

Current financial context

Lancaster City Council is facing a bleak financial future with further significant savings needing to be found over the next two years. Furthermore, the trend of year on year reductions in funding is expected to continue beyond 2016/17.

For 2015/16 the council will have to find savings of £1million, with £2.5million having to be found for 2016/17. This is in addition to the savings the council has had to find over the period since 2010/11, which has already seen the Council's general net budget reduce by 32% in real terms.

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 do everything that it currently does.

Therefore it is more important than ever that the council has 'a better understanding of communities and needs so services that matter most to our communities will be prioritised', as identified in the council's Corporate Plan.

Consultation can help to provide this information; however, due to the continuing reduction in resources, council services will only consult as appropriate.

Legislation

Local Government Finance Act 1992

Under this Act, the council has a statutory duty to consult ratepayer representatives on its annual spending proposals, ahead of setting its budget.

The Council currently does this by inviting a range of stakeholders to a Budget and Performance Panel Committee meeting held towards the beginning of each calendar year.

Localism Act

Research shows that too many people feel they have little or no influence over the public bodies that affect their everyday lives and that they can play little part in decision making.

Central government believes that this can be changed and that service delivery can be improved by the empowerment agenda and its initiatives. To build on long standing general consultation requirements, such as that set out in the Finance Act referred to above, recently central government has given 'involving and empowering local communities in local public services' an increasingly higher profile.

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.

For more information visit www.lancaster.gov.uk/communityrights

Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)

The PSED came in to force on 5 April 2011. The Council must consider all individuals when carrying out its day to day work – in shaping policy, in delivering services and in relation to its own employees.

The Council must have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation
- Advance equality of opportunity
- Foster good relations

Engagement - what the general equality duty requires¹

“Having due regard to the aims of the general equality duty requires public authorities to have an adequate evidence base for their decision-making. Engagement with people with different protected characteristics² can help you to develop this evidence base. Case law from the previous equality duties has stressed the importance of engagement in ensuring public authorities understand the impact of their decisions on different people.

Engagement should be proportionate to the size and resources of your organisation, as well as to the significance of the policy. This means that the greater the impact of your policy on equality of opportunity and good relations and the greater risk of it being discriminatory, the more likely you are to need significant public (or more tailored) engagement.”

Statutory Requirements

Many council services have specific statutory requirements to consult eg planning.

The latest statutory guidance on the Best Value Duty (November 2012) 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 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.

The council is required to consult:

- People who pay council tax in the area
- People who will use the service and other people who might be affected
- Local voluntary and community groups and small businesses

¹ Essential Guide to Public Sector Equality Duty – revised (third) edition November 2012 (pages 15 and 16)

² The general equality duty covers the following protected characteristics: age (including children and young people), disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Please refer to <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-value-statutory-guidance--4> for detailed guidance.

Lancaster City Council's approach to consultation

Lancaster City Council is committed to providing good value for money services that put the community at the heart of everything the council does.

The council values local people's views on its services and future proposals to help to ensure that it is providing customer focused services that offer value for money and meet the needs of people who live, work and visit the District.

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.

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.

Our approach to consultation and engagement is consistent with the council's ethos eg collaboration, social justice and value for money.

Consultation criteria

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:

- 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

Used effectively, consultations can provide key customer insight to help better understand the council's customers' 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.

Poorly managed consultations can reduce confidence in the council and can unrealistically raise expectations of council services. Good communication is integral to successful consultations.

Consultations are not referendums but can help to inform council decision making.

Services must contact the council's Consultation and Engagement Officer for advice, guidance and support and refer to the council's 'Consultation Guidance: A framework for effective consultation' when planning consultations.

Levels of consultation

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

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.

Consultation principles³

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.

³ 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.