

# Rochford District Council

## Consultation Strategy

## 1. Introduction

This document sets out the Council's approach to consulting and engaging with the residents of the District and users of the Council's services.

The Council is committed to listening to what all local people have to say about what should happen in their area, about the services that should be provided, and how those services should be provided. All reasonable efforts will be made to consult, involve and communicate with people across all service areas. This is a key part of the Council's approach to ensuring that the services delivered are those that local people want at a price they are prepared to pay. This can make a direct contribution to service satisfaction levels.

This strategy also has regard to the proposals contained in the White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities" which will require local authorities to take steps to ensure the participation of local citizens in their activities.

There is already a comprehensive range of consultation carried out by the Council, and a key objective of this strategy is to build upon those existing arrangements to ensure that continuous improvement in involving the public in the work of the Council is achieved. The Council has a number of statutory processes with prescribed timeframes that will, by necessity, not be covered by this consultation strategy.

This strategy sets the framework for consultation and communication for the Council. Within it will be:

- A tool kit on conducting consultation exercises
- An annual plan of consultation for the coming year,
- An action plan to help us develop our approach to community engagement and consultation

## 2. The need for consultation

The Council has, over recent years increased its level of consultation with its local communities. It understands their needs, and they in turn, understand the issues the Council is facing. The link between levels of satisfaction with Council services and community involvement have been proven. Rochford has high satisfaction levels and intends to maintain and build on them. (BVPI survey)

The Council's Corporate Plan sets out the Council's vision and corporate aims. It also sets out the Council's values as being to:

- Act with integrity
- Be open and transparent about what we do
- Respect others and treat people courteously and equally

- Be responsive to customer needs and requests
- Always try and improve on what we do – continuous improvement
- Work with others to improve what we do both directly and through partnership working

In order to demonstrate that the Council is applying these values to its approach to consultation and engagement, we need to:

- Establish effective means of public consultation (which means listening to and taking account of the views of people consulted, and then advising them of the outcome)
- Outlining the **purpose** of the consultation to participants
- Engage the public in the **decisions that affect them**
- Ensure **consultation methods are appropriate, and the process well managed and timely.**
- Make **consultation inclusive**
- Provide **feedback** on the outcome of consultation
- Evaluate the **effectiveness** of consultation exercises once they have been completed
- Review and monitor all service standards, in the interests of achieving continuous improvement.
- The need to monitor changing expectations and requirements in relation to council services

### 3. **What do we mean by ‘Consultation’**

Consultation is the process of finding out what those with an interest in the delivery of services think of those services, and how they think they should develop. Depending on the topic concerned, consultation may be carried out with a full range of stakeholder groups or a selected few, including non-users. There are a variety of ways in which consultation can be carried out and it may be necessary to use more than one type to measure what people think, understand why they think this way or seek comments and views on specific proposals.

Consultation is recognised as being on the mid-point of the Ladder of Citizen Engagement (Arnstein, 1966), with ‘Inform’ being at one end of the scale and ‘Involvement’ at the other.

### 4. **Making consultation effective**

This Consultation Strategy is intended to involve stakeholders by involving, empowering and formalising processes. A stakeholder can be defined as “Any person, group, or organisation that can place a claim on the organisation’s attention, resources or output, or is affected by that output” (Bryson, 1995)

The strategy will:

## **Involve** stakeholders in

- Identifying issues that affect their lives
- Voicing their needs
- Identifying solutions to problems
- Setting and monitoring standards for the continuing improvement of council services

**Empower** all stakeholders to gain a voice within the decision making processes and to play a key role in the strategic planning of services and in the monitoring of service delivery.

**Formalise** the consultation process so that all involved understand how their views will be used in the process, to balance the competing priorities and constraints in which the Council operates.

Implementation of the Consultation Strategy will ensure that;

1. The Council is open and responsive to the views of all stakeholders
2. Local communities are involved
3. There is increased public participation in the decision making process
4. The concept of citizenship is enhanced throughout the District, residents are aware that the council actively seeks and values their input, and informs them of how decisions are made using that input.

Historically, divisions within the Council have a good track record in consulting the community as part of their service delivery. This strategy does not seek to change that tradition, but to add value by;

- improving the linkages between divisions, and reduce consultation overload through greater coordination of consultation exercises,
- continuously improving the existing arrangements to meet changing expectations in how people are consulted
- sharing of best practice and data after consultation exercises between departments and Council contractors and to those consulted,
- developing greater engagement with the all sections of the community and capacity building where necessary.

## **5. Using the right consultation methods**

Before embarking on any piece of work that seeks the views of the public it is imperative to be clear whether it is a piece of research, with a sound methodology and robust results that can be taken as representative of the public's views, or a piece of consultation where the results are likely to be more qualitative or 'softer' in terms of the information gathered. Research seeks the public's views and does no more, whereas consultation can add extra value through supporting people to engage who may feel excluded or unable to participate in

more traditional forms of research. In reality any exercise that seeks the public's view on an issue should use a mix of more than one consultation tool, and use a combination of both methods.

When conducting any exercise there are groups who are less likely to take part for a variety of reasons. These are collectively known as 'hard to reach' groups. In order to get their views it is necessary to have consultation arrangements that are designed in a way that allows them to participate more easily, and may well take form of focus groups, workshops or one-to-one interviews. The consultation will usually be taken to them rather than expecting them to come forward to take part in or attend events. These groups will vary from area to area but are likely to include, non-users of a service, the young, old, physically impaired, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, homeless people, travelling communities, those living in deprivation or in remote areas.

Whilst not normally classified as hard to reach but also worth considering are the vast majority of the public who do not get involved in consultation exercises through lack of time, other commitments or disinterest. Consultation should provide a variety of options that makes taking part in consultation as easy as possible.

## **6. Best practice when consulting**

The Consultation Toolkit provides advice and guidance on which method is most appropriate for the consultation to be undertaken. There are five main principles of best practice:

- Consultation should be necessary
- Consultation should be robust
- Consultation should be inclusive
- Consultation should be used
- Consultation should be shared

These principles of consultation should be embedded in whatever method is chosen as follows:

### **Purpose of the consultation**

Consultation needs to be centred around a decision that it can affect. If it's not then, firstly it's not consultation as the audience is being informed about a decision, and secondly, more importantly this will instil negative feelings in those consulted if they feel their views have not been taken into account or been able to change a decision.

### **Well managed, timely consultation**

Consultation needs to be competently carried out if the exercise is going to be of value to both the consulter and the consultees. It is imperative that the toolkit supporting the strategy is followed to ensure the right methods are used, the right audiences selected, and data analysed in a robust methodology. The timing of the consultation also needs to be carefully planned so that the stakeholders have enough time to respond, the results analysed and the information used in the decision-making. The length of time allowed for consultees to respond is key, as some sections of the community may need a considerable amount of time. For instance, the Council is signed up to the Rochford Compact that sets out guiding principles on how the public and voluntary sector will interact with each other. One of the areas covered by the agreement is consultation. The Compact sets twelve weeks as the ideal time for the voluntary sector to respond as they invariably have to consult with a large number of the small organisations that they represent.

### **Inclusive Consultation**

As highlighted earlier, the consultation needs to include all stakeholders in the issues. A variety of methods need to be used to allow as many ways of participating as possible, and that the correct methods are selected for the different audiences being targeted.

### **Results and Feedback**

The results of consultation need to be used. The results of consultation need to be analysed using a robust method suitable to the type of consultation undertaken. The analysis needs to be fully explained in reports or presentations rather than just listed. This process turns the information into intelligence that can be used by Officers and Members in decision-making.

Apathy is easily created if consultees do not see any direct action based on their views. Feedback needs to be provided at two points.

- Firstly, after the completion of the consultation exercise the respondents need to be informed of what the responses were and the process of how the views will be used, and in what timescales this will happen.
- Secondly, once the decisions have been made they need to be informed of the outcome of the decision making process. As there is quite often a significant time-lag between consultation exercises and decisions it is important to feedback twice so that respondents don't feel their views have been ignored.

Feedback needs to be accessible to the public, and should be disseminated through as many channels as possibly. Results can be fed back through providing a summary sheet to respondents, on websites and Council publications.

## **Continuous Improvement**

At the conclusion of each consultation exercise there will be a review of how successful the exercise has been. The areas that will be reviewed are:

- the overall response rate,
- the proportion of each section of the community that responded, and via which method used.
- The suitability of methods used and any future improvements that can be identified.

These lessons will be fed into the Consultation working group so that this experience can be disseminated across the council

## **7. The current position**

As already outlined Rochford has a number of existing consultation arrangements that seek to capture resident's views and feed them into the service and decision making processes. These include:

**Local Area Agreement(LAA) Surveys** – As part of the LAA process there are a number of surveys being undertaken that provide the Council with a range of information on the communities within the district and their changing attitudes to a number of issues. This information allows us to adapt to changing demands in the way services are provided

**Tenants' Forums** – these are run by the Housing Division for their tenants. The Forums allow tenants to discuss services issues with the department to engage in a two-way dialogue.

**BVPI Survey** – A statutory survey conducted every three years by all councils in England. It seeks residents' views on quality of life in their area, and on a range of services. These surveys provide quantitative data that can be benchmarked against other authorities for customer satisfaction. These surveys provide useful data on customer satisfaction that can, in theory, be tracked over time. However, what the surveys are unable to tell us is why customers feel the way they do.

### **Statement of Community Involvement (SCI)**

As part of the Local Development Framework the Council has produced a SCI setting out how it will consult people in the new planning system.

**Divisional or 'issue based' consultation**– these are carried out as part of service reviews or service issues. They are carried out when necessary to help inform the decision making process.

**Other consultation events** – the Council uses a number of other consultation tools such as road shows, open days and exhibitions where the views of the public are gathered.

## **8. The way forward**

There are a number of areas where the Council needs to develop the consultation for the future, to fully engage more sections of the community it serves. To do this it will:

1. Provide more than one method of consultation when carrying out consultation exercises that are appropriate to the needs of the group and consultation issues.
2. Develop its range and skill base in conducting qualitative or 'softer' forms of consultation.
3. Proactively work with sections of the community in the harder to reach groups to build their capacity to engage
4. Work with the community and voluntary sector, parish councils and other local groups to build capacity and skills levels that will allow them to conduct consultation on behalf of the Council, and for their own user groups
5. Ensure feedback from consultation is improved through increased communication through two areas of feedback;
  - feedback from the results of a consultation or research exercise
  - the outcome from the decision made based on the information gathered
6. Evaluate the effectiveness of the consultation exercises and disseminate any lessons that have been learnt

## **9. Implementation of the strategy**

The strategy will be implemented through the action plan that supports this Strategy. It will ensure the actions set out in the previous section are delivered, that the consultation tool-kit is embedded to provide a consistent approach to consultation across the Council.

The action plan will be updated annually and the strategy reviewed after three years.