

Cherwell District Council

Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2012-2015



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Introduction and purpose of the strategy

The Council's first Consultation and Engagement Strategy was approved in 2009 and provided an effective framework to complete consultation activities that enabled the ongoing development and improvement of services for the community.

Since 2009 there has been a greater prominence across the Council for consultation and specifically community engagement as a key principle of service delivery.

Development in the processes used to undertake consultation and engagement has resulted in achievements such as the introduction of targeted activities with specific communities and groups. including: the Disability Forum, the Faith Forum and the Equality Panel. These events allowed us to ensure our services are available, accessible and appropriate for people with diverse needs, helped identify gaps within the service provision and ensured adherence to good practice in terms of engaging with harder to reach groups.

Other successes include the introduction of Connecting Communities, a series of community engagement events aimed at supporting Cherwell residents, the launch of a public Consultation Portal and the development of our 'knowing our communities' events which aim to give Councillors, council employees and members of local voluntary and public sector organisations a better understanding of issues affecting local people.

The aim of this updated strategy is to continuously strengthen and develop consultation and engagement activities within Cherwell to enable wider participation and involvement.

As part of the review of the previous Consultation Strategy we have identified specific areas for development and these are included in this revised version:

- Improving partnership working and joint initiatives / approaches to consultation
- Reviewing opportunities for shared working between Cherwell District Council and South Northamptonshire council on appropriate joint consultation opportunities
- Increasing co-ordination of and improving access to consultation and engagement events
- Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of engagement activities

This strategy has been refreshed to address these issues and sets out a broad framework for how Cherwell District Council proposes to consult and engage with local people and communities, including residents, people who work in the district, local businesses and the voluntary and public sectors. This framework will be used as the basis for a medium term action plan to guide the work of the Council in this area during the period 2012-2015.

Looking forward: developing our approach to consultation and engagement

The strategy outlines our developing approach and commitment to consultation with Cherwell residents and communities. It does not replace any statutory or formal consultation processes that we currently undertake, for example in relation to planning, licensing or any appeals processes. The Council's Local Plan is covered by the Statement of Community Involvement which provides the consultation strategy for the preparation of the Local Plan.

The Consultation and Engagement strategy and action plan covers Cherwell District Council services, decisions and processes and does not commit partner agencies to its objectives. However, it is recognised that working in partnership is an important part of this approach and one

of the aims of the strategy is to develop joint strategies to improve consultation and engagement with partners.

Timeframe

This is a medium-term strategy covering the period 2012/13 (April 2012) to 2014/15 (March 2015).

Performance and review

An annual performance report will be published that reviews our performance against the strategic aim, objectives and actions outlined in this document. The content of the strategy and action plan will be reviewed and updated on an annual basis taking into account new policy developments and changes in local requirements, areas identified for improvement and national policy initiatives and ensure these are reflected in new actions as required.

Performance, in terms of implementing the action plan, will be reviewed by officers on a quarterly basis as part of the Performance Team's service plan.

Strategic aim

Cherwell District Council is committed to consulting the people and communities of Cherwell and developing strategies and services that take into account local priorities. Consultation and community engagement helps us to ensure that we are responsive to local needs and aspirations.

This consultation and engagement strategy will provide the Council with a consistent, corporate and agreed approach to how we consult the people and communities of Cherwell and use the results to inform our policy, strategy and service delivery.

The aim of the consultation and engagement strategy is to ensure the delivery of high quality consultation and effective engagement across the Council. The people and communities of Cherwell will have confidence in our activities and consultation and engagement will produce robust results that can inform service development and council policy.

This aim supports the delivery of the Council's strategic priority "Cherwell – An accessible, value for money council".

Strategy objectives

Our objectives are to:

1. Demonstrate clear commitment to consultation and community engagement
2. Develop flexible ways of engagement to effectively support formal processes, other council departments and partners
3. Work in partnership with others to ensure joined up consultation and engagement
4. Undertake consultation in line with clear standards and good practice

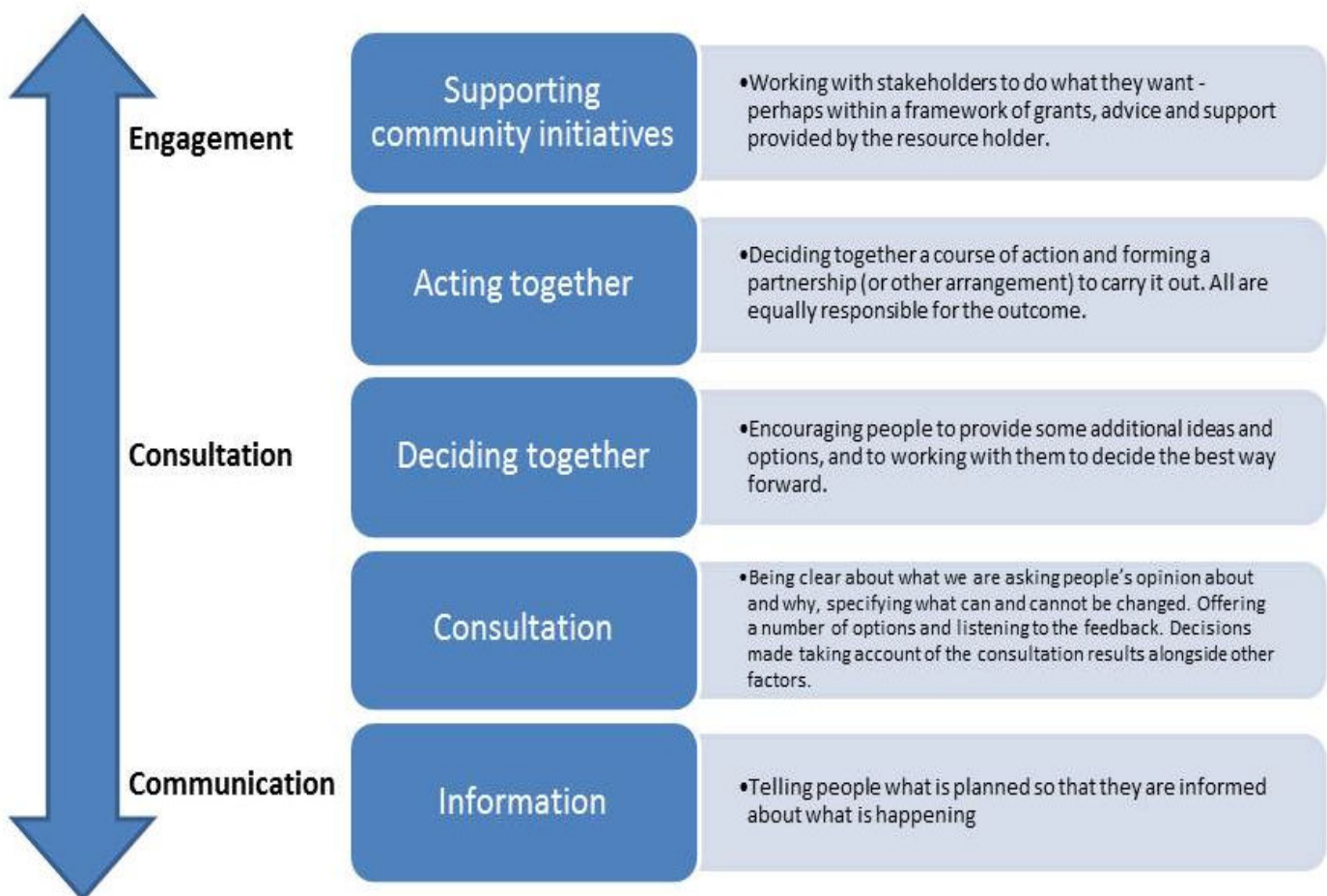
5. Ensure our consultation and engagement is open, accessible and inclusive
6. Demonstrate how the results of our consultation influences outcomes

What is consultation?

The concept of a ladder of consultation or participation is well known (e.g. Arnstein's model in 1969). This approach sees consultation as a continuum moving from the most basic information giving to more complex and interactive modes of engagement. David Wilcox (1994) <http://www.partnerships.org.uk> identifies a number of stages that is useful for local authorities and those working in community consultation activities. (See figure 1)

This strategy aims to support consultation and engagement activity in each of these stages, using techniques that are appropriate for the kind of consultation or engagement required.

Figure 1: From Communication to Engagement



(See David Wilcox, 1994, <http://www.partnerships.org.uk>)

Why does the council consult?

The main purpose of consultation and engagement is to ensure that our services reflect the needs of the local community. This requires us to actively undertake consultation to inform strategy, policy, service development and the allocation of the council budget. Key requirements include:

- To support the role of Councillors in understanding the needs and aspirations of the Cherwell community
- The need to inform the service planning and provide a solid knowledge base for developing services and service strategies
- To measure customer satisfaction and opinion in relation to service delivery and be able to track changes over time and in relation to service changes
- To measure issues around quality of life, such as the fear of crime
- To measure performance of the council services
- To improve the delivery and take up of our services
- To support bids for resources or the allocation of resources

How does the council consult?

The council has a good record of using different ways to consult people and communities, including surveys online and by post, workshops, focus groups, formal methods such as the publication of draft policies and strategies and consultative forums.

We are committed to using consultation and engagement methods that are inclusive and appropriate for the target audience. The council is also keen to consult in partnership with others and works with partners to jointly commission consultation. This strategy will help to improve our techniques and methods (with the aim of improving response and participation rates) and also increase the amount of joint projects we undertake with partners.

The council will publish planned consultations and the results on online consultation portal (<http://consult.cherwell.gov.uk/portal>)

Who does the council consult?

Before embarking upon consultation it should be clear who the target audience is. For example service users, potential services users, the families/carers of service users, council tax payers, partners, local businesses, other public agencies and the voluntary and community sector. The target audience and purpose of the consultation may have an impact on the consultation methods and techniques chosen.

Within these broad categories we recognise that there may be people or groups that are less likely to take part in consultations for a number of reasons for example they may have language or other accessibility requirements, they may not use many council services, they may be busy or spend a lot of time outside the district. These groups are often called 'harder to reach' and different approaches are usually required to establish and maintain contact with them, so that their views are not overlooked. This strategy will help improve the council's approach to consulting and engaging with groups that have sometimes been seen as hard to reach.

Quality and standards

There are a number of standards that we will be working to. These include standards for consultations involving voluntary and community sector organisations, government set standards for consultations and good practice standards such as those laid out by the Market Research Society or the Consultation Institute.

Cherwell consultation and engagement principles

1. Purposeful

Consultation is the cornerstone of the Cherwell Sustainable Community Strategy, the medium term strategies flowing out of it and the Council's Business Plan. Consultation should be undertaken when we have a good reason, informing or developing service delivery, council policy or strategy. Consultation must be targeted and well-focussed, with clear objectives.

2. Robust

Consultation should be of good quality, meeting our required standards. We should be clear about the purpose and scope of the consultation and how its outcomes will be used. We must consult at a formative stage rather than later on in the process and provide people with information to allow informed response. The council will employ external expertise as necessary and support staff to undertake effective consultation.

Efforts will be made to ensure that information collected is in a standard format in order that it can be easily retrieved using a standard set of demographic categories and put to use by all council departments and partners. This contributes to reducing the need for new consultations and research.

3. Accessible

Consultations should use methods that appropriate to the people who need to participate. Consultations should allow all interested parties to have their say and give them adequate time to do so. Consideration should be given and steps taken to engage with groups we find hard to reach or those who may be unlikely to participate in traditional consultation methods. Consideration should be given to people who find it harder to participate in consultation and engagement activities for any reason, factors may be social, economic, cultural, geographical, health related, age related or time availability.

4. Communicated and Coordinated

Consultation activities should be appropriately communicated and integrated into the service and financial planning framework. Co-ordination of consultation activity should take place both across the council and with partner organisations to avoid duplication of effort, to share knowledge and provide better value for money.

5. Used

Proposals to carry out consultation and engagement must include a clear explanation of the information needed in order to ensure that all consultation activity is of value and relevance. Consultation findings should be reported clearly and outcomes of consultation must be clearly fed back to consultees and stakeholders; this includes the results of consultation and action taken on the basis of consultation findings.

6. Proportionate

Consultation expenditure will be proportionate to the scale of the service or theme being researched and the significance of the issue. Consultation should demonstrate value for money and be conducted in a coordinated way to avoid duplication of effort (both within the council and across partnerships) and consultation fatigue.

7. Flexible

Consultation and engagement activities will be organised in flexible way to meet needs of local communities and people. Formal processes are not always the most appropriate ways of engaging with certain audiences e.g. young people while could be convenient for others e.g. members of official groups or bodies. Flexible approach will be adopted to ensure most effective ways of engagement and to ensure wide participation and involvement

Contact details:

For more information about this strategy, the supporting action plan or the guidance and toolkits contact the performance team.

For information about planned consultation and engagement events have a look at the consultation calendar on our web pages.



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Have your say:

Our online consultations are available at <http://consult.cherwell.gov.uk/portal/>