
Cabinet Member (Community Safety and Equalities)
Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

18 December 2013
22 January 2014

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member (Community Safety and Equalities) - Councillor Townshend

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Chief Executive

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title: Effectiveness and quality of recent consultation exercises carried out by Coventry City Council

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

Following a request by the Cabinet Member this report addresses the effectiveness and quality of recent consultation exercises conducted by Coventry City Council. Ensuring that those with limited access to ICT facilities are enabled and supported to take part was a particular concern.

The report provides examples of consultation methods used for a sample of high profile recent consultations and demonstrates that a range of ways to take part has been offered. It emphasises that in order to maximise participation of those most interested or affected, consultations should be designed to: use the engagement methods preferred by those most affected; remove barriers to participation; be meaningfully written or explained; be carefully promoted. Guidelines and good practice already exist within the Council, along with mechanisms to help officers leading consultations. It is important that these continue to be provided and promoted across the Council to ensure that future consultations are fit for purpose and offer the most appropriate consultation methods to encourage participation by those most affected.

Recommendations:

The Cabinet Member is recommended to:

- Note and endorse the report;
- Request that officers continue to ensure that future consultations are undertaken in ways that enable those who are most affected to take part

Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee is recommended to:

- Examine this issue further with particular regard to developing the role of elected members in promoting good consultation practice and make any comments or recommendations to the Cabinet Member (Community Safety and Equalities)

List of Appendices included:

None

Other useful background papers:

Coventry Partnership Inform, Consult, Involve Guidance
<http://www.coventrypartnership.com/research>

Best Value Statutory Guidance
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-value-statutory-guidance--4>

Citizens and Local decision Making: What Drives Feelings of Influence?
<http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/research-reports/citizens-and-local-decision-making>

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

Yes, it will be considered by Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee on 22.01.14

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Effectiveness and quality of recent consultation exercises carried out by Coventry City Council

1. Context (or background)

1.1 On 13th September 2013 the Cabinet Member requested a report into the effectiveness and quality of recent consultation exercises carried out by the Council. Ensuring that those with limited access to ICT facilities are enabled and supported to take part was a particular concern. This is an especially important issue during the current climate of cuts to Council budgets and the consequent need for the Council to make difficult decisions about how it spends its money.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

2.1 The Council aims to be honest, fair, and transparent when making decisions, and to achieve this it is important that high standards are applied consistently to its informing, consultation, and involvement activities. Engaging people (who are affected by decisions) in the process of making those decisions is both a statutory requirement and a prerequisite to providing effective and efficient services.

2.2 The Council already has a dedicated team that promotes good consultation practice, which is guided by the *Coventry Partnership Inform, Consult and Involve Good Practice Guide*. The team provides advice and support to plan, deliver, and analyse consultations. The recommended proposal is to continue this work, emphasising that all City Council consultations should encourage greater participation in consultation by those people and organisations who are directly affected by or interested in the subject of the consultation.

In practice this involves:

- *Using consultation methods that are fit for purpose.* This begins with identifying which people or organisations will be most affected by or interested in consultation proposals and then choosing consultation methods preferred by those affected. Face to face methods (e.g. interviews, focus groups, workshops) should be used when those most affected cannot or do not generally use ICT or who would otherwise be least likely to get involved.
- *Making consultations meaningful and making it easy to take part.* This involves clearly explaining proposals - whether in writing or verbally. Consultations should provide genuine opportunities for people to explain the impact on them and to suggest alternatives.
- *Removing barriers to having a say.* This is done by addressing specific equality issues to ensure consultations are inclusive and accessible to those people most affected. This will also mean offering paper alternatives to electronic surveys and making it clear that these are available and providing a named contact. Sufficient time must be allowed for those affected to take part (including for organisations to consult within their networks).
- *Effectively promoting consultation.* This is achieved by inviting participation from those affected, either by direct invitation or through partner/partnership networks and organisations. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter can also be used to advertise and garner interest. Where essential small incentives may be used to encourage involvement from vulnerable groups who are directly affected but least likely to take part.

- 2.3 Overall, the ideal is to offer a range of opportunities to have a say. However the Council needs to be mindful of the duty of best value and must ensure that resources used for consultation are proportionate to the importance of the decision to be made.
- 2.4 When conducting electronic surveys the Council offers a paper alternative and the number of consultation surveys responses collected recently is provided below. In addition to surveys, consultations have included a range of other methods which vary from consultation to consultation.

Directorate	2012/13		2013 /14 (to Aug 13)	
	Total responses	Surveys	Total responses	Surveys
Children, Learning & Young People	1161	19	1627	17
Community Services	1671	27	947	7
City Services & Development	1570	20	541	8
Customer & Workforce Services	1164	14	57	2
Chief Executives	4222	30	2069	11
Finance & Legal	770	6	416	5
Coventry Partnership	70	2	188	2
TOTAL:	10628	118	5845	52

Recent examples of high profile consultations are provided below along with the range of methods used to engage those affected.

- *Domestic violence and abuse services new delivery model:* views were sought using a range of methods including a series of service provider workshops, focus groups, and creative workshops with victims and perpetrators, and general surveys.
- *Neighbourhood Working Review:* views were sought from residents on the proposals for the future of neighbourhood working in the City through electronic surveys, paper surveys in libraries, and briefings at Neighbourhood Forums and Safer Neighbourhood Groups.
- *Youth Service Review:* views on changes to staffing, location, and delivery of services were sought through eight public meetings, a group discussion with children with special needs, group sessions at Youth Centres with young people, online surveys, paper surveys in libraries and youth centres (at which support to complete surveys was provided).
- *Homelessness and Ex-Offenders Review:* this review carried out a formal consultation with providers of supported accommodation, other stakeholders, referring agencies, and service users, to design a more streamlined and simplified service mode. It used paper surveys and online surveys for voluntary sectors providers and general public, focus groups with service users, feedback workshops, and a service user online survey via Homefinder.
- *Expansion of Primary School Places 2014/15:* a total of 54 consultation meetings for staff, governors and parents/carers were held across each of the 20 schools affected. In addition an online and postal survey was conducted and responses were invited via email/letter.

2.5 A good example of an effective and good quality consultation is the on-going "A Bolder Community Services" Review. A range of ways were used to publicise the consultation and collect in views of those affected, including:

- Direct and targeted contact with staff, service users, and family carers who will potentially be affected by the proposed changes;
- Community Services staff briefing sessions;
- Contact with all commissioned service providers, Voluntary Action Coventry (VAC) members, respondents to the Adult Social Care and Carers Surveys (where involvement in future consultation was requested), and Adult Social Care lead Partnership members (Learning disabilities, Older People and Physical and Sensory Impairment);
- Contact with all members of staff from Coventry and Rugby Clinical Commissioning Group, their GP practices, and Patient Reference Groups;
- Public drop-in sessions;
- Media including Facebook and Twitter;
- Posters in libraries, Council reception areas etc.

2.6 This demonstrates that considerable effort has gone into ensuring that individuals and groups have a range of opportunities to participate in consultation exercises, and that these opportunities were not limited to those that have access to ICT facilities.

2.7 In the current climate of service cuts and re-prioritisation it is almost inevitable that dissatisfaction with consultation will increase. National research has found that the extent to which residents are satisfied with the quality of consultation activities is driven by a range of factors, including the provision of effective information, the quality of the consultation experience, and whether the views they have expressed have been acted upon. They are also strongly linked to experiencing tangible improvements to the local area and to the quality of services.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

3.1 This report is about reviewing the consultation approach adopted by the Council and suggesting steps to improve this process.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

4.1 If the recommendations are accepted implementation will be a continuation of existing arrangements and therefore be immediate.

5. Comments from Executive Director, Resources

5.1 Financial implications

There are no direct financial implications from the recommendations in this report. When decisions are made on appropriate consultation methods, lead officers need to ensure that the financial resources required are proportionate to the importance of the decision to be made. Costs of consultation are generally met from within the existing service areas budgets.

5.2 Legal implications

Statutory Best Value Guidance sets out requirements for local authorities to consult with those affected by or interested in its services, policies, and decisions.

Local authorities are legally bound to consult by statutory best value guidance and through a duty to act “fairly”. Expectations about what makes a consultation fair is set out in case law: consultation must take place before a decision is taken, there must be sufficient information to enable intelligent consideration of the proposal(s) (including information about any equality impacts), sufficient time should be allowed for consideration and response, and decision-makers must consider consultation findings at the time of decision-making.

6. Other implications

None

6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / Local Area Agreement (or Coventry Sustainable Community Strategy)?

The Council aims to be honest, fair, and transparent when making decisions. The proposed option will help to achieve this through promoting and supporting application of high standards consistently to its informing, consultation and involvement activities.

People are more likely to feel that they can influence decisions if key service providers provide them with sufficient and appropriate information, if they listen to people's views, act upon them and then demonstrate how people's views have improved delivery of services. Good quality consultation provides evidence to help to achieve high quality relevant public services that meet the needs of our most vulnerable communities, and aids us in making difficult decisions on the best use of public resources.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

A dedicated team within the Council provides advice and support to plan, conduct, and analyse consultation activities. The team works collaboratively with the Council's Legal Service to manage identified risks resulting from concerns about the fitness for purpose of proposed consultations.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

None

6.4 Equalities / EIA

The Council has produced a guide to statutory consultation and equality duties that outlines how consultation processes should support equality impact assessments and consider the effects on protected groups for any proposed change of service or policy. The Equality and Consultation Analysis process captures both consultation evidence and evidence of equality impacts and consideration of how any adverse effects might be mitigated. By bringing processes for equality impact analysis and consultation the consideration of equality impacts is strengthened.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

None

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

The Coventry Partnership "Inform, Consult and Involve" Guidance underpins advice provided to officers leading consultations. It sets out principles that partner organisations will work towards when undertaking informing, consulting or involving work. The principles will support the delivery of high quality consultation and effective engagement across partner organisations. Continuing with existing co-ordination and support arrangements makes best use of established partner networks and established collaborative working.

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