

# User focus and citizen engagement

Learning from comprehensive performance assessment:  
briefing 4

*The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, housing, health and criminal justice services.*

*As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.*

**The Commission is publishing a series of 'Learning from CPA briefings', to accompany the national report *Patterns for Improvement: Using Comprehensive Performance Assessment as a Guide to Achieving Better Public Services* (April 2003). Each briefing examines a key driver for improvement identified by the first round of CPA for single tier and county councils in 2002, describes the critical success factors for improvement and signposts sources of help and advice. As each of the briefings are published they will be made available on the Commission's website at <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/cpa/analysis.asp>**

## Introduction

- 1 The first round of comprehensive performance assessments (CPAs) for single tier and county councils has identified the linked themes of user focus and citizen engagement as key drivers for improvement. The purpose of this briefing note is to:
  - briefly explain the concepts of user focus and citizen engagement;
  - give some of the headline messages and findings from the corporate assessments;
  - describe some critical success factors that have resulted in improved user focus and citizen engagement;
  - outline future Commission work in this area; and
  - provide sources of further information and advice.
- 2 This briefing is designed to help those who are interested in how councils can improve user focus and citizen engagement. Councillors and officers, working with partner bodies both at an operational and strategic level, will find this document a useful starting point.

## User focus and citizen engagement

- 3 Improving the level of involvement of local people in public services is a major part of the Government's modernisation agenda. Recent legislation and guidance emphasises consultation and involvement of the general public and service users in developing services and local policy. The White Paper, *Modern Local Government – in Touch With the People*, sought to put local government in touch with local communities by improving local democracy, increasing financial accountability and improving local services. The Local Government Act 1999 introduced best value reviews, including consultation with local taxpayers and service users, as one of the key ways of improving the quality and effectiveness of council services.

- 4 Developing an approach that is more centred on service users is not just a regulatory obligation. It is also part of good management and providing high-quality services. Consulting and involving service users, and finding out what the general public want from their local services, can help councils to carry out their work more efficiently and effectively. And public participation is not just about improving service delivery; it is also about enhancing the democratic legitimacy of local government and the development of community leadership. Although this briefing concentrates primarily on the processes and outcomes of user focus and citizen engagement, as identified by CPA, these underlying reasons for public participation are highlighted in the *Learning from CPA Community Leadership* briefing available at <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/cpa/analysis.asp>

## Messages from corporate assessments

- 5 As part of CPA, corporate assessments were carried out at each council by a small team, which included an auditor and inspector as well as officers and councillors from 'peer' councils. The outcome of the corporate assessment was a high-level report detailing the council's strengths and weaknesses, and a judgment about its ability to improve, which contributed to the council's overall CPA.
- 6 There is scope for service users and citizens to be involved at all levels in a council, from member engagement with the communities in their wards to service departments. Of the 150 councils assessed, 96 were commended for having good consultation arrangements. Many used existing consultation systems to prepare their community priorities. Sixteen were particularly commended for their inclusivity and for reaching out to 'hard-to-access' groups. A range of methods were used and many councils had a citizens' panel or other representative polling, as well as local fora and targeted consultation exercises. Thirty councils were specifically commended on the cycle of learning from consultation.
- 7 However, 52 councils were identified as having poor systems of consultation or systems that were in need of review. In these councils there were key problems in the consultation cycle, such as limited feedback or no feedback at all to participants. This can leave participants feeling isolated or lacking confidence that their views will make a difference. In 30 councils this fear would have been justified, as consultation exercises had not produced any action. In 12 councils consultation was criticised for not being inclusive, often ignoring key minority groups. Citizen and user engagement is not just about consultation exercises, but about the way in which the council communicates with, involves and understands its local people.

## Critical success factors

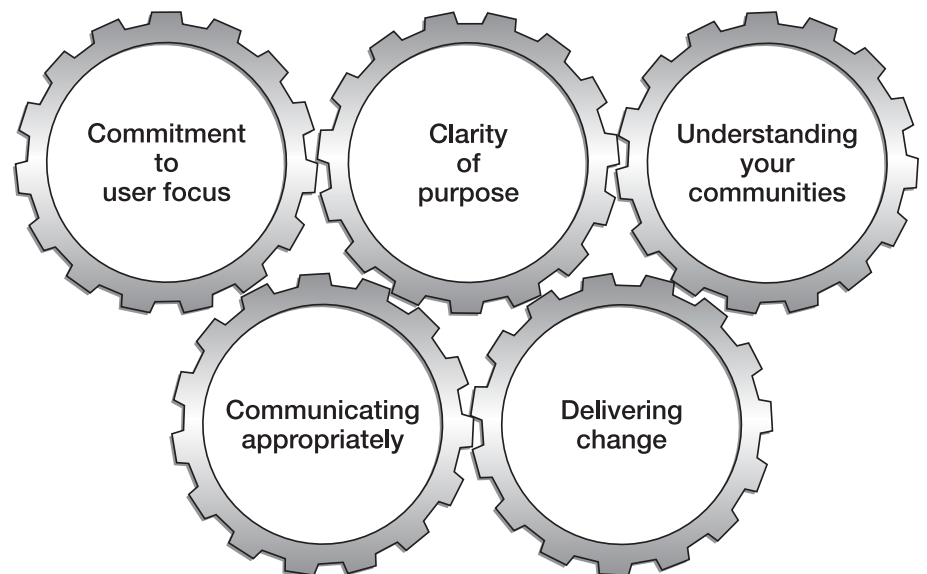
- 8 An analysis of a sample of corporate assessment reports has built on previous Commission thinking to identify five factors that are critical to successful user and citizen engagement (**Exhibit 1**):
- commitment to user focus and citizen engagement;
  - understanding your communities;
  - clarity of purpose;
  - communicating in appropriate ways; and
  - delivering change and improved outcomes.
- 9 Councils have tackled each of these critical success factors to differing extents. They are rarely good at all of them. Although it helps to make progress on all fronts, moving forward in one area can be a good start. In order to improve, councils need to identify areas of weakness, outline their improvement needs and learn from their existing strengths.

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### Exhibit 1

#### Critical success factors for user focus and citizen engagement

An analysis of corporate assessment reports has identified five critical success factors that work together to ensure that councils successfully engage with users and citizens.



## Success factor one – commitment to user focus and citizen engagement focus

- 10 Strong user focus is underpinned by core values, such as honesty, inclusiveness, fairness and realism. Those councils that are succeeding in engaging users are committed to these and similar values and demonstrate them in their organisational behaviours and priorities. In Gateshead Council, councillors and staff have a shared goal – improving people’s quality of life – and a focus on the needs of the customers in delivering services. This translates into the council’s priorities, which mirror those set out in the community strategy, developed through extensive consultation with residents and partners. In councils that are more successful in engaging users the council leadership also plays a key role. Westminster Council’s leadership, for example, ensures that the customer is placed at the heart of the service delivery agenda. Both the leader and the chief executive share a strong vision – to provide quality services at an affordable cost and to engage and enthuse the whole community.
- 11 Rethinking organisational structures has also helped some authorities to ensure that they have a commitment to, and focus on, user engagement. Hertfordshire County Council has introduced a more customer-focused organisational structure, based around user groups (for example, older people or lone parents). In the last three years this has seen the establishment of new children’s schools and families and adult care services departments. Additionally, it is essential that officers and members are kept informed through good internal communications of the importance of user and citizen-focused initiatives that are already being undertaken. It is also vital that councils regularly review their commitment to user-focused work – this itself can form part of a community consultation strategy. Rotherham Council, for example, believes that proactive community consultation and participation is the most effective basis for delivering and monitoring all its activities, policies and developments.

## Success factor two – understanding your communities

- 12 Communities can be defined in a number of ways, the most obvious of which is geography, but people belong to many other communities at different times in their lives. Users and citizens can be, for example, members of communities of interest (commuters or church members), demographic groups (young people or parents of young children) or minority communities (ethnic, non-English speaking, gay and lesbian). Successful councils understand the perspectives of the people they serve and the complexities of their communities. They are able to anticipate, plan for and respond to people’s needs. These councils have adopted a variety of methods to engage users and citizens.

*People benefit most from public services that are based on a real understanding of their needs.*

**Audit Commission, Connecting with Users and Citizens**

- 13 Some councils have concentrated on establishing mechanisms for certain demographic groups. For example, West Sussex County Council and Medway Council have established, and support, youth cabinets and youth parliaments. Others have concentrated more on area-based initiatives. Dorset County Council has client-focused groups, such as social services and library users groups. Other councils have linked up with partner organisations to improve user involvement. For example, Hammersmith and Fulham Council has agreed a protocol with voluntary sector representatives to ensure consistent and effective user involvement in best value reviews. There is no single 'right approach', but by using a mixture of methods to understand the variety and complexity of community patterns councils will be better able to plan and provide flexible and appropriate services.

## Success factor three – clarity of purpose

- 14 Those councils that gain the most from a user- and citizen-focused approach are clear about what they are trying to achieve, whether it be simply providing information to citizens, undertaking a consultation exercise with users or attempting to encourage greater involvement in decision making. All of these aims require very different methods and processes. For instance, sometimes participants who are involved in consultation exercises are uncertain about the impact consultation will have on outcomes for local people. Therefore, members, officers and citizens need to be clear whether consultation has influenced council priorities, and, if so, how. Appropriate and timely feedback is important, with councils providing information and communicating clearly on how consultation has affected their priorities – this feedback may take place in different fora supported by the council, or in newsletters. Some councils are seeking to broaden consultation and involvement to include more budget-related issues. However, it is important to ensure that the process is clear and not over complicated.
- 15 Good connections with users can be established by encouraging communities to communicate with the council and with each other. Rutland Council has established a website that provides an interaction point so that communities can share information as well as contact the council. The key to good connections lies in variety and flexibility so that two-way communication, effective consultation, meaningful involvement and participation in decision-making processes all take place.

*It is important for feedback to be honest, especially when consultees were critical, or when the authority has decided to do something that the majority of consultees did not support. By demonstrating that the authority has paid attention to what consultees have said, feedback can help authorities to strengthen the credibility of their consultation work. It can also increase the likelihood that consultees will respond to future exercises.*

**Audit Commission, Listen Up! Effective Community Consultation**

*In Changing Gear the Commission argued that some councils are not seeking the views of local people in a sufficiently focused or challenging way. Councils are not always clear about why they are consulting, what decisions the findings will inform or how the results will be used.*

**Audit Commission, Message Beyond the Medium: Improving Local Government Services through E-government**

## Success factor four – communicating in appropriate ways

- 16 The means by which councils communicate, consult and involve their citizens and service users can contribute to good user and citizen focus. The most effective councils use a combination of approaches that enable people to communicate with their council at a time and in a manner that suits them. North Lincolnshire uses a range of channels to identify issues that are important to local people. These include quality of life surveys, community/citizens' panels, service satisfaction surveys, their websites and surveys about specific issues. Those councils that are most successful at engaging users do not rely solely on traditional 'paper-based' methods of consultation and are always looking to develop their range of consultation channels.
- 17 In some areas a variety of user engagement methods are used by different agencies, particularly where there is more than one tier of local government. In such cases it can be beneficial to rationalise these approaches. The consistency and co-ordination of approach is important both between different bodies and within the same body – the most successful councils ensure that there is a corporate approach to consultation. Many authorities like Wigan and Oxfordshire have developed comprehensive consultation strategies and Gloucestershire has developed a corporate consultation manual/guidance for staff. The more successful councils ensure that consultation is integrated and systematic.

## Success factor five – delivering change and improved outcomes

- 18 The most successful exponents of user engagement not only put into place the practice and values of critical success factors one to four but also ensure that the rationale behind user focus and citizen engagement results in positive change and better services:
- local consultation in Hartlepool has influenced proposals for the transfer of housing stock, the development of the Heugh tourism site, and the use of some football pitches;
  - in Cheshire a wide range of issues identified through consultation have been used to inform the County Council's community strategy, including social inclusion, rural recovery, the need to improve highways and addressing the fear of crime;
  - Kensington and Chelsea Council has further developed their approach to diversity and equalities issues through a number of initiatives, such as services targeted towards older sections of the minority community and financial and practical support being provided to community groups, such as the refugees forum; and
  - Barnet Council carried out a specific programme of consultation on major programmes and key issues. This has led to the introduction of a new street cleaning programme and the establishment of a neighbourhood warden scheme.

- 19 In delivering change, the most effective councils have listened to and learnt from communities. They have incorporated what they have heard into their community strategies and have also ensured that they have communicated the council's priorities to citizens. Where user focus works the positive benefits for the council should be increased user engagement, greater trust between individuals and councils and a greater sense of ownership of services by users and a willingness to participate among citizens.

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### The case study

The London Borough of Wandsworth has many of the critical success factors in place. The Council's priorities have been developed through a process of democratic endorsement and consultation with service users and the community. Using this intelligence the Council's priorities reflect the views of the local communities. These priorities are additionally subject to wide consultation, including a consistent focus on public response to trade-offs between cost and service level and quality. The feedback from this consultation is then used to inform the budget. Communication of the council's priorities is exemplary providing important feedback to the community.

The consultation process draws on a survey programme and consultation that is tailored to particular needs, which uses a wide variety of mechanisms to understand and communicate the needs of the local community. For example, the Council has established an inter-faith group that is used for consultation, exchange of information and as a conduit to the broader faith community. These methods and a high investment in ward work, including a programme of Ward 'Report Back' meetings and regular Saturday morning members' surgeries, ensure the council has good intelligence, a clear picture of what matters and a good early warning system for future issues. Much of the consultation effort is co-ordinated centrally but financial and other responsibility rests with service managers. The London borough of Wandsworth approach has resulted in the achievement of 29 Charter Mark awards demonstrating the quality and appropriateness of the services it provides to its communities'.

*Source: Developed from corporate assessment and London Borough of Wandsworth self-assessment*

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**More in-depth case studies are included in *Connecting with Users and Citizens***

## Future Audit Commission work on user engagement

20 The Commission is committed to carrying out further work on user engagement. This includes:

- analysing the public's perception of public sector service providers in its current research on corporate governance;
- user-focus projects, such as the current disabled children's study;
- continuing its citizen-focused audit work; and
- improving the Commission's knowledge and understanding through its internal and external user-focus learning networks.

## Sources of information and advice

21 Further information and advice can be found in the following publications.

### Audit Commission Publications

(available from [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk))

*A Fruitful Partnership: Effective Partnership Working*, Audit Commission, 1998.

*Message Beyond the Medium: Improving Local Government Services through E-government*, Audit Commission, 2002.

*Listen up! Effective Community Consultation*, Audit Commission, 1999.

*Connecting with Users and Citizens*, Audit Commission, 2003.

*Quality of life: Using Quality of Life Indicators*, Audit Commission, 2002.

*Directions in Diversity – Current Opinion and Good Practice*, Audit Commission, 2002.

*What Seems to be the Matter – Communication Between Hospitals and Patients*, The Stationery Office, 1993.

## Other Resources

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), Local Government Association (LGA), Audit Commission and Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) – Connecting with Communities Good Practice Toolkit.

(<http://eshtw01.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/cwc/pages.nsf/httpPublicPages/Home?opendocument&login>)

LGA, *Let's Talk About It... Principles for Consultation on Local Governance*, LGA, 2000.

National Consumer Council, *Involving Users: Improving the Delivery of Local Public Services*, National Consumer Council, Consumer Congress and Cabinet Office, 1999. ([www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/1999.consult.index.htm](http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/1999.consult.index.htm))

Age Concern, *Involving Older People – Good Practice Guide*, Age Concern, 2000.

Vicki Combe, *Up for It – Getting Young People Involved in Local Government*, The National Youth Agency and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2002.

ODPM, *Public Participation in Local Government – A Survey of Local Authorities*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2002.

Community Foundation Website – [www.cdf.org.uk/html/menu.html](http://www.cdf.org.uk/html/menu.html)

IDeA – [www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)

Joseph Rowntree Foundation – [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

ODPM – [www.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.odpm.gov.uk)

LGA – [www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk)

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