

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP AND INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY

We understand that the people of Worcestershire expect the public service organisations in the County to work together to support economic development in the area, to improve the health and well-being of the population and to protect the environment in which we live.

Recently we have developed a strategic alliance known as the Worcestershire Partnership. Members of the Partnership include the County Council, the District Councils, the NHS in Worcestershire, educational and employment organisations, religious and voluntary sector organisations, the Police and commercial bodies.

Foundation Community Strategy

The Local Government Act 2000 places a duty upon the County Council to develop a Community Strategy to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of its communities. It is essential, in developing the strategy, to involve residents, communities of interest and other key stakeholders.

Our Foundation Community Strategy, was produced in Autumn 2001 and the aim is to produce a full strategy for autumn 2002 with the Worcestershire Partnership to ensure that we work together to make Worcestershire a better place in which to live, work and visit. We are currently focusing our efforts on seven key areas: - Community Safety, Culture, Economic Development, Environment, Health and Well-being, Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion. The following guiding principles will underpin our work as we move to produce a full community strategy which will provide the basis for our strategic planning process: -

- Engage and involve local communities.
- Involve active participation of councillors and non-executive directors of representative organisations.
- The strategy will be prepared and implemented by the Local Strategic Partnership, through which the local authority can work with other local bodies.
- The strategy will be based on a proper assessment of needs and the availability of resources.

Corporate Consultation Strategy

Last year we said that we had put in place a corporate consultation strategy, which is now being implemented together with a consultation database of key information that provides:

- A year planner (on our Staff Intranet site) on which directorates, services and teams will enter key details of planned consultation.
- An officer contact for each consultation to enable further information to be requested.
- Information to provide a valuable record and source of reference on our past consultations exercises.

Some of the proposals upon which we have consulted during the year include:

New Political Structures, options for change – we consulted with a wide cross section of people and organisations in the County to seek opinions on the options for new political management at the County Council. Over 60% of respondents chose the Leader and Cabinet model as their preferred choice and the County Council subsequently adopted this model.

Council's Budget Strategy – each year we consult council taxpayers, business ratepayers, service users and a wide range of special interest groups. Their views are fed into the budget-making process to help the Council to determine its budget strategy for the year ahead.

Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA)- the negotiation of the LPSA has involved extensive consultation and partnership working (see section 'Performance management for continuous improvement' below for more details on LPSA).

Best Value Reviews – consultation of service users and others affected by the service is an integral part of our Best Value Review process. The views expressed through these consultation exercises are used to inform the outcome of the reviews.

Fair Funding – all schools' headteachers and governors have been consulted on proposals for alternatives for the local education authority's scheme of delegation and funding for schools in 2002/03.

Hagley Schools Area Review - we consulted the local community, parents, staff, trade unions and school governing bodies as part of a review of education provision in the Hagley area. A strong local call to consider options relating to changing to a two-tier structure was received and this has been considered within the consultation process.

Education Development Plan – we have consulted with headteachers on the preparation of Worcestershire's second Education Development Plan a strategic document for school improvements within the Local Education Authority.

User/Carer Involvement - Our consultation of carers and users of social services (both in Adult and Children's Services) has been identified as a national leader. We will be sharing our expertise through national conferences having been approached to host the Social Services Inspectorate regional conference on user/carers involvement in June this year.

Citizens' Panel - we also consulted our standing panel of 2,000 residents. On two occasions we surveyed their opinions and used the information to help determine our future priorities and design our services.

What you have told us – and what we've done about it

The theme of the Summer 2001 Citizens' Panel was '**access to services**' and it revealed that:

Access to local services - people in rural areas have significantly more problems accessing local services compared with people in urban areas with access to hospitals being the main area of concern (40% expressed difficulties).

The County Council is working in partnership with the Health Authorities to improve access to health care. Public transport and community transport services are being increased and improved to provide all the County's residents with a transport service for health care-related journeys. In addition improvements in Information Technology and Communication are being put in place to link hospital appointment systems to public transport information with the aim that in the near future all hospital appointments will feature suitable public transport information links for the patient.

Access to lifelong learning - this issue was previously consulted on in May 2000 and so the results have been compared to identify trends. The key trend is that the take up of further education opportunities is increasing, though, for some lack of finance and lack of childcare remain significant barriers.

Health and welfare for older people - The key message on the issue of the welfare of older people was that our attention should focus on the indirect means of improving the health of older people, such as improving the maintenance of their homes.

The County Council has made "helping older and vulnerable people live more independent lives" one of its top three priorities supported by a larger budget allocation. We are working to achieve this by providing more home support to older people.

Community well-being - there was an overall sense of well-being for most people, though, rural dwellers are significantly more positive about their local area than those living in towns. Both urban and rural residents said they felt safe in their local areas, though speeding and dangerous driving was a concern in all areas.

We are working in partnership with the Police to ensure that crime levels are kept low in Worcestershire and that we continue make the roads safer and reduce car accidents year on year.

The theme of the winter 2001 citizen's panel was '**the County Council's Corporate Plan**' which outlines our key policy priorities. The results revealed that:

- For each of the County Council's 8 key policy priorities (listed earlier in this document) well over three-quarters of respondents agreed they should be a council priority.
- The Council's services that were identified as being most important were health improvement, road safety and accident prevention and consumer protection.
- 94% of respondents supported the County Council's aim of reducing crime and fear of crime.
- 92% felt it was important that the Council minimises waste through recycling.

- 87% felt it was important that the Council provides progress reports.
- 78% of respondents supported the County Council in protecting children from abuse and neglect.
- 74% of respondents supported the County Council in encouraging people to continue to learn and build on their skills.

The most preferred means of communicating with the public was found to be by newspaper feature, or in the case of rural residents, feedback letters.

This year we have increased coverage by reporting on our performance both through a free newspaper and also a leaflet distributed with the Council Tax bill.

We are very pleased that so many of you are satisfied with the services we provide as a whole. We will continue to do the best we can to maintain and improve your satisfaction and to continue to deliver best value services to meet the needs of all Worcestershire's residents and visitors building upon the progress we have made during the last three years.

A new way forward for community consultation

We are also actively developing new and innovative approaches to community consultation and recently set up an Area Democracy Team to give a clear focus to this important requirement. The Area Democracy Team will work in close collaboration with District Councils and other service providers to develop credible public consultation and awareness raising opportunities that seek the views, aspirations and concerns of local people. This will be achieved in part through a programme of local public meetings (known as area arrangements) set up throughout the County.

The public meetings programme will form an integral part of the community planning process and will set in place a mechanism that feeds local information into the Local Strategic Partnerships, Worcestershire Partnership and the County Council decision-making and service delivery processes.

The team has also carried out a number of specific public consultation and awareness-raising exercises including:

- Devising and implementing a public consultation programme to explain and seek opinions of the new political management options available to the County Council under the Local Government Act 2000. This involved canvassing public opinion and preferences from a wide cross-section of residents and businesses. The result of this consultation directly informed the decision to opt for the Leader and Cabinet management model.
- Developing a programme of commercial radio features and circulating an easy to read and understand leaflet illustrating the many services provided by the County Council.
- Organizing and co-ordinating a public meeting for residents in the Throckmorton area to meet The Army, DEFRA and other professionals involved with the disposal of Foot and Mouth infected cattle carcasses at the nearby former airfield.

- A “Meet the Council Leader” lunch for invited County residents. Eight local residents met with the County Council Leader, Dr. George Lord to informally talk about their experiences and concerns about services provided by the County Council.
- Organizing and co-ordinating the consultation of Parish and Town Councils throughout the County on a proposal for delegating some highway land drainage functions.

Future Consultation

We intend to build on the progress we have made in consulting the people of Worcestershire. We will be reviewing our consultation strategy to ensure that joint partner consultation is addressed. We are also moving towards the greater involvement of communities in developing local services that meet the needs of the whole community rather than simply consulting. Our priority areas for development include:

- improving information provision about the County Council and its work so that people are better informed about what we do.
- increasing face to face contact with the public.
- strengthening links with the business community.
- developing IT links.
- working with schools to develop community links.
- developing links with hard to reach groups.
- sharing the results of consultation exercises with key partners and reducing duplication.

If you require details of our consultation strategy or about individual consultation exercises please contact the Policy Unit at County Hall. Tel: 01905 766680.