

## **Chesham Town Council's Consultation Procedure**

This is the agreed procedure for the Council's consultation exercises. The purpose of the procedure is to ensure that we carry out appropriate consultation in an inclusive and effective manner.

### **1. Is Your Consultation Necessary?**

We have agreed that we will only consult where it is possible to influence decision-making, or when we need to identify user satisfaction or add to our stock of local knowledge. If the proposed consultation does not do any of these things you will need to reconsider whether consultation is necessary.

### **2. Defining Objectives**

Before carrying out any consultation, it is essential to work out **why** you are doing it. You need to set objectives for your research which are:

1. Specific – exactly what do you want to know? The target must be clearly defined.
2. Measurable - what proportion of the community are you looking to consult? E.g. What will be the size of your survey?
3. Accepted – that everybody involved in the consultation understands and accepts the objectives.
4. Realistic – that the consultation is within the availability of resources, knowledge and time.
5. Time-bound – that a realistic schedule has been set for consultation, with a clear deadline for consultees.

#### **2.a. What Do You Want To Know?**

Below is a list of common reasons for conducting consultation:

- To compare and challenge the existing service
- To look for unmet needs
- To shape the way the service is delivered
- To measure service satisfaction
- To prioritise future spending
- To set targets for the service
- Find out reaction to new ideas
- Look for quality improvements
- Check opinions and views
- Assess potential interest in something

### **3. Build on Existing Work**

Check whether any consultation work has already been done. A list of consultation exercises can be found on the Council server at:

Council\Consultation C.70\Consultation List 2007 on.doc

Do you need to do further consultation? Can you build on the existing work?

### **4. Identify the Stakeholders**

**Who** you consult will depend on what you want to find out. You will need to prioritise who you will consult with, starting with your main customers/users of your service. You will need to consider which of the following it is appropriate to consult:

#### **Key Customers**

- People who pay directly
- People who pay indirectly (e.g. Council Tax Payers)
- Internal customers (e.g. other staff)

#### **Non-Users**

- People unaware of the service
- Dissatisfied ex-customers
- Potential future customers

#### **Others**

- Residents
- Businesses
- Interested organisations/agencies

You will need to make particular arrangements to find out some people's views. For example:

- People who have problems reading, writing and speaking English
- Some people on low incomes
- Some people from ethnic minorities
- Time-poor people
- Older people
- Younger people
- People with disabilities

## 5. Decide What Questions to Ask

The objectives of your consultation exercise will determine what questions you need to ask.

Typical questions might include:

- What do people like most and least about the service?
- Is the standard or level of the service right?
- What takes too long?
- Is the service reliable?
- What about comfort, convenience and safety?
- How good is your customer service?
- Is the range of services available appropriate?
- Is the service equally accessible by everyone?
- Is there enough information available about the resource?
- Is the service good value?

## 6. Decide What Type of Consultation Method(s) to Use

There are two main sorts of consultation:

1. Direct Consultation with a sample of people
2. Delegate Consultation with people representing the views of others, e.g. representatives from a community organisation

Consultation may either be a one-off exercise, e.g. a survey, or you may undertake ongoing consultation with consultative groups, e.g. a local neighbourhood forum.

Consider whether it would be appropriate to undertake the consultation in partnership with other bodies. Does the subject of the consultation involve/affect other organisations in addition to the Town Council?

You will need to consider:

- **who** you are consulting
- **what** you are consulting on
- the **resources** available
- the **time** available

in order to decide the most effective method of consultation.

You will need to give consideration as to how the views of people who do not normally participate, or who find it difficult to participate, can be obtained. It may be helpful to use a mixture of consultation methods. Some of the most common are:

**Postal Surveys** – these often get a result of <20%, but can be good if you wish to provide information also

**Focus Groups** – helpful for considering complex issues in detail

**Telephone Surveys** – ideal for a quick response on basic questions

**Personal Interviews** – often the most statistically reliable method

Consider the need for statistical analysis to determine the significance of your results.

Depending upon the method and scale of the consultation, it may be appropriate to use an external contractor.

## **7. Start the Consultation**

When collecting information, ensure that the consultees know:

- The purpose of the consultation
- Who is being consulted
- Deadline for response
- What decisions will be influenced
- Who will take the decisions
- When the decisions will be made
- How the results will be fed back to them
- Anonymity will be respected, if requested
- Who they can contact about the consultation, or for more information

### **7a. Data Protection**

We will collect and process information in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). This Act applies to data that identifies a living, individual, natural person and does not apply to data once identifiers linking it to a natural person have been removed (e.g. anonymous survey data).

If personal data, i.e. that identifying someone, is to be collected, you must ensure that consultees are given a clear explanation of what will happen as a result of providing the information. If the respondent agrees to be interviewed and answers the questions, this is sufficient consent.

If you are asking for sensitive data, explicit consent must be obtained and you must provide a detailed explanation of how the data will be used. Sensitive data includes:

- Race or ethnic origin
- Political opinions
- Religious beliefs
- Physical or mental health

Data collected during consultation should only be used for the purpose it was collected.

### **7.b Timing**

If you are asking about satisfaction with your service, it is usually best to do this as soon as possible after the service has been delivered.

### **7.c General Considerations**

Make your consultation as accessible as possible. It is important that the consultative process is anti-discriminatory and does not preclude participation on the grounds of age, race, disability, gender or sexual orientation.

Ensure that you:

- Use plain language – don't use jargon
- Avoid leading or ambiguous questions
- Think about 'hard-to-reach' groups
- Give plenty of time to respond

Classification/personal questions are best left until last.

If you are using a written consultation method, e.g. a survey, consider the following:

- The survey may need to be provided in multiple languages
- You should provide an introduction explaining what the consultation is for, along with a reference to Data Protection/confidentiality where appropriate
- Ensure that the design is in line with the RNIB's Clear Print Guidelines
- Provide a deadline, a contact name and a return address
- The survey should end with a thank-you message, including how and when the results will be disseminated
- Pre-paid envelopes will increase response rates

It is worth running a **pilot consultation** on a small sample of people to test the accessibility and time needed to complete the consultation.

## **8. Results & Dissemination**

Once you have your results and have analysed them, you need to identify:

- findings that do not require action, e.g. low priority, or good results
- things that cannot be changed in the short term
- results that highlight the need for communication – who to, what, where and how
- results that highlight the need for action and the next steps to take

It is essential to act on these results and disseminate them. You may need to provide different levels of information to different audiences. Key stakeholders are likely to be:

- Consultation Respondents
- Councillors
- Front Line Staff
- Partner Organisations
- Users, Residents

You will need to provide a summary for lengthy documents.

Ensure that dissemination takes place within the agreed timeframe.

## **9. Evaluation**

After the consultation exercise is completed, you should evaluate the consultation against the SMART objectives that were identified at the beginning of the process.

Factors to consider when conducting your evaluation include:

- Were the objectives understood by all stakeholders?
- How many people took part – did it meet expectations?
- Were a representative set of views obtained?
- Was the timescale transparent and was it kept to?
- Was the consultation accessible (e.g. translation, large print, plain English)?
- Did you reach hard-to-reach groups?
- What were the costs?
- Has it lead to a change in policy or service?
- Has it influenced a decision?
- How many people will be affected by the changes?

Evaluation will enable you to identify areas of success and areas needing improvement.

## **10. Documentation**

Ensure that you keep a record of the consultation, why it was undertaken, how it was conducted, what the results were and the outcomes of the consultation.

Add your consultation exercise to the list maintained on the server at:

Council\Consultation C.70\Consultation List 2007 on.doc

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