

Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Framework for Effective Consultation and Community Engagement

1. Why consult?

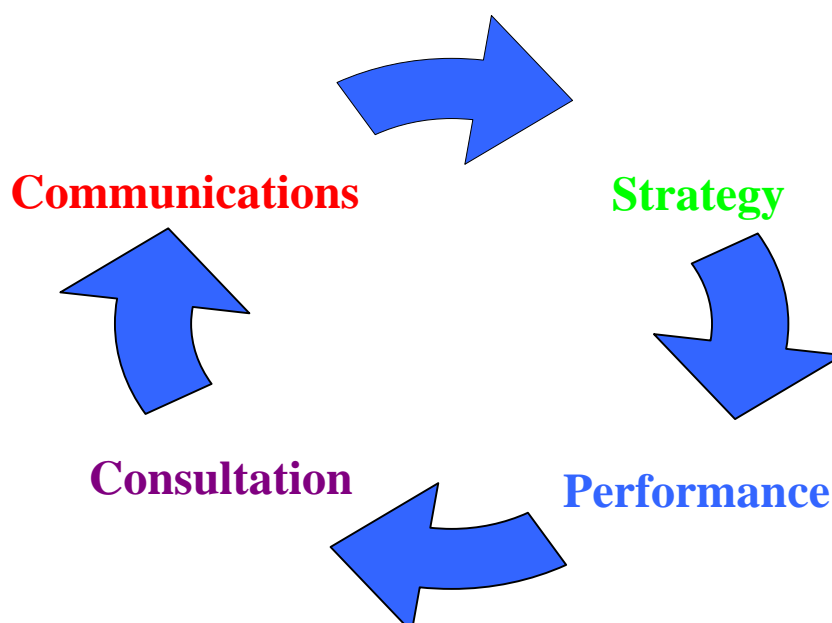
The council is committed to spending public money wisely to deliver services that meet the needs of our residents, service users, the business community and other stakeholders and to understand what they require of their local elected representatives.

Seeking the views of local people is therefore of utmost importance and, while all local authorities have a statutory duty to consult their communities, the Royal Borough is committed to extending its consultation far beyond any statutory requirements. We want to ensure that our community has the opportunity to be involved in the planning, prioritising and monitoring of our services – that they are at the heart of all council decision-making processes and activities and that the council is democratically accountable to its residents.

In addition, since 1 April the council has a Duty to Involve specifically in the provision of information to, consultation with and involvement of representatives of local people across all authority functions. The council will need to demonstrate that it:

- understands community interests
- makes information, consultation and involvement opportunities accessible and well targeted
- coordinates engagement activities with partners where appropriate
- ensure local people know how to get involved and feel that the council provides good engagement opportunities.

Communications is key in this process as illustrated in the diagram below. Consultation should inform policy and strategy and therefore performance, but it is also necessary to ensure that residents are aware of the outcomes of consultation and the actions the council is taking as a result. Those councils who have high or higher levels of resident satisfaction are usually good at informing residents about what they have done as a result of talking to them.



Consultation refers to a wide range of activity, including one-off and ongoing public and stakeholder consultation, forums and focus groups, as well as sample surveys and market research. There is no single correct way to consult. Methods employed need to be assessed for particular needs to help ensure maximum participation and outcomes.

2. Overarching objectives of this framework

- To deliver a more strategic approach to consultation and ensure it is firmly rooted in the council's strategic management framework and its corporate priorities
- To deliver a framework that enables the right level of consultation for the right issue – flexibility and ease of use will be key
- To target consultation and ensure that it is focused and specific
- To engage with all communities so that they are able to participate in consultation if they wish
- to identify innovative ways of ensuring maximum participation of all those who have an interest in life in the Royal Borough
- To ensure that outcomes are available to elected members to facilitate their decision-making
- To ensure there is a co-ordinated consultation process across the council to avoid duplication
- To ensure there are consistent standards for consultation throughout the council and that these are promoted.

3. Power of partnership

The borough is fortunate to have an extensive partnership network, including more than 50 primary stakeholders such as the police and fire service, the PCT, housing associations, parish councils and businesses, and around 200 3rd sector, faith groups and community organisations (many of them represented by Windsor and Maidenhead Voluntary Action).

Through the Community Partnership all subscribe to a shared vision that reflects inclusion, openness and transparency and they work together wherever possible to provide high standard, value-for-money services that enhance the quality of life and well-being of residents in our community.

The power of partnership working is a strong thread that binds the common overarching themes adopted by the Community Partnership, working to the shared Community Strategy and agreed LAA priorities.

With the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) placing community engagement at the heart of the assessment process, all partners must demonstrate that they are co-operating to address critical local issues and meet local targets/priorities.

By working together on consultation wherever appropriate, the partnership will maximise its effectiveness by:

- gathering vital evidence that will be beneficial to a range of partners
- sharing opportunities to reach target audiences (piggy-backing)
- sharing resources for consultation management, wherever possible
- achieving value for money
- planning consultation to prevent duplication and avoid consultation fatigue in our residents.

- strengthening the Community Partnership and its response to residents' needs and concerns.

4. Strategic Consultation Group

The Strategic Consultation Group, drawn from the Community Partnership, has been a very successful medium for consultation initiatives and co-ordination. With membership covering a wide range of public and private sector partners and the voluntary sector, the group – reconvened and its terms of reference refreshed – will be a significant force in driving the consultation process in the future.

5. How this framework will make a difference

It will:

- Underline the corporate impetus to use consultation as a key part of the decision-making process
- Allow for effective, efficient and meaningful dialogue with residents and customers
- Ensure that the outcomes of consultation and research are used to inform policy and decision-making by the council and its partners
- Enhance co-ordination between the council and its key partners
- Ensure consultation outcomes feed into the council's key communications programme
- Ensure consultation results in better value for money by matching service delivery with people's needs (particularly important when there is a continuous squeeze on public finances, requiring tough decisions on service levels)
- Make provision for feedback to those who have taken part in the consultations.

6. Planning for effective consultation

It is important to implement consistent quality standards for consultation. Extensive consultation guidance notes are already available on Hyperwave but should be revisited to bring them up to date, reflect changes to consultation requirements and to ensure co-ordination.

All consultations within the council should be co-ordinated to avoid duplication. A central register will be established to enable effective monitoring to reduce duplication, avoid waste and maximise resources. This will also enable the sharing of good practice and contribute to the continuing development of consultation as a key part of service improvement.

7. Who do we consult?

Choice of consultees will depend entirely on the issue, the information being sought and the purpose for which it is intended – ranging from consultation with every household to randomly-selected residents to targeted exercises involving one or more sectors of the community, e.g. young people, older people, 'easy-to-overlook' residents and service users or specific groups or organisations.

Care must be taken by the person/service responsible for each consultation to ensure that it is representative of the sector of the community from which we need to get information and feedback.

8. Consultation methods

Consultations will fall broadly into one of the following types and a consultation exercise could use one or more to achieve a worthwhile outcome:

- Factual research (information gathering) – e.g. opinion polls, mystery shopping, one-to-one interviews
- Qualitative consultation – e.g. borough panel, ViewPoint Panel, focus groups, questionnaires, open space conferences, community workshops, youth forum, area forums, customer-user panels, electronic-based consultation
- Participation/engagement (giving residents a part in shaping their community and environment and contributing to local democracy) – e.g. neighbourhood management panels, business panels, area meetings, customer/user advocacy groups, monitoring groups.

The following channels can be used to facilitate consultation across the borough:

i Citizens' panel – ViewPoint Panel

This panel of 1,000 residents (refreshed by one-third annually) allows for a variety of both quantitative and qualitative research. The council will continue to use an outside specialist contractor to re-establish, maintain and refresh the panel to ensure that there is professional input into the contents of each consultation and accurate, weighted analysis of the responses. This means that the council and its partners are provided with robust information on which to base decision-making and service delivery

ii Use of existing networks

Through the Community Partnership, our partner organisations are a natural consultation resource for both community-wide and specifically targeted consultations.

There are also a considerable number of business connections through the planning and economic development services that give the council access to invaluable reserves of knowledge that can be tapped through appropriate consultation processes when needed.

The use of the network to consult primary research – or to 'piggyback' on consultation exercises being conducted by partners – will be a key part of the council consultation and engagement framework (see Power of Partnerships and Strategic Consultation Group on page 2).

iii Use of technology / the internet

It is essential that the council also investigates other ways of engaging with its residents and service users. This includes a more high profile use of its own website so that it is used by residents not only as a natural source of information but also as a preferred route for opinion and feedback, contributing to local democracy. Websites are increasingly used by local authorities to get people's opinion on a fast, real time basis. Other e-comms methods need to be explored, including the use of text messages and community forums.

9. Making consultation inclusive/barriers to engagement

It is vitally important that consultation reaches the right people. To be inclusive and relevant, it must be designed to reach the appropriate target audience, particularly 'easy-to-overlook' groups which may include Black Minority Ethnic (BME) communities, people with disabilities, young people, those who 'don't care' etc.

The Consultation and Engagement Framework will help ensure that such groups are engaged and methods of consultation adopted to reach and involve them through, for example, community leaders and by using different methods (eg texting to reach young people, visits to day centres or sheltered accommodation for consulting with older people etc).

Poorly-crafted consultations can also be a barrier to effective engagement, underlining the need for professional contractors to be employed (see paragraph 8 i).

10. Responsibility

While overall co-ordination and responsibility for the council's community consultation lies with the Communications and Marketing Team in the Policy and Performance Directorate, each service is responsible for – and has ownership of – its own consultation initiatives. This means ensuring that consultations adhere to the corporate guidance and that they are registered centrally. The central register will be monitored by the Corporate Communications and Marketing Manager in association with the Head of Policy and Performance and the Lead Member.

11. Feedback

Developing methods of feedback is a key part of the consultation framework. Honest feedback is vital to let participants know the result of the consultation in which they were involved and to inform them about decisions and outcomes. Particular care must be taken to avoid causing 'consultation fatigue', i.e. when people are not given feedback and, when consulted again, their immediate reaction is: "Why bother?". This can be avoided by regular dialogue and feedback.

Feedback is directly linked to the emerging Communications Strategy and methods employed should:

- Reach the people who have taken part
- Offer opportunities for further participation if needed
- Lead to strong relationships between the council and its residents/service users.

Mechanisms for providing people with feedback will depend on the size and type of consultation and the nature of the target group, but could include:

- Around the Royal Borough
- Council website
- Direct mail
- Email
- External group leaders
- Meetings
- Exhibitions
- Consultation newsletter (or e-newsletter), eg to the ViewPoint Panel
- Local networks, eg patients groups, LINKs, parish councils etc
- Media (as a supporting mechanism only).

12. Evaluation

Evidencing success is key. Assessing and measuring effectiveness of consultation will demonstrate if we are using consultation to make a difference. Ways in which we will evaluate the effectiveness of consultation and research include:

- Evaluating consultation activities at the end of each initiative, against criteria such as: the extent to which target audiences were reached, feedback from participants, meaningful interpretation, cost effectiveness, impact on decision-making etc
- Developing an evaluation model that will include measurement criteria that can be used to assess effectiveness of engagement and involvement with local communities
- Establishing good audit trails of all stages of consultation.

The Strategic Consultation Group will have a key role in this work, taking a lead where necessary. It will ensure there are consistent standards for consultation applied across their respective organisations, that corporate guidelines are adhered to and that feedback is given to consultation participants so they are kept informed about how their views are contributing to policy and service delivery.

13. Key issues of the framework

- Developing a framework that ensures engagement accurately reflects and determines local priorities, using a range of consultation methods
- Consulting through the Community Partnership and its ambition groups
- Working to ensure that the council is able to identify and understand the barriers to engagement, adopt approaches to engage with 'easy-to-overlook' people and those communities that traditionally don't engage
- Undertaking engagement / consultation that adds value to softer qualitative information on the perception of local people and community groups
- Ensuring that engagement strategies can be used to improve public perceptions as required by a range of LAA indicators
- Identifying methods of communication, including online/web routes, that effectively reach residents and service users
- Ensuring staff have the right skills and are supported in their role of engagement to ensure they put consultation at the centre of service development
- Utilising alternative/additional approaches to community engagement to those already being used in the borough
- Working with elected members to maximise community engagement by using their extensive local knowledge and contacts
- Building capacity of the 3rd sector to improve engagement
- Embedding community engagement and empowerment activity in the work of the council.

14. Internal process management

The framework provides a new opportunity to develop good consultation management practice across the organisation.

The Policy and Performance Directorate is responsible for developing corporate policy on consultation, working with officers and members to:

- Ensure effective consultation co-ordination
- Promote best practice
- Achieve consistency
- Provide mechanisms for effectively sharing information about consultation and the results of consultation
- Establishing effective evaluation processes.

As part of the consultation / engagement process the following is proposed:

1. Central Register

A new central register of all consultation carried out by the council and its partners should be developed and maintained, held by the Policy and Performance Directorate but placed on Hyperwave to allow service departments to access the information and add their own consultations where appropriate (similar to the process already used for external consultations, ie where the council is the consultee). This would avoid too many consultations being held at one time and enable 'piggy-backing' for cost effectiveness and value for money.

2. Strategic Consultation Group

This group will have a critical role in ensuring the consultation is both cost effective and efficient.

This group would provide a management structure for the consultation function, not only across the council to prevent and eradicate duplication, but to co-ordinate resources with external partners.

3. Consultation standards

Effective consultation must be seen as an integral part of all council services and be based on identified business priorities. There should be consistent standards for consultation and the council's consultation guidance should be revisited to ensure it remains relevant and be updated if necessary.

15. Action plan

To meet the objectives of this framework the following Action Plan will enable the Royal Borough to develop a robust consultation and engagement programme for the year ahead and to monitor progress.

Resources required for the initial implementation of the Action Plan have been identified from within Policy and Performance. Although consultation will be driven and monitored corporately, each directorate/service area will continue to be responsible for the implementation and administration of its own consultation activities.

Framework for effective consultation and engagement

Action plan

Ref	Action	Desired outcome	By when	Lead member/s officer/s	Resource implications	Progress to date
1	Consult with key partners on new framework	Agreed framework for future partnership consultation	3 June 09	Andrew Elkington/Anne Dackombe	Staff time	Complete - comments included in framework
2	Report to CMT on framework and partnership consultation	Agreement for framework to go for member decision	17 June 09	Andrew Elkington	Staff time	Complete - comments included
3	Report to Cabinet	Lead member discussion and agreement for framework to be adopted	23 July	Andrew Elkington	Staff time	
4	Engage market research company to manage ViewPoint Panel and manage a series of focus groups to consider key issues, such as public perceptions of the council and e-consultation methods. The cost of running focus groups will be included in the initial tender price	New panel to help inform service development and the decision-making process	12 June 09	Cllr Bateson Andrew Elkington/Anne Dackombe	To be advised following discussion with successful company	Company engaged. Work to refresh ViewPoint Panel underway. Plans for focus groups being drawn up.
5	Review and refresh consultation guidance	Robust guidance to ensure consistent, high quality consultation practice across council	30 July 09	Anne Dackombe Strategic Consultation Group	Staff time	Initial work underway
6	Establish evaluation model	Providing staff with criteria by which to carry out sensible evaluation of all consultations	30 July	Cllr Bateson Andrew Elkington/Anne Dackombe	Staff time	Work underway to find examples of best practice
7	Reconvene Strategic Consultation Group and refresh	Partnership approach to consultation that ensures	30 July 09	Cllr Bateson Andrew	Staff time	

	terms of reference	effectiveness, shared resources and value for money		Elkington/Anne Dackombe		
8	Establish council central register for external consultations, particularly highlighting what consultations are forthcoming and opportunities for partnership exercises etc. This includes partner consultation exercises, through the Community Partnership	A consultation programme that makes the best use of resources without duplication or overlaps	30 July 09	Anne Dackombe	Staff time	
9	Publish monthly table of consultations	This will enable members to see where consultations are taking place across the council	30 July 09	Anne Dackombe	Staff time	Introduction will follow the setting up of central register
10	Test success of recent high profile initiative, e.g. recycling rewards, Adopt-a-Street, Community Toilets etc	Councillors will have evidence of: a) what residents think of a key initiative b) the robustness of the consultation function	Sept 09	Relevant lead members Andrew Elkington/Anne Dackombe	Consultation costs (tbc) Staff time	
11	Review council website as means of effective communications	Residents look to rbwm.gov.uk as a place where they can make their voices heard	Sept 09	Cllr Kellaway, Jonathan James, Melanie Harper, Anne Dackombe	Staff time initially – may be cost implications, depending on identified web development	
12	Establish need for staff training programme	Knowledgeable staff who are aware of the need for consultation to be at the heart of service improvement and delivery	Sept 09 start and ongoing	Andrew Elkington/Anne Dackombe/Phil Crooks	Staff time	
13	Investigate e-consultation	Residents using modern	Oct 09	Cllrs Bateson/Maxwell	Staff time	

	methods	methods of communication to voice their views		Andrew Elkington/Anne Dackombe/Keith Clark/		
14	Potentially establish annual residents' survey	Residents will have a regular medium through which to voice their views about the services provided by the council and its partners	Nov 09	Cllr Bateson Andrew Elkington/Anne Dackombe	Resources and cost implications as the council does not have the expertise for this specialist task	