

Warwick District Council

CONSULTATION STRATEGY

Revised December 2003

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1 Summary of the Council's Approach to Consultation

- 1.1 To ensure the Council understands local requirements and expectations and provides services that meet these, the Council places a strong emphasis on effective consultation.
- 1.2 Warwick District Council will use consultation with appropriate stakeholders to inform the decision it makes in relation to :
 - Development of Corporate Strategies and priorities
 - Development of Service Area Plans
 - Progression of specific projects and issues
- 1.3 Warwick District Council will make every effort to ensure that consultation undertaken provides results which reflect the make up of the communities affected
- 1.4 Warwick District Council will work to ensure that the views of sectors of the community who are traditionally under-represented are sought and taken in to account in the decisions made
- 1.5 Warwick District Council will ensure the results of consultation are fed it to the decisions the Council makes by using the following channels :
 - At a strategic level :
 - the development of the Community Plan,
 - Revisions to the Corporate Strategy
 - Setting of Annual Priorities through Portfolio Holder Statements
 - At a Service Level :
 - the development of Service Area Plans,
 - the ongoing review of Service Area Plans through the monitoring and review process to sustain progress,
 - the Best Value Review process
 - At a Project Level :
 - the development of Project Plans
 - the ongoing review of Project plans

2.0 Planning Consultation

- 2.1 Prior to embarking on any form of consultation it is essential to consider what the purpose is. Setting the objectives and goals for the consultation process will help focus on the appropriate method whilst aiding identification of the key groups to be consulted with.
- 2.2 **Reasons for Consulting**

- 2.2.1 Consultation may be undertaken for any or all of the following reasons:
- Developing Strategies: Allowing the public and partners to have timely input into the development or revision of Corporate Strategies and important Plans
 - Sustaining improvement: listening to and learning from public opinion to improve the service or refocus service objectives
 - Exchanging ideas: encouraging debate on the service, its' purpose, need or effectiveness
 - Informing the public: providing the public with more information on the service or testing their previous awareness
 - Gaining acceptance: getting endorsement of proposed or recent changes

2.3 People to be Consulted

2.3.1 Whenever consultation is undertaken consideration will be given to which groups should be consulted and the most appropriate method for consulting each. Whilst considering the wider community it is essential not to forget the internal users of the service and staff involved directly or indirectly in the service provision. Staff are a vital asset to the Council and will always be given the opportunity to participate in consultation.

2.3.2 External Consultation

- Customers / Non customers
- Hard to reach groups / Language needs
- Local Interest Groups
- Partners / other Stakeholders
- Other agencies

2.3.3 Internal Consultation

- Unions
- Customers (Client Units)
- Councillors
- Staff

2.4 Information to Provide when Consulting

2.4.1 When undertaking any form of consultation those being consulted will be provided with sufficient information to allow them to respond to the questions asked. The information shall be provided in a clear and concise manner making use of plain English and avoiding the use of jargon or technical terms.

2.4.2 In every consultation exercise information will be provided on:

- The purpose of the consultation
- How the information they supply will be used
- The timetable and decision-making process
- The outcome of the consultation and
- The reasons for this outcome

2.4.3 Those being consulted have a right to expect that their opinions will be used to inform the decision-making process in a clear and unbiased manner. They have the right to know that anonymity will be maintained where this has been requested or stated in the consultation process, and that, in such circumstances, results will not be published in a manner that may allow an individual to be identified.

2.4.4 The results of consultation will not, however, be expected to determine the course of action to be taken. This is a matter which will be determined in the normal manner.

2.5 Frequency of the Consultation

2.5.1 Consideration must be given to the required frequency with which the consultation is to be undertaken. For some consultation, such as the Residents Satisfaction Survey, this is specified by the government for every three years. For most other consultation exercises it would be desirable that they are undertaken on an annual; quarterly; monthly or one off basis.

2.5.2 Where changes in user satisfaction for a larger area of operation are being monitored, it is not worthwhile to consult on a short term basis, instead consideration should be given to incorporating this within future Residents Satisfaction Surveys.

3.0 Consultation Methods & Analysis

3.1 There is a huge variety of methods of consultation which may be adopted as appropriate to the individual circumstances. Forty varying methods of consultation have been identified for potential use within Warwick District Council which are incorporated within a Consultation Guide.

3.2 Consultation Guide

3.2.1 To aid the consultation process the Council has a Consultation Guide. This guide is not designed to be an exhaustive list, but instead details the relative Pros and Cons for many of the more common methods of consultation.

3.2.2 Whilst supporting the use of the Citizen's Panel, Units are also encouraged to consider use of alternative consultation methods highlighted throughout the Guide as a means for ensuring greater consultation and particularly for involving areas of the community whose views are less often considered.

3.3 Analysis of Results

- 3.3.1 Prior to embarking on consultation, consideration must be given to the estimated return rate and the time required for inputting and analysis of the results. The size of consultation planned should match the resources and staffing available to ensure that timely analysis and reporting is possible, maintaining a high level of accuracy.
- 3.3.2 Recognising the Council's commitment to equality of opportunity it is important that all non face-to-face consultation exercises ask standard monitoring questions. The latest version of these questions will be contained within the Consultation Guide. When analysing the results they should be able to be broken down in accordance with the key criteria specified.

4.0 Reporting on the Consultation

- 4.1 Conducting the actual consultation is only the first stage in the process. If we are truly committed to involving and responding to the needs of the community, it is essential that the results of each consultation exercise are reported on. This reporting will be fair and unbiased, highlighting the good aspects as well as those considered as potentially being areas for improvement. It is important to remember that whilst we strive for excellence, there will virtually always be areas for improvement. Whilst reporting on these areas for improvement it is essential to incorporate some timescale or mechanism for addressing the concerns raised: we can all identify problems but the public and media expect to also see a solution and timescale.
- 4.2 The results of consultation will be reported to four groups of people:
- throughout the Council to Corporate Management Team, Councillors and relevant staff;
 - to those participating in the consultation exercise;
 - customers of the service and interested stakeholders; and
 - where relevant to the media to enhance the profile of the Council.
- 4.3 This reporting should be undertaken using appropriate formal or informal methods. Particularly for frontline services this would include displaying the key results in areas where users of the service may readily see them (e.g. in swimming pools or sports centres).
- 4.4 A written report of the should results be e-mailed to the Policy & Projects Officer (Best Value) to aid our partnership working and information sharing agreement within the County. This information will be incorporated within the county-wide Consultation Database.

5.0 Co-ordination of Consultation

5.1 Co-ordination is vital to ensure the continued high quality of consultation and customer service. It is essential to have a knowledge of who is being consulted, when and on what topic. This allows for easy resolution of questions or complaints, whilst aiding in ensuring that the same people or organisations are not subjected to an unreasonable amount of consultation.

5.2 Consultation is potentially an expensive and time consuming area of work. To reduce the time and costs involved it is important that where possible consultation work is undertaken on a joined up basis. This involves working corporately within the Council and in partnership with other organisations.

5.3 Through the co-ordination of consultation we are able:

- To set high and consistent standards of consultation geared towards meeting overall Council objectives.
- To share best practice on approaches to consultation so that Units and Services can learn from each other.
- To share common data between services, ensuring that relevant information resulting from consultation by one Unit / Service is passed on to other effected Units / Services without being lost in the process.
- To provide common services where this is more cost effective e.g. survey design, distribution and analysis.
- To programme different consultation exercises to ensure particular groups and individuals do not suffer consultation overload.

5.4 Within the Council

5.4.1 Where timing coincides, or consultation is not essential, it is important to consider opportunities to combine consultation exercises which could involve the same groups of people, organisations or businesses.

5.4.2 If the proposed consultation exercise is small it is important that consideration is given to combining the questions in another exercise being undertaken by a different unit or service. This approach may be particularly relevant when using the Citizen's Panel, where it is hoped that several smaller consultations could be undertaken as one of the quarterly uses of the panel, or where a limited number of additional questions incorporated into a larger consultation exercise would make little difference.

5.5 In Partnership

5.5.1 Warwick District Council will continue to work in partnership with the County Council, Warwickshire District & Boroughs, the Health Authority, Police and Police Authority. This work will be co-ordinated through the Warwickshire Joint Consultation Group, on which the Council shall continue to be represented.

5.5.2 Partnerships for consultation may be established with any other public or

voluntary sector organisations as a means of joining up services, reducing costs or enabling a greater depth of consultation for individual exercises. This will be particularly suitable for supporting voluntary sector organisations within the District.

- 5.5.3 In particular, the District Council is looking to exploit consultation links with Stratford District Council, to both reduce costs and increase the effectiveness of consultation. This recognises that many communities associate themselves with south Warwickshire in general rather than one of the two Districts. It is therefore not always effective to consult as two separate entities
- 5.5.4 The Council is committed to being an active member of the Warwickshire Joint Consultation Group. In this role we will work jointly and co-ordinate consultation with the other Group members. This will include the sharing of results through the Consultation Database.
- 5.5.5 The Consultation database will also be promoted across the District Council so that staff and members can see what consultation is planned (and can therefore co-ordinate with this) and can see the results of past consultation.
- 5.5.6 Consultation partnerships may be established with the private sector in some circumstances, though caution must be exercised due to the possibility of reducing independence and potential future relations with the organisation concerned. This approach is most appropriate when an existing partnership exists with a private sector organisation.

6.0 Consultation Timetable

- 6.1 To avoid overlaps and aid in co-ordination it is important to maintain a corporate consultation timetable. This will be developed each year in December/January and will identify the main corporate consultation to be undertaken. In its design this will enable corporate prioritisation when issues or programmes conflict, whilst aiding in combining smaller pieces of work. In developing the timetable consideration is required of the Best Value Review Programme, where each review is required to consult prior to review.
- 6.3 The Consultation Timetable shall form a separate document which will be maintained by Policy and Performance to show the timing of all corporate consultation. Through maintaining this timetable those undertaking other consultation exercises may identify appropriate times to consult or develop links with established consultation requirements.

7.0 Implementing Service Improvements based on Consultation

- 7.1 The final part of the consultation process is the implementation of improvements based on the information provided by the consultation. Of all the stages, this is perhaps the most important and without this, the rest of the process is at best a waste of time and at worst a major blow to the credibility of the Council.

7.2 The following are the key tools for ensuring consultation is used effectively

- Use of results to develop strategies (including the Corporate Strategy and Community Plan) in line with the approach set out in the Community Plan process
- After each citizen's panel a consultation expert will provide interpretation on the results to the commissioning service area. This interpretation will not only underline the meaning of the results but will also explore the cross tabulations available within the results and will explore whether further consultation tools are needed to achieve better understanding of the reasons behind the results
- At the commencement of the Service Area Planning process each year Service Area Managers will be required to assess the results from any consultation undertaken in the previous 12 months and will feed this information into the assessment of key issues facing the service and where appropriate, the targets to improve the service
- As part of the quarterly performance reporting timetable, the results of consultation will also be considered by teams to assess whether any short term service amendments or project developments are required as a result of consultation
- Where consultation has been undertaken as part of a Best Value Review, the results will be considered by the Review Team during their options development or options appraisal (as set out in the Best Value Review Guide) and by members responsible for providing challenge to the process. A summary of the consultation results will also be included in the final report. The Best Value action plan will also refer back to any consultation to show how consultation has led to planned service improvements

7.3 When devising the improvements or action plan it is important that accountability for implementation of each task is allocated, along with clear timescales, reporting mechanisms and staff involvement.

8.0 The Role of Councillors

8.1 Councillors have a key role to play in consultation within Warwick District Council. Arguments nationally have been developing about the Members' role in consultation since the advent of Best Value and the changing roles brought about through the modernising local government agenda. The generally accepted approach is that:

- There is seldom a single community view. There are conflicting interests and the wider social good to be taken into account. Councillors are well placed, being elected and accountable, to take this broader role.

- There may be some instances when direct decision making by the public is possible and desirable. In the foreseeable future these instances are likely to be limited, and Councillors still have an important role in deciding which decisions those should be and keeping an oversight of that process.
 - For much of the time, Councillors will continue to act in a representative capacity. They can never have full knowledge of their constituents, let alone the wider community, so the more they are able to listen and consult, the better they will be able to represent.
- 8.2 Through adopting these roles in consultation for Councillors it enables them to maintain their representative role, which involves not just taking decisions, but scrutinising officers, politicians and performance.
- 8.3 It is important to remember that Councillors will have the final decision relating to the area of consultation. There is no onus upon Councillors to follow the priorities or suggestions raised through the consultation process. Consultation should be viewed as a means of gaining greater insight and information to allow an informed decision to be made: it does not imply acceptance of recommendations arising.

9.0 The Role of Officers

- 9.1 There are two separate roles for Officers involved in the consultation process:
- 9.2 The roles of Service based Officers is to:
- Give information to consultees on the consultation project
 - Actively seek the consultees views
 - Receive, process and analyse responses
 - Report the views of the consultees accurately and fairly to the decision makers and Policy Services, making recommendations and giving professional advice on the way forward relating to the subject matter of the consultation exercise
 - Report back to consultees on the outcome of the consultation exercise
- 9.3 The role of Policy and Performance Officers is to:
- Advise on the Council's obligations to consult and the extent of these obligations
 - Provide expert advice on consultation and appropriate techniques for the desired audience, including identifying more suitable types of consultation
 - Co-ordinating timetabling of Best Value consultation and receiving feedback from Units / Services on their consultation requirements
 - Ensuring the Corporate perspective is maintained and gathering information that will feed this view and be of benefit to other Units / Services
 - Developing a database of stakeholders and interested parties for consultation purposes
 - Managing the Citizens' Panel and dealing with all consultation occurring

though this method.

10.0 The Strategy

10.1 It is essential that consultation is undertaken effectively throughout Warwick District Council. For this reason it is important to have a Consultation Strategy. This strategy consists of the key elements detailed below:

- To reduce costs and ensure greatest efficiency in consultation, wherever possible, consultation exercises should be combined. This could involve other Units, other Councils, the voluntary sector or exceptionally private sector partners.
- The Citizen's Panel should be used for consultation of customers on a regular basis through the themed consultation programme. This should be in addition to other consultation methods.
- Use of the Citizens' Panel will be supported to incorporate qualitative aspects through the use of Reflector or Focus Groups.
- Efforts will be made to shadow the work of the Citizens' Panel with other specific groups to address particular areas of the community not so well represented through the Panel. This will include involvement of the Youth Fora and bodies incorporating ethnic or disable people.
- Citizens' Panel members will receive annual feedback on results and how these have been incorporated into service improvements.
- Different mechanisms for consultation will be used to ensure that all sectors of the community are involved. The appropriate mechanisms will be selected to ensure that the views of the business community, non users of the service and hard to reach groups are sought.
- Consideration will be given to the best method to consult with staff, unions and other Services or Units within the Council where this is appropriate to aid improving the service.
- When conducting any consultation sufficient time will be allowed for interested individuals or groups to make their responses, in accordance with the requirements set out in the Consultation Guide.
- Councillors may wish to be involved in the consultation process from the outset, being involved in any elements of the design and consultation they feel would be beneficial. Councillors shall, also, have results of consultation made available to them in a timely manner, helping to enhance their representative role and allowing them to make any decisions required.

- Efforts should be made to ensure that the results of the consultation are large enough to be valid and representative of the area as a whole.
- Results of all consultation shall be reported accurately and in a timely manner to those participating in the exercise and those with an interest in the consultation. Where necessary interpretation of the results from a consultation expert will be available to the commissioning service area
- Individual managers will be responsible for ensuring that consultation results are reported, updating the countywide consultation database and for providing the Policy & Projects Officer (Best Value) with a final consultation report for each exercise for authorisation and reporting.
- Efforts will be made to ensure that the results of consultation are reported widely, making use of the media where possible.
- The results of consultation exercises will be able to be analysed by minority group (as identified within the Consultation Guide), allowing identification of differing responses between gender, ethnic disability or age groups.
- Every effort will be made to ensure the results of consultation will be used effectively to influence decisions and approaches. This will be achieved through the following channels
 - Use of the results in the Service Area Planning process
 - Use of the results alongside the quarterly performance reporting to make short term service amendments or project developments are required as a result of consultation
 - Use of result as part of a Best Value Review,
 - Use of results to develop strategies (including the Corporate Strategy and Community Plan)
- In the year prior to undertaking a Best Value Review there should be consultation on the subject of the review, to set the foundations for the review and aid in the scoping.
- New methods for consultation should be explored and in the longer term consultation through information technology shall be developed, making full use of the website and helping with meeting e-government targets.