

Bromsgrove District Council Consultation Policy – September 2007

Introduction

Bromsgrove District Council is committed to making evidence-based decisions that take into account the views and experiences of all those affected by them. We will seek to engage with all sectors of the community to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to have their say.

This Consultation Policy has been developed to ensure that all consultation undertaken by the Council is effective, efficient and consistent. The policy and associated guidance provides the framework for all consultation that takes place throughout the Council and sets out the commitment we are making to consultation and our expectation that everyone leading consultation initiatives will be absolutely clear about the processes involved.

Central Government's agenda to modernise local government stresses the importance of getting closer to communities, not only by encouraging people to vote but by giving people the opportunity to be much more involved in council decision-making through consultation and other community engagement activities. This agenda was originally stressed in the Local Government Act 2000, and is strengthened in the 2006 Local Government White Paper and in guidance for the Comprehensive Performance Assessment of councils and the new Comprehensive Area Assessment. The Council has clearly stated its commitment to consultation in its Improvement Plan for recovery from Voluntary Engagement.

Aim

This Policy aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of consultation undertaken by the Council in order to strengthen community engagement and support informed and transparent decision-making by Elected Members.

Why consult?

Consultation is the only way to ensure that services are user-focused. Effective consultation can deliver a range of benefits and is used to inform all aspects of the Council's work, as well as improving its relationship with its customers by:

- Tracking and improving customer satisfaction;
- Creating a working partnership with customers, so that they have an interest in what the Council does and in improving its services;
- Identifying problems early so they can be corrected before they escalate;

- Planning, prioritising and delivering better services, to give users what they want and making the best use of limited resources;
- Ensuring service standards reflect customers' preferred outcomes;
- Supporting the delivery of the Community Strategy ;
- Fostering a greater sense of 'the Council and its community';
- Supporting bids for external resources.

Without a consultation policy the Council would face a number of risks, including:

- A lack of evidence from customers and stakeholders on which to base decisions;
- The potential for the misdirection of limited resources;
- The failure to meet satisfaction targets;
- The inability to meet the Council objectives of 'Improvement' and 'Sense of Community and Wellbeing' (and beneath these, the priorities of Reputation, Performance and Community Influence);
- The failure to address the actions identified in the Improvement Plan;
- The failure to become a fair Council in the short term, and an excellent Council in the long-term.

How to consult?

Consultation can take many forms, and there must be a common understanding amongst staff, elected Members and the community about the scope of any consultation activity and the degree of influence consultees may have when being invited to share their views to help make decisions. Bromsgrove District Council recognises this and has devised the following five categories of consultation that will be used in planning all consultation activities:

Description	Definition – the circumstances under which this category of consultation would be used	Example of this category of consultation
Category A: Information gathering	I am testing out satisfaction with services that will inform future planning. I don't need to make a decision now but I am gathering information that I may use later.	Questionnaire on satisfaction with waste recycling
Category B: Seeking Views	We will be making a decision, or planning service changes, so we are seeking information/your general views to help us make that decision or plan changes	Consultation on a draft strategy before taking the final version to Members
Category C: Making choices	We have a number of options and are seeking your views/ preferences before making a decision. We are taking a 'vote' on options and your preferred option will be reported to the relevant decision	Workshop to obtain views on design options for park facilities

	making body	
Category D: Generating Ideas	We are seeking your views on an issue that is at an early stage. We do not have definite options at this stage, so we want you to help us generate ideas/options so we can jointly identify and agree a way forward	Consultation to identify the locations of community sports equipment across the Borough
Category E: Participation /Joint Decision Making	Let's jointly agree what needs to happen and how. We will be making decisions together.	Working party to identify suitable amenities and services in a Community Centre.

All consultation activity will, as far as possible, be planned in advance and included in each Service Business Plan for the forthcoming year. This will ensure an appropriate level of resources for consultation can be allocated, and it will create a Council-wide view of planned consultation activity that will enable efficient planning and promote cross-service working.

Regular opportunities for consultation are afforded through several Council mechanisms and existing local neighbourhood / issue-based forums. Members and officers alike should be aware of these and make use of them wherever possible, according to the fit between the category of consultation each mechanism falls into (by using the table above) and the aims of the consultation activity itself. Full and effective use will be made of:

- Customer Panel Surveys (two per year);
- Service-specific Focus Groups;
- Budget Focus Groups;
- Two area committee pilots in Waseley/ Beacon and Alvechurch;
- The Equalities Forum and Disabilities Forum;
- Local PACT (Partners and Communities Together) meetings.

Additionally, the Bromsgrove Partnership holds two Town Hall stakeholder meetings each year which enable local organisations and residents to find out more about local priorities and to feedback their views. The Partnership also has an Older People's Project Group and Young Persons Forum, both of which promote a dialogue with, and provide opportunities to consult with these specific sections of the community.

The Council also operates a range of internal staff consultation mechanisms including:

- Union Liaison
- Staff Champions
- Middle Managers Forum

- Management Conferences
- Staff Forums

Roles and Responsibilities

Everyone involved in leading consultation activities at Bromsgrove District Council is expected to be absolutely clear about their roles and responsibilities in doing so. Separate consultation guidance has been developed provide greater detail on the processes and methodology to be used:

- *All Elected Members* are expected to act as community or Council advocates, through ward work and surgeries. They are also expected to assist with communicating results back to consultees and acting as links with partner organisations for the purposes of joint consultation.
- *Cabinet Members* are expected to ensure that the results of consultation are used to develop policy and make informed decisions.
- *Scrutiny Members* are expected to commission and manage issue-specific consultation in line with Scrutiny's work programme.
- *Senior Managers/Corporate Management Team* will ensure that the strategic direction of the Council is informed by appropriate consultation and that planned consultation is reflected in the Service Business Plans.
- *The Corporate Communications, Policy and Performance Team* will act as guardians of the principles and practices of consultation within the Council. They will provide the tools for managers to co-ordinate consultation across the organisation to avoid risk of duplication. They will manage the Customer Panel and work with officers on corporate consultation exercises and to promote internally and externally the range of consultation activity carried out, and monitor the improvements being made.
- *All staff* will seek the views of customers / stakeholders and share those views with the relevant manager.

Our General Consultation Principles

The following principles underpin our commitment to consultation and the execution of consultation activity:

Undertaking consultation

- We will undertake consultation only where relevant and where we need to build customers' current views and wishes into the decision-making process, or in order to discover people's satisfaction with our services and on other issues as they arise. The results of previous consultation activities will be

checked before planning a new consultation to identify whether the Council already has sufficient existing evidence that it could use to safely move forward.

- Consultation activities planned across the Council will be outlined annually in every Service Business Plan so that consultation activities can be overseen and consolidated where appropriate.
- We will always consult, as a minimum, on:
 - The Council's budget
 - Major changes in services or plans to introduce new services
 - Plans to change buildings or their use, or to construct new buildings
 - On any issue that has a statutory obligation for us to do so.
- Consultees will be given adequate time to prepare their responses. The length of time will vary depending on the time of year, who is being consulted and the level of response that is being sought. Sufficient time will be allowed for the results of consultation to be collated, analysed and considered, so that the results of consultation feed directly into the decision making process.

Use of resources

- We will ensure appropriate use of consultation resources through joint working with other organisations where appropriate and reflect the 'issue-' based, rather than 'service-' or 'organisation-' based, concerns of stakeholders.
- We will be clear about the scope of any consultation activity and be open about that scope with those involved.
- We will co-ordinate consultation across the Council and the Local Strategic Partnership to ensure best use of resources.

Equalities and Diversity

- Consultation is part of the democratic process and people have the right to have their voice heard and to influence service delivery. We will ensure that there are opportunities for that to happen and for service users and Council stakeholders to be empowered to have a say about Council services and performance.
- Consultation will aim to seek a representative cross-section of views. Appropriate action will be taken to ensure that the views of individuals and groups that are harder to engage in consultation are not excluded or overlooked.
- We will take into account the diverse needs of our communities in any consultation exercise and we will consult using a variety of methods to ensure

that all groups can participate fully. We will further encourage participation by paying attention to timings and locations of events, the provision of information in different formats, access requirements etc. The methods we use to consult will reflect the abilities, ethnicity, age and other characteristics of the target group.

- We will use Plain English and keep our consultation jargon-free. Where appropriate we will use formats that make consultation accessible for people with physical, sensory or learning difficulties.
- We will harness the opportunities offered through new technology and alternative methods of consultation to secure people's views, such as through web-based software. Methods chosen will be appropriate to the purpose, reflecting the strengths and weaknesses of each method and will be managed with a clear understanding of the particular skills, knowledge and resources required.

Feedback and information sharing

- We recognise that consultation is a two-way process and should be used to inform consultees as well as to seek their views. Accessible feedback will be provided to consultees on the results of consultation and on how they have been used, in order to encourage greater public participation in the future.
- We will publicise improvements and changes to services and facilities arising from customer feedback.
- We will share consultation findings across the organisation linking results to our Council Plan as a way of continuous monitoring and evaluation.
- We will act as a learning organisation by monitoring the appropriateness and effectiveness of consultation activity and sharing good practice.
- All consultation activity undertaken within the Council will be categorised accordingly according to the following definitions outlined in page 3, to ensure clarity from the outset about the scope of the activity. This will be made clear in any reports to elected Members.