

CONSULTATION STRATEGY

OLDHAM COUNCIL'S COMMITMENT TO CONSULTATION

Oldham Council believes that

" effective consultation with the people of the Borough improves the quality of the decisions that it makes and the services which it provides on their behalf."

WHAT IS CONSULTATION?

Consultation is one particular form of communication between a Council and the citizens of its area. It is generally taken to mean:

seeking, listening to, and taking account of local people's views prior to making decisions

Other terms which are often used in this context are "information" , "participation" , and "empowerment".

Information.	Letting people know what is happening, in situations where, realistically, no choices are available
Participation.	A term often used interchangeably with "consultation", Participation can be seen as a more intense and interactive form of consultation. It is an approach which encourages a greater level of involvement in the exploration of issues, and therefore an increased sense that people are sharing in the process of decision making.

Empowerment.	People being given power to make decisions on matters that affect their lives. Unlike consultation, this involves a shift in the location of decision-making. Processes of empowering communities and encouraging more “active citizenship” are, for example, seen as important ingredients in many current regeneration schemes.
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THE SCOPE OF THIS STRATEGY

The Strategy focuses on consultation. That is, of course, not to say that the issues of information or empowerment are not significant. Each of these relationships between the Council and its citizens is valid in its own right. It is, however, important to have a clear understanding of the distinction between these approaches. The question of which is appropriate in any particular instance will depend upon the circumstances. This should be carefully explored at the inception of a project.

In the longer-term, Oldham Council would like to progress to a position where more local people want to be ‘participants’ in local democracy and they actively want to develop their citizenship role. However, the local community also has to want this before it can happen.

The Strategy is primarily about consultation with the people of the Borough. It is recognised, however, that the Council also consults with public and private organisations both within the Borough and beyond. Many of the principles set out in this document and some of the methods outlined in the Consultation Guide, which has been prepared to assist officers to implement the Strategy, may be applicable in that context.

In many cases, joint working with other organisations has progressed to the stage where it can be genuinely described as “partnership”. This type of continuing joint working in pursuit of shared objectives is a vital part of modern local government. The effective building and operation of partnerships are important subjects in their own right, but are ones beyond the scope of this document. However, advice is available on these issues from a number of sources. The Consultation Guide provides information on these sources.

A further topic which is outside the remit of this document is the matter of communication with the Council’s own staff. Effective consultation within the organisation is essential in order for external consultation to be carried out effectively. Again separate advice is available on this subject, in this case from the Personnel Department.

This Consultation Strategy establishes a set of principles which will underpin all of the Council's consultation activities. The attached Guide provides practical advice about the selection and application of a range of methods of consultation, and is intended to assist officers who are about to embark on any project where effective communication and consultation with local people will be important.

STRATEGIC LINKS TO OTHER PROCESSES

Best Value is one of the main driving forces for improving the standard and breadth of consultation carried out by Councils. The principles contained in the strategy are directly applicable to Best Value consultation that is undertaken with Council service users, the wider public and stakeholders. All Best Value consultation should attempt to involve existing and potential users and be as inclusive as possible. The Best Value regime places a particular emphasis on **service user outcomes** and it should therefore be a key aim of any Best Value consultation to clearly identify improvements required by service users, with a view to implementing them as the 'outcome'.

Service Planning guidance now requires divisions and service units to consider and record the key pieces of consultation they will undertake in the next financial year. The process of anticipating and planning consultation in advance is an important step in developing a more strategic corporate approach to consultation. This occurred for the first time in the 2002/03 service planning process and will be refined in future years.

Corporate & strategic planning tends to occur in cycles as plans and strategies need to be updated e.g. corporate planning, budget setting, community planning etc. It is highly desirable for all such planning processes to be informed by public opinion. The Council's citizens' panel will allow a body of consultation and research data to be amassed and is ideally suited to tracking trends and changes in public perception and opinion over time. In some instances, it may be enough to refer to previous panel results to inform strategic decisions. Otherwise, the flexibility and frequency of the citizens' panel lends itself well to consulting on simple strategic issues.

The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) as it develops into its role will become a major strategic force in the borough of Oldham. It is essential that the decisions that are taken by the partnership reflect the needs of the many stakeholders in the borough, not least local people. The citizens' panel is likely to become a useful resource for the LSP in determining local priorities and needs.

The need for public bodies to consult in partnership is recognised in this strategy and by the LSP. The Authorities Consultation Events (ACE) database is a good

starting point for the dissemination of local consultation initiatives, and in due course greater co-ordination and partnership where it proves practicable.

THE ROLE OF COUNCILLORS

The role of the elected Members of the Council is fundamental to the concept of local government. Councillors have a range of responsibilities, for example:

- setting policy for the Council;
- establishing priorities and allocating resources;
- scrutinising and reviewing services;
- working in their constituencies; and
- representing the Council on outside bodies etc.

Consultation should help Councillors with all these tasks by providing them with a fuller picture of the needs and aspirations of local people.

Of course, Councillors themselves undertake consultation, often having more direct contact with local people than do officers. By listening to constituents in surgeries, from the letters and telephone calls which they receive, and through meeting people in the course of their everyday lives, they obtain invaluable first hand information. It is important to ensure that Councillors “feed” their knowledge into any wider consultation exercises.

THE BENEFITS OF CONSULTATION

Oldham Council is committed to consultation with local people because it believes that it improves the quality of local government.

The benefits of consultation can be felt in a number of ways. The **outcomes of consultation** can inform decisions upon:-

- **Policy** - in formulating policies both to guide the Council’s own activities, and which form a framework which directs and regulates others. Councillors will normally consider the results of consultation about policy decisions in a formal setting such as a Committee. Land use and development planning policies as expressed in the Unitary Development Plan are an example of the latter;
- **Resources** - in establishing **priorities** at a strategic level for the allocation of resources, both the Council’s own resources and those which may be drawn in from external sources. Consultation on resource priorities has been conducted at Area Committees and usually goes on to be considered by Councillors at the Full Council;

- **Services** - in designing services so that they are as far as possible tailored to the needs of users; and in obtaining feedback on the quality of service delivery so that continuing performance improvements can be achieved. The pursuit of Best Value depends upon this dialogue being effective. The results of consultation with service users and stakeholders are normally considered by managers and staff and are used to improve service delivery or standards. In the case of Best Value Reviews, Councillors also receive reports that explicitly highlight service users views and opinions.

Additional benefits can arise from the *process of consultation*. These include:-

- **Public Awareness of local government** - the democratic legitimacy of local government depends ultimately upon people valuing it and being prepared to demonstrate that they do so at the ballot box. Through continuing consultation across a broad range of topics, the public's understanding of the scope of a local authority's activities, and of the direct relevance of those activities to their daily lives, can be greatly enhanced.
- **Revealing the complexity of choices** - consultation will usually prompt a diversity of responses. This is inevitable given the complicated issues with which local government has to wrestle, and the wide range of different interests and opinions within the community. Consultation processes can reveal just how difficult it can be to reach essential decisions on behalf of the community. People are likely to gain a better understanding of the value of having a system of local government to make those decisions on behalf of the community, and a fuller appreciation that effective government inevitably involves making hard choices, and reaching decisions that will rarely be universally popular.
- **A positive relationship with local citizens** - even though the Council will ultimately not always be able to act in accordance with all the views which it receives, the process of seeking opinions, listening to them, and including them as an element in decision making helps to build a positive relationship with local people. It emphasises that the Council's activities are "for" the people, not directed "at" them. The relationship is one of dialogue with "citizens", rather than a business relationship with "customers". This reflects the fact that the relationship between local people and local government should be an enduring one, since generally people have little opportunity to take their "custom" elsewhere.

The Government is, as part of its wider "Modernising" agenda, strongly encouraging local authorities to become more open and responsive, and to widen the scope of public participation to include, for instance, policy formulation. Its proposals on Best Value include a new duty to consult. It believes that

“The prize is an ever closer match between the needs and aspirations of communities and the services secured for them by their local authority, better quality services, greater democratic legitimacy for local government and a new brand of involved and responsible citizenship.”

It is suggesting that authorities prepare consultation strategies leading to more systematic approaches and the exploration of wider opportunities for dialogue with local communities. Oldham is following exactly this approach and as part of our consultation strategy has developed the following mechanisms for recording activities & outcomes, sharing relevant findings and consulting regularly with Oldham citizens:

Mechanism	Purpose	Implementation date
▪ The Corporate Consultation Network	Sharing good practice and key findings among departmental representatives	May 1999
▪ The Consultation Guide	To provide a resource on consultation good practice and effective approaches	January 2000
▪ A consultation newsletter – ‘Consultation News’	Disseminating information on consultation to a wide Council audience	December 2001
▪ Corporate consultation budget	Funds the activities of the citizens’ panel and corporate consultation development work	April 2000
▪ The ACE (Authorities Consultation Events) database	Recording consultation activities and outcomes	April 2001
▪ Area Committees covering 6 areas	To consult with the Committee and the general public on local & borough issues and implement local initiatives through a small budget	Autumn 2000
▪ A Citizens’ Panel – ‘The Oldham Way – Listening to Oldham’	To consult with a broadly representative cross-section of the Oldham population	October 2001
▪ Focus groups drawn from the citizens’ panel	To explore in depth the perceptions of Oldham residents on a range of issues	April 2002

THE PREPARATION OF THIS STRATEGY

During 1998 an audit was undertaken of consultation activity within the Council. This revealed a very considerable volume of activity, but also several areas of potential improvement. It recommended that a corporate strategy be developed, setting out the Council's philosophy and commitment; core principles; and the relationship between consultation and the role of the Elected Member. The strategy would be accompanied by a handbook giving practical advice on consultation methods.

The Strategy and Guide have been developed by a corporate project group. The opportunity has been taken to learn from good practice in other local authorities, partner organisations, and within the Council. A range of good practice examples are included in the Guide. The process of learning should be a continuing one. The documents which have been developed should be seen as a springboard for further innovation in the future.

PROGRESS UPDATE JANUARY 2000 – MARCH 2002

The implementation of the strategy has expanded considerably since the writing of the consultation strategy and guide. The table above shows the progress that has been made at a strategic level and undoubtedly individual departments and units have made similar progress in their consultation processes.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

Good progress has been made over the past 2 years in putting in place the corporate 'infrastructure' that is needed to support and facilitate effective consultation. In the next 1-2 years one of the Council's priorities will be to refine and enhance its corporate consultation arrangements. The action plan at the back of this document indicates the types of activities that have been identified in consultation with departments. There are four underlying motivations for these activities:

- The need to improve the amount and type of management information on consultation as a Council – without creating an excessive administrative burden;
- To strengthen the existing good practice guidance by addressing gaps and looking for new and innovative ways to consult;
- The need to join-up local consultation activities wherever it is practicable to do so; and
- The desire to support the current national drive to improve and promote citizenship by developing local proposals.

PRINCIPLES WHICH WE WILL FOLLOW

There are many different methods of consultation. The choice of which to use will depend upon factors such as the topic, the type of groups involved, and the time and resources available. Advice about methods is contained in the Guide. However, there are certain principles which should guide all of the Council's consultation activities.

Eight principles of consultation have been developed based on good policy and practice identified locally and nationally.

We will :-

1. Respect people. Listen to and value their contributions.
2. Be clear about the scope of consultation.
3. Strive to give people equal opportunity to contribute.
4. Identify the needs of different sectors of the community.
5. Keep people informed.
6. Make effective use of resources.
7. Work with partners.
8. Learn from experience.

How Can All This Be Done?

The next section looks at these principles in more detail.

1. Respect People. Listen to and Value Their Contributions.

To be successful all consultation should start from a position which respects and values the contributions of all those involved - local people, Councillors, staff and stakeholders.

Local People

Local people can contribute detailed information as well as opinions. They may also have technical expertise to offer. However, they have many other demands in their lives and their time should be valued. Some forms of consultation, such as citizens' panels, can involve a significant commitment of time. People should not be asked to give this time unless there is a real opportunity for the information and opinions that they offer to influence decisions. "Token" exercises in consultation will damage the overall credibility of the Council's consultation activities. Ideally, consultation should only be undertaken when there is the potential for and commitment to change on the part of the Council.

Councillors

Councillors have a detailed and practical knowledge of local issues in the area they represent. Local people will often choose to communicate their views via their Councillor. It is important to ensure that Councillors "feed" this information into consultation exercises.

Staff

Staff should be respected for their expertise. Front line staff will be aware of many of the issues local people face, and will have a first hand impression of some of the practical effects of Council policies. They should be given the opportunity to inform the Council's decision-making processes, and indeed to contribute to the design of consultation activities.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders are individuals or organisations that have a direct interest in the issue being consulted on. They might be service users, a carer or family member of a service user, or people employed by a public, private or voluntary sector agency. Stakeholders normally have a keen insight into issues within their area of expertise and can offer well-informed perspectives and ideas. At the very least, relevant stakeholders should be invited to give their views in writing, allowing adequate time for responses – a central Government guideline suggests 3 months for large / complicated written documents.

2. Be Clear about the Scope of the consultation.

An important part of respecting people involved in consultation, and building up trust, is to be honest and open about the scope and purpose of the consultation that is being undertaken. This should be communicated clearly. Is there a limited choice of options, or are all possibilities open for discussion?. If certain factors are fixed, (such as perhaps the finance available for a proposed project), make this clear from the start. Clarity about the scope of the consultation is very important, otherwise people's expectations may be raised unrealistically, and confusion may be caused.

Another way to make the scope of consultation clearer for participants is to explain to them what will happen to the results and to what extent they will be used to influence decisions that go on to be made. For example, will the findings be used by staff to improve the service on a day-to-day basis or will results be considered explicitly at a Council Committee or Executive for a decision? Is the consultation one small part of a bigger exercise or is it a regular annual process?

It is also good practice to be open at the outset about how the Council intends to use their views and how their views can add value to the decisions of the Council.

3. Strive to give People Equal Opportunity to Contribute.

Not everyone has an equal ability or opportunity to express their views. It is important that in planning any consultation we recognise right from the start that inequality and disadvantage is a reality for certain people and may disincline or limit their ability to get involved. On the other hand, some groups have good access to resources and professional advice, and there is a danger that, because of this, their voices may be heard more loudly.

Disadvantaged groups can be given better opportunities by providing interpreters, translators, child care, carer support, appropriate meeting times, transport, out of pocket expenses, choosing suitable venues etc.

We should be conscious of our obligation to use media that are accessible to people with special needs.

Another way of helping people to participate on a long-term, sustainable basis is to give them the skills or support systems that they need to do this, for instance, by providing training or support and opportunities to get experience. Building skills capacity within communities themselves through assertiveness training, training on how to motivate people, how to run a group and speak at meetings are all important to enable participation. People might also need practical support and help putting their case, so might need special meeting facilities, help

with word processing or photocopying etc. The aim of providing this type of support is to generate able citizens who can represent their own interests and those of their community in due course.

The Council cannot please everybody, but consultation should give everybody an equal opportunity to have their say.

4. Identify The Needs Of Different Sectors Of The Community.

Oldham is a Borough which contains striking contrasts and it is only to be expected that consultation will reveal many different needs and opinions amongst the communities within it. This needs to be recognised when designing and analysing consultation activity. The Council has the task of mediating between the competing needs of different communities, and it is important that consultation assists it in that task. We should therefore acknowledge differences where they are revealed, rather than just aggregating results to create a majority view which conceals the complexity of the real situation. This issue is important for communities that have traditionally been excluded, and relates closely to the question of equality of opportunity. .Minority views may need to be specifically targeted or highlighted when the results of consultation are reported.

5. Keep People Informed.

Any information given out in the course of consultation should be clear and concise and expressed in a manner which is easily understandable, without the use of jargon or unnecessary technical terms. Information should be provided in minority languages where appropriate. It should clearly state which part of the Council is organising the consultation, giving a contact name, address and telephone number. Adequate time should be allowed for participants to deliberate on any information that accompanies consultation exercises.

Everyone involved in the consultation should be told about the results, and about decisions or actions which have followed. Anyone affected by those changes should also be informed. By feeding back to people you are also telling them that you valued their involvement and that they have made a positive difference.

6. Make Effective Use Of Resources.

Consultation takes place across many areas of the Council's activities. It is important to make use of the good practice and expertise which exists in every department. There are opportunities to learn from others about planning, implementing, and evaluating consultation, and feeding back results to the public. The Guide is designed to help by giving examples of good practice in Oldham.

There can also be opportunities to make more effective use of resources by

designing joint consultation activities that span departmental boundaries. It should be remembered that the public generally do not perceive the key issues that affect their lives in terms of departmental or service area boundaries.

Resources could also be used to invest in the community itself through the training and support of individuals or groups on an ongoing basis or until such point that they become self-sufficient. The Council already does this in some areas e.g. tenant participation, environmental policy, regeneration initiatives etc

Ultimately, the investment in consultation should be proportionate to the end result e.g. positions which cannot or are unlikely to change should not be the basis for large scale and costly consultation, but where there is genuine scope for public opinion to influence the outcome, this is a highly positive use of resources.

7. Work with Partners.

The Council works with a range of other organisations to develop policies and provide services for the benefit of the people of the Borough. Health, housing, community safety, economic development, and environmental improvement are just a few examples of areas of joint working. Opportunities for joint consultation should be sought out with partner organisations. Again, this can help to ensure that complex issues are considered “in the round”, that resources are used effectively, and that we learn from good practice in other organisations.

8. Learn From Experience.

Deciding what has been successful about a particular consultation exercise and what could have worked better is vital if the Council is to continually improve all of its consultation processes. It can also give departments the confidence to innovate and try out new consultation ideas, knowing that successful consultation can be defined in different ways. At the start of any consultation exercise it is important to establish how success will be judged.

One of the most basic yet important indicators of the success of any consultation exercise is the outcome for service users and the people who have been consulted – put simply, have their views been listened to and used as a force for change, and has it made a positive difference for customers? Time should always be set aside to evaluate how effective consultation has been, against this critical indicator at the very least.

In major consultation exercises this may be necessary at an interim stage so that changes can be made before the programme of consultation is completed.

The process of evaluating consultation and learning from our own and other's experiences is explored in the guide and an evaluation framework specifically for consultation has been developed for voluntary use by services.

No consultation is perfect, but every occasion is an opportunity for learning and improvement.

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Action Plan – Review of the Council’s Corporate Consultation Arrangements (March 2002)

	Recommendation / action			
	Strengthen / add to the consultation strategy document in line with the recommendations made in the report	Performance Team	May 2002	Staff time – updating
	Develop good practice guidance focusing on hard to reach groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Engaging people from ethnic minority communities ▪ Engaging children and young people ▪ Engaging older people ▪ Engaging vulnerable people / people with disabilities ▪ Engaging the disinterested / disillusioned ▪ Engaging the business community 	Corporate / local working groups		
			October 2002	Staff time – research and development
			October 2002	Staff time – research and development
			March 2003	Staff time – research and development
			March 2003	Staff time – research and development
			October 2004	Staff time – research and development
			October 2004	Staff time – research and development
	Strengthen the messages in the consultation guide regarding information, deliberation and analysis	Performance team	May 2002	Staff time – updating
	Develop written guidance on commissioning consultation from the private sector	Performance team	July 2002	Staff time – research and development
	Make consultation evaluation framework available to departments	Performance team	April 2002	

	Recommendation / action			
	Gather information on innovations in consultation and add to guide	Performance team / Corporate Consultation Grp.	Ongoing	Staff time – research
	Review departmental membership of the corporate consultation group	Departmental representatives	April 2002	
	Agree name change for corporate group	Corporate Consultation group	May 2002	
	Simplify the ACE forms & database	Performance team and IT Development	August 2002	IT Development time & PPR development time
	Expand the database to include the activities of other agencies and invite submissions	Performance team	May 2002	Staff time – research and marketing
	Develop capacity within ACE to extract relevant management information for the purposes of monitoring performance around consultation	Performance team and IT Development	August 2002	IT Development time & PPR development time
	Create a consultation participant checklist for inclusion on ACE	Performance team	August 2002	Staff time – development
	Update the groups and local clubs facility on ACE and add professional contacts	Performance team	August 2002 and ongoing	Staff time – research and development
	Develop learning / training materials for a revised programme of consultation training	Performance team & Training Section advice	Dependent on resources available	An initial outlay on training materials particularly if open

				learning / action learning methods are pursued or funds for ad hoc commissioning of training. Possible scope within Citizens' Panel tender.
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Priorities for Consultation Development 2002-03

	Recommendation / action			
	Enhance current arrangements for providing feedback to participants – maximising benefits of e-government	Performance Team	March 2003	IT Development time & PPR development time
	Improve links and information sharing with other consultation practitioners with a view to joining-up consultation initiatives	Performance Team	March 2003	PPR research and development time
	Research and develop a range of proposals for promoting active citizenship in Oldham	Performance Team & other relevant departments	March 2003	PPR research and development time