

Consultation Strategy



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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The council continues to face up to economic challenges and government funding cuts by balancing things that matter to local people with the need to reduce costs and increase income, wherever possible. By 2021/22 the council will need to have identified savings of just over £2.4million.
- 1.2 Savings of the magnitude required cannot be achieved without prioritising and challenging the way the council currently operates. Difficult decisions will be needed and the council – and citizens – must accept that in the future the city council will not be able to balance future budgets without increasing the charges for some services, as well as reducing the overall range and quality of services provided.
- 1.3 Therefore it is more important than ever that the council ‘works with others to understand the needs of residents, businesses and other partners’, as identified in the Council Plan.
- 1.4 Consultation can help to provide this information; however, due to the continuing need for efficient and cost effective services, the council will only consult as appropriate.

2.0 Purpose of the strategy

- 2.1 The Consultation Strategy highlights the value of consultation and sets out the relevant legislation that the council must adhere to.
- 2.2 This is supported by internal consultation guidance and officer support and advice.
- 2.3 The council’s annual consultation plan also helps to co-ordinate consultation across the council and outline consultation opportunities to members of the public.

3.0 Legislation

- 3.1 Under the **Local Government Finance Act 1992**, the council has a statutory duty to consult ratepayer representatives on its annual spending proposals, ahead of setting its budget.
- 3.2 Under the **Local Government Act 1999** the council has a statutory duty to consult representatives of a wide range of local persons. It also has a duty to consult ratepayer representatives to help ensure that service delivery is continuously improved in relation to economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- 3.3 The **Equality Act 2010** addresses discrimination and inequalities and protects all individuals from unfair treatment. The council has a number of statutory duties arising from the Act to better advance equality into our service planning and decision-making processes.

The duties require the council to consider how the decisions we make, and the services we deliver, affect people from different equality groups who share a ‘protected characteristic’.

- 3.4 The **public sector equality duty** came into force in 2011. This contains the general duty (which replaces the previous race, gender, and disability duties) and requires local authorities (and other public sector bodies) to it to have due regard to the need to:
- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation
 - advance equality of opportunity between different groups
 - foster good relations between different groups
- 3.5 Equality Impact Assessments can help to demonstrate that decision makers are fully aware of the impact that changes may have on stakeholders.
- 3.6 The **Localism Act 2011** includes a community empowerment section. A number of Community Rights have been introduced to give local residents the opportunity to have a greater say about what happens to local amenities, how local services are delivered or how new development is planned. Furthermore, should any council wish to increase its council tax above the annual threshold set by Government, then it would need to gain support for its proposals by holding a local referendum.
- 3.7 Many council services have **specific statutory requirements** to consult e.g. planning.
- 3.8 The **Revised Best Value Statutory Guidance 2015** sets out some reasonable expectations on the way councils should work with voluntary and community groups and small businesses when facing difficult funding decisions.

The guidance states that authorities are required to ‘consider overall value, including economic, environmental and social value, when reviewing service provision’.

The council has a statutory requirement to consult when thinking about buying or stopping payment for services provided by voluntary and community groups or small businesses.

- 3.9 The Council is required to consult representatives of:
- Council tax payers
 - Those who use or are likely to use services provided by the council
 - Those appearing to the council to have an interest in the district
 - Local voluntary and community groups and small businesses

4.0 Lancaster City Council’s approach to consultation

- 4.1 Lancaster City Council is committed to working with others to understand the needs of residents, businesses and others partners.

The council values people’s views on its services and future proposals to help to ensure that it is providing great value services, which are flexible and appropriate to local needs, and to help to inform development of the district to help to improve the visitor experience and the lives of those who live and work here.

It is important for the council to focus on what matters most to the people of the district, therefore the council is keen to continue to engage relevant people and organisations across the district. However, in this bleak financial climate, this must be balanced with the need to ensure that the council's shrinking resources are used in the most cost effective manner to deliver our approved priorities and agreed standards of service.

- 4.2 Working in partnership with a wide range of organisations and groups and the community is more important than ever to deliver services and meet the district needs. Consultation can be resource intensive so working in partnership can help to share the costs and reduce duplication between partners.
- 4.3 Our approach to consultation and engagement is consistent with the council's principles of community leadership, shaping place, a business-like approach and valuing distinctiveness.

Consultation criteria

- 4.4 Lancaster City Council services will consult:
 - to meet budget and tax setting requirements
 - to meet equality duties (develop evidence base to assess potential impact)
 - to meet statutory requirements
 - when considering whether to buy or stop paying for services provided by voluntary and community groups or small businesses

It may also wish to consult when:

- a 'service need' must be determined
- to inform future prioritisation and budget decisions
- to inform design of future service provision
- to identify service improvements
- to monitor service provision

Management of consultations

- 4.5 Used effectively, consultations can provide key customer insight to help better understand the council's resident needs, expectations, behaviours and experiences. This can help to monitor/manage performance and inform council decisions to prioritise, design and deliver effective and efficient services.
- 4.6 Poorly managed consultations can reduce confidence in the council and can unrealistically raise expectations of council services. Good communication is integral to successful consultations.
- 4.7 Consultations are not referendums but can help to inform council decision making.

- 4.8 Services must contact the council’s consultation officer for advice, guidance and support and refer to the council’s consultation guidance when planning consultations.

Appendix 1 - Levels of consultation

The council consults on different levels depending on the issue and available resources:

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| Informing | When the council lets people know what it is planning to do. This is an important stage of a consultation as it lets people know when and how they can have a say or get involved, although this is not a consultation in itself. |
| Consulting | When the council invites people to have a say on something, there may be a range of options available. The consultation results are taken into account and used to inform a decision. |
| Involving | When the council works with people to find out their concerns and aspirations which are understood and considered. |
| Collaborating | When the council works together with people on each aspect of a decision, including the development of alternatives and solutions. |
| Empowering | When final decision making and/or devolved budgets are placed into the hands of the community. |

Appendix 2 - Consultation principles¹

The following principles are used by Lancaster City Council’s employees, where relevant, to ensure that we further improve the efficiency of our arrangements.

- **Clarity of Purpose:** before beginning any engagement activity, it will be clear why it is happening, what it will achieve, who is involved, what the community can and cannot influence, and how the information gathered through the engagement activity is going to be used.
- **Evidence Base:** relevant available research, knowledge and community intelligence will be used to help plan engagement activities. Engagement activities won’t be carried out if the information is already available.
- **Proportionate:** the approach to engagement and resources will be proportionate to the issue and likely benefits within the resources that partner services have.
- **Communication:** communication will be tailored by using a variety of accessible and inclusive ways to promote and provide information on engagement opportunities to communities.

¹ Lancaster District Community Engagement Guidance

- **Timing:** sufficient time will be allowed to design and carry out engagement activities that are inclusive and encourage participation from all relevant communities. How the information shapes the future of services must also have a realistic time frame.
- **Partnership:** there will be a co-ordinated approach to information provision, consultation, involvement, shared relevant information and intelligence. This will avoid duplication of effort and reduce consultation fatigue.
- **Integrity:** there will be a culture of openness, honesty and accountability when engaging with communities, it is important not to raise unrealistic expectations.
- **Inclusive:** the best and most appropriate methods of engaging with communities will be used to make sure as many people as possible are involved. No one must be left out by design.
- **Action:** where possible action will be taken on the results of engaging communities. Where it is not possible, sound reasons will be fed back to communities.
- **Feedback:** inclusive and accessible feedback to the community will be provided about the engagement activities carried out and will explain how the community's input contributed to the decision-making process. Feedback will be built into the whole process from the start.
- **Monitoring & Review:** engagement activities will be monitored and reviewed and reported on periodically to the community.