

**Communication Viewpoint Focus Groups
Summary
8 and 9 July 2009**

Background

In order to gain the views of the general public to inform the scrutiny review of Communications, Consultation and Engagement, it was decided to hold Viewpoint focus groups.

Three adult discussion groups were held (34 viewpoint members attended in total) and one youth panel was held (7 youth viewpoint members attended).

The sessions were facilitated by Jenny Elstob and Judith Trainer and also attended by Michelle Jones.

A summary of the comments made at both sessions follows:

What do you expect the Council to be telling you about?

Comments were varied and included:

- Services
- Performance
- Road works
- Public transport and changes
- Events
- Recycling
- Council Tax
- Councillor Expenses
- Tristar issues
- Future Plans for the Borough
- Parish Council role
- How residents can get involved

The youth session were interested in:

- Events
- Youth Clubs and activities
- Public Transport

Do Panel members have examples of where Council communications have been good? Why was it good?

Recurring examples of good communication included:

- Stockton News
- Care for Your Area
- Recycling Information
- SIRF
- A-Z of Services
- Good response from main switchboard number

Youth viewpoint highlighted events, Stockton News and libraries

Are there instances where communications have not been good? How could they have been improved?

Several panel members had experienced poor communications/ lack of response in respect of individual issues.

Panel members expressed dissatisfaction with:

- The Council's website and response to emails
- Poor communication about changes to public transport
- Confusion about role of different organisations
- Need more information about the role and work of Councillors
- CD versions of Stockton News are abridged
- With the exception of SIRF, not all events are publicised well
- Some dissatisfaction with responses from Councillors

Youth viewpoint felt that there was not enough information about activities for young people and that communication from Tristar was poor.

Do you feel that the Council is in touch with people in the Borough?

The adults groups generally felt that the Council was in touch or was trying to be in touch although there was several comments that the Council was not in touch with individual residents.

Youth viewpoint strongly felt that the Council was not in touch with young people.

Do you feel that the Council gives good value for money?

There was a mixed response to this question but in general members felt that Council had a good reputation and was better than in other areas. Good cleanliness of the area was highlighted.

The youth session felt that money was not being spent on the right things and that more money should be spent on young people.

How do you feel the Council is viewed by local people; what does it stand for?

Again there was a mixed response to this question. Although there were some positive comments and reference to improvements in recent years, most members felt that this depended on where you lived in the Borough.

The youth group felt that the Council was not approachable for young people.

Do you think that a strong identity and positive image is important for the Council?

All groups felt that this was very important. One group commented that this had to be earned.

Do you feel that you have enough information about decisions that are being made by the Council?

In general the groups felt that more information could be given – specifically area/ward based information and more information on the role of Councillors and how Council money is spent. Several members commented that although minutes were on the Council website, a more user friendly format and proactive approach to informing residents about decisions being made would be welcomed.

The youth session commented that they only knew about Youth Viewpoint.

Do you feel that you can personally influence decisions affecting your local area?

In general the groups felt that could not personally influence decisions being made. Participants felt that there was insufficient information or that residents heard about things after decisions had been made or that consultation was not genuine.

The youth sessions again commented that they only knew about Youth Viewpoint.

To what extent do you want to be involved in decisions being made?

Participants wanted to be involved where there were big issues under discussion or where issues affected them as an individual or in their local area.

How do you want the Council to keep you informed?

Panel members advocated a range of methods:

- Libraries
- Email
- Website
- Stockton News
- A-Z Guide
- Local Parish Magazines
- Ward Newsletters
- Communications through schools
- Local Newspapers
- Leaflets
- Information with Council Tax Bills

One group felt that leaflets to the door was a waste of money and paper and often got “junked”.

The youth session wanted to be kept informed in the main through events/festivals or through displays in town centres. Only some wanted to be contacted by email or text.

Views on the Website

Most panel members had used the Council website although comments were mixed. Some areas of the website had been found useful but some members found it difficult to navigate (in particular the search engine). There were some concerns about information not being updated regularly.

Several panel members highlighted some problems for people with visual impairment when using the website.

The youth session suggested an area of the website for young people.

Views on Stockton News

Comments in relation to Stockton News were generally positive. Most panel members read Stockton News, found it enjoyable and informative and kept it until the next edition. Panel Members highlighted the following good things about Stockton News:

- Well balanced
- Eye catching
- Good format
- Good spread of issues across the Borough
- What's On
- Day in the Life
- Breakdown of Council expenditure

Ways that Stockton News could be improved included:

- Too much positive spin
- CD version for blind people does not contain all information
- Needs more articles on ward issues
- More information on the work of individual Councillors – perhaps a day in the life
- Councillor expenses should be published in it
- Should contain alternative views – perhaps a letters page
- Need more info on library opening times and NHS opening times

Youth viewpoint members had seen and read the magazine but felt the format was not so good for younger people as there was too much text. They suggested that there should be a section of the magazine for under 16s and 16 – 25s and that there should be more about future events than past events.