

STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL

Consultation Strategy



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STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL CONSULTATION STRATEGY

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STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL

CONSULTATION STRATEGY

1. INTRODUCTION

All local authorities have a statutory duty to consult on specific areas of service delivery. As a listening Council, Stockton-on-Tees is committed to extending its consultation far beyond any statutory requirements. We want to ensure that residents of Stockton, our service users and all other interested parties have the opportunity to be involved in the planning, prioritising and monitoring of our services - that they indeed are at the heart of all council decision making processes and activities.

In the current climate of Modernising Local Government, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council recognises and welcomes the fundamental importance of consulting effectively with local people and with others who have an interest in life in the Borough. Equally, consultation is crucial within the Best Value regime which Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council embraces. Best Value is about the provision of the best possible services at reasonable cost and about the continuous improvement of those services. A central feature of Best Value is the need to consult with stakeholders. To give them the opportunity to assess the current performance of services, to set targets, standards and performance indicators and have a say in future service planning and delivery.

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's Consultation Strategy is intended to:

INVOLVE all stakeholders in:

- identifying issues which affect their lives
- voicing their needs
- identifying solutions to problem
- setting and monitoring targets for the continuing improvement of Council services

EMPOWER all stakeholders to gain a voice within the decision making processes and to play a key role in the strategic planning of services and in the monitoring of service delivery

FORMALISE the consultation process so that all involved understand the competing priorities and constraints under which Council services are delivered.

Implementation of the Consultation Strategy will ensure that:-

- a) the Council is open and responsive to the views of all stakeholders
- b) local communities are involved in identifying local needs
- c) there is increased public participation in the decision making process
- d) the concept of involved and responsible citizenship is enhanced throughout the Borough
- e) residents are aware that the Council actively seeks and values their input
- f) business and community partnerships flourish

2. MAKING CONSULTATION WORK

In order to ensure that consultation processes are meaningful and effective **WE ARE COMMITTED TO:**

- Using a variety of consultation methods in order that as many people as possible have the opportunity to become involved and to give us their views.
- Reducing barriers to communication and consultation.
- Identifying ways of involving groups of people often excluded from consultation exercises.
- Ensuring that nature of any consultation initiative is clear and that an appropriate level of consultation is undertaken.
- Working in partnership with a wide variety of organisations and groups.
- Ensuring adequate feedback to consultees takes place.

i) **Methods of Consultation**

There are a wide variety of methods available which we will use to consult. These include

- Public/open meetings
- Use of the media (including the Authority's own Stockton News and Staff Newsletter)
- Focus groups

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- User surveys (Corporate & Departmental)
- Community and Business Newsletters
- Questionnaires and surveys
- Residents' surveys
- Partnership working, (i.e. Stockton Renaissance Board, Safer Stockton Partnership etc)
- The Residents' Panel (*Following from the Borough wide survey which took place in 1998 we have established a Residents' Panel which is regularly used to ascertain the views of residents of the Borough*)
- Local Charters (*A programme of Local Charters is underway throughout the Borough. Local Charters involve us working closely with local residents to identify ways in which the quality of life within the Borough can be enhanced*)
- Consultation with Partnership Bodies, (i.e. Stockton Renaissance Board, Safer Stockton Partnership etc)

We will continually seek to improve our consultation through the identification of new and innovative ways to consult.

ii) **Removing barriers to communication and consultation**

In order to remove barriers to communication and consultation **WE ARE COMMITTED TO:**

- Developing appropriate information channels to ensure effective distribution of information.
- Making written information accessible, not only in terms of appropriate ethnic minority languages and large print for the visually impaired, but also by the use of "*plain English*".
- Identifying alternative media to reach people who have literacy problems.
- Using realistic time scales when feedback is required and, where possible, agreeing all time scales with consultees.
- Making every effort to ensure that the consultative process is anti-discriminatory and does not preclude participation on grounds of age, race, disability or gender.
- Exploring creative possibilities to enhance community consultation in terms of accessible venues, transport provision, crèche facilities, signing and interpreting services etc.

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- Choosing venues for consultative meetings carefully, not only in terms of physical accessibility but also in terms of ensuring a welcoming and non – threatening environment.

iii) Including groups of people often excluded from consultation exercises

Particular initiatives will be pursued to ensure the involvement of people who may be under represented in consultation exercises, including the following:

- Young People
- People with disabilities
- People from ethnic minority groups
- People who are elderly

Young People will be consulted through a variety of networks including:

- Schools and Colleges
- Youth and Community Centres
- Local Authority Youth Forums
- Community and Voluntary Organisations

People with disabilities To facilitate effective consultation with people with disabilities we will, wherever possible:

- ensure that all venues for consultation meetings are fully accessible
- ensure that transport is provided where necessary
- ensure that all forms of communication meet the needs of the visually impaired
- liaise with voluntary and community groups whose members have disabilities
- encourage the active participation of carers and advocates
- provide appropriate facilities for all meetings, (i.e. induction loops, sign language facilities etc)

People from minority ethnic groups Every effort will be made to consult directly with residents (using appropriate translation and interpretation services). Written information will be made available in appropriate languages. Liaison will take place through Mosques, Temples, relevant voluntary and community organisations and community leaders. Particular initiatives will be identified to involve gypsies & travelling people.

People who are elderly will be consulted through a variety of organisations, both statutory and non-statutory, which offer services, advice and assistance to them. Special initiatives will be identified to contact the frail elderly who may be largely housebound or in residential accommodation.

iv) Involvement and Clarification

WE WILL:

- Involve people as early as possible in the consultation process
- Always clarify the nature of the consultation exercise

Early involvement is not only desirable in terms of allowing people real input into the decision making process but also confirms the credibility of the consultation exercise. People will not feel that crucial decisions have been made prior to their participation. An early involvement will promote interest, community empathy and ownership.

Clear objectives will be set for any consultation exercise and the nature of consultees' involvement will be made known at an initial stage of the consultation process. (Clarification of the nature of the consultation exercise at this early stage will avoid misunderstanding and possible disillusionment later). Any limitations upon the degree of consultation, i.e. legislative or financial restrictions, will be made known.

v) Levels of Consultation

An appropriate level of consultation will always be identified. Levels of consultation include:

Public Information *“Here’s what we are going to do”*

Public Consultation *“Here are our options, what do you think”*

Public Participation *“We want you to help us develop our options and decide our actions”*

PUBLIC INFORMATION is the process by which the local authority informs people of its intentions, procedures and practices. This level of consultation will underpin more active participation and will often act as a precursor to other levels. However, in isolation it is only appropriate where a range of options regarding the items under discussion are not available

PUBLIC CONSULTATION is the process by which people are invited to express their views, usually where a range of options is available to the authority and the authority is willing to use public opinion as an important criteria for deciding upon a particular course of action

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION takes place when people have a significant voice in the planning and decision making process. Public participation, as a consultative measure, is only appropriate either where no pre-determined decisions have been made or where the authority is willing to be led or influenced by public feedback

vi) **Partnership Working**

The local Authority will consult with a number of partners as appropriate. These may include:-

- Direct & indirect service users
- Potential service users
- Residents & the local community
- Community and voluntary organisations
- Local businesses
- Parish Councils
- Stockton Renaissance Board
- Employees
- Trade Unions
- Partners to the Authority's Community Plan
- Other public service providers
- Stockton Borough Voluntary Development Agency and Voluntary Sector Forum

vii) **Feedback from Consultation**

Appropriate methods of feeding back to consultees will ALWAYS be identified and such feedback will ALWAYS be undertaken. Feedback will take place as soon as possible after any consultation exercise and within an agreed timescale.

3. EVALUATION

In order to ensure effective consultation clear objectives will be set for any consultation initiative. These will be:

Specific
Measurable
Agreed
Realistic
Timebound

Each consultation exercise will be subject to evaluation against the set objectives.

4. IMPLEMENTATION - A CORPORATE FRAMEWORK

The Authority will co-ordinate its consultation programme effectively in order to avoid consultation fatigue amongst people being consulted and to ensure the best use of local authority resources. Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council will produce an Annual Community Consultation Plan which will set out the Authority's proposals to consult and involve citizens. This document will identify ways in which we will seek the views of the community and how we will continue to increase community involvement.

Co-ordination of consultation exercises through the Annual Community Consultation Plan will:

- ensure that Members and Officers are informed about forthcoming consultation events
- avoid unnecessary duplication of time and resources by enabling consultation exercises to be co-ordinated and to be combined where appropriate

To ensure effective implementation of this Consultation Strategy, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has produced a comprehensive Guide to Effective Consultation. This is intended to provide practical advice to officers and to elected Members in order to help them ensure that consultation is meaningful and successful. The Guide also details how corporate co-ordination of consultation exercises will work.

5. THE ROLE OF MEMBERS

The representational and scrutiny role of Members is crucial to the consultation process in terms of their formal involvement in:

- local community initiatives
- community planning
- the Best Value process, including Best Value service reviews
- the development of local performance plans

Their role as community leaders gives Members a major input into the consultation process and Members will play a key role in the implementation of this strategy through:

- instigating Consultation initiatives
- feedback from their involvement in local groups, partnerships and Forums
- their unique relationship with residents
- feedback from the Councillors Complaints and Enquiries system

6. CONSULTATION AND BEST VALUE

Local Authorities have been given a new impetus to consult effectively with the introduction of the Best Value philosophy, which is about the provision of the best possible services at reasonable cost and about the continuous improvement of services.

Under the Best Value regime, local authorities have a statutory duty to consult with:

- representatives of Council Tax payers
- representatives of non-domestic rate payers
- representatives of current or potential service users
- representatives of other interested parties

Effective consultation is central to the achievement of Best Value, for without it the views of service users and other stakeholders will not be heard and they will be unable to influence the way forward.

7. CONCLUSION

This Consultation Strategy reflects Stockton on Tees Borough Council's commitment to effective consultation and to open and accountable local government. We hope that it will foster an enhanced working partnership between the Authority, its residents, service users and all relevant stakeholders.

The Strategy reflects, from within the Authority, a corporate and departmental impetus to use consultation as a key feature of the decision making process. Practical implementation measures have been established to ensure that consultation initiatives are co-ordinated and are successful. The Authority will continually evaluate how consultation is being undertaken and will seek to identify innovative ways of ensuring maximum participation of all those who have an interest in life in the Borough of Stockton on Tees.

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