

# Manager Conference Survey

**Research study for**

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# 1 Executive Summary

Lancashire County Council's manager conferences, which have been running since 2002, were initiated as part of the culture change programme. They are run regularly although their format has changed since the last set of events. They now use a mix of interview and question and answer sessions to replace formal presentations at the start. The second part of the conference was a workshop, facilitated by CTU trainers, to look at values within the organisation.

All 237 managers who had registered to attend one of the October to December 2008 manager conferences were invited to complete a short online survey into their experience of the conference. The survey was completed by 97 managers, giving a response rate of 41%.

## 1.1 Key findings

- Overall, almost all respondents were satisfied with the manager conference they attended (79% were very or fairly satisfied, with 27% of all respondents *very* satisfied), though 9% of respondents answered that they were dissatisfied. Overall ratings have fallen since the last set of conferences (by 15% for very or fairly satisfied), and could result from previous experience of the conference affecting perceptions because previous attendees were less likely to be satisfied.
- Satisfaction with aspects before the conference (registering for the conference and usefulness of joining instructions) and the venues is high. Although respondents were less satisfied with the amount and usefulness of the information given at the conference.
- Although a quarter of delegates said the conference didn't meet their expectations (26%), most would recommend it to a colleague (88%). The reasons given for it failing to meet their expectations were around the changed style of the conference (ie lack of involvement from delegates in the question and answer session) and the usefulness of the information they were given.
- Three-fifths of people responding to the survey had attended a manager conference before – representing more first time delegates for this set of events (particularly from lower pay scales). The main reasons given for attending were to hear an overview of the challenges facing the council (88%).
- Most delegates had heard of the conference through staff notices on the intranet (57%) or by email (25%).
- Respondents wanted the conferences every six months (56%).

- The most preferred priority for manager conferences is for them to be a communications tool and for personal motivation. And managers most preferred to share the conference information with their team in a team meeting and thought that written summaries would help them most to share information with colleagues.

## 1.2 Recommendations

Delegates felt that “managers conferences are an ideal opportunity for the ELT to share the vision and way forward” and had many suggestions for how to improve the events.

- The delegates wanted more interaction with senior managers (eg joining discussion groups, participating in the whole event). It was especially important to delegates to be able to ask their own questions during the question and answer sessions (eg formulated from group work, or submitted individually during the conference or in advance).
- Respondents thought that the information given at the conference could be improved by giving more specific information on issues and challenges the authority is facing (eg how the county council is preparing for the recession) and on the direction of the council. Getting this right is especially important as this was their primary reason for attending.
- Have a clear programme showing what will be covered in the conference to manage expectations and make it clear to delegates what will be expected of them and how they can prepare.
- Continue holding events every six months as this is the most preferred frequency, and ensure the rooms are large enough to comfortably accommodate the number of attendees.
- Consider creating written summaries of the conference on the intranet as delegates thought this was the most useful way to share information with colleagues. As delegates felt video material was less useful, the amount of events that are filmed needs to be considered because one attendee felt it “made it a little uncomfortable for people”.
- Review the way the events are promoted in light of who the events are aimed at. For example consider targeting the promotion at specific directorates to increase attendance in directorates where it is lower, and whether to continue to encourage more managers who have not attended a conference before (for example by not inviting previous delegates).

## **2 Introduction**

Lancashire County Council's manager conferences, which have been running since 2002, were initiated as part of the culture change programme. They are run regularly with more than one opportunity each time for managers to participate. The conferences are a half day in length. Their format has changed since the last set of events. They now use a mix of interview and question and answer sessions to replace formal presentations at the start. The second part of the conference was a workshop, facilitated by CTU trainers, to look at values within the organisation. The conference is promoted by a variety of means including staff notices on the homepage of the intranet, an article in fast forward and direct emails to managers.

The last set of conferences were held in from October to December 2008, two events were held at Woodlands, one at the Hub, and one at County Hall. Attendance has generally been around 40 to 50 attendees for each conference.

To measure the success of these conferences, and take on any suggestions for improvement, a short survey of delegates was commissioned.

## **3 Methodology**

All 237 managers who registered to attend the October to December 2008 manager conferences were invited to complete a short online questionnaire on their experience of the conference. The invitation was sent by email with a link to the survey, there was no reminder email was sent.

The survey looked into the communications before the conference, the usefulness of the conference itself and suggestions for future improvements.

The survey was completed by 97 managers, giving a response rate of 41%.

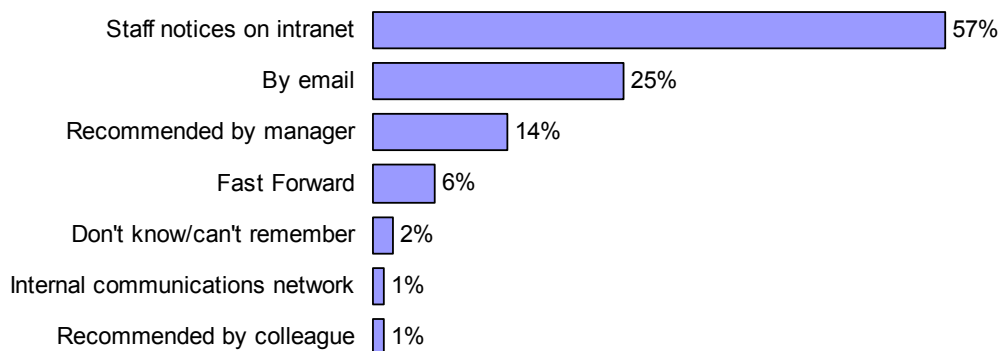
## 4 Main Research Findings

Lists of respondents' comments from the questionnaire are in the appendix.

### 4.1 Before the manager conference

Respondents to the survey were most likely to have heard about the conference from staff notices on the intranet (57%) and email (25%). These remain the most effective promotional methods, although the importance of the staff notices has increased and email has decreased since events earlier in the year.

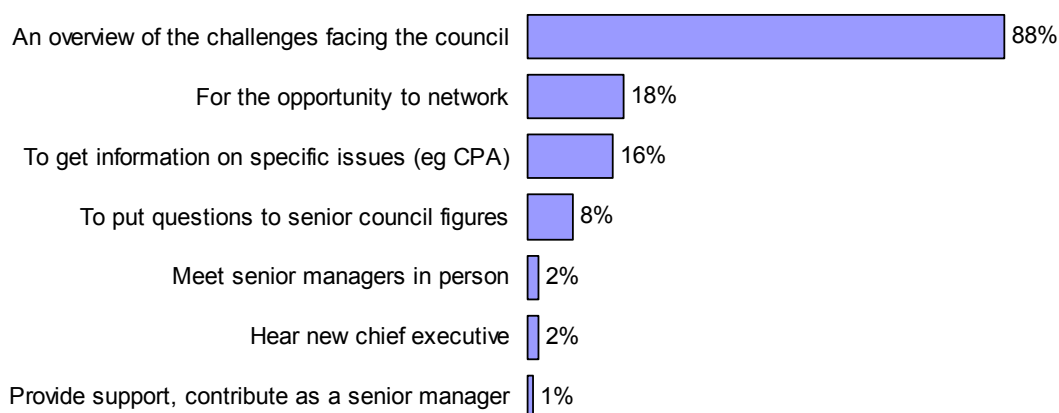
**Chart 1 - How did you hear about the manager conference?**



Base: all respondents (96)

About nine in ten of delegates attended to receive an overview of the challenges facing the council (which was also the most popular reason for attending previous events). The next most popular reasons for attending were to network (18%) and get information on specific issues (16%).

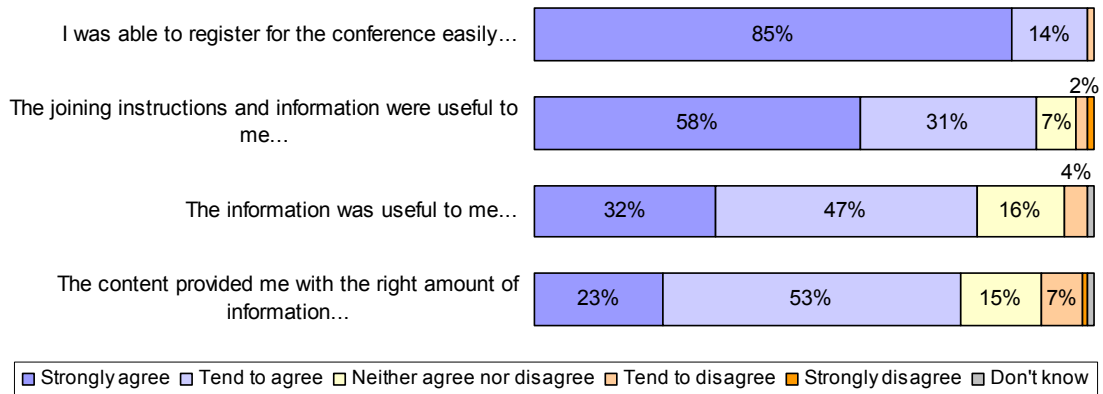
**Chart 2 - And why did you decide to attend the conference?**



Base: all respondents (96)

The vast majority of survey respondents agreed that they were able to register for the conference easily (85% strongly agreed) and that the joining instructions and information were useful (58% strongly agreed). The agreement with the statements that the information was useful to me and the content provided me with the right amount of information was less strong (32% and 23% strongly agreed respectively).

**Chart 3 - And how much do you agree that...?**



Base: all respondents (96)

The respondents who were more likely to agree that the conference provided them with the right amount of information were more senior managers (56% strongly agree) compared to middle managers (21% of PO43-54 strongly agree), and for first-time attendees (28% strongly agree) compared to previous attendees (20% strongly agree).

Respondents were then asked how the information given in the conference could be improved. The improvements suggested were mainly around giving more specific information on issues and challenges the authority is facing, allowing the audience to interact more and ask open questions during the question and answer sessions, and to have a clear programme showing what will be covered in the conference.

The actual comments respondents made are written below.

*"I would prefer more detail about specific issues and challenges we are facing. I did not like the contrived pretend interview situation, and could not really see the point of the exercise of what is important to me - issues arising were obvious but we spent a lot of time on this that I felt could have been more usefully expended."*

29 October at the Woodlands Centre

*"I don't remember much information being given apart from personal history. The focus appeared to be on participation of delegates looking at a values exercise"*

29 October at the Woodlands Centre

*"I did not get the 'direction' or strong messages that have previously been delivered at these conferences and I felt I had not been given the Corporate view of where LCC was heading for the coming year and beyond. This information is useful so that the plans we make are in tune with the corporate 'feel'."*

29 October at the Woodlands Centre

*"By giving a true picture of what the 1/2 day session would involve. It was hardly a 'manager conference'".*

29 October at the Woodlands Centre

*"Would have been better if Hazel, Ged and Stuart could have stayed for the workshop session"*

21 November at the Red Rose Hub

*"Question and answer session was stage-managed with limited opportunities to put questions direct. Content could be improved by focussing on specific issues."*

21 November at the Red Rose Hub

*"As done in the early conferences more chance for open questions."*

21 November at the Red Rose Hub

*"Bullet points on items/topics to be discussed. State there will be group work and what it will on."*

21 November at the Red Rose Hub

*"I have no improvements to suggests as I felt that the way in which the session was set ie informal and accessible was very good."*

9 December at the Woodlands Centre

*"What information? The answers provided by the panel to the questions? Advance notice of the opportunity to pose questions would have been useful."*

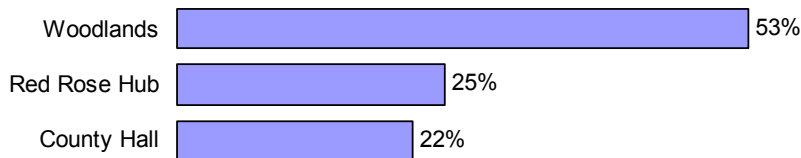
9 December at the Woodlands Centre



## 4.2 At the conference

The spread of survey respondents across the three venues match the events held as two events were held at Woodlands and consequently more respondents attended this event (53%).

**Chart 4 - Which conference venue did you attend?**

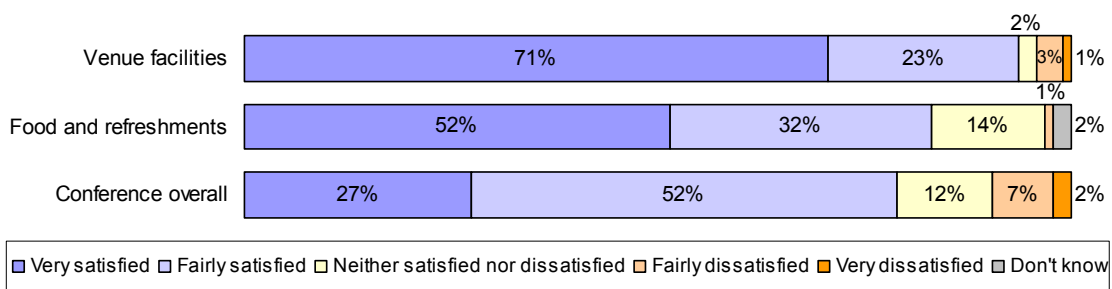


Base: all responses (96)

The majority of delegates were very satisfied with the venue facilities (71%), but less likely to be very satisfied with the food and refreshments (52%). Respondents were less satisfied with the food and refreshments served at County Hall (15% very satisfied) against all other events.

The majority of respondents were satisfied with the conference overall (79%), those most were only fairly satisfied (52%). Though a significant proportion were dissatisfied with the conference overall (9%). This is a significant drop in satisfaction since the August 2008 events (15% fall in proportion of respondents very or fairly satisfied). It is respondents who have been to a conference before who are less satisfied with it overall (23% very satisfied) compared to first-time attendees (33% very satisfied). This difference could result from their previous experience affecting their expectations.

**Chart 5 - How satisfied were you with...?**



Base: all responses (95)

Only a three-quarters of respondents said the conference met their expectations (74%), and this is a significant fall since the August 2008 events when 93% said it met their expectations.

The 24 people who said the conference did not meet their expectations were asked why the conference didn't meet their expectations. These reasons could partly explain respondents lower levels of overall satisfaction with this set of events. A full list of the comments can be found in the appendix.

The main reasons respondents gave were that "the opening question session was stage managed" some delegates feeling that "the conference delegates merely observed passively". Because of this they felt that "the vision of the senior management team was not conveyed clearly" and "[didn't] assist them in helping plan my services' activity in the future to match the aims of the ELT". A few people said they "left the conference feeling that [they] had heard nothing new" and didn't know "how the things mentioned were to be achieved". A number of respondents also didn't like the values group session because they felt they have already "been flogged to death in the past". Another respondent didn't receive any joining instructions so they "didn't know what to expect or how to prepare ... [and couldn't find] contact details on the intranet site [to] enquire in advance".

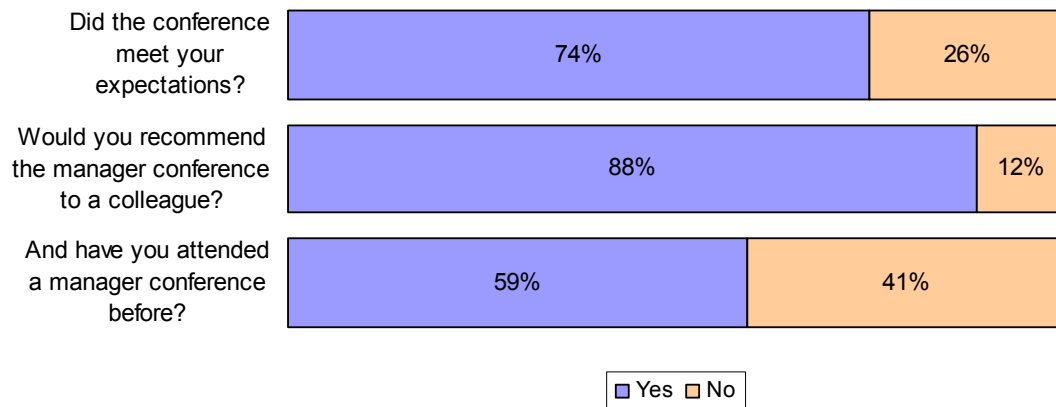
They wanted the sessions to be informative on the direction of the council, a number of respondents wanted corporate issues being faced by the council on the agenda (eg "how LCC was preparing itself for the forthcoming recession"). They also wanted to be able to put their own questions to the panel, perhaps by having a "group discussion during which each table could come up with a set of questions", and to have "an opportunity to talk with senior managers or network". One respondent suggested having "input from the panel for the whole session".

Although most respondents would recommend the manager conferences to a colleague (88%), it has fallen since the last set of events (by 9%). Three-fifths of respondents had been to a manager conference before (59%). This set of conferences attracted more first time delegates than the ones earlier in the year<sup>1</sup>, and therefore reaching a wide cross-section of managers. No respondents on lower pay scales (SO2 and below) had been to a conference before.

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<sup>1</sup> This could be a result of the type of people who are more likely to complete a survey

**Chart 6 - Conference attendance**



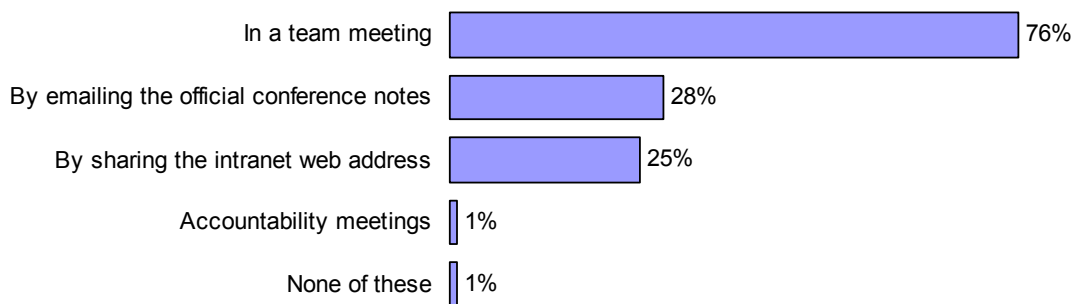
Base: all respondents (94)

### 4.3 Preferences for future conferences

Most respondents prefer to share the information from the conference with their team face-to-face in a team meeting (76%). The electronic forms of communication were less favoured (emailing official conference notes 28%, sharing the intranet web address 25%).

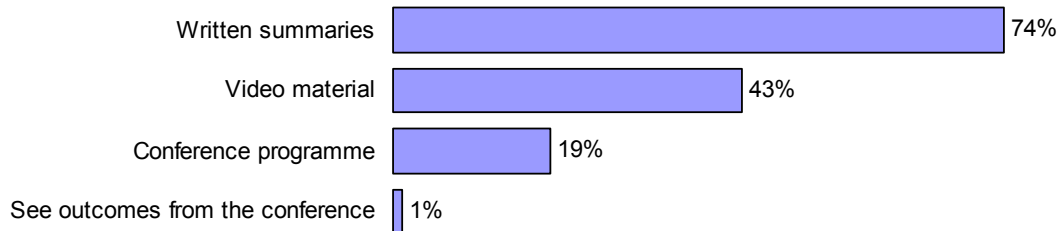
The most preferred online materials to help share the information from the conference with colleagues were written summaries (74%) and video material (43%). Fewer respondents thought that the conference programme would be useful (19%), although respondents on lower pay scales were more likely to find it useful (up to SO2 67%). Written summaries were more preferred by middle managers (PO 43-54 81%) compared to senior managers.

**Chart 7 - How would you prefer to share information from the conference with your team?**



Base: all respondents (95)

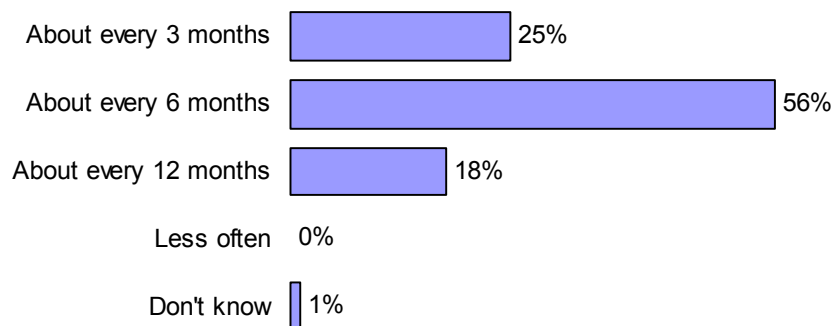
**Chart 8 - Which of the following online materials would you find most useful to help you share the conference information with colleagues?**



Base: all respondents (94)

The preference for the frequency of manager conferences remains to hold them about every 6 months (56%).

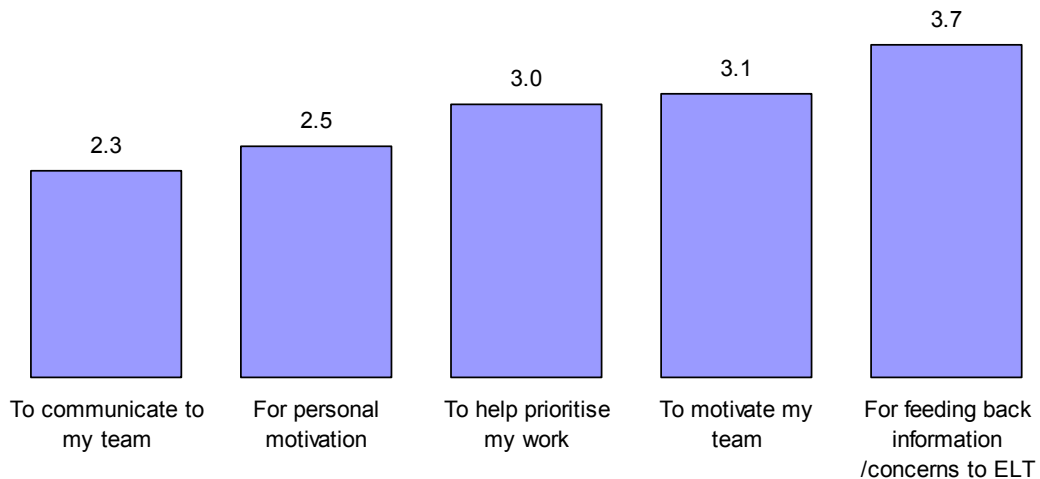
**Chart 9 - How often would you like to see the manager conferences arranged?**



Base: all respondents (95)

The next question asked what the priorities of the conferences should be. The most important priorities were to use them for communicating to my team and for personal motivation (mean rankings of 2.3 and 2.5 respectively). Using the conferences to help prioritise my work, to motivate my team, and for feeding back information or concerns to CMB are all less preferred.

**Chart 10 - What do you think the priorities of the manager conferences should be? Please rank each of the following aspects of the conference from 1 to 5 in order of their importance to you, where 1 is most important and 5 is least important.**



Base: mean rank from 1 to 5 - all respondents (89)

Delegates were also invited to give their suggestions for improving future manager conferences<sup>2</sup> given that one attendee said “managers conferences are an ideal opportunity for the ELT to share the vision and way forward”. The main themes coming from the comments were around the style of presentation and the information that is given at the conferences.

The information delegates are particularly interested in are “messages on the way forward, the authority’s priorities and the challenges facing us” so that they are “informative on the big issues”. An example for content was basing each event around a corporate theme or a key topic.

There were also suggestions around improving the delivery. They like participative elements but in general wanted “the question and answer session to be less staged and more open to attendees” this would make them “feel a bit more listened to” and be less intimidating. They suggested allowing “more opportunity for delegates to ask questions” either by:

- writing them down during a coffee break after they had listened to the key messages;
- allowing people to submit them online in advance; or
- group work during the conference where “groups can work on their own questions to put to the panel” which is “a relatively safe environment”.

<sup>2</sup> All of the comments are listed in the appendix.

Respondents also thought delegates would benefit from “knowing the content of ELT members discussion topics/strong messages that they want to deliver so that relevant questions can be asked from the floor” and they understood what was going to take place. Some attendees preferred the “formal presentation from senior managers about the hot topics to keep those of us based away from the centre fully up to date”.

Conference attendees also thought they could have more time for direct or informal interaction with senior managers. Examples given were:

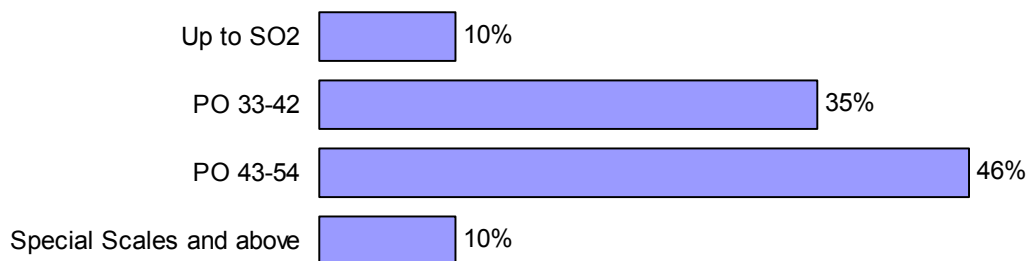
- through senior management participation in group activities as “small groups as this would make them more accessible”;
- through “feedback to the panel the results of group exercises ... to see how near their perceptions ... reflect the opinions of those present”;
- “some questions from the top table to the delegates would have stimulated debate”;
- “ELT to stay for whole conference and maybe spend some time talking directly to people around the tables to seek views and answer questions ... people don’t like to ask in the larger forum”.

Some respondents found the rooms cramped which caused problems with noise and the temperature, though they did like the informal layout and size of tables as it was easy to communicate with everyone around the table.

One person felt that “the fact that the conference was filmed made it a little uncomfortable for people”.

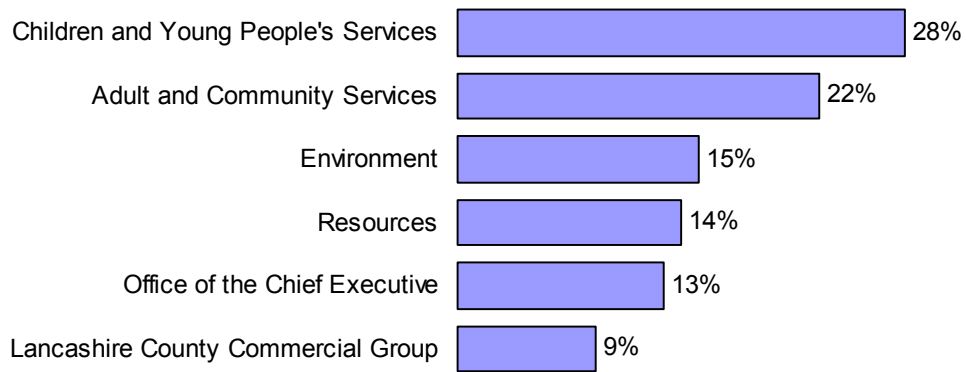
The final questions asked which directorate respondents worked in and for their job scale. Four-fifths of attendees were middle managers (PO33 to 54). Most respondents worked in Children and Young People and Adult and Community Services (28% and 22% respectively).

**Chart 11 - Please indicate below which area of the pay scale your job falls into.**



Base: all respondents (94)

**Chart 12 - *And finally, which directorate do you work for?***



Base: all respondents (94)

## 5 Appendix: open comments

### **Reasons respondents gave for the conferment not meeting their expectations (the question was “Why do you say this?”).**

“Also felt the interactive session was a "nice to do" rather than "this is really going to make a difference".” 29 October at the Woodlands Centre

“It did not address in your words "To get information on specific issues (eg CPA) or For an overview of the challenges facing the council". The opening question session was staged managed resulting in inane responses rather than the new C/Es vision, and challenges over the next 12 months / 3 years. There was nothing to assist me in helping plan my Service's activity in the future to match the aims of the ELT. The second part of the afternoon would have been more effective and meaningful had delegates been informed of the format before hand. However, I would question this session at a manager conference.” 29 October at the Woodlands Centre

“I was not impressed with the cosy question time format, particularly as the questions were put by a member of staff from the OCE whilst the conference delegates merely observed passively.” 29 October at the Woodlands Centre

“I didn't feel that any of the corporate issues needed to be faced by LCC were on the agenda. It was very insubstantial. Two younger members of staff I was seated with loved the exercise, but I felt it was a bit like being back at school.” 29 October at the Woodlands Centre

“Did not learn much” 29 October at the Woodlands Centre

“Left the conference feeling that had heard nothing new and wondering why it was felt that the values element was needed and what will be done with the information distilled from the activity session.” 3 November at County Hall

“Too rehearsed with little chance for questions.”  
21 November at the Red Rose Hub

“The information given by all the senior managers in the main was superficial with no real depth or substance. Most of the information given was already know by a lot of the managers there. I had expected they would advise how LCC was preparing itself for the forthcoming recession. I had thought Stuart Wrigley would talk how the Environment Directorate was preparing itself for the future bearing in mind all the recent changes and restructuring that has occur in his Directorate over the last 12 - 18 months. The working groups were virtually ineffective. I will think very hard before I go to the next Managers Conference because the one on the 21st of Nov was most certainly not the most effective use of my time.”  
21 November at the Red Rose Hub



“It was not as informative as other conferences. I did not like the Q&A style. The workshops revisited core values that we have flogged to death in the past. It is now time we started to find the root causes of why these common values are not yet implemented and embedded.”

21 November at the Red Rose Hub

“I was expecting to hear about challenges / issues affecting the Council, but only a small proportion of time was given to this.”

21 November at the Red Rose Hub

“I felt the vision of the senior management team was not conveyed clearly as it was at last conference I attended”

21 November at the Red Rose Hub

“I didn't think the group activity was effective in achieving its objectives. I felt that the value date delegates came up with was good to start with but the activity forced people to pigeon hole values into global categories which meant very little to me.”

21 November at the Red Rose Hub

“I believed I would be given some direction rather than someone pick our brains to compile managers competencies”

21 November at the Red Rose Hub

“The questioning from Kate Hunter was contrived and I believe unnecessary. I think a lot of people would have asked questions if the opportunity had been offered from the start. I would prefer Ged and Hazel to kick off by talking about priorities and challenges. Possibly this could be followed by group discussion during which each table could come up with a set of questions? I am not convinced that the exercise after the break was a great use of time”

9 December at the Woodlands Centre

“The opportunity was a welcome one, however only one of the panel could genuinely be described as inspiring and obviously passionate. Whilst the philosophical points espoused were unarguable, they did not give the impression of anything innovative or radical. The post break session was a time filler. The time would have been better spent enabling greater questioning of the panel.”

9 December at the Woodlands Centre

“The format is not conducive to ordinary staff members asking questions its too exposed. It was also too stage managed by the person asking the questions”

9 December at the Woodlands Centre

“Questions to the panel appeared to be orchestrated giving an impression, perhaps unfairly that responses were 'stage managed'. Only 2 or 3 questions were actually taken from the floor and there were no awkward or demanding questions. Very much 'on message'.”

9 December at the Woodlands Centre

"No joining instructions, therefore I didn't know what to expect or how to prepare. There were no contact details on the conference intranet site so I could not enquire in advance." 9 December at the Woodlands Centre

"It was very short and there wasn't much of an opportunity to talk with senior members or to network." 9 December at the Woodlands Centre

"I was concerned that the questions put to the panel and the answers were a bit pat. There was nothing really of substance in the answers as to how the things mentioned were to be achieved eg resources needed, staff etc, serious acknowledgement of the work that staff and managers already achieve in making LCC an excellent council." 9 December at the Woodlands Centre

"I expected input from the panel for the whole session." 9 December at the Woodlands Centre

"Felt there should have been more opportunity/encouragement for delegates to ask questions." 9 December at the Woodlands Centre

"Expected a bit more proactive input from the Chief officers and leader - I felt the question and answer session was a bit artificial. Also, would have preferred advance notice of the workshop bit to have come better prepared." 9 December at the Woodlands Centre

**If you have any suggestions for how to improve future manager conferences (such as changes to the content, format, room layout) please enter them below.**

"Would like to know content of ELT members discussion topics/strong messages that they want to deliver so that relevant questions can be asked from the floor"

"Turn the heating down, it was ridiculously hot!!"

"The second session was very useful, particularly because it was so participative. The Q&A session was very professional but I felt it was a bit scripted. The first session at the last round of conferences was better because managers were able to come up with their own questions in a relatively safe environment."

"The room used at the Red Rose Hub was slightly too small to be comfortable and the air conditioning tended to drown out the speakers. However, the team activity was useful and gave people an insight into other Manager's values, to be compared with my own. I found this very interesting especially when comparing with different service providers."

"The room layout was a bit cramped and consequently the noise between tables during the workshop session did get a bit loud."

"The question and answer session was too staged - questions mainly being asked by an interviewer at the back of the room, and not by people within the room itself. It would be helpful to have a structured questions session that enabled people to put written questions forward, say, in a coffee break, after they've had time to think through the key messages being delivered at the beginning - that way you would feel a bit more listened to."

"The initial Q&A session was very much driven by Kate, who asked all but one question that was asked by me. The questions she asked were good but I wonder whether the approach stifled questions that may have come from the floor. Having said that, it was better than no questions at all. Perhaps it would be an idea to invite questions to be submitted online before the conference, and use these if questions don't come from the floor."

"Session seemed a little rushed, a little more time may be helpful especially for the group work."

"Senior managers should be part of the workshops, small groups as this would make them much more accessible."

"Previous manager conference have allowed for meaningful time with, and an exchange with the Leader and C/E etc. They also gave messages on the way forward, the Authority's priorities and the challenges facing us. As with

all these types of events they should be of value and add value. The current format does not, whereas the previous formats either did or went some way to achieving that aim. A clear agenda should be issued so that staff can make a proper evaluation to attend. If the current format is repeated I will not be attending in the future."

"Please note, unfortunately I was unable to attend so can only offer responses on the registration process"

"Need to be more informative on the big issues."

"More time to be allowed for direct engagement with ELT members."

"Maybe base around corporate themes - and focus on one per conference"

"Making the Q&A session less staged and more open to attendees"

"Larger room"

"It might have been interesting to be able to feedback to the panel the results of the group exercises and to see how near their perceptions of the future values of the organisation reflect the opinions of those present"

"Identify a key topic to be covered"

"I thought the table size at this conference was right for the group exercise, I have been to others where larger table sizes were used and it was more difficult to communicate with everyone around the table"

"I think the fact the conference was filmed made it a little uncomfortable for people. Also if we are to continue with question and answers maybe have a box so people could write their questions down and someone read them out? Perhaps this is better done towards the end of the session so people have time to think of things."

"I think managers conferences are an ideal opportunity for the ELT to share the vision and way forward + delivery a 'Team Talk' for the use of a better analogue. Group work in the past has proved very useful e.g. at Woodlands it allowed people to pool thoughts and ask questions. Individuals then to be shy of asking questions when in a large group. This tend to diminish when in small groups with a nominated spokes person."

"I think if a question to the panel concerns a certain team that is present at the conference then that team/person should have the right of reply."

"I preferred the previous conference whereby groups worked on their own questions to put to the panel. This event was too staged and I believe alittle

intimidating in the sense that I did not feel able to put my own question forward."

"I like the tables. More time to discuss issues raised with colleagues around the table. ELT to stay for whole conference and maybe spend some time talking directly to people around the tables to seek views and answer questions that maybe people don't like to ask in the larger forum. Some indication of the 'activities' planned for the second half."

"I haven't ranked the questions above because the aspects I consider to be important aren't in the list. I didn't feel that the question and answer session was as useful as in the past. It felt stage-managed. I realise that people can be reluctant to ask questions but perhaps some questions from the top table to the delegates would have stimulated debate. "

"I have attended several manager conferences since they started. I prefer some part of the conference to comprise a formal presentation from senior managers about the hot topics to keep those of us based away from the centre fully up to date. I like some group work but as indicated above, I was not impressed with the question time format."

"I found the previous style very good. Whilst I did not expect this, I welcome workshops that progress an issue to a successful conclusion, but I think our values should be well known by now. Why revisit them?. It's time for action to implement and embed them. Just a suggestion."

"I found the breakout session of limited value. It was well run but I felt that it was a little contrived. By constantly focusing on the more numerous themes that were important to people in the groups and filtering on this basis it was inevitable that certain words and themes would come to the fore. In exploring what was truly important to people I think some of the less numerous, perhaps more obscure comments should be explored."

"I cannot recall being given any instructions to access the papers for the meeting. Whilst I found the Q and A session useful I thought it might have been useful had we had prior warning this was going to take place. I had presumed that the event would have followed previous events where the Directors gave a presentation and questions were asked later."

"During the first section, there should've been more opportunity for delegates to ask questions rather than staff from corp comms."

"Clarity as to what would be done with the information from the exercise with clear timescales. The room was a little cramped although the informal layout was appropriate."

"Build in more time for 'unscripted' questions from the floor."