



Lancashire Combined Fire Authority Public Consultation Strategy

1. Background

The Lancashire Combined Fire Authority Consultation Strategy has been in place since the new Integrated Risk Management Planning arrangements were introduced in 2003. It was thoroughly reviewed and updated in 2007 and 2014. In addition, the review in 2016 amended the Strategy to make clearer links between the equality impact assessment process and consultation.

The strategy is reviewed annually by the Planning Committee to ensure that it continues to meet statutory requirements; incorporates good practice and provides the public and stakeholders with timely opportunity to influence development of their fire and rescue service.

2. Scope

This strategy sets out the Lancashire Combined Fire Authority arrangements for public consultation which are delivered on its behalf by the Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service. The Combined Fire Authority acknowledges the significant contribution of fire and rescue service staff in terms of service delivery and encourages the active participation of employees in fire and rescue service consultation exercises. Arrangements to consult staff are not included in this strategy as they feature within internal documentation.

3. Definitions

Engagement is an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining links with stakeholders. In itself it is not consultation, although consultation uses these links to reach people or individuals to take part in a specific consultation. It is a term given to a range of techniques that give stakeholders opportunities to influence how organisations work and the services that are delivered.

Consultation is one of these techniques and is a process through which the views of relevant stakeholders are sought about a particular issue, proposal or options over a defined period of time, to which due consideration is given by the Authority in reaching a decision.

Other engagement techniques include:

Informing – telling people what is going on, what decisions have been made and what action will be taken but views are not actively sought.

Involving – asking people for views to help shape the development or implementation of options, plans and activity on an ongoing basis or at the start of a policy development.

Collaborating – involving people in working together to develop solutions or proposals.

Negotiating – discussion with people to seek a jointly owned outcome where differences are addressed.

Empowering – giving people the power to control decisions and services within available resources in a specific area.

A public consultation led by the Authority may also involve some of these techniques as part of the consultation plan. Particularly, it will seek to involve people throughout work undertaken to develop options for change and will inform them about actions that will be taken which will not be subject of a consultation exercise.

4. Public Consultation Approach

Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service will undertake public consultation on a range of issues on behalf of the Combined Fire Authority to ensure that the views of communities, partners, individuals who have characteristics that are protected in the Equality Act and stakeholders are used to inform decision making.

4.1 Subjects of public consultation

The extent of the consultation will be proportionate to the nature and extent of any proposals being considered. It may include consultation on:

- the draft Integrated Risk Management Plan;
- annual action plans; budget and council tax;
- proposals which may have a major effect on the services we provide to the public.

In some cases a formal consultation exercise may not be necessary. For example:

- where it is necessary to implement a legal judgement or Government instruction;
- where stakeholders have influenced proposals by early involvement in the consideration of options and planning of proposals;
- where minor adjustments are being advocated;
- where issues can be resolved without formal consultation;
- where the Authority has already reached consensus and consultation results are unlikely to influence a decision;
- where there are no genuine options except for that which is proposed;
- where the Authority has already taken a decision through its usual democratic process.

In these instances the Authority will communicate information to stakeholders to inform them and raise awareness of the changes that have been made or the decisions that have been taken.

4.2 Planning public consultation

The Annual Service Plan, published in April, outlines the planned projects or proposals to be delivered in the year that might require public consultation. These consultations may not take place immediately following publication of the action plan but at the time that is most relevant to the planned project or proposal. At this point the Authority Planning Committee will be provided with details about the issue and options being considered and permission to consult with the public sought.

Due to the pace of change, issues may arise during the year that requires public consultation but which has not been considered within the Annual Service Plan. In these cases, permission to consult with the public will be sought from the Authority Planning Committee Chairman and Chairman of the Authority as urgent business if the meeting schedule does not permit discussion at a meeting.

The Fire and Rescue Service will maintain a calendar to ensure that consultation exercises do not clash and to avoid public consultation overload or fatigue.

5. Timings

Public consultation timeframes will vary in proportion to the scale of the issue/proposals, with a minimum of four weeks and a maximum of twelve-weeks.

In setting timings consideration will be given to:

- the scale of the issue or proposals;
- the size of the audience we need to consult with;
- the need to work with voluntary groups who require time to extend the consultation through their memberships;
- the time of year and any impact on the availability of target groups;
- the urgency with which a decision needs to be taken;
- allowing a realistic time to enable the formulation of a considered response.

All information provided about the consultation will provide details of the deadline for responses.

6. Targeting public consultation

Before undertaking any consultation exercise, the Authority will undertake an Equality Impact Assessment of the impact of any proposals on groups likely to be particularly affected. A plan will be prepared which sets out which stakeholders with legitimate interest in the proposals it will attempt to consult with in order to give them opportunity to express their views.

Where appropriate, this will include:

- the general public – particularly those that are likely to be directly affected by the proposal or issue;
- community organisations, including specific community groups, particularly those

- that represent the interests of people with legally protected characteristics;
- public representatives, such as Members of Parliament and local councillors;
- businesses or business organisations;
- local authorities, public agencies and other emergency services;
- relevant government departments.

7. Information about a public consultation

The focus of consultation will be on meaningful engagement, through relevant methods, with staff, the public and any other requesting body or individual, during which the following information will be provided on the Service website:

- details of the issue and/or proposal;
- why the issue has arisen and/or what is being proposed;
- how the proposals are likely to impact on the provision of service;
- background statistics and assessments and
- the anticipated timescales for decision/implementation.

However, it is recognised that while this information is useful reference, it is not in itself enough to secure consultee response. For all but the shortest written document, a concise summary will be provided for each consultation detailing the issue and options and setting out opportunities to contribute. This should be accessible, clearly written, or produced visually, and use digital channels of distribution/accessibility wherever possible. Information will be localised to ensure that people understand how plans may affect their local area. Assistance in providing information in other languages or formats will be offered.

Information will be widely distributed directly to targeted stakeholders and the consultation exercise will be promoted in public places, through the press and on social media.

8. Consultation methodology

No single activity or mix of activity through which to consult will be right every time. Our approach is to create a dedicated consultation plan to address the specific issues with a mix of activities designed to seek the views of the identified stakeholders. This may involve a mix of:

- public scrutiny panel;
- questionnaire;
- engagement events;
- deliberative forum;
- focus groups;
- feedback given at open public meetings;
- attendance at local Authority meetings or scrutiny committees;
- debate and feedback given through social media;
- written submissions;
- telephone survey.

Where it is feasible, participation in the consultation and responses received will be acknowledged and an audit trail kept of responses. Explanations, where requested and appropriate, will be given to respondents who ask why individual proposals have been rejected.

9. The decision making process

At the end of the consultation period the Combined Fire Authority, or a relevant Committee of the Authority, will determine whether the consultation exercise was sufficient in scale and scope.

A report on the consultation exercise will be presented to the Combined Fire Authority, or a relevant committee of the Authority which will include a summary of statistical results and views offered. This will include the updated Equality Impact Assessment.

Consultation rarely concludes in a single opinion and elected members will make their own judgements about the weight to be given to different views alongside other factors such as financial cost, environmental impact and professional experience and advice. However, all consultation responses will be available to the Combined Fire Authority, or a relevant committee of the Authority, before associated democratic decisions are taken.

10. Feedback and evaluation

Decisions made about proposals that have been the subject of public consultation will be communicated on the Service's digital media channels and via news release to the press. More detailed feedback will be made available to consultation participants directly or through the Service's website, depending on the extent of their involvement with the consultation.

Consultation exercises will be evaluated to assess the effectiveness of the particular processes adopted.

Reviewed July 2017