

Newcastle-under-Lyme Co-operative Strategy 2013-2015

What is does a co-operative approach mean for Newcastle-under-Lyme?

Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council is committed to becoming a co-operative council and wishes to work towards making the borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme a co-operative Borough.

In developing its ambition for a co-operative approach, the Borough Council is seeking to improve the Borough through a renewed relationship between the key stakeholders in the area – including the Council itself, its public sector partners, the community, staff and elected Members – via partnerships and other collaborative arrangements which help delivers the overall Borough Council vision of “a borough that is prosperous, clean, healthy and safe”.

The background and drivers for this commitment are manifold. They include: -

- The financial pressures currently affecting the Borough Council and its partners – budgets are being reduced significantly
- Despite these pressures, the increasing expectations of residents and other key stakeholders for services of the highest quality
- The constantly changing legislative agenda of government
- The desire to work, where possible, in partnership with others in order to deliver high quality, cost effective and seamless services

In terms of these drivers and pressures, there is an inherent risk that a gap will appear between what service users and others expect and need and what local authorities and partner agencies can actually provide.

The net result of these factors is that the nature of local government – as it has developed over the past 15-20 years – will have to change. This is reflected in other ways, such as the ending of the performance regime introduced by central government in the early 1990s and continued on until 2010 and the developing agenda of localism, as expressed in the Localism Act 2011 and in other government-sponsored initiatives.

Not all those involved in local governance agree on the nature of this change, although all agree that change is necessary.

At its heart, the changes required need to address the related issues set out above of financial pressure, coupled with increasing levels of demand against a backdrop of legislative change and a desire to deliver services differently. In developing these changes, the need for local authorities is to reduce levels of demand from service users and also to enhance the ability of other stakeholders to deliver services

where possible. In other words, by providing key stakeholders with the necessary tools to deliver services themselves or in partnership with each other they are able to better satisfy demand and reduce it through the re-design – where necessary – of services.

In Newcastle, we are keen to seek out opportunities to meet the challenges we currently face across the areas already outlined above.

Our over-arching mechanism to do this is to develop a co-operative approach, in order to create the conditions for individuals and communities to take greater responsibility for their own areas and their own lives and to rely on public services, as well as being able to commission the services they feel they need. We see this process as delivering some financial savings, but – more importantly – facilitating the continued delivery of high quality services.

Increasingly, we shall need to adopt new approaches as the ‘conventional’ approaches to finding efficiencies will not be available indefinitely and we need new, sustainable solutions.

In pursuing a co-operative approach, we wish to change the nature of local governance by remodelling the way we do business and the way in which we relate to the key stakeholders in the Borough. We believe strongly that keeping our commitment to act as a civic leader helps us to co-ordinate the pooling of resources to continue to deliver for the people of the Borough.

We are not advocating, therefore, that we as a Council should abdicate our leadership role in the community – as a local authority we are unique amongst our partners in that we are directly elected and we take our place in society seriously. In addition, we do not wish to remove ourselves from the everyday life of our community as we alone – in many cases – have the ability to bring different stakeholders together. Unlike the ‘Big Society’, our co-operative approach envisages a role for the local authority and the public sector agencies in delivering change and delivering quality services in a different way – one that recognises and reflects the times we are living in.

What we are seeking, therefore, to do is use our position and our role as a community leader to lead by example and encourage other stakeholders to become self-reliant – for example, by bringing different stakeholders such as residents and the wider community more into our decision making processes and also involving other stakeholders in how we structure and deliver our services in the future. By doing this, we want to open up our decision making processes and allow others to ‘own’ what is done in a positive way and a way where they feel that things are being done ‘with’ them and not ‘to’ them. In this way, we also feel that change will be sustainable and will not be the victim of changes in political party control or changes at the national level.

As a Council, we want to both set the best possible example to the rest of the Borough in everything we do, and offer the rest of the Borough the opportunity to get involved in a real sense in our activities and responsibilities.

Delivering change in this way – by working with communities, partners, staff and residents - is not easy and we do not pretend it will be easy. To achieve our ambitions will require considerable changes in the way we do things both internally and externally as an organisation. We will be seeking to look at the internal culture of our organisation – to examine what we can improve to allow our staff to co-operate fully in the ways set out above. In addition, we will be seeking to bring partners together to improve the co-ordination of service delivery to our citizens (at the times they are our customers) so that their ‘journey’ as customers is straightforward and effective in them getting what they want when they want it. Our work on managing demand and redrawing the boundaries of our relationship with citizens will also play a key part in our future development.

Having set out what we are seeking to do in developing our co-operative approach, we have also given some thought to how we are going to deliver against our ambitions.

As we have said, our ambition is to deliver the necessary changes required by a number of key drivers – including the financial position we find ourselves in, but also the legislative changes we need to implement.

The changes we want to see have the collective aim of reducing some of our expenditure, but we also want to be able to continue to deliver high performing services. Our preferred approach to dealing with these challenges is a co-operative one – working with other key stakeholders to empower them (in the case of communities, for example) to deliver services themselves or co-produce services with us or other public sector agencies. This does not mean, as already stated, that we will stop doing things ourselves altogether, but it will mean that we need to take decisions on how we want to do certain things in the future.

In pursuing our co-operative vision, we have already made it a key priority in our Council Plan 2013-2016, and we will be making a number of key announcements following the publication of this strategy including the development of a Co-operative Charter setting out a number of minimum standards we hope to achieve from our co-operative work.

In delivering our vision of a Co-operative Council, we will seek to develop a number of key elements: -

- **Encouraging collaborative working** – we already work successfully in partnership with others but we want to develop this further and make it a central part of the way we operate as a business so that every decision will be looked at from a partnership perspective

- **Enhancing citizen and customer experiences** – we want to co-operate with our citizens at the times they are our customers by simplifying the way in which we deal with their enquiries and ensuring that they do not have to go from organisation to organisation to get what they want
- **Engaging with others** - we will seek to develop further our consultation and communication techniques and approaches, building on our consultation on the 2013/14 budget for the Borough Council and work with our Locality Action Partnerships in delivering the key parts of this strategy – our aim is to make sure that everyone, so far as possible, knows what we are doing and what we are planning to do
- **Establishing change** - as this strategy has set out, we need to change and we want to deliver that change via a co-operative approach and we want to ensure that this change lasts

We call these the 4Es of co-operative working in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

In delivering this vision, via these key areas, we want to establish a Borough where people feel they have a say in what happens in their locality and where they also feel they 'own' decisions and actions taken in their name. We also want to foster a feeling of concern and care amongst people as to the direction the Borough is taking. Too often we see situations where one group of people feel that things cannot be changed or have nothing to do with them – we feel that changing attitudes towards a more responsible and engaged populace is key to delivering successful change in the way we have outlined here.

Finally, we want people to be able to decide as to what they want for their own lives. We want communities to make it clear about the level of service they require, for example, as it may be that they either want an enhanced service or perhaps a reduced service. We as a council can also take decisions for our own future, given the relative freedom given to us to determine our own destiny. Overall, we want to be able to deliver services with the highest possible quality for the best possible price, but with an ethical and social value as well.

Overall, therefore, we do not see a co-operative approach as narrow, instead we see it as delivering the 4Es set out above with the aim of creating a fifth E – that of **empowerment**. In other words, we want people to be able to control their own lives and decide what resources they and others need from the Borough Council and from other partners. In this way, co-operation can mean a great many things in practice.

What does working co-operatively mean for Newcastle-under-Lyme?

Achieving our ambition of becoming a co-operative council does not mean that all our existing or future problems and challenges will be solved, but it does mean that we can seek to deliver some of our needed savings not by traditional 'salami slicing' activity but through a method which allows us to be innovative and also allows decisions to be made in a new way through involvement and dialogue with our key stakeholders – especially our communities.

A co-operative vision for this Council and for the Borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme as a whole offers a range of opportunities for us. It builds on our acknowledged strengths – planning and priority setting; partnership working; sound financial management; high performing services; excellent staff; good engagement with communities and others; sound governance – and potentially tackles some of our acknowledged areas for development such as developing elected Members; involving LAPs and the wider community in a more constructive way to build capacity amongst the community; identifying what are not priorities for us; and delivering necessary savings in the future.

Further to these points, it allows us to set a benchmark for the future for this area, to provide the opportunity for our employees to develop a co-operative future and for us to develop our own model for achieving this future, along the lines set out in this strategy so far.

The involvement of our staff is a key part of our co-operative approach as we see them as the best asset we have. In developing our staff to act more co-operatively, we feel we need to facilitate an atmosphere for the changes that we wish to see. In order to achieve this – at least in part - we are seeking to address elements of our organisational culture, such as: -

- Supporting risk taking and discouraging blame amongst staff and all stakeholders
- Continuing our focus on action centred work
- Focusing on the use of plain English and eliminating jargon and acronyms where possible
- Opening up the work of the organisation in a real and physical way including the use of open days and innovative approaches to publicity
- Generating ideas and removing blockages from the system which prevent these ideas getting through

We believe that by examining our own culture in this way, we will set an example for others to look at the way they do business and seek to develop their own approaches to co-operation, including the community.

In delivering these ambitions, we will devote resources from the Borough Council, including a number of elements of the co-operative approaches set out here in a change programme led by the Executive Management Team and including other key employees.

We have acknowledged that our approach to co-operation can encompass many different ways of working. We can express our approaches in the form of a ladder of co-operation. The ladder can stretch from simply working in way which is based on the key elements of co-operative working set out above ('the 4Es') to more complex methods of working together, such as the use of mutuals or single purpose vehicles. Each of these 'rungs' on the 'ladder' can involve different stakeholders or groups of stakeholders - see below (together with existing examples of our work for illustration): -

Services delivered by formally constituted company – delivering a service via a mutual or unincorporated company – e.g. the Newcastle Town Centre Partnership
Co-production of services with communities other others – such as the purchase of facilities from Council for community to run themselves – e.g. Bradwell Lodge
Active input into decision making from stakeholders – giving service users the power to shape services – e.g. the review of community centres in the Borough
Working based on the 4Es – community development, culture change, elected Member development to develop new ways of working – e.g. LAPs development
Partnership working – working with partners on key projects – e.g. Let's Work Together
Consulting with residents and other stakeholders – on key areas of policy – e.g. the Budget setting process
Informing stakeholders of key decisions – providing timely information – e.g. about elections

Figure 1: Ladder of Co-operative Working

Work has already been undertaken by the Borough Council on the various types of service arrangement which could be developed under a Co-operative Council heading – as can be seen by the examples above. It should be pointed out that none of the ‘rungs’ on the ladder are mutually exclusive, and a combination of different approaches can be adopted. What we want to show, however, is that there is a range of choices open in developing a co-operative approach and we see the notion of developing key stakeholders to work co-operatively is a key part of seeking out new ways of dealing with the challenges that face us. It should be stated that we do not see the above as a list of importance; rather we see it as an assessment of some of the options available as we seek to deliver our co-operative vision.

What have we done so far?

As said in the previous section, work has already got underway in developing a co-operative approach for Newcastle under Lyme B.C.

As an organisation which is used to dealing with change, the Borough Council has been busy in developing a range of approaches to face up to the challenges facing it over the next few years. The major documents setting out the Council's plans and ambitions are: -

- Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council Plan 2013-2016 – referred to at various points in this strategy
- Newcastle under Lyme Economic Development Strategy 2012 -2017 – covers the key elements of economic development and growth
- Stronger and Safer Communities Strategy 2012 – 2017 – focuses on crime-related and partnerships issues, including driving forward prevention
- Health and Well-Being Strategy

Each of these key documents set out the overall vision for the Council, together with its key priorities. These are: -

Vision – To create a borough that is prosperous, clean, healthy and safe

Key priorities

- A clean, safe and sustainable borough
- A borough of opportunity
- A healthy and active community
- Becoming a co-operative council which delivers high quality, community-driven services

In addition, the three strategies set out the key actions which will seek to deliver against the key priorities set out above. In so doing, the Borough Council has sought to bring together partners, communities, and other key stakeholders to deliver key actions.

This Co-operative Strategy is both a part of this strategic framework and yet is also something else. We acknowledge that the notion of being co-operative is nothing new – indeed, it has its roots in the nineteenth century. It is a new concept, however, in the way we are seeking to achieve it. As said, we seek to develop a new role for the Council, as well as for other stakeholders in that we want to encourage these stakeholders to play a much greater role in decisions; and even to potentially deliver services for themselves. In addition, we are keen to develop our own organisation, to change our culture and become a co-operative council in a real sense.

In a sense, therefore, this strategy both complements the above documents but also adds a delivery approach which covers all of the above. In other words, our Council Plan sets out what we are planning to do, and the three strategies above set out what we are going to do to deliver against this plan. The Co-operative Strategy, however, sets out *how* we are going to do this. We see co-operation as the over-arching delivery mechanism – developing our stakeholders such as our local community to deliver for themselves and offering our leadership role to co-ordinate and lead on that.

This Strategy covers the period 2013-2015, as we believe that it will take a period of time to lay the foundations for our co-operative approach. Having said that, we have already done a number of things to move us in this direction. These include the following: -

- Committed to the introduction of a Living Wage, ensuring that the lowest paid staff earn at least the local cost of living
- Restructured our partnership working, to move away from meetings and to focus on action and delivery
- Developing an approach to employee volunteering and encouraging volunteering generally in the borough
- Focusing on our town centres as locations for economic growth by working with local businesses
- Developed a wholesale consultation process around the budget setting for 2013/14

These are at the early stage of our work on becoming a co-operative council. As we have said, we recognise that there is still much to do.

The Next Steps

We very much want to build on the work we have already done towards developing a co-operative council, as we have outlined in this strategy.

As said, we have as one of our key corporate priorities to become a co-operative council delivering high quality, community driven services. In order to deliver against this priority, we want to fundamentally change the way we operate as a council and also redefine the relationships we have with our key stakeholders, including our communities and residents.

We understand that to realise our ambition, we need to develop communities in order for them to take their own decisions and we need to develop ourselves in order to act as a community leader, and we can also build on our acknowledged role as the leading agency for the Newcastle Partnership. As part of the Council's development, we will be seeking to develop a range of different actions, but – as the key point in our development – we will seek to develop our workforce and work with others to change the culture of the organisation and also to work on changing assumptions about the public sector amongst the public. We know that the public sector is not seen positively at present and we want to seek to challenge that.

As we have said, we are aware that this will take time and we have set aside a period of time in this strategy to achieve its key aims, in order to bring about the reality of, first, a co-operative council and – in time – a co-operative borough for Newcastle under Lyme.

In so doing, we will seek to achieve our vision – as articulated in the key corporate priority set out above – in a number of key areas. These include: -

- Improving the customer journey, including focusing on the levels of demand from service users
- Examining the ways in which we currently deliver services and changing methods of delivery if needed, including developing community led services
- Working and engaging with others where possible – including developing co-location opportunities and our work on welfare reform
- Changing key areas of our organisation – including developing our employees and elected Members

These key areas, combined with the 4Es as outlined previously in this strategy, we believe are key to developing a co-operative council and we have studied other co-operative councils, such as Oldham and Telford, to learn valuable lessons from them in terms of how they delivered their own ambition to be co-operative.

These areas of work, focusing on key stakeholders, are designed to bring together the different strands of the co-operative approach in order to deliver change in the way set out in this strategy. These key areas of work are designed to complement the basis for the co-operative approach, as set out in the 4Es and will form the basis of an extensive change programme for the Council, led by the Cabinet and/or with the Executive Management Team (EMT).

Our ambition to become a co-operative council must be balanced, we believe, with a desire to deliver positive outcomes. With this in mind, we have developed and will implement in 2013/14 a new performance management framework which is outcome-focused and we will be seeking to performance manage our work on pursuing a co-operative approach.

Our ultimate ambition is to bring about long-term sustainable change both internally for the Council and also externally with communities and partners throughout the borough, and also with other bodies nationally where possible. We will seek to deliver this change in a coherent and clear way, so that we remain transparent and accountable at all times during this process.

What will we do between 2013 and 2015?

In order to deliver a co-operative council by April 2015, we will develop an implementation/action plan and we will record our progress against it as part of the performance management framework of the Council.

As we have seen, some work is already ongoing to achieve this, but we will seek to build on these foundations in conjunction with other key stakeholders.

Our work here is designed to complement other key areas of work, to provide the framework for all the work we are hoping to do as set out in our Council Plan and the three main strategies of the organisation. We do not intend to duplicate existing areas of work, nor do we intend to supplant existing workstreams – instead this strategy focuses on additional areas of work which are designed to assist with our ambition of co-operation and which will seek to assist in delivering other key ambitions for Newcastle under Lyme B.C.

As we have seen, we are looking at a number of areas of work at present, including developing existing areas of engagement (e.g. the LAPs) and also developing new areas where possible, including the potential to devolve decision making and even service delivery where possible and where practical. We will continue to work on these areas, in order to develop our communities and our residents in order that they may get more involved in the workings of the local authority and to deliver true co-operation across the council and the borough.

In order to bring this to fruition, we as a Council recognise the need to change both our culture and our ways of working. We are not saying that we need to change everything, but a whole range of external and internal drivers – as outlined in this strategy – mean that we shall have to do things differently in future.

Key elements of this work will involve developing both our employees and our elected Members. We see elected Members playing a central role in the development of the co-operative council and we want to build on good areas of practice and develop Members into civic leaders, ready to lead by example, bring people together, and help to deliver co-operative solutions for the council and the borough. In the same way, our staff need to be encouraged to look wider than the traditional solutions to issues and problems and bring both innovation and different ways of thinking into what they do.

As we have seen, this strategy seeks to make sense of the co-operative approach for Newcastle under Lyme B.C. In it, we have highlighted our overall ambition, as contained within our key corporate priorities, of creating a co-operative council. In bringing this ambition to life, we have focused upon a number of key areas – we have called them the 4Es – of encouraging collaborative working;

enhancing the experience of our citizens, especially when they are our customers; engaging with our communities and other key stakeholders; and establishing change. Building on the 4Es – which we see coming together to empower – we will seek to follow a number of work areas, such as simplifying the customer journey; improving our consultation processes; working with our partners on key projects (e.g. welfare reform); working with our communities in areas like funding bids; promoting community based service approaches such as the freeing up of assets; developing our organisation and our workforce and developing our elected Members.

This is our strategic framework, designed to create the conditions for the Council to continue to deliver in the short, medium and long terms as we work towards our vision of a prosperous, clean and healthy Newcastle against a background of financial challenge.