

Executive

Consultation and Engagement Strategy

2 February 2009

Report of Chief Executive and Community and Corporate Planning Manager

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report presents a final version of a consultation and engagement strategy and action plan for Cherwell District Council and outlines the steps the council needs to take to meet the requirements of new legislation in this policy area.

This report is public

Recommendations

The Executive is recommended:

- (1) To undertake consultation on the draft strategy and make any amendments in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Community Planning.
- (2) Following consultation, to recommend to Council the adoption of the consultation and engagement strategy and action plan as council policy and the preferred approach to improving consultation and community engagement, to delivering our commitment to be an Accessible, Value for Money Council and to meeting the statutory requirements of the Duty to Involve in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.
- (3) To request an annual progress review of the strategy and action plan to be received by the Executive.

Executive Summary

Introduction

- 1.1 Cherwell District Council has a record of effective consultation and engagement with the local community. This currently takes place across the council in all service areas and covers issues around customer satisfaction and service development. In addition, our service and financial planning framework and partnership work aims to identify and address needs within the Cherwell community.
- 1.2 Recent policy developments (including new legislation and the Comprehensive Area Assessment) mean that councils and other public bodies are being required to improve their approach to community consultation and engagement. This includes requirements to demonstrate we have consulted and acted on the basis of the results and to work increasingly closely with partners to consult, engage and demonstrate a clear understanding of the needs of the local community.
- 1.3 Our Strategic Priority to be an Accessible, Value for Money Council commits us to being easy to contact, approachable and responsive, seeking the views of customers about our services, maintaining transparent and public decision making and listening to views and comments from the local community. This strategy will help us to deliver our commitments within the corporate plan. The strategy also helps us to meet our commitments under Theme 10 of the Cherwell Community Plan as it also provides a framework in which to improve engagement with harder to reach groups.

Proposals

- 1.4 To update the council's existing consultation framework, to include a number of documents and activities: a medium term strategy to develop and improve our current approaches; a three year action plan to meet the strategy's objectives; a charter that clearly outlines our commitment to consultation and the standards that consultees can expect; toolkits; support and guidance for managers and officers undertaking consultation; and a clear approach to working with our partners to consult with the local community.
- 1.5 It is proposed that the strategy and action plan is based on six objectives. Cherwell District Council will:
 1. Demonstrate a clear commitment to consultation and community engagement.
 2. Have a coordinated but flexible approach to consultation that meets the needs of all our services and ensures a consistent approach across the council.
 3. Work in partnership with others to ensure joined up consultation.
 4. Undertake consultation in line with clear standards and good practice.
 5. Ensure our consultation is open, accessible and inclusive.
 6. Demonstrate how the results of our consultation influences outcome.

1.6 The strategy also outlines a series of principles that should underpin all future consultation to ensure quality and value for money. These principles are explained more fully in the consultation strategy attached as Appendix 1.

1. Purposeful
2. Robust
3. Accessible
4. Communicated and Coordinated
5. Used
6. Proportionate

1.7 Appendix 2 outlines the actions that will deliver the objectives outlined in the strategy. These cover a three year period.

Conclusion

1.8 The business benefits of adopting the consultation and engagement strategy as proposed in this paper, and the supporting appendices, go beyond meeting statutory requirements. They reflect and develop the Council's current commitment and approach and include:

- A clear statement of our commitment to consultation and engagement and an overview of the standards the public can expect when we undertake consultation.
- Support for Members in terms of better information about community needs and also improved opportunities to be involved in consultation.
- Closer alignment between service and financial planning and community needs as expressed through robust consultation and engagement opportunities. This will include the provision of an evidence base for service developments and growth bids.
- A clear set of standards and requirements for managers in terms of service consultation and support to help them fulfil this. Support will include consulting with harder to reach groups.
- Improved coordination of consultation across the Council and in conjunction with partners. This will ensure consultation results are timely, improved sharing of information and the reduction of consultation fatigue.
- Improved access to consultation for members of the local community. Consultations will be better planned and publicised. This will include better online access.
- Better value for money by working with others to procure consultation and share results.
- By adopting clear principles and standards the quality of our consultations will improve.

- A programme of corporate consultation that can be used to underpin the Council's strategic framework including setting the budget and the corporate plan and understanding customer satisfaction trends.

Background Information

2.1 Our Current Approach

Currently all councils have a statutory duty to consult on major policy decisions and specific areas of activity or service delivery (for example in planning). To meet this requirement we undertake a local annual satisfaction survey, the BVPI surveys (now the place survey), and complete a detailed qualitative programme of budget consultation. We also consult widely with regards to medium term strategies and the Community Strategy. In addition, service managers undertake specific and necessary consultation to inform service development.

Our current approach is comprehensive; we are committed to undertaking consultation and use a variety of techniques, we are part of a county wide group that jointly procures government required questionnaires to improve value for money and quality and we are developing fora to help improve community engagement.

We have also signed up to the Oxfordshire Compact which sets consultation for consultation and engagement with the voluntary and community sector.

Key Issues for Consideration/Reasons for Decision and Options

3.1 New statutory requirements

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007) places a Duty to Involve upon us. This duty is a specific requirement that we (and all Best Value Authorities) must fulfil with regards to consultation and engagement.

The requirement comes into force in April 2009 and Appendix 3 to this report explains the implications of the new duty in greater detail. Whilst the duty does not require us to undertake any specific consultation events we will be required to demonstrate that are proactive and coordinated in our approach to consultation (both across the council and with partners). It also requires us to feedback the results of consultation to those who have taken part and take action as a result of consultation (or be able to demonstrate that we have considered consultation results and can account for why we have not acted upon them).

In order to fulfil this duty we will need to ensure we have robust approaches to the issues outlined below. The consultation and engagement strategy aims to address them:

- Accessibility - using appropriate methods and ensuring we talk to groups that are sometimes considered harder to reach for many reasons, for example economic, social, cultural, geographic, health, time etc.

- Proportionality - balancing the benefits and costs of consultation with the significance of the issue
- Partnership working – to ensure we are joined up across the district, learning from our partners, better value for money
- Coordination - ensuring our consultation activities are part of an integrated approach across the area
- Timing - when to consult, making sure the results can feed into service planning and development, making sure we avoid consultation fatigue

3.2 The Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA)

Our response and approach to these new requirements will be measured through the CAA (the inspection regime that replaces the CPA (comprehensive performance assessment) from April 2009. One of the key questions that will be considered as part of this assessment is the extent to which local priorities express community needs and aspirations. As such we will have to demonstrate that we have robust arrangements in place to collect, listen to and act upon the results of community consultation and engagement.

As part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment an annual Use of Resources assessment will be undertaken. This judges the effectiveness of the organisation in terms of the extent to which it meets the criteria outlined in the key lines of enquiry (KLOEs).

These KLOEs require a number of activities and achievements in terms of stakeholder consultation and involvement. These include consultation around setting the budget, setting priorities on the basis of local need, consulting with people in terms of how they would like to access information about the council and its reports, policies and services, consulting with service users when designing and commissioning services, using information (including customer information) to improve service performance and working with partners to ensure information about community needs is effectively and safely shared.

3.3 Working in partnership

In addition to the requirements of the CAA already identified in this paper the assessment will also consider how effectively we work in partnership to engage the community and understand community need. We already work with partners to improve our understanding of community needs (for example as part of the Community Planning Partnership and the Safer Communities Partnership) and this strategy will help us to develop this work.

3.4 The Cherwell Community Strategy – Focus on People (Theme 10)

Theme 10 of the community strategy identifies specific actions aimed at improving accessibility and engagement with younger people, older people, people with disabilities and people from black and minority ethnic communities. This strategy will support these actions by improving our engagement with groups of people we find hard to reach and improving consultation resulting from equality impact assessments.

There is also a clear requirement to effectively consult and engage the community as outlined in the equalities standard and our own equalities policies. This is with regards to the impact council policies have on different communities in the district (through equality impact assessments).

3.5 Service and Financial Planning

The proposed strategy will build upon the work undertaken during 2008 and further integrate consultation into the service and financial planning process. This means identifying consultation needs early on (as part of service plans) effectively planning and resourcing them and making best use of consultation outcomes to inform our service strategies. It will also ensure that there is a corporate consultation plan and programme to inform key strategies and activities such as the corporate plan and budget.

3.6 Value for money

An improved approach to consultation and engagement will support improved value for money in a number of ways. A clear strategy and action plan underpinned by additional support for managers will reduce duplication, improve procurement of research services and reduce the amount of time spent undertaking consultation work.

The outcomes of consultation should also result in improved services, focused on service users' requirements and therefore providing better value for money.

3.7 As a result of these issues it is recommended that the Executive adopt the proposed Consultation and Engagement Strategy as council policy. It is also recommended that the Executive receive an annual update regarding the progress and implementation of this strategy.

The Executive is also invited to identify any additional issues, actions or initiatives to be included in the strategy and action plan.

Consultations

External The Equality and Access Advisory Panel considered issues around communication, consultation, engagement and participation and a public meeting on 1 December as part of the equalities impact assessment for this strategy.

Internal The Community Links officer group has reviewed the strategy and the council's approach to consultation has been considered by EMT.

Implications

Financial: None beyond current budgets set for 2009/10. The action plans for subsequent years will require resources to ensure it is implemented. These will be drawn from the Community and Corporate Planning budget.

Comments checked by

Legal:

The new community strategy will meet the requirements of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, particularly the Duty to Involve. It will also provide a framework for emerging legislation around the 'Communities in Control' White Paper.

Comments checked by Liz Howlett, Head of Legal and Democratic Services/Monitoring Officer, 01295 221686.

Risk Management:

Without the adoption of a new strategy there is a risk that the business benefits outlined in paragraph 1.8 will not be realised. In addition there is a risk that we will not meet the standards required by the new legislation or that we will not meet the standards outlined in the CAA.

Comments checked by Rosemary Watts

Risk Management & Insurance Officer, 01295 221566

Equalities

Approaches to consultation and engagement have been discussed by the Equality and Access Advisory Panel and one of the actions in the strategy is to develop guidance on improving consultation with harder to reach groups.

Comments checked by Grahame Helm, Head of Safer Communities and Development 01295 221615

Wards Affected

All

Corporate Plan Themes

Strategic priority 4 – Cherwell: an accessible, value for money council.

Executive Portfolio

Councillor Barry Wood
Portfolio Holder for Policy and Community Planning

Document Information

Appendix No	Title
Appendix 1	Draft Consultation and Engagement Strategy
Appendix 2	Draft Consultation and Engagement Action Plan
Appendix 3	Duty to Involve Briefing Note
Background Papers	
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