



Community Engagement Framework

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Introduction

As a new council, we have an opportunity to do things differently. This framework is a fresh look at how we engage with our communities and include them more in decisions that affect them.

We want the framework to enable deeper, more regular, interactions with our communities. This will allow them to become more involved in the design and delivery of services, and recognise the power they have to transform themselves.

Our Council Plan outlines our vision for community engagement:

“We believe 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 residents’ views and ideas, and will work alongside them to design and create the services. 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 everyone can engage with us. We recognise that engagement must be meaningful.”

Our ultimate aim is to improve the health and wellbeing of our communities. We can’t achieve this alone. We must engage with our communities and build a culture of participation across the council.

Through improved community participation, we can build trust and understanding, which improves our decision making and helps us deliver better services.

We can work more effectively with communities if we understand what people need, what can be done together, and what communities can do for themselves.

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

When our communities face challenges, they respond with power and capability. We need to work with communities to harness and build on that strength.

This framework embeds a consistent approach to community engagement across our organisation. Its principles and procedures encourage working alongside communities, capturing a range of voices and experiences. This approach will be reflected in our decision making, leadership, planning and delivery.

Purpose of the framework

The Community Engagement Framework sets out the principles and standards for how we will create a more consistent and inclusive approach to engagement.

It provides guidance to officers and Members - building clear, shared expectations that focus on what can be achieved.

The framework outlines what we will do to improve how we engage, involve, and empower local people.

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

The approach aims to:

- Reach more people, giving everyone a voice - especially those we seldom hear from;
- Strengthen existing connections with communities and stakeholders, and establish new ones, to support ongoing conversations;
- Seek community and stakeholder views and aspirations to create 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 its priorities and values continue to shape services;
- Increase levels of trust and ownership among our communities.

The framework will help us make every contact count.

It looks at a range of issues - from basics like the language we use, to ambitious new ways of working with communities on redesigning services and taking decisions (using methods such as co-production).

The framework is supported by a toolkit of detailed guidance, examples of good practice and techniques that 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:** those defined by a geographical area.
- **Communities of interest:** those with a shared interest or experience. This could include tenants/residents groups, allotment holders, people involved in environmental projects, or people who come together to use services.
- **Communities of identity:** people who share characteristics, or who share experience of, or a stake in, a particular issue. Examples might be young people, older people, disabled people, ethnic groups, or LGBTQIA+ people.

It could also mean people with other common bonds, for example students or business people.

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

What do we mean by 'community engagement' and 'community empowerment'?

Community engagement can mean different things to different people. It is a process, not necessarily a defined series of activities or events. It includes ongoing interactions - things that happen 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 is about involving people.

Community empowerment is allowing, enabling and encouraging people to use their confidence, skills, and knowledge to influence the planning and delivery of services. Empowered communities can actively challenge and participate. They are confident, well informed and knowledgeable about processes and rights.

What do we mean by 'consultation'?

Consultation is the systematic collection of views on a range of options, solutions, or potential decisions. Consultations tend to be quantitative, using techniques like surveys. In some cases, the council has a legal duty to consult before making changes to policies or services.

Consultations have a clear remit and 'start and end' points. However, they can still form part of an ongoing period of engagement and a formal decision-making process.

More guidance around any formal requirements we must adhere to can be found in the toolkit.

What is good engagement?

Relationships are a key element of our new approach. We must continually invest in these to engage well, reach new people, and collaborate with different communities and partners. This investment will encourage better decision making and problem-solving by hearing more ideas, and different voices, as early as possible.

Many parts of the council have existing relationships with stakeholders, which have often been nurtured over time. These good relationships help us see how changes might affect communities, then develop solutions to local issues.

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

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 may prefer to engage in different ways 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. It means using accessible methods, allowing communities to engage in a way that best suits them.

It means equipping staff and elected members with the right tools to engage effectively. Our Community Development Team can support engagement activity, including linking to the Community Networks. Find out more about our Community Panels and Networks on [our website](#).

Our principles

Engagement should be:

- Inclusive.
- Co-ordinated.
- Collaborative.
- Meaningful.

Inclusive

This means engaging in different 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. We should think about how to reach seldom heard voices and those with lived experience

What this means in practice:

- Having conversations in places 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 might need to be adapted.
- Using clear, informative, jargon-free language and avoiding overly formal or complicated processes.
- Working with internal and external partners to identify community organisations and individuals to help us improve our reach.
- Developing ongoing relationships with organisations already connected to the 'seldom heard,' and calling on them to foster participation.
- Clearly identifying all stakeholders and ensuring engagement meets their needs. For example, business people may have less time to participate, so might need an event outside business hours, or a shorter technique.
- Gathering information from engagement activity to help us understand how effective it is.
- Monitoring who takes part, and who does not, and adjusting our approach to make sure we hear all relevant views.
- 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.

Case study:

Community Panel priority engagement

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

Considerations:

- Officers visited community organisations including disability groups, youth clubs and pensioners' groups, to engage with seldom 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.
- The survey was available online in a range of languages.
- Engagement ran for three months to allow time for people to have their say
- Different styles of engagement events such as drop-ins, presentations and 'market stalls' were run across Cumberland. These ran at various times of the day to meet the needs of the community and ensure inclusivity.



Co-ordinated

This means working across the organisation, and with relevant partners, to make sure activity is co-ordinated, and intelligence is shared effectively.

It is important to avoid duplication of effort, inside and outside the council. This makes best use of resources and avoids under or over-engagement.

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.
- 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 Insight team so it can be built into community profiles.

Case study

Family Hub project in Aspatria

Aspatria Library was extended to create a Family Hub which also houses a Children's Centre. During the engagement, it was important to keep the ward councillor updated so they could answer residents' questions about service changes, including a temporary library service while the building was closed.

The project team co-ordinated with partners such as the Library Service, SEND team, Adult Learning and the Children's Centre provider, who joined the events to speak to the public about their services and what people would like to see in the area.

Considerations:

- The library would be closing, and a smaller library was to run from an alternative location. It was important to ensure library users, and the local member, were aware.
- Were there any internal or external organisations who also wanted to engage the residents of Aspatria? Was it appropriate to include these conversations at our events?
- Previous library service engagement, about what users would like, was reviewed and fed into discussions.

Collaborative

We aim to develop more collaborative decision-making processes through co-production approaches. This means developing capacity, confidence, skills, and knowledge so communities can shape the planning, development, and delivery of quality services and policies that reflect local need.

We should provide flexible and innovative opportunities for communities to do this.

Building relationships is central to delivering our ambitions for engagement. 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 who could 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 - 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.

Case study

Support during COVID lockdowns

Cumberland had experienced significant flooding and other emergencies in the past and, through the local emergency response to those, groups had formed.

The Community Development Team helped some of these become established and was still in touch with them.

These relationships were vital to the council during COVID. Groups, with our support where needed, tailored their responses and stepped up to support the community.

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

Considerations:

- How could the council ensure safe working with community organisations?
- Which communities had emergency response groups?
- Were existing groups able to support during lockdowns?

- Were there any areas without a response group?
- Where were the gaps? Were there existing organisations that could be supported to form an appropriate group?
- What support and advice did groups need to safely support their communities during lockdowns?
- How could the council create an effective two-way flow of information with groups and the community?

Meaningful

We must work with communities in an open and honest way, and with integrity.

We must ensure our language is clear and information is easy to find.

Our engagement activity must be **timely, well planned, proportionate, transparent and informed**, so that it can feed into decision making processes. People engaging with us need to see how their involvement has made a difference.

What this means in practice:

Timely

- Engagement should happen early in the process of developing policies, reviewing services, or making plans. This enables quality conversations and real community involvement and influence.
- Our engagement plans should make clear when people will be able to collaborate with us or influence decisions, and when they will know their impact on the project.
- Any defined engagement period must allow sufficient time for people to find out about the opportunity, 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.
- The use of digital and non-digital tools and techniques.
- When and where we need to engage to ensure we capture the target audience.
- Which activities are needed in order to encourage participation.
- The size of the project and the scale of the impact. For complex issues/topics we might consider more sophisticated approaches such as Citizens Juries.
- Any wider implications for the project, such as the complexity of the issue.

Transparent

We must tell people about the impact of their contribution - creating a culture of involvement and building trust. This includes:

- Making sure engagement plans say how we will inform people about our decisions.
- Telling people what impact they have had, and where things cannot be changed.
- Making sure information and insight from local communities is clearly reflected in our decisions.
- Providing feedback on the result of our engagement in simple and accessible ways - for example, 'you said, we did.'
- Where we have not taken suggestions on board, explaining why.
- Providing updates when progress is delayed, to keep people connected to the process.
- Telling people where to find future updates.

Informed

This means:

- Carrying out local and national background research (for example socio-economic data, or best practice) to inform our engagement.
- Using local intelligence - for example, what we know about local service use and need, or what local people and organisations have told us already.
- Understanding circumstances, inequalities, outcomes etc, and how they affect a given group.
- Finding out what tools and techniques have and haven't worked in the past.

Case study

Millom and Haverigg Flood Defence scheme

The Millom and Haverigg Flood Defence scheme required targeted engagement in the Millom area. Our own local intelligence was combined with that of partner agencies to understand the town's flooding issue. Throughout, we held regular meetings with residents to keep them up to date with plans, progress and outcomes.

Considerations:

- Who could provide local intelligence?
- What agencies were involved?
- Who had been directly affected by past flooding?
- Who had been indirectly affected by flooding?
- How could people stay in contact throughout the scheme?
- The creation of an engagement plan
- What information did people want?
- What information was confidential?

The role of Elected Members

Our elected members have an important role as community leaders.

Members can create a climate for better engagement between the public sector, voluntary sector and community leaders.

They can bring local activity together and act as a bridge between the council and communities. They know the leaders and enablers in their communities, and can facilitate the right support to make their activities a success.

Our members can:

- Facilitate the flow of information and intelligence between communities and the council - identifying issues and opportunities in their wards, and providing the information communities need 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, building grassroots partnerships meeting local need.

Role of the Community Development Team

The council has a 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 guidance to colleagues;
- Encourage teams to develop appropriate engagement plans, considering anyone who will be affected by the proposal;
- Publish an engagement toolkit and offer training to colleagues;
- Give direct support where engagement is more complex, ensuring those facilitating engagement have the relevant knowledge, skills, and training to succeed.

Summary

We want to improve how we listen to, involve, and empower communities.

We want to work together to create, influence, design and deliver services, and support strong, active, and inclusive communities.

With this framework, we aspire to create a consistent and inclusive approach to community engagement.

It shows 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 across the organisation.

The engagement toolkit that supports this framework sets out best practice and suggests a variety of ways to support this new approach.

