

Agenda Item No: 6
Report To: Cabinet
Date of Meeting: 24th November 2022
Report Title: Report of the Consultation and Engagement Task Group
Report Author: Abi Sheppard
Job Title: Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Task Group Chairman: Cllr. Noel Ovenden



Summary: The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to form a Task Group to review consultation and engagement as part of the 2022/23 work programme.

This report outlines key areas discussed by the Task Group during the review and details any findings and conclusions.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorsed the recommendations at their November meeting and Cabinet are asked to consider these.

Key Decision: NO

Significantly Affected Wards:

Recommendations: The Overview and Scrutiny Committee would like to recommend to the Cabinet that:

- I. Corporate consultation guidance be produced to provide services with good practice for setting up future consultations. The guidance should include details on the different methods of consultation and set out some minimum standards that need to be complied with before and after a consultation has concluded.
- II. Non-conventional methods of consultation should continue to be explored by the council in order to increase levels of engagement from residents such as video and Hello Lamppost.

- III. The use of easy-read versions of consultation papers should be considered for all public consultations.
- IV. An internal advisory group should be formed for Officers to review consultations before they are published. The group would meet informally to test and feedback to services about proposed surveys.
- V. A calendar of consultations is produced to ensure that the council can oversee how many consultations are issued to residents during one period.
- VI. Work to increase subscribers to ABC publications should continue to be developed by the Council.
- VII. The council explore options around creating a Citizens Panel to encourage local residents to give their views and opinions on services and issues that affect the Borough.
- VIII. Residents are engaged with the scrutiny work programme each year using the Council's communications channels

Policy Overview:	N/A
Financial Implications:	
Legal Implications:	N/A
Equalities Impact Assessment:	Not Required
Data Protection Impact Assessment:	Not required
Risk Assessment (Risk Appetite Statement):	
Sustainability Implications:	

**Other Material
Implications:**

**Exempt from
Publication:**

NO

**Background
Papers:**

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Report Title: Report of the Consultation and Engagement Task Group

Foreword from the Task Group Chairman

1. The Overview and Scrutiny Task Group has reviewed Consultation and Engagement at the council. The review highlighted that conventional ways of engaging with residents did not always reach all groups of people in the Borough. New methods of consultation outside of traditional paper and digital surveys were increasing and Members felt that these options should be explored further.
2. Research from other Local Authorities showed that they had implemented corporate guidance for Officers to refer to when they were required to consult with residents. It was found that the council would benefit from having a set corporate process which could be made available to all staff. Furthermore, the Task Group also endorse the setup of an internal advisory group to provide an opportunity to discuss consultations on an individual basis and ensure the best method taken.
3. I would like to extend my thanks to Members of the Task Group and Officers involved for attending meetings and participating in discussion and debate.

Introduction and Background

4. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to review the council's approach to consultation and engagement. Members were particularly interested in how the council consulted with residents regarding current issues, new policies and projects. Members also wanted to understand what the challenges were with engaging hard to reach groups and compare best practice with other local authorities. It was agreed consultation and engagement would be a priority topic for the scrutiny work programme during the 2022/23 municipal year.

Review Scope

5. The Task Group assembled of 4 Members; Cllr Ovenden (Chair), Cllr. Ledger, Cllr. Blanford, Cllr. Barrett to examine the councils methods of consultation and engagement and, if required, make some recommendations to improve this to the full Committee.
6. A scope was initially compiled for the review to establish where scrutiny could be beneficial. A scoping document was agreed which outlined 5 key aims for the review:

- a. What methods of engagement and communication are used by council services and could they be improved to engage with hard to reach groups?
 - b. How is the council engaging with hard to reach groups in the Borough and what are the obstacles.
 - c. To understand the council's public consultation process and how this contributes to decision making.
 - d. To explore best practice and the tools used by other Local Authorities to carry out public consultations.
 - e. Identify ways that Overview and Scrutiny could engage more with residents to increase public participation at Committee meetings.
7. The Task Group discussed the methodology for this review and agreed that a combination of research reports and witness sessions would be the best approach. It was also suggested that council officers from other authorities could be invited to discuss the methods they use. Tunbridge Wells BC was identified as an authority who had recently adopted a new consultation software and so the Task Group would look to invite a representative to a future meeting. Essex County Council were also invited and provided evidence to council officers outside of the task group sessions.
 8. The Communications Team were also considered as key officers for this review. It was noted that this would not be a review of all the communication issued by the council but instead look at what consultation methods have been used to engage residents.
 9. The Panel would like to thank everyone that gave their time to the review.
 10. In order to keep the scope timely and focused, Members agreed to exclude the following sub-topics from this review:
 - a. Planning consultations (except where relevant to consultation software)
 - b. Engagement with Parish Councils
 - c. Communication with local business
 - d. Internal communications
 - e. Tenant Engagement

Review Findings

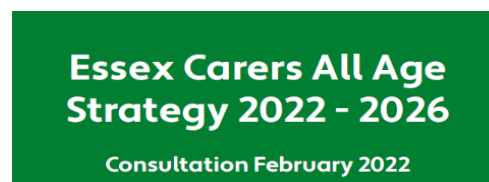
ABC's Public Consultation Tools and Methods

11. A report was prepared for the Task Group regarding how the Council services use public consultation to engage with residents over:
 - a. Draft policies or strategies (e.g. Equalities Policy)
 - b. The quality of council services (e.g. Residents Survey)
 - c. Upcoming Housing Developments (e.g. Henwood Site)

- d. Planning proposals (Both planning policy and development management)
 - e. Changes to some licensing or financial laws (E.g. Gambling Act 2005)
 - f. Budget Consultation
12. Consulting residents on strategic projects and key policies had created opportunities for residents to have a say in council initiatives. Therefore, this type of consultation has the potential to help strengthen the council's relationship with communities.
 13. However, with the increased use of online platforms to carry out consultations, there have been some challenges with reaching all groups of people. The council collects survey responses online through a digital software, 'Inovem' and Officers are able export the results and analyse the data. Some of the more hard-to-reach groups of people in the Borough may be digitally isolated and therefore unable to participate easily online. Different ways of interacting with digitally excluded groups of people are being explored by Officers and alternative formats are always offered. **(Recommendation II)**.
 14. There are also benefits to digital consultation and engagement. Online consultations are more efficient to conduct and many people prefer this method as people do their business online at a time of day convenient to them. We have also seen an increase in engagement at council meetings due to the new hybrid working arrangements and the ability to stream videos and upload them to YouTube.
 15. There were a variety of consultation software solutions that could be used for administering consultations. Bang The Table and Citizen Space were alternative systems used by other local authorities and were introduced to the Task Group. Members felt that the most important aspects for online consultations were that they should be engaging, to the point and in plain English. It was agreed that in comparison with other providers, the council's current software was capable of carrying out consultations in similar ways.
 16. The Policy and Performance team worked as a main contact for providing help and advice to services regarding their surveys and questionnaires. Although the team were able to assist in this regard, there was no formal guidance or central process for consultation. Research from other Local Authorities showed that toolkits were used offsetting out minimum standards which were expected to be complied with and also helped users to consider the aims and objectives of the consultation in question.
 17. Dover District Council have developed a 'Consultation Toolkit' which is designed to give services a step by step process for carrying out consultation work. The toolkit provides a set of minimum standards which are expected to be complied with and asks you to consider the aims, objectives of the consultation. There is also a section that advises on the different consultation methods and the benefits and drawbacks to each one. Also, the Consultation Institute has commended guidance issued by Northampton Borough Council. In a similar way to Dover DC, the guidance gets users to think about what they are trying to achieve out of undertaking a consultation exercise and ensures that methods and resources are considered in the process.

18. It was proposed that the council create a guidance document for corporate consultations in a similar way to other local authorities and based on best practice set out by the Council. The Task Group agreed that having a framework could help address some of the challenges experienced by Officers, for example, by ensuring that there was a recommended minimum time frame for which a consultation should run. It could also provide guidance on deciding the most appropriate type of survey, constructing questionnaires and different formats. Furthermore, a guidance document could help to widen the methods of engagement used by the council and help bring forward new ways of consulting, which is particularly important when seeking views from hard to reach groups. **(Recommendation I)**

19. As well as traditional paper based or online surveys, it was found that the council could look to use other methods more frequently to ensure hard to reach groups had their voice heard. For example, it was suggested that easy-read version of consultation papers or videos could help explain things in a more simple way. Essex County Council provided evidence about their approach to easy read consultations and how they employed an external company to create easy read versions when appropriate for the subject matter. **(Recommendation III)**



EasyRead Version



20. The Task Group discussed the process of how consultations were published. Members proposed that more could be done to ensure there was a clear quality checking process for future consultations. An example had been provided of where a consultation had been too long and repetitive which had led to a number of the responses not being fully completed. It was suggested to Members that an informal internal consultation advisory group could be formed for Officers to create a process for submitting and publishing consultations. This would ensure that all avenues of consultation were discussed and explored during the early stages of a consultation. It would also enable the consultation to be properly tested to ensure plain English, question routing and length was appropriate. **(Recommendation IV)**
21. Members also wanted to ensure that a calendar was created to clearly set out what consultations were expected during the year. The calendar could then

inform the advisory group as to when they should convene. Creating a record of consultations could also help to track what methods the council has used more frequently and capture lessons learned to inform future consultations.
(Recommendation V)

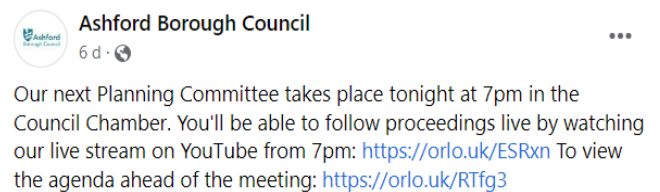
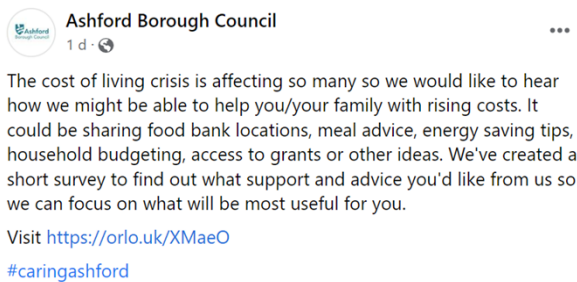
Witness Sessions

22. The Task Group invited the Communications Manager from Tunbridge Wells BC (TWBC) to attend a meeting and talk about the consultation methods they used at their council.
23. The Task Group compiled a list of questions which were presented at the meeting.
 - a. Can you provide an overview of how consultations work at your council?
 - b. Have you seen an improvement with getting consultation responses since you have implemented the new system?
 - c. How do you collect a database of people to consult with on specific issues?
 - d. What other methods of consultation and engagement do you use that are/have been successful?
 - e. Are consultations reviewed by a panel or individual before being published?
24. Members took interest in the community group database that had been created by TWBC and was used to consult residents on specific issues. It was noted that only contact details from subscriptions that allowed you to opt in could be used for consultation purposes. It was felt that using the 'opt in' feature more in council communications would help build up a subscriber list of contacts of people who wanted to engage with the council more often.
(Recommendation VI)
25. As part of the research for this review, the scrutiny team made contact with Essex County Council to discuss their online methods of consultation and engagement. Essex were identified as a council that used a different consultation software called Citizen Space. Essex had also used Citizen Space to develop a Residents' Panel. The panel are regularly asked to provide feedback on services and issues that are important to residents, up to six times a year. Any adult resident who lives in the area is able to sign up and choose what to take part in and prize draws are ran on occasion as an incentive to take part.
26. Whilst it was good to have the option for people to sign up to a Panel it was important that any panel was representative of the local community to ensure a diverse range of voices were heard and that the borough was represented properly. If ABC were to adopt such a Panel then consideration to the membership to ensure wide representation should be given. It was also important that any panel would have a reasonably active programme of consultations, surveys or straw polls each year to ensure momentum was maintained and membership did not become outdated.

27. The introduction of a Citizens Panel at Ashford Borough Council could be another way of increasing engagement with residents. Collecting feedback to consultations from Panel Members regularly could also help the council understand what the most prominent issues are facing residents.
(Recommendation VII)

Communications and Engagement

28. Members were interested to learn about how the Communications team used different media platforms to engage with residents. A presentation was provided to the Task Group and advised on the following
- Overview of Communications key functions
 - Ashford For You magazine
 - Readers' Survey
 - Social Media channels and digital approach
 - Promoting consultations
 - Ongoing challenges and possible solutions



29. The Task Group discussed the use of social media to convey council messages. Keeping up to date with the increasing number of social media channels had proven to be a challenge. However, it was useful to target certain groups of people by choosing social platforms that they used more often, for example, Instagram was a popular platform used more by younger people. Council meetings such as Overview and Scrutiny were announced on social media and the meetings were also promoted as hybrid which allowed residents to join online from home. It was suggested that further work could be done to promote council meetings by sharing what topics were due on the agenda in advance. For Overview and Scrutiny, using social media and the council's magazine could help engage residents with the work conducted by the Committee. One way of doing this could be to ask residents to submit their own ideas for the scrutiny work programme each year. These could be reviewed by the Committee using the scrutiny topic selection matrix.
(Recommendation VIII)

Conclusion

30. The Task Group recognised the importance of consulting residents on various issues. Although public consultations had been undertaken for many policies, strategies and developments, a high response rate was not always received. Members agreed that new ways could be explored to help reach all types of residents in the Borough which may involve looking outside of traditional surveys and questionnaires. The creation of a Citizens Panel was also considered as a new way to increase regular engagement with residents.
31. Creating a corporate approach to consultations was seen as key for ensuring their quality. The Task Group concluded that more could be done to guide Officers when considering consultation methods and a wider group of consultation experts in the council could be formed to help with this.
32. The Task Group found that public participation at public facing committees had improved due to the new hybrid working arrangements. However, it was suggested that more work could be done to engage residents with the work of the O&S Committee through social media and the council's resident magazine.

Recommendations

2. **The Overview and Scrutiny Committee would like to recommend to the Cabinet that:**
 - I. Corporate consultation guidance be produced to provide services with good practice for setting up future consultations. The guidance should include details on the different methods of consultation and set out some minimum standards that need to be complied with before and after a consultation has concluded.
 - II. Non-conventional methods of consultation should continue to be explored by the council in order to increase levels of engagement from residents such as video and Hello Lamppost.
 - III. The use of easy-read versions of consultation papers should be considered for all public consultations.
 - IV. An internal advisory group should be formed for Officers to review consultations before they are published. The group would meet informally to test and feedback to services about proposed surveys. .
 - V. A calendar of consultations is produced to ensure that the council can oversee how many consultations are issued to residents during one period.
 - VI. Work to increase subscribers to ABC publications should continue to be developed by the Council.

- VII. The council explore options around creating a Citizens Panel to encourage local residents to give their views and opinions on services and issues that affect the Borough.
- VIII. Residents should be engaged more with the annual scrutiny work programme via the Council's communications channels.

Next Steps in Process

33. The final report of the Task Group was submitted to the council's Management Team who have provided advice to the Cabinet regarding each recommendation. Overall, Management Team were supportive of all the recommendations and their advice is tabled below:

No.	Recommendation	Management Team Advice
I	Corporate consultation guidance be produced to provide services with good practice for setting up future consultations. The guidance should include details on the different methods of consultation and set out some minimum standards that need to be complied with before and after a consultation has concluded.	MT supported the recommendation and endorsed using best practice issued by the Chartered Institute.
II	Non-conventional methods of consultation should continue to be explored by the council in order to increase levels of engagement from residents such as video and Hello Lamppost.	MT agreed that more informal methods of engagement should be considered for future consultation.
III	The use of easy-read versions of consultation papers should be considered for all public consultations.	MT agreed that easy-read publications should be available where relevant.
IV	An internal advisory group should be formed for Officers to review consultations before they are published. The group would meet informally to test and feedback to services about proposed surveys.	MT recommended that the communications team should be involved in the group to help ensure the use of plain English in publications.
V	A calendar of consultations is produced to ensure that the council can oversee how many consultations are issued to residents during one period.	MT supported the recommendation.
VI	Work to increase subscribers to ABC publications should continue to be developed by the Council.	MT endorsed the approach taken by the Communications team to increase subscriptions to publications.
VII	The council explore options around creating a Citizens Panel to encourage local residents to	MT agreed with the idea of a Citizens Panel in principle and

	give their views and opinions on services and issues that affect the Borough.	supported further research in to how this could operate at Ashford BC.
VIII	Residents are engaged with the scrutiny work programme each year using the Council's communications channels.	MT support the recommendation.

34. Subject to Cabinet approval, it has been proposed that an update on the recommendations is brought to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee during later 2023 to review their progress.

Contact and Email

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