

Corporate Consultation Strategy

1. Introduction

Bury Metropolitan Borough Council is committed to improving the way we consult and engage with our communities. This corporate consultation strategy provides a clear corporate framework for how the Council will consult and involve our communities and other stakeholders in decision making, to ensure that services and priorities reflect local needs.

The strategy will enable the Council to co-ordinate a wide range of consultation activity with clear aims and objectives and a detailed action plan for implementation.

The strategy focuses initially on consultation and contains the key aims, priorities and principles to be adopted in carrying out an effective consultation exercise. A consultation toolkit will follow and will detail some of the techniques and methods available, key audience groups and recommended techniques.

The strategy is a live document and will evolve and move forward towards active participation as its implementation takes shape.

2. Aims of the strategy

The strategy aims to:

1. demonstrate the Council's commitment to consultation.
2. make consultation effective and meaningful.
3. set corporate standards for an integrated and consistent process for managing consultation exercises
4. contribute to the continuous improvement of service delivery across the Council by ensuring that consultation with the Council's stakeholders is integral to the decision making process.
5. improve the co-ordination of consultation between directorates and key partners

3. Objectives of the strategy

The objectives of the strategy are:

Objective One

Establish a corporate approach for all consultation activity.

Objective Two

Provide clear corporate standards, advice and support on consultation activity and good practice.

Objective Three

Ensure that all communities within Bury, especially hard to reach, disadvantaged groups and disengaged groups can actively engage in effective consultation exercises.

Objective Four

Use the outcome of consultation activities to inform the Council's decision-making process and deliver services that meet local need.

4. What is consultation?

Consultation is a very broad term and several definitions exist. For the purpose of this strategy Bury Metropolitan Borough Council interprets consultation as

'a process of dialogue that leads to a decision'.

(Audit Commission *listen up- effective consultation paper*) <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/AC-REPORT.asp?CatID=&ProdID=EA01768C-AA8E-4a2f-99DB-83BB58790E34>

"The notion of consultation being a dialogue implies an ongoing exchange of views and information, rather than a one-off event.

Dialogue implies two or more parties listening to and taking account of one another's views. This definition highlights the importance of consultation being closely related to decisions: there is little value in agencies consulting over policies or services that they have no plans to review. However, the notion of consultation 'leading to' a decision is important too.

The results of consultation are an important input to decisions, but having consulted the public does not free authority officers and members from their duties to offer advice on, and to make, decisions. Authority members need to

consider a range of factors when making decisions, and the outcome of consultation is only one of these factors, albeit an important one”.

Many of the terms and principles of consultation also apply to the concepts of ‘Empowerment’ and ‘Information giving’.

Although much of the guidance contained in this strategy can be applied to these other types of public/stakeholder involvement, the reader should note that there are distinctions between the different concepts (outlined below).

Empowerment tends to go beyond the boundaries of consultation to allow 'participants' to be directly involved in the decision making process. Empowerment is about the ability of people – all people – to have a real say in decisions that affect the shape and course of their lives.

www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1163065

Consultation is a higher level of involvement than information giving. You may be asked for views and perceptions on the problems, offered some options, allow comment, take account and then proceed. Consultation is appropriate when you can offer people choices on what you are going to do - but not the opportunity to develop their own ideas or put plans into action

Information giving underpins all other levels of participation, and may be appropriate on its own in some circumstances. Information giving is essentially a “take it or leave it” approach. However there are likely to be problems if all you offer is information and people are expecting more involvement. It is important to use language and ideas which the audience will find familiar and be clear about why you are informing rather than consulting.

5. Principles of Consultation in Bury

Consultation with local citizens, for whom the council provides services for, must be rooted in their right to influence the development and provision of services that affect them.

The most effective consultation is underpinned by:

- Adequate resources of expertise, time and money and effective systems and processes within an organisation;
- Organisations sharing and trading relevant skills and experiences both internally and externally and actively encouraging consultation and involvement activity;
- Local citizens being involved in the planning, monitoring and evaluating consultation activity.
- Council departments regularly reviewing how they are approaching and encouraging local citizen’s involvement in planning and provision of services.

6. Why consult?

Statutory obligation

Bury Metropolitan Borough Council has a statutory requirement to consult under the Local Government Act 2000 and Comprehensive Performance Assessment. There are also statutory requirements within departments to consult, particularly for Planning, Children's Services and Adult Services.

Local democracy

By engaging local people and communities the council can plan more effectively and provide the services that local people want and expect. This in turn helps services make better use of limited resources. It can also foster a positive dialogue between citizens and the Council, which reinforces the Council's commitment to be open and accountable. At a wider level, it supports participation in the democratic process and the quality of community governance and develops skills and knowledge in local communities.

Any effective consultation exercise can produce significant financial savings in terms of service delivery as services can be closely tailored to meeting specific, identifiable needs. This should help ensure a high take-up of services and increased revenue.

A range of benefits include:

Planning for the future	Designing and targeting services to meet local need
Deciding priorities	Checking out satisfaction with services
Making financial choices	Monitoring the impact of change
Encouraging our stakeholders to become more fully involved in the council's decision-making process	Improving the council image and community understanding of council work
Strengthening the council's role in community leadership	Improving services and service take up
Establishing local aspirations	Promoting sustainability in improving existing services and introducing new ones;
Proposals for change	Testing out proposed ideas before implementing them;
Implementing local initiatives	Partnership projects

7. Who to consult?

The Council will consult with a wide range of people and organisations. Consultation needs to be carried out effectively so the Council can use the information to balance the needs and aspirations of local people within its limited resources. Below are some of the main categories of stakeholder that may be consulted.

Local Citizens	Children & Young People
People working in the borough	Interest Groups
Voluntary and Community Groups	Elected members
Service User / Non User Groups	Council Employees
Trade Unions	Local Strategic Partnership
Tenants and Residents Groups	Area Boards
Business and economic sector	Private sector service providers
Other public sector bodies	Schools
Citizens Panel	Faith/cultural groups
Regional / National bodies	Neighbouring Authorities
Older people	Black and minority ethnic groups
Disabled groups	Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community
Carers and their families	Homeless people
Socially-excluded groups	Homeless people

Making consultation inclusive

The Council wishes to consult as widely as possible and to include specific groups who, for a variety of reasons, do not tend to take part in consultation activity; therefore a more targeted approach is required. These groups are often described as “hard-to-reach” groups.

The council will use a range of methods with individuals and local communities to engage in ways and levels appropriate to their capacities and wants.

These groups are described as ‘hard to reach’ because traditional or standard methods of research and consultation may not be appropriate or may not achieve a sample that will produce valid and reliable results.

Examples of hard-to-reach groups include:

some children and young people, including looked after children and disabled young people	Black and minority ethnic groups, particularly those who do not speak English
Some older people, such as the housebound	Homeless people.
Refugees and asylum seekers	

8. How do we consult?

Consultation takes many forms and will utilise a variety of methods including –

Surveys	Informal Discussions
Citizens Panel	Focus / Discussion Groups
Customer Comments and Complaints	Presentations / Briefings
E-Forums	Listening days
Interactive Web-Sites	Visioning Exercises
Local press - media	Questionnaires / Feedback
Question & Answer Sessions	Seminars / Workshops

9. What we will consult on

The Council is committed to consulting its key stakeholders in the following areas:

Areas of Corporate Significance

This type of consultation will include review of services and the Best Value Satisfaction Surveys. In addition, the Council will also consult annually on its Council priorities.

Services and Improvement

The Council strives to achieve continuous improvement and will consult service users and key stakeholders to plan future service development and improvement. This type of consultation may include internal and external stakeholders to ascertain the levels of satisfaction with services. The Council will also consult with non-service users, to ascertain why they do not use the services, and to find out what changes (if any) would encourage them to use the service.

Local Focus

The council will ensure effective and meaningful consultation by continuing with an on-going dialogue with local community groups.

The role of Councillors is crucial as both “consultees” and as elected representatives who are routinely meeting and talking with local residents. Councillors have a formal role as representatives of a geographical community but will also be involved in community groups and local organisations, often providing a direct link to communities of interest and be able to advise on targeting consultation to reach people from different parts of the community.

10. When to consult

Consultation may need to take place:

- At the start of the process of planning services
 - When options are being narrowed down
 - At the final stages of the process – when a preferred option is being proposed or considered
 - During review of services and any formal inspection of services
 - As part of regular customer satisfaction surveys to improve service delivery
 - When evaluating a particular service or undertaking an Equalities Impact Assessment;
 - When a service is to be altered
 - When there are new or emerging issues.
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- If there is a statutory duty to do so

Officers that are undertaking consultation exercises can get information from a number of sources

- Research and Consultation Co-ordinator
- CLOG – this is a group of officers that meet three times a year to discuss consultation and share best practice. This group will be developed in 07 to include members from partners. This will enhance the capability to timetable in major pieces of consultation across the Borough. Therefore hopefully removing clashes and consultation fatigue.
- Consultation Handbook – which can be found on the Intranet
- Consultation Database – This holds details of past, current and planned consultations. The database is maintained by CLOG members and allows staff that are planning a consultation to see what has already taken place in that field and to speak to people that have experience of consultation in a specific field.

11. Post Consultation

After every consultation feedback will be produced in a form that is appropriate to the groups that were consulted. This will be in the form of 'you said we did'.

The process will be evaluated to assess if any lessons can be learnt for the future.

12. Conclusion

This strategy is part of the Council's corporate approach to improving internal and external consultation.

Taking a corporate approach should make sure that consultation exercises are carried out competently and consistently. This would also involve a sharing of knowledge and good practice which in turn will help develop consultation techniques and mechanisms.