

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

FROM: Corporate Support Manager

REPORT NUMBER **E27**

TO: Overview & Scrutiny (Stewardship)

DATE OF MEETING 17 May 2005

PUBLIC CONSULTATION STRATEGY

1. **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 Paper D241 “Securing Effective Decision Making” recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny (Stewardship) Committee develop a Public Consultation Strategy that takes account of a number of guiding principles.
- 1.2 A Public Consultation Strategy plus an associated action plan are attached as appendices.

2. **RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1 The Committee is asked to make a recommendation to Strategy Committee to approve the Public Consultation Strategy and associated action plan attached as appendices to this report.

3. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the implementation of the strategy, but some may arise as the action plan is carried out. These will be reported to the relevant committees at the appropriate time.

4. **KEY INFORMATION**

- 4.1 In reviewing the Council’s constitution (Paper D241) Strategy Committee recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny (Stewardship) Committee develop a Public Consultation Strategy that takes into account the following nine principles:
 1. The need for consultation should be clarified
 2. The purpose for the consultation should be specified
 3. Opinions obtained should be informed
 4. Consultation should be well planned and timely
 5. Consultation should be inclusive
 6. Consultation methods should be appropriate and well managed
 7. Results should be acknowledged and fully considered
 8. Feedback should be accessible
 9. The effectiveness of the exercise should be evaluated
- 4.2 The Council has a good track record in using consultation to develop Community Strategies, set priorities, gain views on specific issues and to measure performance.
- 4.3 Consultation underpins all of the Council’s priorities. It directly contributes to ‘Encourage and facilitate the active involvement of citizens in local democracy’ as consultation provides the

conduit through which the public can engage on issues that affect them, and inform the decision making process.

- 4.4 To date the Council's consultation has been quite traditional, set piece events, statutory BVPI surveys, and formal consultation that have fed into the service and financial planning process and the Corporate Plan. Consultation has taken the form of either postal questionnaires, or public meetings.
- 4.5 This Public Consultation Strategy sets out how the Council can engage more effectively with the full range of public stakeholders by employing a range of different consultation tools to target different sections of the community including the 'hard to reach' groups.
- 4.6 In line with the Strategy Committee's recommendation and building on current best practice a Public Consultation Strategy (Appendix 1) and Action Plan (Appendix 2) have been developed that set out how the Council should conduct consultation in the future.

5. **APPENDICES AND BACKGROUND PAPERS REFERRED TO:**

Appendix 1- Public Consultation Strategy

Appendix 2 - Action Plan

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Babergh District Council

Public Consultation Strategy

Introduction

This document sets out the Council's approach to public consultation.

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 implementing the 'Local Government Modernisation Agenda' and providing services that local people want at a price they are prepared to pay. This can make a direct contribution to service satisfaction levels.

In reviewing the constitution, the Strategy Committee recommended that a Public Consultation Strategy be developed to improve effective community engagement.

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.

This strategy sets the framework for consultation for the Council. Within that framework there will be:

- A tool kit on conducting consultation exercises
- An annual plan of consultation for the coming year,
- An analysis of the previous years' consultation exercises and the lessons to be learnt from the process used.

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 Council's Corporate Plan sets out the Council's vision, values and corporate priorities, and identifies the need to:

- Encourage and facilitate the active involvement of citizens in local democracy
- Establish a 'fit for purpose' consultation strategy to improve the effectiveness of public consultation, analysis, feedback and engagement, including hard to reach groups

In order to achieve these the Council will need to continue 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)
- Outline the **purpose** of the consultation to participants
- Provide appropriate **information to inform** the public

- 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

Making consultation inclusive

This Consultation Strategy is intended to be more inclusive by involving and empowering the public, and by formalising processes.

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 divisions and with those consulted

- developing greater engagement with the all sections of the community and capacity building where necessary.

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 more qualitative methods such as 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, the young, old, physically impaired, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, homeless people, travelling communities, those living in deprivation or in remote areas.

In Babergh the large geographical area and general rural nature of the District are likely to be the main challenges faced in engaging people. The dispersed nature of the population provides challenges in making consultation exercises as accessible for as much of the population as possible. The relatively low populations in villages also mean that consultation that takes the form of local public meetings, forums or workshops needs to be replicated many times across the District if a reliable sample of views are to be gathered. This, in turn, creates capacity and resource issues for the Council in carrying out sound consultation.

The group hardest to work with is likely be the BME groups as these are numerically a very small group (1.3%, Census 2001), and with a number of different ethnic backgrounds within that overall figure. Each group will have differing needs and cultural norms that need to be borne in mind when engaging with them. The General Statutory Duty, set out in Section 2 of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 requires that, along with eliminating racial discrimination, Local Authorities must promote equality of opportunity, and promote good relations between persons of different racial groups. However, the potential isolation of these groups, often as small as one family in a village, can create difficulties in allowing individuals to participate or access services designed to meet this duty, due to a lack of support networks, and language or cultural barriers. It is therefore, essential that these 'voices' are heard in consultation exercises.

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.

Best practice when consulting

There are five main principles of best practice. Consultation should be:

- Related to a decision the Council intends to take
- Competently carried out
- Inclusive
- Used in practice
- Provide timely feedback

Each of these principles needs to be applied if consultation is to be effective.

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. It must be clear to the public at the outset whether their views will be treated as consultation to assist the Council in reaching a decision, or as a referendum which the Council will feel obliged to follow.

Well managed, timely consultation

Consultation needs to be competently carried out if the exercise is going to be of value to both the consuler 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, such as the development of the Corporate Plan. 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 Suffolk 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.

Babergh the current position

As already outlined Babergh 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:

Suffolk Speaks – a partnership between all Councils, the Primary Care Trusts, Learning and Skills Council, and the Police in Suffolk. The panel was recruited to be representative of the demographics of each council area across the county. The panel is used for postal questionnaires three or four times a year, and asks residents their views on various service areas. The panel has now become 'tired' after three years, and the response rate to surveys has dropped considerably. Ways to improve the outcome are being discussed.

Residents' Forum – is relatively new. The Forum takes the form of a public meeting, and whilst it allows people to air their views, it does tend to attract those who:

- Feel comfortable in expressing their views in public
- Have a strong point of view they wish to express
- Have the time to attend meetings
- Have access to transport.

Widening the number and locations of these meetings will help to address this, particularly if the participants can be more representative of the population as a whole. It could provide a useful mechanism for people to engage directly with the Council.

State of the District Event – is a set event as part of the budget and policy setting framework. It works in much the same way as the forum, and allows members the opportunity to hear the views of other public sector bodies, representatives from business, parish councils and the public on the issues facing the district. This provides members with views that they can feed into the State of the District Debate, where members discuss the key issues for the area and what the Council can do to address them in the coming year when agreeing the corporate plan and budget.

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 the quality of life in their area, and on a range of services. These surveys provide quantitative data that can be benchmarked against other authorities. 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.

Youth Conference – held annually it brings young people from schools in the District together to discuss the issues that affect them. It is considered by all to be a worthwhile exercise and provides an opportunity to gain young peoples' perspective. It is acknowledged that those young people that have taken part in the Conference have been selected by schools as those that are easily able to articulate their views in a more formal setting. That is good, but it is hoped that in 2005 young people from a wider variety of backgrounds will be taking part in the conference.

Babergh Matters – This twice-yearly publication is frequently used as a means to consult with the whole district. Around 4000 people normally respond. But it is uncertain as to how representative they are of the population as a whole.

Divisional or 'issue based' consultation – these are carried out as part of service reviews or on specific 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.

The Council has its own resources to carry out, process and analyse quantitative consultation exercises, and these have been deployed for conducting statutory BVPI surveys, Best Value reviews and other internal exercises.

The way forward

We will look to continue with the above arrangements. In addition, there are a number of areas where the Council needs to develop consultation for the future and to fully engage more sections of the community it serves. To do this it will:

- Provide more than one method of consultation when carrying out consultation exercises where that is appropriate to the needs of the group and consultation issues.
- Develop its range and skill base in conducting qualitative or ‘softer’ forms of consultation.
- Proactively work with sections of the community in the harder to reach groups to build their capacity to engage. Specifically working with;
 1. Black and Minority Ethnic communities (BME)
 2. Disabled groups
 3. Those of working age
 4. The elderly
- 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.
- Work with other public sector bodies, such as Suffolk County Council, to carry out joint consultation on a wider front.
- Ensure feedback from consultation is improved through increased communication through two areas of feedback:
 1. feedback from the results of a consultation or research exercise
 2. the outcome from the decision made based on the information gathered
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the consultation exercises and disseminate any lessons that have been learnt.

The Council will also look to more actively engage Members in consultation with the public.

Implementation of the strategy

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

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

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Public Consultation Strategy Action Plan

Appendix 2

AIM	ACTION	TARGET	RESOURCE LEVEL	LEAD	DEADLINE	OUTCOME
To effectively coordinate and disseminate consultation	To establish an internal inter-divisional working group	Working group with terms of reference to be established	low	Corporate Policy Adviser	Jul-05	reduced consultation overload, reduced duplication, increased quality of consultation
	To imbed the consultation toolkit	Each member of the working group to have disseminated within their division	low	Corporate Policy Adviser	Sep-05	increased quality of consultation
	To produce an action plan for communicating consultation feedback	Plan to be produced by working group	low	Communications & PR Manager	Aug-05	increased satisfaction and feeling of empowerment within the community
To engage more stakeholders in consultation	To build links and capacity with hard to reach groups	To have identified 'gate keepers' and undertaken work to identify barriers to participation with disability, and BME groups residing in Babergh	High	Corporate Policy Adviser	Mar-06	consultation that is more reflective of the whole community
	To further develop Residents forums	To develop Residents forums that cover recognised geographic boundaries or community of interest	medium	Corporate Policy Adviser	Jul-05	increased participation in the democratic process by residents

Public Consultation Strategy Action Plan

Appendix 2

AIM	ACTION	TARGET	RESOURCE LEVEL	LEAD	DEADLINE	OUTCOME
	To develop a consultation framework to engage young people	To have an appropriate range of methods and 'gate keepers' to engage young people	medium	Corporate Policy Adviser/ Corporate Support Officer	Mar-06	consultation that is more reflective of all young people
To review existing consultation arrangements	To review value for money and credibility of Suffolk Speaks prior to the panel being renewed	To have submitted to management team options for future participation in Suffolk Speaks	low	Corporate Policy Adviser	Jul-05	Increased cost effective consultation
	To review the quality of consultation tools being used by departments	To have reviewed the quality and range of consultation tools and techniques being used.	low	Corporate Policy Adviser	Jun-05	Increased cost effective consultation
	To review the consultation strategy	The strategy to be reviewed by June 2007	low	Corporate Policy Adviser	Jun-07	consultation that is cost effective, of a high standard and inclusive