

Laying the groundwork in Staffordshire

Like many local authorities, Staffordshire County Council has been through significant transformation over recent years. Throughout this period of change has worked towards a compelling vision for the future – a connected Staffordshire where everyone has the opportunity to prosper, be healthy and happy.

To achieve this, the council recognises the need to rethink its approach to public consultation and engagement including new and creative ways to capture, collate and analyse public opinion and to reach a broader cross-section of residents.

The challenge of achieving this vision of ‘connected citizens’ continues against a backdrop of significant change in public sector funding and reform and requires a shift in the way the council works and communicates with its residents and communities.

To meet the challenges of the future Staffordshire County Council has moved away from traditional client/provider relations and is instead working to create a culture of shared responsibility, encouraging participation and leadership from staff, partners and communities.

To support this Staffordshire County Council were keen to use this pilot to look at the benefits of using new methods of engagement including networks of influencers and social media channels, as well as existing consultation routes such as neighbour panels and partnership groups to stimulate different conversations about the role of public services.

Within this context, the council is using two pilots to inform their approach:

- A ‘place-based’ approach designed to harness the existing capacity of partners, communities and local assets to ask questions in new ways
- Testing new community based activity, social media networks and innovative outreach work to reach new audiences and increase participation

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The pilots are being used to inform two strategic public reform priorities for Staffordshire:

Priorities	Approach to be tested
Development of a new model to support Staffordshire’s vulnerable children and families.	Use of local partnership arrangements to generate customer insight through sharing data and intelligence at operational level to increase understanding of needs.
Identifying priorities for Staffordshire’s Police and Crime Strategy and Plan in partnership with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner.	Helping staff, partners and community ‘influencers’ to collect quick insight on local priorities around community safety as part of ‘business as usual’. ‘Influencers’ involved in this activity include barbers, hairdressers, school children, and front-line staff.

The next steps will involve evaluating the two pilots to capture lessons learnt and to understand how the good practice can be transferred to larger-scale consultations. This will involve reviewing the quality of the insight and assessing the extent to which it has led to positive behaviour change amongst commissioners and communities.

Ultimately the project will support the council in refreshing its approach to consultation and engagement through unlocking new channels of communication and doing more to capitalise on existing networks.

Through these mechanisms the council hopes to create an affordable and sustainable approach to consultation based on genuine engagement and meaningful outputs.

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