

# **Stirling Focus**

## **Focus Group Research**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1. Research was undertaken to determine Stirling Council residents' thoughts of Stirling Focus, to help inform and improve future editions of the publication.
2. The methodology used was focus groups, using the Stirling Sounding Board (Citizens Panel). Two urban groups and one rural group were held.

### **Urban focus groups**

3. It was very important to participants that they know what the Council is doing. The intent of Stirling Council to communicate to the public, the need to be informed and given accurate (positive and negative) information was crucial, as was knowing what Council money is being spent on.
4. Expectations of where to find information on Stirling Council were mainly libraries and Stirling Council's website. Other sources were local papers, Local Offices, Councillors and to a lesser extent Community Councils.
5. Preferred methods of communication were Stirling Focus magazine, direct mail or the Stirling Observer. The Stirling Council website was seen as effective, but not inclusive of everyone.
6. A Welcome Pack for new residents was suggested as a way of improving communications, as was providing information in central places in Stirling city e.g. libraries, Thistle shopping centre, train and bus stations.
7. Awareness of Stirling Focus prior to the focus groups was almost non-existent. Perceptions of the publication were positive; the size, colours and informative articles were regarded highly by urban participants.
8. The magazine version was preferred to the older newspaper style. The presence of adverts in Stirling Focus was preferred on single pages, however participants were content to have adverts in the publication if it reduced Council spending.
9. Elements perceived as missing from Stirling Focus were the Council obtaining citizens' views to enable communications to be a two way process, and also the presence of a 'What's On Guide'. The importance of providing information for rural areas was also stressed.
10. The requirement of providing open and informative performance information (positive and negative) was very important. The performance information (pie chart) in the last edition of Stirling Focus was perceived as not providing enough meaningful information.
11. Inserts or cut-outs were perceived as good ideas, in particular 'A-Z Contacts', 'A Guide to Services' and a 'What's On Guide'. The concept of inserting questionnaires periodically in Stirling Focus and forming a Readers Panel was received positively.
12. Preferred frequency of publication of Stirling Focus was quarterly (seasonal).

## **Rural focus group**

13. The rural citizens had feelings of exclusion and discontentment with general communications from Stirling Council. The group felt that rural areas do not have access to enough information and that their viewpoints are not listened to. These issues largely dominated the focus group discussion.
14. The group weren't impressed with Stirling Focus as it lacked articles on rural issues, and felt they would be very disappointed if future editions of Stirling Focus were similar to this.
15. Receiving general communications from Stirling Council was very important to rural citizens. As with urban citizens, the intent and enthusiasm of Stirling Council to communicate information was crucial, as was the provision of open and informative (positive and negative) information.
16. Rural participants' expectations of where to find information about Stirling Council were libraries, the Stirling Observer and Stirling Council's website.
17. Preferred channels of communication were the website (rated highly, but again not fully inclusive), Community Councils, libraries, direct mail and the Stirling Observer.
18. Suggested main methods of improving communications were via the Stirling Observer and Councillors.
19. Over half of the rural group were aware of Stirling Focus prior to the focus groups. Perceptions of the publication were mixed. Positive aspects were size and colours. The print was seen as being too small. The publication was not seen as easy to read and considered haphazard and largely uninformative. The title was perceived as not being representative of the rural areas and gave the impression it focused on Stirling city.
20. Similar to urban citizens, the magazine version was preferred to the older newspaper style and the presence of adverts in Stirling Focus was accepted if it helped reduced Council spending.
21. Realistic information (highlighting both positive and negative issues) was perceived as missing from Stirling Focus, in particular performance information. Rural participants were keen to see open and informative information regarding Council spending. Similar to the urban groups, the performance information (pie chart) in last edition of Stirling Focus was perceived as not providing enough meaningful information.
22. Similar to the urban participants, inserts or cut-outs were perceived as good ideas, in particular 'A-Z Contacts', 'A Guide to Services' and a 'What's On Guide'.
23. Preferred frequency of publication of Stirling Focus was quarterly.
24. The concept of inserting questionnaires periodically in Stirling Focus and forming a Readers Panel were not received positively by rural participants.

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## **1.0 Background**

Stirling Focus is a publication that is sent to all residents in Stirling Council area. It details news on services provided by the Council. However, the production of Stirling Focus has been sporadic over the last few years. In addition, it is unknown whether the content and layout of the publication is actually what residents want.

As a result, some research was undertaken by Debbie Cunnell, Research Officer, Quality, Performance and Research Team on behalf of Caroline Moore, Policy and Planning Manager.

### **1.1 Aims and Objectives**

The overall aim of the research was to determine residents' thoughts on the content, layout and frequency of production of Stirling Focus.

A number of different aspects were explored:

- General communications from Stirling Council
- Awareness of Stirling Focus
- Perceptions of layout/format
- Perceptions of information provided
- Frequency of production

The findings of the research will be used to help inform and improve future copies of the publication.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Focus Groups**

The methodology used to meet the research objectives was focus groups, using the Stirling Sounding Board (Citizens Panel). Members of the Sounding Board were sent a recruitment letter asking if they wished to participate. Where possible, a mixture of age groups and males/females were selected.

It was proposed to hold a series of four focus groups - two groups with urban residents and two with rural residents. However, the recruitment process of rural residents proved to be difficult – there were only enough willing participants to hold one focus group.

The two urban groups were held in Stirling Council, Old Viewforth, Stirling whilst the one rural group was held in Balfron High School, Balfron. The groups lasted 1.5 hours each and were facilitated by Debbie Cunnell, Research Officer. Susan Cunningham, Communications Officer attended as an observer, took notes and answered any questions relating to Stirling Focus. The groups were recorded for analytical purposes and participants were asked if they agreed to be recorded.

The discussion plan used is shown in Appendix 1. The transcriptions have been bound as a separate document due to their size.

### **2.1.1 Urban focus groups**

The urban groups comprised a cross-section of the local community. From the panel members who volunteered to take part, a range of ages and gender were invited to attend. A total of 24 people were invited (12 in each group). However, in focus group research it is very common for respondents not to arrive for the group. As a result, 8 respondents attended the first group (31.08.05) and 8 attended the second group (07.09.05). This number of respondents is however large enough for the group dynamics to exist and provide meaningful data.

### **2.1.2 Rural focus group**

The rural group comprised of people who lived in rural parts of Stirling Council area. When recruiting participants, three dates and venues were offered (Callander, Balfron or Old Viewforth). As previously mentioned, there were only enough participants to hold one group, in Balfron. A total of 10 people were invited, however 7 attended.

## **2.2 Analysis**

The focus groups have been analysed to highlight the main themes that arose from the groups. The two urban groups are analysed together, whilst the rural group is analysed separately.

It is worth bearing in mind that people in focus groups tend to influence each other. A theme that comes up and is discussed at length in one group will probably reflect a concern or interest on the issue. This report aims to draw out the main themes arising collectively from the participants without leaning towards the isolated comments or opinions of one strong character.

Quotes by participants have been added to illustrate these findings and give a flavour of the type of comments made during the discussion.

**PART 1**

**URBAN FOCUS GROUPS**

## **3.0 Urban groups**

### **3.1 General comments**

Six males and two females attended the first group. Four participants were aged between 35–44 years, whilst four were over 65 years of age. The participants came from Laurelhill, Braehead, Causewayhead, Bridge of Allan, St Ninians, Throsk or Cambusbarron.

At the second group, four females and four males attended. Again, four participants were aged 35–44 years, two were aged 45-54 years whilst two were over 55 years. They resided in Riverside, Causewayhead, Bannockburn, Bridge of Allan, Cambusbarron or Stirling city centre.

### **3.2 General communications from Stirling Council**

The groups firstly discussed their thoughts in terms of general communications from Stirling Council.

#### **3.2.1 Importance of communications**

It was very important to participants that they know what the Council is doing. The need to be informed and given accurate information was also important, as was knowing what Council money is being spent on.

#### **3.2.2 Expect to find information**

The groups were asked where they would expect to find information about what Stirling Council is doing. A range of sources was given, however libraries and the website were the most popular. Other sources were local papers, Local Offices, Councillors and to a lesser extent Community Councils.

#### **3.2.3 Preference in communications**

When asked how they would *prefer* to find out or receive information about Stirling Council services, a range of communications was mentioned. Stirling Focus magazine was seen as a preferred communication channel by the majority:

*“it would be very useful if you had something like this (Stirling Focus) that catches your eye very easily and you know that it is different from the rest of the bulk of junk mail. Even when it comes through the door, make it special that it would stand out and look different from the rest”*

It was also felt that different communication mediums need to be used and at different frequencies, depending on the type of information being communicated:

*“I think it depends on what it is, I mean if it’s a change to a service, an initial change, then it can go in here (Stirling Focus)”*

*“I think there are some things that need to be more urgently communicated to everybody, but there are also some things that are reference, which I agree, the website is good for”*

Direct mail and local newspapers were seen as a good way for the Council to communicate to citizens:

*“the letterbox is probably the best way of communicating as it goes to everybody....”*

*“if I open The Observer and there is a notice in it about the bins, that is me getting information”*

The web was seen as being useful as a reference point, however discussion occurred around the issue of this not being inclusive of everyone:

*“it is important to have access to the web and to remember that there are people who literally don’t have access ”*

### **3.2.4 How Council can improve communications**

In the first group, discussion arose around the importance of Stirling Council’s *intent* to communicate to citizens in the area – everyone felt this was of utmost importance, more so than the actual means of communicating. It was felt that there wasn’t enough encouragement given to people to become involved in a two-way communication process:

*“nothing happening in terms of the Council getting people like myself involved or informed”*

In the second group, a Welcome Pack for new residents was suggested – all participants saw this as a good idea. It was suggested that it could go out with Council Tax bills or Stirling Focus:

*“how about a welcome pack for new residents ?”*

*“as a new family or individual, say tenant, moves into a home in Stirling, they are going to have to pay rates to the Council – there could be a welcome pack with one of these (Stirling Focus) and the Council’s detailed policy on refuse collection”*

*“there is also people in rented property, either local authority or private rented, it would be very good if that scheme could be developed there..... if that information could somehow go to landlords, I think that would be useful as well”*

Providing information in central places was suggested and welcomed in both groups. It was suggested this information could be in different places where citizens' attention may be caught – e.g. libraries, Thistle Centre, at the bus and train stations:

*“a display that school children did about recycling..... it was in the Council and you had to be there to see it.....what struck me about that display was that it inspired school children..... a display like that needs to be somewhere other than Council offices, in the library for example or Thistle Centre”*

*“having something in the Centre, an information point where you can go to access information e.g. regarding recycling or Council Tax or anything Council has to offer”*

*“people won't even go to Community Centre, they will just go to the shopping centre. If you have something in the town centre, and they are passing..... like an information point, they can ask the person to give them information, a phone number, or the correct person to contact”*

For older groups, it was suggested that they could have difficulties getting to Community Centres, but that Stirling Observer and leaflets are good communication channels.

### **3.3 Awareness and perceptions of Stirling Focus**

A copy of Stirling Focus was sent to all participants prior to the focus groups being held. At the groups, they were asked if they remember ever receiving a copy of it before then. Almost all participants were not aware of the publication and had not previously received one.

To gauge perceptions of Stirling Focus, the groups were asked to take part in a word association exercise whereby they wrote down three words that came into their mind when they thought of the publication. Both positive and negative thoughts were given. The following words and phrases illustrate the main themes:

- Good size
- Colours bright
- Easy to read, clear
- Informative
- Telephone numbers good
- Too many adverts
- Content disappointing

### 3.4 Format of Stirling Focus

The title 'Stirling Focus' was perceived as being good by both groups. Participants were then asked if they liked the current magazine format of Stirling Focus - a positive response was given by the majority. They liked its size, bright colours and some felt it was informative.

*"the print, quality, photographs – I'm comfortable with that, I recognise I would be concerned if it was very glossy, over produced"*

Participants were handed out some older versions of Stirling Focus (newspaper style) and asked if they preferred this to the current magazine style. The new magazine style was unanimously chosen. This was also preferred to receiving leaflets e.g. via a mailout to households.

Again, some participants felt that it was just one form of communication and needed to be backed up with another medium to inform citizens on more 'serious' matters which are occurring in the Council:

*"I would think, that as it is, it is useful, but it needs other stuff to back it up, a flyer or in-between information on an information point..... This is all well and it is good, I like it, but wouldn't fulfil a call for any serious information about what is going on at the moment in Stirling Council"*

*"it is useful and I would be quite happy to read it, but it needs a supplement in between, some sort of bulletin, more frequently on bigger issues about the Council"*

*"I think the challenge would be across the whole issues in year, to make sure that you are covering all of the various services that the Council has"*

#### 3.4.1 Other Council's publications

The groups were shown the following Councils' magazines/newsletters to determine what styles they preferred.

- 'La Tribune', Villeneuve D'Ascq (Stirling's French twin town)
- North Lanarkshire News
- Carlisle Focus
- Edinburgh Outlook
- 'Broadcast', Dumfries and Galloway
- Perth and Kinross News
- Your Cumbria, Cumbria County Council

Some of the above encouraged discussion. For example, 'La Tribune' had a pull-out Calendar of Events which several participants thought was useful. In addition, this magazine had all its adverts on single pages, which was appealing and considered to be easier to read than Stirling Focus, where both adverts and articles are sometimes on the same page.

Perth and Kinross News had a section called “Who’s Who” where Councillor’s names, photographs and telephone numbers were given - this was perceived as being very useful. In the last edition of Stirling Focus (Spring 2005), Councillor’s names and contact details were given, but not photographs.

The map showing walk and cycle routes in Edinburgh Outlook was seen as useful by one of the groups, in particular as it was a one-off pull-out supplement in the magazine:

*“this Edinburgh one has.... a map and it shows areas of walking, cycling. I know Stirling has got the cycle routes..... something along those lines could be useful, as a one-off in the magazine”*

### **3.5 Information in Stirling Focus**

The groups were asked their opinions on the content of the last edition of Stirling Focus, whether they felt anything was missing and what types of stories they would like to read. This encouraged different discussions in the groups. Some people found it easy to read, interesting and informative, whilst others did not.

#### **3.5.1 Content**

Generally, both groups wanted the publication to be open and informative, providing information which reflected both negative and positive news about Council services:

*“needs to be informative rather than PR”*

*“don’t put a spin on it if its good or bad or any controversy about it, just inform us. In-depth information about it, so not really to colour it, just to inform”*

The first urban group were generally positive about the contents:

*“I think it is about right, it is easy to be critical”*

*“it does appeal to everyone..... you need a bit of a mixed bag to appeal to everyone”*

*“its mature. I simply see it as a process of evolution”*

However, some members of the group did not find it informative:

*“we were actually disappointed in the contents and that it didn’t tell us anymore than we knew through local chit chat”*

*“it is superficial”*

The second group tended to discuss the articles they liked in Stirling Focus. They were interested in those which focused on services.

*“I was interested in the series of work that people are doing, about the Community Wardens. I would like information like that”*

*“I like the bits about Volunteer Centres, what they are doing”*

*“like the Volunteer Centres, the Trading Standards one is telling you something about what people do in those services. They are also offering information about how you access those services”*

*“what interested me was the good sports part, where you had the children going on about sport and fitness”*

### **3.5.2 Adverts**

When asked what they thought about the number of adverts in Stirling Focus, some participants didn't mind, whilst other thought there were too many. As previously mentioned, the groups liked 'La Tribune' publication, where all adverts were on single pages. This topic was brought up again, with some participants saying this was easier to read.

The main discussions in both groups surrounded the issue of the cost of producing the publication and sponsorship from adverts. Most participants felt that they didn't mind the adverts if it meant reducing Council spending:

*“I counted 10 adverts in 32 pages, which I think you collect heavily for that publication. I mean if there is a financial thing there that helps cover the costs of publication then that's the decision”*

*“sell your principles for the sake of the cost of the magazine. Possibly, yes. If that's what we've got to do, then okay..... If it comes to; is the magazine published or not, because of how many adverts are in, then go with it”*

*“I have to say, if the inclusion of the adverts means it costs the Council less to produce, I'd prefer that”*

### **3.5.3 What is missing**

Having discussed what they thought was missing from the publication, no real consensus was met in the first group. This was with the exception of including Stirling citizens' views in the publication:

*“we really want to get the views from people who live in Stirling and are directly affected by Stirling Council services to give the feedback on - it is good or not good, and not to conceal the fact that the voice of the people has to be heard”*

*“include stories about local people, inclusive of everybody”*

*“as long as it is integral to the story of the Council’s activity.....and gets a point of view of somebody who lives in the town about what they need and like. If you sit in a wheelchair it is a different world, if you are disabled, you see things quite differently”*

The second group thought a ‘What’s On’ guide would be useful e.g. Tolbooth listings and sports activities at Forthbank. In addition, discussion arose around the importance of providing information about rural issues in Stirling Focus.

### **3.5.4 Inserts and cut-outs**

Inserts or cut outs in Stirling Focus were perceived to be good ideas by both groups – this emerged throughout the discussion groups. Some suggestions were given:

- A-Z contacts, useful numbers
- Guide to Services
- Tear out and keep borders, rather than inserts
- What’s On
- Useful information in different languages

### **3.5.5 Questionnaires**

Participants were asked if they would complete short questionnaires if they were inserted in Stirling Focus periodically, and whether they thought the general public would also do so. The majority said yes, dependent on its relevance, clearness and simplicity.

### **3.5.6 Performance information**

The groups were asked if they would like to read in Stirling Focus how the Council is performing and where money is being spent. Both groups wanted to see such information in the publication and again stressed the importance of providing open and informative information:

*“if you do put something in it like that, it has got to be purposeful”*

*“what we want to know is why does our tax go up year after year”*

*“it is important to have that sort of information clear and not confusing”*

*“I don’t mind if the information is to cover up a mistake, as long as I am told”*

*“who would be writing such an article? Would it be objective?”(agreed by all)*

*“information on how money is being spent on education and where the money is going”*

When asked if pie charts were a good method of presenting performance information, mixed opinions were given. Generally, pie charts were seen as being a good presentational tool, however several participants commented on the performance information (pie chart) in the last edition of Stirling Focus. It was felt that this didn’t provide enough information:

*“I thought the pie chart was so high level that you couldn’t actually disaggregate its element. I would be interested in finding out how much money is going on schools, sport, recreation. To say 44% for Children’s Service is fine, but I’d like to know where it is going”*

*“have it (pie chart) broken down”*

*“I thought that pie chart was simply very high level. If you had put more information in, it would be better”*

*“it needs to be kept simple, but this (pie chart) is too simple. It doesn’t provide enough information i.e. reference to it”*

### **3.6 Frequency of production**

When asked how often they would like to receive Stirling Focus, it was generally felt that quarterly would be best, with seasonal editions. One group felt it was more important to get the distribution right as many people hadn’t received it.

### **3.7 Readers panel**

Both groups said they would be interested in taking part in a Reader’s Panel, should it be formed.

**PART 2**

**RURAL FOCUS GROUPS**

## **4.0 Rural focus groups**

### **4.1 General Comments**

Four males and three females attended the rural group. As there were only a few people who offered to participate, it was more difficult to recruit different age groups. As a result, the age of participants was generally older than those in the urban groups. One person was aged between 35 – 44 years, whilst six were aged over 55 years.

### **4.2 General communications from Stirling Council**

#### **4.2.1 Importance of communications**

Similar to the urban groups, it was important to participants that they know what the Council is doing and what money is being spent on.

The discussion highlighted their need to be informed and given accurate information, however was dominated by the groups' feelings of rural areas being generally excluded in communications from Stirling Council:

*“it (Stirling Focus) focuses on Stirling and we are out in the villages” (majority agreed)*

*“we are badly served out here and that’s it in a nutshell. You don’t listen to us”*

*“this is in Stirling Council and the furthest west it (Stirling Focus) comes basically is the Raploch. Apart from one line mentioning Killearn School, that’s about it”*

*“you’ll see nothing of the western villages if you look through here (Stirling Focus). Absolutely nothing and that’s not unusual is it?”*

*“its not neutral is it?”*

*“You might as well be in Bombay or something like that. That is the situation”*

These feelings of exclusion and discontent were re-visited throughout the focus group.

## 4.2.2 Expect to find information

Some suggestions were given as to where the group expected to see Council information e.g. library, Stirling Observer, Councillors and the internet. However, again, the discussion mainly surrounded the issue of rural areas not being given enough information (particularly about the roads):

*"I don't think you get that information (on what Council is doing). Not the information you need e.g. the Council doesn't spend anything like they declare they are going to spend on roads. Where does money go to if it doesn't go on roads?"*

*"make it known to everyone"*

*"you know, if you want to know where the money was spent, how much it costs etc, you do have to go and dig it out"*

*"everybody in this area is complaining about the roads because they are in such a bad state and have been for a long number of years, so naturally we want information on the roads"*

## 4.2.3 Preference in communications

When asked how they would *prefer* to find out or receive information about Stirling Council services, some suggestions were made. For example, Community Council, libraries, website and direct mail:

*"posting this out to everyone. It means you can't say you haven't received it, or you can't get to the Community Council meeting, or your Community Council doesn't use a notice board, or you can't go on the internet. If you send it by post you have got it haven't you?"*

The Stirling Council website was praised by several participants:

*"has anybody looked at the website – it is excellent. You can get every detail on the website, what's happening. I don't think there are many people logging onto it"*

*"it is a good website and I don't think you can complain they are not giving us enough information if you don't use the facilities"*

*"the website tells you most things and for us in the west, particularly Drymen you can log onto the National Park"*

As with the urban groups, discussion occurred around the issue of the website being exclusive of those who don't have access to a computer. The need to have different methods of communication was stressed by the group:

*"there would need to be an alternative method as you say, a lot don't have computers and can't use it, why should they be excluded?"*

#### 4.2.4 How Stirling Council can improve communications

The Stirling Observer and Councillors were seen as channels to improve communications. However, the discussion began on the problems associated with accessing Council information in rural areas:

*"I have a car, I have no problem getting information if I want it. Other people don't have access to facilities as they don't have a car, they can't get to Balfron, so just the library is no good"*

*"we don't have facilities, we are so isolated"*

The majority felt that a way of improving communications from Stirling Council was via the Stirling Observer:

*"of course there is another forum for day to day communications – the Stirling Observer. A lot of this information could be put from the official point of view....an official Council column"*

*"there is planning information, that sort of thing, but I am talking about day to day – it (Stirling Observer) would be a very good forum"*

*"have the various villages writing in as to what's going on – that could be incorporated"*

The group also thought that communications should reach them through their Councillors:

*"I think the vehicle must be through our Councillors, I don't think we use our Councillors enough"*

*"you have Councillors if you are unhappy with the roads, you should be going to your Councillor and I think that is what we don't do in the western villages. I don't think we make our Councillors work hard enough for us"*

*"does the feedback from this group go to Councillors? Because if it doesn't, it should" (agreed by all)*

### 4.3 Awareness and perceptions of Stirling Focus

A copy of Stirling Focus was sent to all participants prior to the focus groups being held. At the groups, they were asked if they remember ever receiving a copy of it before then. Four participants had, whilst three had not.

The group proceeded to discuss once again their feelings about the lack of communication from Stirling Council; everyone felt the Council aren't interested in what they have to say:

*"I am not a member of the Community Council in Strathblane, but I do go occasionally and I get the very distinct impression that it is a total waste of time them recommending anything to the Council, you should do something about this. They never ever get an answer"*

*"Balfron is in the same position. They reflect how the people feel. The Council don't want to know how we feel, they really don't want to know" (agreed by all)*

*"you only have to go on the roads situation, there have been umpteen letters in the papers about the roads, especially in the western villages. Do they take any notice of it, not a blind bit of notice"*

*"I had an enormous problem getting a reply from the Council (about gritting on roads), even though I used a Councillor"*

*"nobody will listen, I don't know what we have to do to listen, they take our money and do very little in return"*

*"we want to know how fairly we are being treated"*

The group wrote down three words that came into their mind when they thought of the publication. Both positive and negative thoughts were given. The following words and phrases illustrate the main themes:

- Well presented
- Colourful
- Compact
- Haphazard
- Print too small
- Lacking in information

## 4.4 Format of Stirling Focus

The title 'Stirling Focus' was perceived by everyone in the group, as not being representative of the rural areas. The group felt it gave the impression it concentrated on Stirling city.

The group liked size and colours of Stirling Focus, but some felt the print was too small.

As with the urban groups, the newer magazine style was unanimously chosen over the old newspaper style. This was also preferred to receiving leaflets e.g. via direct mail to households.

### 4.4.1 Other Council's publications

The group was shown some of the following Councils' magazines/newsletters to determine what styles they preferred:

- 'La Tribune', Villeneuve D'Ascq (Stirling's French twin town)
- North Lanarkshire News
- Carlisle Focus
- Edinburgh Outlook
- 'Broadcast', Dumfries and Galloway
- Your Cumbria, Cumbria County Council
- Falkirk Council's publication

Similar to the urban groups, the rural group were impressed by La Tribune's pull-out 'Calendar of Events'.

The 'What's Your View' section of Falkirk's publication which allowed readers to give their opinion on Council matters was also appealing to some of the group.

## 4.5 Information in Stirling Focus

The rural participants were asked their opinions on the content of the last edition of Stirling Focus, whether they felt anything was missing and what types of stories they would like to read.

The majority felt the latest edition of Stirling Focus wasn't very easy to read:

*"you can't just pick it up and read it – you have to go through cover to cover to get the information. It is not terribly logically laid out"*

*"it is haphazard. You are getting all sorts of juxtapositions about all sorts of information"*

*"I think it is haphazard and there is no theme to it"*

### 4.5.1 What is missing

The group felt that Stirling Focus should provide a realistic picture of what is happening in the Council by highlighting both positive and negative stories:

*“they don’t tell us the negatives and this (Stirling Focus) is perhaps the forum where they should”*

*“this is our right to know and get a balanced view right down the middle and let us make our own judgements from that and it has to be accurate, not skewed to promote any kind of political point of view”*

*“information has to be factual” (agreed by all)*

*“they could tell us what their policies are going to be”*

The type of information the group thought was missing from Stirling Focus was predominantly what Council money is being spent on, see section 4.5.2 (Performance Information).

### 4.5.2 Performance information

The group felt that clear and informative performance information was missing from Stirling Focus.

The type of performance information they wanted was where Council money was being spent:

*“you could take one area and give us a breakdown on how the money is spent”*

*“I think each one could have a theme e.g. roads, education”*

*“information that is a cost to the tax payer”*

Throughout the focus group, participants referred to the performance information (pie chart) in the last edition of Stirling Focus. The majority felt that the chart wasn’t informative and that comparative information with other Councils would be useful:

*“it is a very broad chart and it tells you absolutely nothing”*

*“it is hiding stuff I suspect”*

*“there is no comparator – we don’t know how other regions, other Councils, other areas have done”*

*“comparisons with other Councils where they have more financial information and compare how they are doing with other people and not hiding behind broad brush stuff like this pie chart – a lovely page which tells us nothing” (agreed by all)*

### **4.5.3 Adverts / Costs of publication**

When asked what they thought about the number of adverts in Stirling Focus, little discussion was generated, however it surrounded the issue of the cost of producing the publication and sponsorship from adverts. Most participants felt that they didn't mind the adverts if it meant reducing Council spending.

A few people mentioned that they would rather money was spent on roads than on communications.

### **4.5.4 Inserts and cut-outs**

Inserts or cut outs in Stirling Focus were perceived to be good ideas by the rural group. Some suggestions were given:

- A-Z contacts, useful numbers
- Guide to Services
- What's On Guide (including rural areas)

### **4.5.5 Questionnaires**

If questionnaires were inserted in Stirling Focus, the group felt there would be a poor response rate from rural areas, as they felt their viewpoint is not listened to.

## **4.6 Frequency of production**

When asked how often they would like to receive Stirling Focus, it was generally felt that quarterly would be best.

## **4.7 Readers panel**

The majority of the group were not interested in being involved in a Readers Panel.

## **5.0 Conclusions**

The results from this research have illustrated some interesting findings which should help inform the production of the forthcoming editions of Stirling Focus. This section firstly draws the main conclusions from the findings.

### **Urban groups**

Receiving general communications from Stirling Council was very important to urban citizens. The intent and enthusiasm of Stirling Council to communicate information to the public was also seen as crucial, as was the provision of open and informative (positive and negative) information.

The requirement to have different methods of communication at different times was seen as very important. Urban participants expected to find information about Stirling Council mainly in libraries and on Stirling Council's website. Other methods were the Stirling Observer, Local Offices and via Councillors. Preferences of channels of communication were via a publication such as Stirling Focus, direct mail or the Stirling Observer. The Stirling Council website was seen as an effective channel but not inclusive of everyone in Stirling Council area.

A Welcome Pack for new residents to the area and information points in central places in Stirling city e.g. libraries, Thistle shopping centre, train and bus stations were suggested as ways to improve communications.

Awareness of Stirling Focus prior to the focus groups was almost non-existent. Perceptions of the publication were positive; the size, colours and informative articles were regarded highly by urban participants. The magazine version was preferred to the older newspaper style. The presence of adverts in Stirling Focus was preferred on single pages, however participants were content to have adverts in the publication if it reduced Council spending.

Elements perceived as missing from Stirling Focus were the Council obtaining citizens' views to enable communications to be a two way process, and also the presence of a 'What's On Guide'. The importance of providing information for rural areas was also stressed.

The requirement of providing open and informative performance information (positive and negative) was very important. The performance information (pie chart) in the last edition of Stirling Focus was perceived as not providing enough meaningful information.

Inserts or cut-outs were perceived as good ideas, in particular 'A-Z Contacts', 'A Guide to Services' and a 'What's On Guide'. Participants felt that the publication should be produced quarterly (seasonal).

The concept of inserting questionnaires periodically in Stirling Focus and forming a Readers Panel was received positively.

## Rural groups

The rural citizens had feelings of exclusion and discontentment with general communications from Stirling Council. The group felt that rural areas do not have access to enough information and that their viewpoints are not listened to. These issues largely dominated the focus group discussion. The group wasn't impressed with Stirling Focus as it lacked articles on rural issues, and felt they would be very disappointed if future editions of Stirling Focus were similar to this.

Receiving general communications from Stirling Council was very important to rural citizens. As with urban citizens, the intent and enthusiasm of Stirling Council to communicate information was crucial, as was the provision of open and informative (positive and negative) information .

Rural participants' expectations of where to find information about Stirling Council were libraries, the Stirling Observer and Stirling Council's website. Preferred channels of communication were the website (rated highly, but again not fully inclusive), Community Councils, libraries, direct mail and the Stirling Observer. Suggested main methods of improving communications were via the Stirling Observer and Councillors.

Over half of the group was aware of Stirling Focus prior to the focus groups. Perceptions of the publication were mixed. Positive aspects were size and colours, however the print was seen as being too small. Participants did not find the publication easy to read and considered it haphazard and largely uninformative. The title was perceived as being not being representative of the rural areas and gave the impression it focused on Stirling city.

The magazine version was preferred to the older newspaper style. Similar to urban citizens, the presence of adverts in Stirling Focus was accepted if it helped reduced Council spending.

Realistic information, highlighting both positive and negative issues was perceived as missing from Stirling Focus, in particular performance information. Rural participants were keen to see open and informative information regarding Council spending. Similar to the urban groups, the performance information (pie chart) in the last edition of Stirling Focus was perceived as not providing enough meaningful information.

Again, similar to the urban participants, inserts or cut-outs were perceived as good ideas, in particular 'A-Z Contacts', 'A Guide to Services' and a 'What's On Guide'. The notion of producing the publication quarterly was welcomed.

The concept of inserting questionnaires periodically in Stirling Focus and forming a Readers Panel were not received positively by rural participants – they did not want to be part of a Readers Panel and felt response rates to questionnaires in rural areas would be low.

# **APPENDIX 1**

## **DISCUSSION PLAN**

## Stirling Focus - Discussion Plan

### Introduction – (5 minutes)

- Thank you all very much for coming today. My name is Debbie Cunnell and I work for Stirling Council, and this is my colleague Susan Cunningham who is here to help answer any questions you may have.
- We are interested to find out what your thoughts and feelings are about one of our publications – Stirling Focus.
- So, the purpose of today is to have a very informal discussion. My role is to **encourage you to tell us what you think**, and to keep the conversation flowing in the right direction.
- Obviously, everyone will have very different experiences and opinions, and it is invaluable for us to hear all of these. So don't be afraid to speak up! Everything you say today will be kept in strict confidence.
- Just to make sure that I remember everything you have said today, I would like to **tape this session**. Is everyone OK with that? I'll ask you to sign a form at the end, to confirm that you gave permission to record. This will only be used for the purpose of this research.
- As I am taping this conversation, and everyone's individual response is important, I would ask that you **speak one at a time** so that I can record it all clearly.
- The session will last **no more than an hour and a half** and we will be finished by 7.30pm at the latest
- OK. Just a few housekeeping details before we can get started. The **toilets** are situated outside to the right, and the drinks are on the side. Please feel free to nip out to use the toilet or to grab a drink as you need. Please switch off your mobile phones.

### Warm-up (5 minutes)

- So, as I said, it's really important that you all get a chance to talk as your comments are very valuable to us. I would like to start by asking each of you to introduce yourself to the group – name, where you live and your favourite thing about where you live

## 1.0 General communications from Stirling Council (15 mins)

I would like to start by asking you about the way the Council communicates its news to you.

- How important is it that you know what the Council is doing?
- Where would you expect to find information on what the Council is doing?
- How would you prefer to find out or receive information about Council services?
- How could the Council improve its communications with you?

## 2.0 Awareness/Perceptions of Stirling Focus (15 mins)

- You will have received a copy of Stirling Focus from me in the last few weeks. Do you remember ever receiving a copy of it before then?
- I would like to know what your perceptions of Stirling Focus are. Let's do a little **exercise**.... Take a minute to write three words that come to your mind when you think of Stirling Focus.
- What did you write? [take turn – 3 or 4 people]. Has anyone else written something different?

## 3.0 Format of Stirling Focus – (15 minutes)

- Is Stirling Focus a good title?
- Do you like the current magazine format of Stirling Focus? E.g. the look of it? colours? Enough photographs?
- Would you prefer a newspaper rather than a magazine?
- Or would you rather receive leaflets or newsletters from the Council?
- Here are some older versions of Stirling Focus – what do you think of them? Do you prefer the larger versions?
- Here are some examples of other Councils' magazines. Which one(s) appeal to you most and why?

#### **4.0 Information in Stirling Focus – (20 minutes)**

- Do you think Stirling Focus is easy to read?
- What about the content – too much or too little?
- Is anything missing from Stirling Focus that would make it a better read? E.g. (letters page, competitions, prizes, reviews, stories that give a more realistic (positive and negative) image of Stirling Council?)
- What do you think Stirling Focus should have more stories about:  
e.g. local people, Councillors, local businesses and organisations,  
Council services and how to access them, Community events?
- Would you like to read in Stirling Focus, about how the Council is performing and where money is being spent?
- What information would you want on how the Council is performing?
- Do you think it would be useful to have inserts or cut outs, in Stirling Focus? – Maybe every 6 months? E.g. A-Z of Services? Useful phone numbers? Contact Centre reminder? Emergency info?
- If Stirling Focus had short questionnaires occasionally inserted in them, do you think you would complete them?

#### **5.0 Production of Stirling in Focus (10 mins)**

- How would you feel about receiving Stirling Focus every two months from the Council?
- If there was a readers' panel for Stirling Focus would you be interested in taking part? This would mean that you would see draft editions of the magazine before it was sent out, and have some input into what goes in it.
- Do you think a Council newspaper or magazine should be paid for by local businesses and organisations advertising or by taxpayers' money?

#### **[click] Closing (5 minutes)**

- We only have 5 minutes left, so I would like to finish by briefly summing up what has been said this evening. If you think I have misinterpreted something, please say.
- Thank you very much for your time and co-operation. All that's left is for me to ask you to sign this form saying you don't mind being recorded.