

Understanding our residents

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building on the results of borough-wide residents' survey undertaken in 2003 Lambeth Council commissioned a qualitative research project to explore residents' perceptions of the Council and the services it provides as part of its commitment to 'Understanding Our Residents'. This document summarises the methodology used for the consultation and provides an overview of the results.

The consultation was based on a series of eight discussion groups held with a broad cross section of local residents chosen to reflect the diversity of the population in Lambeth, in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, tenure and social class. As the purpose of consultation was to explore attitudes towards the Council's services, some of the groups were recruited with users of specific services; such as Council tenants. The eight groups for the consultation were as follows; Older people, Professional people, Council tenants, Young people, Parents with children at local primary schools, Parents with children at local secondary schools, Black African people and People with disabilities. A total of 65 people attended the eight discussion groups. With the exception of the group with People with disabilities, which was recruited at the Lambeth Resource Centre, all the other groups were recruited at random.

The discussion groups explored participants' perception of the Council and its services and of their priorities for how they would wish to see the Council change in the future. Given the wide agenda for the consultation it was inevitable that not every service could be covered in the same depth. Where residents appear to be satisfied with a service, such as street lighting, they tended to have little to say and that is reflected in the report.

Discussion in the focus groups concentrated on three strategic issues:

- ?? What do people think about Lambeth Council and its services and why?
- ?? What are the underlying reasons that are causing residents to hold the opinions they do?
- ?? How does the Council need to change to meet the needs and aspirations of local people?

1.1 Corporate Results

Awareness

Participants in many groups have a low awareness of the Council in terms of its services, its Council Tax and its political control. Most participants found it hard to name many or, in some cases, any services that the Council provides. Awareness was limited to universal services, such as refuse collection and street cleaning, and the main services that people used; such as housing (tenants) or schools (parents). When shown a list of the Council's major services many people were surprised and some were notably more interested in the discussions that followed.

The general view was that Lambeth's Council Tax was 'one of the highest' and many found it hard to believe that it was the seventh lowest in the country. This combination of over estimating the level of the Council Tax, whilst underestimating the range of services the Council provides, makes the Council appear to be providing poor value for money.

Few participants knew which party was in control of the Council with the majority of those expressing an opinion still thinking that it was Labour. Again, when the true situation was explained, many participants were surprised.

1.2 Image and Reputation

Participants had a clear view about the type of Council they wished to have in Lambeth; one whose mission was to make the local area a better place to live but was also efficient and well run. Making Lambeth a better place to live implies a wider agenda than just service delivery. It means engaging in issues, such as community safety, that previous surveys have shown is the main priority for local residents. Whatever its shortcomings, local residents are looking to their Council to take the lead in tackling the problems they face and to make Lambeth a better place to live. In parallel with this wider vision comes the caveat that the Council must be efficient and well run. As was found repeatedly, many residents have severe reservations about the Council's capacity to deliver.

The perception that the Council is inefficient influenced discussion about some key corporate initiatives:

Website Why try to pay your Council Tax using the website if the Council will either lose your message or your bank details?

Joint Service Centres Would a Joint Service Centre merely offer greater opportunities for confusion and delay? Is it not easier, for both residents and the Council, if they report just one problem at a time to an office that concentrates on that service area?

Consultation What is the point in responding to consultation if the Council does not have the capacity to respond, even if it wished to?

When asked for their images of the Council more negative than positive comments were received. The Council was seen to be remote, slow, inefficient and wasteful. The services people experienced that had most impact in influencing these views were Housing Repairs, Secondary Education and Parking. However, a third of all participants said that they thought that the Council was improving, with better communications, primary education, recycling and adult education being cited as the main examples.

1.3 Communications

Discussion of Lambeth Life was overshadowed by the fact that 50 of the 65 participants claimed that they had never seen a copy of the magazine. Only three participants had a copy of the latest edition delivered to their home. Despite this unpromising start, the magazine was well received in terms of its style and what it was trying to achieve; telling local residents about what the Council was doing. Residents wanted the magazine to concentrate on hard information (more details about services and how to access them and how the Council spends its money) have less 'good news' stories and more coverage of what it is really like to live in Lambeth.

Contractors

Complaint was that services are better when they are delivered directly by the Council and not put out to sub-contractors. There were complaints that financial services, the repairs service and home care services had all deteriorated since contracts were awarded to sub-contractors.

1.4 Results by Service Sector

(i) Environment

Environmental services had the highest profile with local residents and, overall, recorded the highest levels of satisfaction. However, although the overall picture was comparatively positive, there were some huge variations in satisfaction even within the same service area. Thus the **refuse collection** service was seen to be good by those living in private accommodation but poor by those sharing communal bins on estates, where the reduction in service to one collection per week was seen to be responsible for the problems. A similarly mixed picture emerged with **recycling**; cited by some as an example of the Council improving but with others being unaware or confused as to how the system worked.

Residents complained about the amount of litter on the streets but there was support for the Council's **street cleaning** service, which was seen to have improved. Problems were associated with people dropping litter, a lack of litter bins and the need to enforce anti-litter laws rather than the need to improve the street cleaning service. There were virtually no complaints about either **street lighting** or the state of the **roads** but residents were extremely unhappy about the condition of many of the **pavements**.

Another area where the consultation found mixed results was **traffic management**. Whilst this was not raised in seven of the focus groups, in Clapham parking problems were seen to be the dominant concern of local people. The parking problems in this area were seen to stem from a combination of too many commuters, too many cars and too strict enforcement of parking restrictions, all exacerbated by the new congestion charges. Whilst acknowledging that many of these factors were outside of the direct control of Lambeth Council, it is interesting that participants were looking to the Council to take the lead there in 'making the area a better place to live'.

The discussion about **leisure centres** proved inconclusive. Although there appeared to be a relatively high level of awareness about the location of the leisure centres, and of the services they offered, there seemed to be no clear reason as to why people did not use them. Parents complained about the cost of their children using leisure centres but the dominant feeling was of a lack of enthusiasm. The discussion in the focus group with Young People concentrated on **youth provision** that was seen as important in combating anti-social behaviour and crime. It was felt that youngsters needed structured activities that were supervised and that had a definite outcome; such as making a record or getting a trial at a local football club.

The discussions about **parks** were similarly low key, with residents enjoying walking through them but criticising the standard of facilities, such as toilets, and some wanting to see more activities, such as music and arts, encouraged.

(ii) Housing

For Council tenants their relationship with the Council was, to a large extent, determined by their experience of the Housing service. Although not on the Topic Guide, the **repairs** service dominated tenants' comments about the Council in the corporate section. There were seen to be three main problems: first, in the reporting of repairs, with the closure or reduction in opening hours of the neighbourhood offices being of concern in some parts of the Borough. Secondly, some participants were concerned about the length of time it took for repair jobs to be assessed and completed. Thirdly, the quality of the work was seen to have deteriorated since the service was 'put out to contractors'.

The tenants' magazine **Here For You** appeared to have a better distribution than Lambeth Life with (on a very small sample) more tenants saying that they received a copy than did not. The magazine was seen to be less attractive than Lambeth Life but more interesting because it covered the issue that tenants were interested in; housing.

The debate about **participation** produced some interesting findings. Tenants felt that the format of tenants meetings was satisfactory, in terms of their location, their length and how they were chaired. The only complaint was about outcome; did the Council listen and respond? By contrast, those tenants who had experience of tenants committees and the Tenants Council were much more critical, feeling that they were unrepresentative of tenants as a whole, were too time consuming and were unproductive.

No participant in any of the focus groups raised the issue of **housing benefits**. When raised by the moderators, the majority of problems seem to have been from a few years ago.

(iii) Education

Again the consultation produced very mixed results. **Nursery education** in the borough was seen to be good, especially for those children who might be disadvantaged when starting at primary school, such as because of language difficulties.

The discussion about **Primary education** was dominated by parents' experience of one primary school. This was perceived to be very good because of the relaxed, but disciplined, atmosphere created by the Head Teacher and the commitment of the staff. Good communications between the school and parents was cited as one of the main features of the school.

In contrast, parents were far less happy about the standard of **Secondary education** in Lambeth. The transition from primary to secondary school was seen to be difficult for many children. Having to travel further, the size and impersonal nature of secondary schools and problems with other children (bullying, theft) all cause concern.

Most parents acknowledged the importance of exam results and wanted their children to go to a school where they would be well taught. However, whilst the publication of school league tables gives parents the chance to compare the performance of different schools, there was widespread confusion and anger about the issue of **Parental Choice**; did parents really have a choice as to which school their child attends? With different schools apparently operating different selection criteria, was there a level playing field for all? The concerns about parental choice may be magnified by the introduction of a new secondary school that opened a few months ago and was widely cited as the example of what constituted a good secondary school. However with limited places, many parents will be disappointed. It is important that other secondary schools in the borough are seen to offer the opportunity of a good education. Some parents complained that too many schools had the same open days limiting their ability to visit a range of secondary schools when making their choice.

Parents were strongly in favour of the concept of **Inclusive education**, whereby pupils of different abilities are taught within the same class. Whilst extra help should be directed to those with special needs, it was felt that there may have to be separate arrangements for pupils who were disruptive. However, these pupils should receive help, such as counselling, within their own school and only expelled as an extreme measure. As with parents of primary school children, communication between schools and parents was seen to be a priority.

Adult education was very important to participants in the Black African Group, attending courses on language skills and IT. They stressed the need for these courses to be inexpensive if they were to be able to attend.

(iv) Social Services

There was considerable support for the policy of enabling people to live in the community for as long as possible. Whilst those participants in **Sheltered Accommodation** were happy with the support they received, there were complaints about the standard and the level of other services needed to help people to live independently.

People complained that **Luncheon Clubs** had been closed and that the number of places, and the hours available, at **Day Centres** had also been reduced. Participants stressed the importance of **Adaptations and Equipment** to help disabled people to manage at home but that it could take a very long time to get an assessment from occupational therapy or for the work to be carried out.

The greatest criticisms were directed towards the **Meals on Wheels** service that some had tried but given up. The standard of the meals was described as being unacceptable, as was the attitude of some of the delivery staff. Participants were appreciative of the **Home Care** service but some complained that they did not always get the level of service specified in their care plan.

There were seen to be issues around communications between some Social Services clients and their **Key Workers**. Clients can be heavily dependent on the services they receive and so extremely vulnerable if there are problems. The consultation found that Key Workers provide a vital role in the communication between day centre clients and Social Services but that clients did not always understand this nor, alternatively, feel that this communication was working efficiently.