissioning provision and partnership support to improve the quality and level of community involvement. The Third Sector Strategy includes a framework for voluntary and community sector organisations to access a range of capacity building services including; Human Resources advice and support; Business Planning; Legal Advice, Employment Advice and Support and training and skills development. They will also build on the volunteering opportunities presented through Viva Volunteers and The Councils emerging volunteering policy;
- We will strengthen communication between Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and young people by creating a more joined up service to improve community engagement and cohesion, considering the value of including young people representation, using the advice and support of key advisers and building on the current Youth Assembly arrangements.

### Be responsive to challenge & ensure feedback to the community

- The Council values informed and constructive challenge and views on proposals relating to service delivery. We will ensure that internal and external challenge is encouraged;
- We recognise the importance of feedback to the community in response to all forms of communication including consultation surveys and requests for information. We will ensure that our action plans include feedback elements to avoid resident frustration.

### To improve the community development and engagement knowledge and skills of our staff

- Our competency framework and appraisal system for key officers will include the use of the Community Development National Occupational Standards to improve the community engagement knowledge and skills of staff.

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## To maximise the skills and experience of the voluntary and community sector

- We recognise the strength and value of the voluntary and community sector and the strategies and plans they have implemented locally and we have reflected their work into the principles of this Community Engagement Strategy. These include supporting communities and special interest groups enabling them to forge and galvanise strong social relationships.
- We also recognise that the planning cycle of the voluntary and community sector organisations requires The Council to be clear and transparent about its commissioning arrangements and intentions in line with the Council's Medium Term Financial Planning cycle, based on the Community Engagement Action Plans which are formulated from this strategy.
- We will also seek to engage with Stockton Renaissance partners and encourage them to share our approach to the sustainability and development of the voluntary and community sector and engagement with local communities.
- We will work with our other public sector partners and the voluntary and community sector to co-ordinate our consultation and engagement activity as far as possible and we will be clear about who to contact for advice, guidance and information relating to consultation, communication and engagement.

## To use local community assets to best effect

- The Council has extensive experience in managing community buildings across the borough and supporting residents and special interest groups to manage the assets on behalf of the community. Our current stock is varied in physical quality and geographical spread.
- To support our Community Engagement Strategy we will draw upon the outcomes of the recently commissioned review of the Council's assets which include community buildings. The review will include borough-wide voluntary and community sector consultation to identify the most appropriate locations; type and quality of provision and will be supported by a set of asset transfer principles.
- The information obtained as a result of the review will assist The Council to consider whether current assets are appropriate and to what extent ownership of assets can be transferred from The Council to the community and how best to offer support and guidance post transfer.
- Our review of assets will also take into account the knowledge that physical improvement to our neighbourhoods can also have a significant impact on the social and cultural landscape.

## FINDING OUT HOW TO GET INVOLVED

The Council has set up part of its web site to help local communities and organisations identify the routes to engaging with The Council. This can be found at [www.stockton.gov.uk/mycommunity](http://www.stockton.gov.uk/mycommunity)

Catalyst and Stockton Community Groups and Residents Association can also provide information and advice on how to get involved. Their contact details are included on the 'My Community' part of Stockton Borough Council's website.



[www.stockton.gov.uk/mycommunity](http://www.stockton.gov.uk/mycommunity)

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