

Consultation Review

February 2005

A review by the Overview Scrutiny Committee

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 The Overview Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake a review of consultation. A Task Group consisting of five members of the Scrutiny Committee were appointed to carry out the review.

1.2 The Terms of reference of the review were:-

To investigate the way in which Gravesham Borough Council consults with its residents and to formulate a code of practice by which the whole authority would operate

To ascertain how other local authorities/public service providers consult with their stakeholders

To examine the recommendations of the Auditors/CPA where these organisations believe that Gravesham Borough Council can improve its consultation with residents.

1.3 The context in which the review was undertaken was the increased amount of public and stakeholder consultation identified by the Local Government modernisation agenda.

1.4 Three evidence gathering sessions were held with witnesses from Gravesham Borough Council, The Greater London Assembly and the Consultation Institute. (Notes on these sessions are reproduced in Appendix 1)

1.5 Recommendations.

1.5.1 Develop a consultation strategy and link it in with the communication strategy due for publication in March 2005.

1.5.2 Consolidate, co-ordinate, maintain and update existing databases of contacts and consultations through an individual or group within the council.

1.5.3 Investigate the possible introduction of a consultation toolkit to ensure consistency and a more professional approach across the authority.

1.5.4 Ensure that there is feedback of results to the participants and others who have an interest. Examine alternative methods (could possibly use parish council's newsletters, local ward pamphlets, residents groups, local press amongst others).

1.5.5 Co-ordinate stakeholder groups such as voluntary groups, special interest groups, young people etc. and use these groups for more focussed consultation.

1.5.6 Exploit alternative new technologies for communication and consultation. (such as discussion boards on the website, use of texting etc.)

1.5.7 Develop the expertise within the council on software such as 'SNAP'. Get Members involved at an early stage and make use of their local knowledge.

2. Background

The Local Government Modernisation agenda has placed participation at the heart of the future of local government.

A government white paper, 'Modern Local Government. In Touch with the People (1998)', comments "The Government wishes to see consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all councils...."

The Prime Minister expresses the view that:

"It may be asking too much to expect local government to get people shouting from the rooftops. But it is not too much

to expect most people to care enough to vote or to know who to praise or blame for what is going on in their locality.

But it is not just representative democracy that needs to be strengthened. We also need to look at other democratic initiatives that will strengthen community leadership. Councils need to avoid getting trapped in the secret world of the caucus and the party group. They should let the people have their say. Some authorities are doing this. Citizens' juries are helping to build consensus on difficult issues. Local surveys are being used more and more to identify locals concerns. And the local referendum could become part and parcel of a council's tool kit to help it exercise its leadership function.

Every authority should set itself targets for improving voter turnout and strengthening local participation in the government of their community"

This desire for increased participation in local democracy has to overcome considerable apathy and cynicism before stakeholders will start to believe that their opinions will make any difference.

3. Outcome of review.

3.1 Gravesham Borough Council

Gravesham's recent (July 2004) CPA report states that "The council already makes effective use of consultation to inform its priorities, it is nevertheless keen to improve what it does. It has introduced new and improved mechanisms for tenant participation and is developing the 'people bank', a focus group introduced by Housing to engage with hard to reach and under represented groups, for use council wide".

Currently GBC's consultation methods include the use of questionnaires, meetings, tenant's forum, focus groups

and community assembly workshops. The last two methods have been used when certain groups are under represented in the initial survey (e.g. council's spending plans)

The Cabinet were aware of the difficulties with consultation and they were developing a programme of consultation and at the same time widening the ways of engaging with the community.

Examples being:

- The Cabinet Road Show
- Consultation in specific neighbourhoods
- Discussions around policy issues such as transport and young people.

There was a corporate co-ordination group chaired by Christopher Woodley looking into these issues.

Mr Ashley Wilcox, Communications Manager, felt that communication and consultation should be linked through a communication strategy and a comprehensive package of methods for both communication and consultation should be developed. A communication strategy was due for publication in March 2005.

The recently revamped website was one area that offered considerable opportunities for engaging the community and consultation. Using the website for the facilitation of single issue discussion boards is a method that is finding favour amongst local authorities as a means of seeking public opinion. Your Borough, the quarterly resident's newspaper, could also be used more effectively as a means of spreading the word.

Analysis of the results of a recent consultation carried out through a questionnaire in Your Borough shows that this is a good method for getting the

views of the retired and the elderly (out of 627 replies, 307 were aged 60 or more but only 16 replies were from those in the 18 -30 age group). However, the analysis shows that this approach was not an appropriate way of getting the views of ethnic communities (out of 627 replies, 508 were UK European with only 12 from ethnic communities). Interestingly this analysis also revealed that about 13% of those who replied wanted to be known as British or English **not** UK European.

Analysis of completed surveys should be used to inform future consultations on the method to use and how questions might be phrased.

The evidence gathering session with Ashley Wilcox and Christopher Woodley reflected on whether communication and consultation, given its importance, should be a separate service within the council.

KCC, for example, had a fully funded corporate centre for communication and consultation and this had proved to be very effective and Gravesham could do something similar.

Recommendations

Develop a consultation strategy and link it in with the communication strategy due for publication in March 2005.

Consolidate, co-ordinate, maintain and update existing databases of contacts and consultations through an individual or group within the council.

3.2 Costs

Authorities such as the GLA have separate departments for consultation and as such the annual costs for the department are readily available. Consultation at Gravesham is carried out by individuals in a number of

departments with no central co-ordination. Currently consultation costs are not identified as a separate item in departmental budgets. So it is virtually impossible to determine how much each department spends annually on consultation.

Having said that, for the year 2003/04 Gravesham the Cabinet Secretary had a budget of £30,000 for consultation. This included the costs, about £15,000, for a market research company to carry out a general user satisfaction and benefits survey. This particular survey is part of the ODPM local authority best value performance assessment. It is compulsory and has to be carried out every 3 years.

Other consultations were on the Council Tax and the Community Plan.

In 2004/05 this corporate consultation budget will be used to establish and maintain a 'resident's panel' It is intended that the panel will be used for this type of consultation in the future.

The table below tries to identify the costs for a very basic in-house consultation (based on a sample of 1000) using

Printing questionnaire (simple black and white)	£55
Covering letter (headed paper) envelopes	£10 £12
Initial mailing	£210
Pre-printed freepost return envelope (price based on an order for 5000)	£19
Return mailing	£210
Estimated staff costs for setting up questionnaire, handling, data entry and data analysis.	£1000
Communicating outcome of consultation	£300
Total	£1816

A survey of all council house tenants would be more than 6 times larger.

Consultation in respect of a planning application is different in that it informs relevant households and individuals about an application and seeks their opinion. Not all applications go out to consultation and those that do can vary from a few (<10) letters to a hundred or so. For this exercise an average of 10 letters per application seems a reasonable assumption to make. The estimated costs based on 1200 planning applications per year are shown in the following table.

Covering letter	£120
Envelopes	£288
Mailing	£2520
Letter outlining decision	£120
mailing decision notice	£2520
Admin	£5000
Total	£10,568

A 1 in 10 survey of those accessing certain Environmental Health services would be smaller but would be repeated several times a year.

The Cabinet Road Show and other consultation forums held out in the community would incur the cost of hiring a suitable hall and publicity.

These estimates are relatively crude and this should be borne in mind when making any comparisons with the costs of consultations carried out by external market research organisations where additional costs and charges would be incurred.

A list of departmental consultations for 2003/04 is reproduced in Appendix 2

3.3 Greater London Assembly

Members of the review task group visited Mr David Mann, the acting consultation manager for the GLA, at City Hall.

There are two teams carrying out consultation and research for the GLA. Mr Mann's team of himself and 3

officers who have responsibility for consulting with Londoners and a Stakeholders team made up of 15 officers whose role is to form relationships and consult with groups and agencies including ethnic, business, the lesbian and gay community and old peoples groups amongst others.

There is a move away from quantitative research towards more deliberative polling and forums. People can sometimes complete questionnaires based on prejudice and uninformed misconceptions giving a skewed result. It can be difficult engaging with hard to reach groups and innovative methods have to be developed.

One deliberative method the GLA has used is Democs (DEliberative Meeting Of CitizenS) which has been developed by the New Economics Foundation (NEF). The NEF website (www.neweconomics.org) describes Democs as "part card game, part policy making tool that enables small groups of people to engage with complex public policy issues". It goes on to say "it enables players to identify and absorb the basic information they need to discuss an issue that may be complex and that they may not have discussed before". The GLA had used this technique when seeking Londoners views on ambient noise. The feedback suggested that participants had enjoyed it and it was a different experience to that of a traditional focus group.

The participants were selected by a recruitment agency as a cross section of the 8,000 individuals who were willing to take part in further consultation.

Such deliberative methodologies can be used effectively when seeking the views of young people.

David was asked whether his team were the GLA's consultation experts He replied that his team didn't do all the consultation but had written some best

practice guidelines that they were in the process of converting into a tool kit that everyone could use. He was also developing a database to hold reports on consultation and market research.

Recommendations

Investigate the possible introduction of a consultation toolkit to ensure consistency and a more professional approach across the authority.

Ensure that there is feedback of results to the participants and others who have an interest. Examine alternative methods (could possibly use parish council's newsletters, local ward pamphlets, residents groups, local press amongst others).

3.4 Consultation Institute.

The two representatives from the Consultation Institute, Rhion Jones and Elizabeth Gammell have many years of experience in customer service and public and stakeholder consultation.

Mr. Jones has written 25 White Papers and a briefing paper "What the Gershon Report means for Consultation" (ref 1) amongst others. Copies of this briefing paper had been circulated to members of the task group as background information for this review. The original report by Sir Peter Gershon entitled "Releasing resources for the front-line" was published in July 2004 and can be viewed at www.hm-treasury.gov.uk

Mr Jones gave a presentation on the part consultation can play in supporting and reinforcing the democratic process.

Consultation should be seen as part of an evidence gathering process to inform a decision. It should only be done if you want to know the answer.

Some principles of best practice:

- Only consult if you want to know the answer.

- Manage the expectation; consultation is not a vote
- Never consult if the decision is already taken
- Consult less – but do it better
- Consultation is part of a process, not an end in itself.

Elizabeth Gammell then gave a presentation on the development of a consultation strategy.

Any consultation strategy should have stakeholder management at its heart. A stakeholder, in this context, refers to a group or an organisation, although all individuals resident in or affected by a local authority are stakeholders.

Other elements of a strategy are programme management, consultation methods and the roles played by Members and by technology.

The implementation of a strategy would need to address:

- The development and maintenance of an up to date stakeholder database
- an understanding of the local environment
- using varied methods of consultation
- in house or contracted out
- getting members on board

Recommendation

Co-ordinate stakeholder groups such as voluntary groups, special interest groups, young people etc. and use these groups for more focussed consultation.

Exploit alternative new technologies for communication and consultation. (such as discussion boards on the website, use of texting etc.)

Develop the expertise within the council on software such as 'SNAP'. Get Members involved at an early stage and make use of their local knowledge.

Appendix 1

Overview and Scrutiny

Review: Consultation

Venue: Civic Centre, Gravesend
5 August 2004

Present: Councillors Rosemary Leadley
K. Jones
M. Singh
Jean Christie

In attendance

D. Finch, Corporate Policy Officer

Interviewees

Ashley Wilcox – Communications Manager
Christopher Woodley – Cabinet Secretary

Summary of Evidence

Introduction

This meeting, rather than being a question and answer session, was a general discussion between officers and members about consultation in the wider context of communication.

Mr Woodley described the current position with consultation in the council. Consultation was closely linked with communication. If a consultation was to be meaningful and have a wide ranging response, the consultees needed to be provided with sufficient facts to make an informed judgement hence the link with communication. This was seen as essential if the results of any consultations were going to be used to inform policy.

The Cabinet were aware of the difficulties with consultation and they were developing a programme of consultation and at the same time widening the ways of engaging with the community.

Examples being

- The Cabinet roadshow

- Consultation in specific neighbourhoods
- Discussions around policy issues such as transport, young people.

There was a corporate co-ordination group chaired by Mr. Woodley looking into these issues.

There is a need to develop citizen's panels that can be consulted on such issues as council tax. These panels need to be managed by experts and there are many firms that can do this on the council's behalf.

A recruitment drive to set up a people bank had been started by Housing about a year ago and currently consisted of a mixture of about 100 tenants and residents. The people bank was predominantly made up from two groups - female 40+ and male/female 60+. It was hoped to expand the 'people bank' into a 1000 strong 'residents panel'

There was concern that consultation can be self serving and people will only respond if they feel strongly about an issue.

Mr Wilcox felt that communication and consultation should be linked through a communication strategy and a comprehensive package of methods for both communication and consultation should be developed.

The recently revamped website was one area that offered considerable opportunities for engaging the community and consultation. Using the website for the facilitation of single issue discussion boards is a method that is finding favour amongst local authorities as a means of seeking public opinion. Your Borough, the quarterly resident's newspaper, could also be used more effectively as a means of spreading the word. The meeting reflected on whether communication and consultation, given its importance, should be a separate service within the council.

KCC, for example, had a fully funded corporate centre for communication and consultation and this had proved to be very effective and Gravesham could do something similar.

Marketing local government was very difficult for small district councils with limited resources.

For the year 2003/04 Gravesham had a budget of £30,000 for consultation. This included the costs for an external consultation agency to carry out our general user satisfaction and benefits survey which were about £15,000. This particular survey is part of the ODPM local authority best value performance assessment. It is compulsory and has to be carried out every 3 years. In 2004/05 this consultation budget will be used to establish and maintain a 'resident's panel'

Overview and Scrutiny

Review: Consultation

Venue: Greater London Assembly,
City Hall, London
Friday 3 December 2004

Present: Councillors Rosemary Leadley
M. Singh
Jean Christie

In Attendance

D. Finch, Corporate Policy Officer

Interviewee

David Mann, Acting Public Consultation
Manager.

Introduction

The task group's visit was hosted by David Mann who is acting public consultation manager for the Greater London Assembly (GLA).

The GLA is a strategic authority and as such operates in a different way to other local authorities. As a strategic authority the GLA has no responsibility for the delivery of services, its main role is the promotion of the elected assembly and Mayor's policies and strategies.

There are two teams carrying out consultation and research for the GLA. Mr Mann's team of himself and 3 officers who have responsibility for consulting with Londoners and a stakeholder's team made up of 15 officers whose role is to form relationships and consult with groups and agencies including ethnic, business, lesbian and gay and old peoples groups amongst others.

The GLA covers an area that has a very diverse population with 40% ethnic minorities and a potential 7.5 million consultees.

The Mayor is a big fan of market research and uses consultation to inform policy development. However, it is not everything, for instance, the congestion charge would not have been introduced had too much emphasis been placed on public opinion.

There is a move away from quantitative research towards more deliberative polling and forums. People can sometimes complete questionnaires based on prejudice and uninformed misconceptions giving a skewed result. It can be difficult engaging with hard to reach groups and innovative methods have to be developed.

One deliberative method the GLA has used is Democs (DEliberative Meeting Of CitizenS) which has been developed by the New Economics Foundation (NEF). The NEF website (www.neweconomics.org) describes Democs as 'part card game, part policy making tool that enables small groups of people to engage with complex public policy issues'. It goes on to say 'it enables players to identify and absorb the basic information they need to discuss an issue that may be complex and that they may not have discussed before'. The GLA had used this technique when seeking Londoners views on ambient noise. The feedback suggested that participants had enjoyed it and it was a different experience to that of a traditional focus group.

The participants were selected by a recruitment agency as a cross section of the 8,000 willing to take part in further consultation.

Such deliberative methodologies can be used effectively when seeking the views of young people.

Are you the GLA's consultation experts?

We don't do all the consultation undertaken in the building but we have written some guidelines on best practice that we are converting to a toolkit. We are creating a database to host reports on consultations and research. Officers will be invited to sign up to a register that automatically generates an e-mail with details of any new reports and consultations.

The GLA also carries out trend surveys which seek the public's view of London. One such being the Annual London Survey in which 1500 face to face interviews are carried out to produce a set of results on concerns such as safety and the environment.

How are the people chosen?

By quota sampling, this is an effective compromise. Purely random face to face surveys are very expensive.

engagement. A service improvement plan was being implemented.

How do you feedback outcomes?

The public are cynical about authorities taking on board their view so we feedback directly to the recruits on a group or forum, through a database available on the GLA website and through our monthly newspaper, the Londoner, which is circulated to every household in the GLA area. The Londoner has a 70 – 80% distribution with a 40 – 45% recall of having seen a copy.

Would you use the Londoner as a vehicle for a survey questionnaire?

No. Even if it were possible we wouldn't do it because it would produce a skewed result with the emphasis on the views of older people.

Do you offer any incentives for members of focus groups?

No, recruits to a focus group would be offered travelling expenses. In exceptional circumstances any incentives would have to be fit for purpose. For example, if you were seeking the views of self employed business men for them time is money and they would need a significant incentive to take part.

Do you out source much of your consultation?

Our statutory consultation is done in-house. We commission research through a number of market research companies. Some of these specialise in hard to reach groups like the young, asylum seekers and truants amongst others. For ethnic groups we would use our stakeholder groups where individual officers have responsibility for engaging with communities.

We have recently been subjected to a best value review with one of the key findings being that we need better not more consultation and

Overview and Scrutiny

Review: Consultation

Venue: Civic Centre, Gravesend
Monday 20 December 2004

Present: Councillors Rosemary Leadley
C. Jupp
K. Jones
Jean Christie

In Attendance:

Ashley Wilcox, Communications Manager
Deborah Carson, Executive Support Officer
Shirley Whatmough, Head of Democratic
Services
Doug Finch, Corporate Policy Officer

Interviewees:

Rhion Jones, Programme Director,
Consultation Institute.
Elizabeth Gammell, Head of Research,
Consultation Institute

Introduction

The task group invited the Consultation Institute to give an expert view on the fundamentals of the consultation process.

Rhion Jones, Programme Director, had 20 years experience in customer service and has written 25 White Papers.

Elizabeth Gammell, Head of Research, has 12 years experience of working with stakeholder organisations and is a major presenter at seminars and workshops on public and stakeholder consultation.

The Consultation Institute was formed about a year ago. It was established to be a source of best practice and advice on consultation.

The Local government modernisation agenda has increased the role of consultation and public involvement in the way councils formulate and deliver policies, strategies and services. Local authorities have a statutory duty to carry out consultation on certain issues and service delivery. This can lead to a 'got to rather than want to' approach.

- Consultation should only be carried out if you want to know the answer!

This increase in the amount and level of consultation has led many local authorities to develop a 'consultation strategy'. Unfortunately, in Rhion Jones' experience, many of these strategies have not been implemented.

- Consultation is part of a process and not an end in itself!
- Consult less – but do it better!
- Never offer options you can't deliver!

Consultation should be treated as part of an evidence gathering process. Consult on aspects of the decision and use the outcomes alongside other inputs to the decision (like financial issues).

A good example of this was the Greater London Assembly's introduction of congestion charging. The congestion charge was a manifesto pledge and as such was going to be introduced. However, Ken Livingston consulted on aspects of the implementation such as the extent of the congestion charge area and the charges themselves.

Elizabeth Gammell then gave an insight into the mechanics of consultation.

A consultation strategy should include elements like programme management, methods and standards, role of members, role of technology and stakeholder management.

Members of the public are stakeholders but in this context 'stakeholders' applies to groups and organisations.

Develop your own consultation strategy. Don't use someone else's!

Programme management.

A fundamental requirement under this heading would be to have an understanding of the local environment. This is particularly relevant in a local authority like Gravesham where there are

urban and rural communities. Having both rural and urban areas would make it difficult to set up a questionnaire for a consultation that addressed the different take on the issue that each community would have. The analysis of the results would have to be undertaken with care to avoid a rather meaningless outcome.

Stakeholder management.

- Developing and maintaining an up to date stakeholder database is essential.
- Manage relationships with stakeholder groups (how do they like to be consulted?).

Methods and standards.

- There are many methods of consultation, use a lot of imagination!
- Use your resident's panel for public consultation.
- Pick consultation to suit panel.
- Look into the setting up of panels for businesses, the young and the elderly.
- Less public consultation more consultation with stakeholders.
- Combined consultation with County Council where the Borough has devolved responsibility. (Make clear who has responsibility for what)
- Involve Members on consultations relating to ward issues.

Appendix 2

Department	Consultation/Community Engagement activity undertaken in 03-04
Town Centre	Garrick Street Transport interchange proposals May 2003 Heritage Quarter Business Plan July/Aug 2003
IT	Racial Equality Scheme
Legal	Town Centre Crime Surveys Public meetings attended with the police On-going case work Meetings with residents associations (Waterdales, Chalk, Northcourt)
Communication	Staff Communication Survey Nov 03
Planning	Planning User Satisfaction Survey Seeking views in respect of planning proposals Heritage Quarter Vision document
The Grand Project	Westcourt Community Audit (3rd party – participating not leading) Communities Against Drugs
Environmental & Public Health	1 in 10 customer feedback questionnaire following requests for Environmental Health Service – Ongoing 1 in 10 customer feedback questionnaires to businesses following planned food safety and health and safety inspections – Ongoing 1 in 10 customer feedback questionnaires following use of rodent control treatment service – Ongoing Statutory public consultation prior to declaration of whole borough as a designated area under the Dogs (Fouling of Land) Act 1996 - May/June 2003 Statutory public consultation in generating Action Plans for 2 Air Quality Management Areas declared in the Borough (AQMAs) - Feb/March 2004 Preliminary consultation on formulation of Statement of Licensing Policy under Licensing Act 2003 – September 2003 and ongoing

Housing	Homemead and Gravesham Court Christian Fields Needs Survey Christian Fields Events Survey Christian Fields House Type Survey Christianfields Young Persons Survey Status Survey Warwick Place Development consultation event Community consultation event Repairs Seminar Setting up of Service Improvement Advisory Groups Setting up of Reading Group Setting up of People Bank Setting up of Sheltered Housing Forum
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