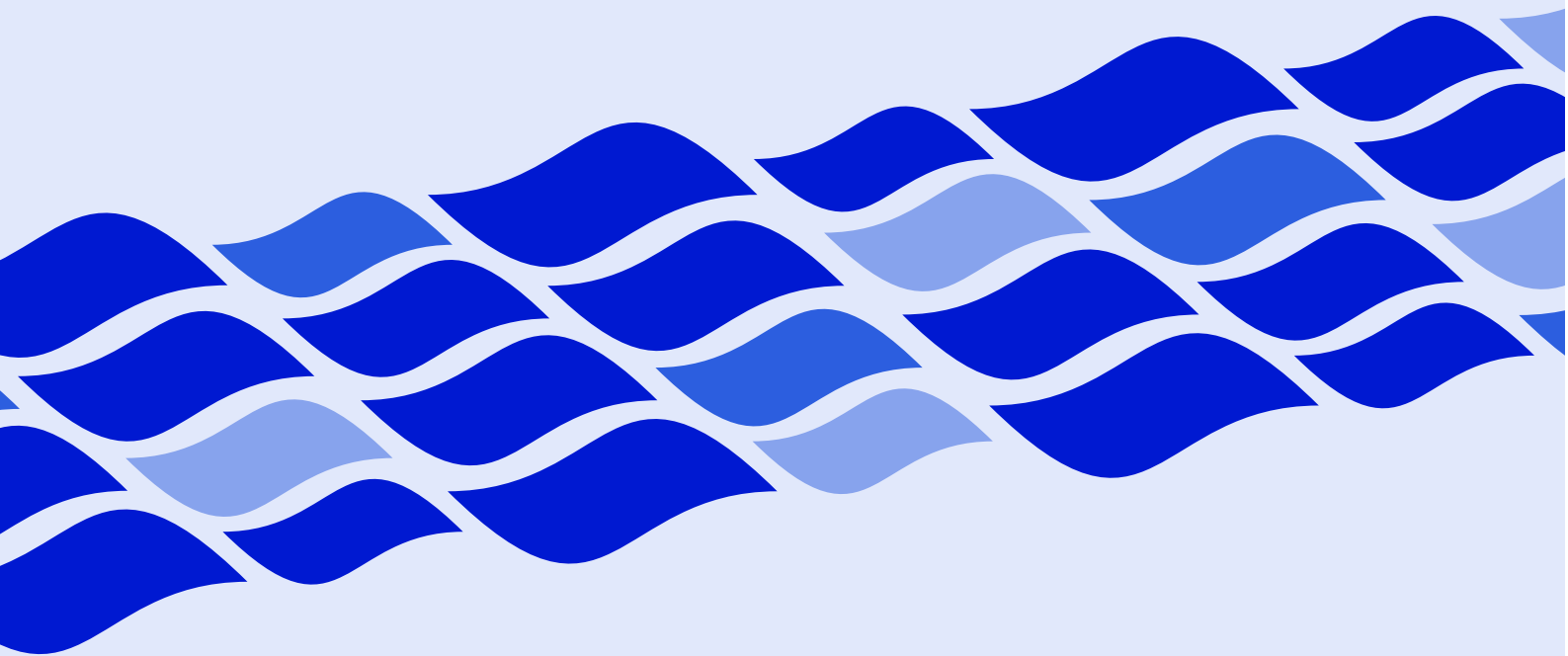


Isle of Wight Council
**Consultation
Strategy**



October 2005



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Supplement (see separate booklet)
Good Practice Guide to Consultation

Introduction

- 1.1** All councils have a statutory duty to consult on a wide range of activity. As a listening council, we need to be committed to extending consultation far beyond these statutory requirements. We need to ensure that Island residents and service users have real and meaningful opportunities to be involved in the shaping and delivery of services across the council.
- 1.2** Public involvement and consultation should lie at the heart of our approach to service improvement. Positive benefits will include better services for users, greater involvement of local people in shaping the future of their area, and an enhanced public image of the council as a listening and responsive organisation.
- 1.3** To be effective we need to introduce and embed a corporate approach to consultation and develop effective collaboration with colleagues in partner organisations. The council needs to:
- **evaluate where it is now**
 - **plan what needs to be achieved**
 - **deliver realistic services that match users' expectations**
 - **check whether objectives have been achieved**
 - **Improve the way it delivers services.**
- 1.4** This strategy identifies the current status of consultation within the council, sets out future goals and provides guidance on how these can be achieved. It is not just a collection of fine words but a real attempt to ensure that consultation becomes a meaningful exercise which influences council decisions.
- 1.5** It will not only provide guidelines to council officers and elected members but will also ensure that the council places consultation with the community at the heart of everything we do.

Background: What we do now

- 2.1** A consultation audit, undertaken within the council in 2003, demonstrated that individual directorates take a 'fragmented' approach to consultation. The overall cost of consultation to the council is therefore difficult to identify.
- 2.2** A budget is held by the community partnership team to cover the principal corporate consultations that currently take place. These are:
- **Annual Budget Consultation** this consultation takes place prior to the budget-setting process and involves members of the Cabinet and representatives from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. Results from these meetings are summarised and presented to the Cabinet as a means of identifying community priorities.
 - **Twice-yearly Citizens Panels** formed in November 2003, the panel is made up of 1,100 demographically representative citizens whose profile reflects our population. The panel was recruited by an independent market research company and is used on a twice-yearly basis to find out the views of Islanders on council services. They are also used for specialist focus groups or bespoke consultations.
 - **Three-Yearly Best Value Satisfaction Survey** (a statutory requirement) – this survey is based on nationally set Best Value Performance Indicator targets (BVPs) and is undertaken on a three-yearly cycle that began in 2000. On that basis, the second such survey was completed in autumn 2003. The survey is undertaken by an independent market research company and involves consulting a representative sample of the Island population to discover their levels of satisfaction with the services provided by the council.
- 2.3** **Elected Members** – members of the Cabinet are regularly involved in the annual budget consultations that take place. These generally take the form of a panel, comprising members, lead directors and senior officers, answering questions from an invited group of representatives drawn from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors.
- Other than the budget consultation there is little or no evidence of elected members being consulted on whether/when a consultation should take place, or in the development or endorsement of appropriate consultation questions.

2.4 Strategic Partners– the council has a tendency to act alone when undertaking its consultations, with no apparent linkage to its strategic partners. Island Futures, the Island’s local strategic partnership, is set to become a major force on the Island and it is essential that decisions taken by the council reflect the needs of the many stakeholders on the Island, not least the community.

The council is not making effective use of this strategic channel of consultation/communication to advance the opportunities for a more ‘joined-up’ approach to service delivery.

2.5 Voluntary and community sectorcurrently, the voluntary and community sector, in the form of parish and town councils and community partnerships, are consulted on a range of subjects including satisfaction levels with council services. Working in conjunction with the Rural Community Council (RCC) we are able to make use of their database for voluntary and community sector consultations. In addition, representatives from the 34 community partnerships form the Island Panel. This group provides a ‘grass roots’ forum that is used for strategic consultations (both as focus groups and postal surveys).

2.6 Staff – employee surveys are undertaken annually by Human Resources and are generally based upon views on working for the council. Results are fed back to the Directors Group to enable action plans to be developed. Other than this survey there are no other regular staff consultations. The council has a Young Employees Forum (YEF) but to date they have not undertaken any regular surveys with their membership.

2.7 Service Plans– directorate service plans contain details of past and forthcoming consultations. However, current detail is limited to the subject under consultation, who is to be consulted and the date the consultation takes place. There is no evidence of how the results of the consultation have been used to influence the performance or delivery of the service.

2.8 Wight Insight– the council’s own publication is used as a means of consulting the community on issues affecting Island residents. These consultations are mirrored on iwight.com, the council’s website.

2.9 Children's services– There are a number of good examples of how young people are consulted and how their views inform service developments. For example, children and family services have been using Viewpoint (an interactive computer-based questionnaire) to consult with looked after children and are planning to extend this to all Island schools.

The Isle of Wight Children's Fund programme is based on the priorities that children and young people identified themselves through consultations such as the Big Day Out.

2.10 Summary

It is apparent that, in many ways, our current approach to consultation is fragmented, largely uncoordinated, and – in some cases – lacking in any real purpose. By continuing in this manner we risk consultation 'fatigue' in our consumers and collecting information that has little real benefit to the council.

Clearly, this approach does not produce the most effective results and does not make the best use of the limited financial resources available. There is a risk that consultation can suffer from a 'tick box' approach where results have little impact on what or how the council does things.

The following sections of the strategy set out our aims, with practical details of how we can reverse this trend. By applying these simple measures we will ensure that all future consultation is meaningful, and delivered in a way that is coordinated, cost-effective and can influence the council's decision-making.

The Aim: What do we want to achieve?

- 3.1** Consultation usually describes a process where one party seeks the views, knowledge or guidance of another. It is a two-way process where views are actively sought and considered before final decisions or plans are made.
- 3.2** The Isle of Wight Council is committed to meeting the needs of the community, improving the quality of life of our residents and keeping the Island an attractive place in which to live and work.
- 3.3** To achieve this we must understand what is important to our residents and work in partnership with other organisations to better address local priorities. To ensure that we engage in the right activities to the best standards, we must also involve others as effectively as possible in the decisions we make.
- 3.4** This strategy aims to:
- put consultation at the heart of everything we do
 - provide a co-ordinated, meaningful approach to consultation and feedback
 - ensure that staff and members understand and value the consultation process
 - support the aims and objectives of the Corporate Plan and the Community Strategy
 - provide a means of improving council services
 - identify the key channels of engagement
 - facilitate the expression of views from all sectors of the community.
- 3.5** The council should view consultation as a tool that is key to our performance management processes. Currently, we set our service targets and then measure our performance against those targets but, without consultation, how do we know we are setting the correct targets to begin with? Consultation needs to be embedded within the service planning process and in so doing become a meaningful part of our decision-making.

3.6 Proactive community consultation and participation is the most effective basis for planning, prioritising, designing, delivering and monitoring all the council's activities, policies and developments. This strategy reflects, from within the council, a corporate and departmental impetus to use consultation as a key feature of the decision-making process.

3.7 Meaningful and timely consultation will foster an enhanced working partnership between the council, the voluntary and community sector, Island residents, service users and all relevant stakeholders.

3.8 If we get it right we will:

- consult in a way that can influence the council's decision-making
- involve the community in the decision-making process
- understand the needs and aspirations of the community
- build positive relationships and confidence in the council
- shape and improve council policy and services.

3.9 Practical implementation measures have been identified to ensure that consultation initiatives are co-ordinated and successful, and will ensure results are used to maximum effect. These are set out in the following sections.

3.10 This strategy does not provide the ultimate solution to good consultation but merely sets down a sound foundation. It provides an opportunity to adopt a more 'corporate' stance on consultation, and to be more aware of it as a management aid to strategic planning. The council should continually evaluate how consultation is being undertaken and applied and seek to identify innovative ways of ensuring maximum participation of all those who have an interest in life on the Isle of Wight.

Implementation: How can we achieve it?

- 4.1** Setting down our aim is not sufficient – we need to know how we will achieve it. This section of the strategy sets out a structured approach to consultation which is based on a ‘toolkit’ consisting of three main drivers of change:
- a **Good Practice Guide** an aid to good consultation techniques
 - **corporate consultation database** a database mapping major consultations and results
 - **an annual consultation planning cycle** a timetable of main consultations.
- 4.2** The **Good Practice Guide** is designed to lead officers through the process of consultation. It contains all the information required to consult effectively and forms Part 2 of this strategy (attached as Supplement 1.)
- 4.3** The **consultation database** will record corporate consultations that have taken place in the previous year, their results and the impact they have had on their respective services. This is available on the council’s Intranet. A separate section containing details of parish and town councils, Island groups, private and voluntary agencies, organisations and individuals that can be used for bespoke consultations is available through the community partnership team.
- 4.4** The **consultation planning cycle** identifies principal council consultations and shows how the results link to key dates in the decision-making process. This is available on the Intranet.
- 4.5** The **‘toolkit’** provides a good foundation for effective consultation but without the commitment and ownership of staff and members it is unlikely to succeed. The following paragraphs discuss how we can best involve each of the individual elements to enable a more effective, integrated and corporate approach to consultation.

- 4.6 By taking a corporate approach, we can ensure that our consultation activity is:
- **efficient** – we can avoid duplication of effort, and utilise expertise within the organisation
 - **effective** – we can make sure we ask the right people the right questions for the right reasons at the right time
 - **economical** – resources can be targeted and pooled and the use of external consultants minimised.

4.7 **Role of members** elected members are a prime source of instigating consultations, providing feedback on council services and acting as a channel for community views. Officers planning consultations should share the development of questionnaires with appropriate elected members. This will ensure that, where local consultation is to take place, members will be informed and become part of that process. Their role as community leaders gives members a major input into the consultation process and they will play a key role in the implementation of this strategy through:

- playing an active role in consultation initiatives
- their unique relationship with their electorate
- providing feedback from their involvement in local groups, partnerships and forums.

4.8 **Strategic partners**– every effort should be made to combine consultations with other strategic partners thereby providing mutual benefits in terms of cost and sharing information. The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) could provide an ideal vehicle for spreading information.

Corporate consultation results will form a vital source of intelligence for the LSP in determining the community's views and priorities. This information could be reported to the partnership on a quarterly basis together with Service Plan improvement details.

4.9 **Voluntary and community sector** the Voluntary Sector Forum, comprising representative members of the voluntary and community sector, will be used for key consultations with the sector.

4.9.1 Much emphasis is being placed on the wider use of the voluntary and community sector (V&CS) as a means of providing council services, not least in the area of consultation. The Rural Community Council could provide an efficient mechanism for working with the council on major consultations with the voluntary and community sector, using their established networks and databases.

- 4.9.2** The council has developed a Compact with the V&CS, through the Compact Development Group (CDG), which is aimed at improving the working arrangements between the two sectors. The council can develop greater opportunities to consult more widely with the V&CS using the CDG as a springboard.
- 4.9.3** The community partnership team has, in the past two years, developed a range of effective communication channels and networks representative of the Island community, with a view to co-ordinating and conducting meaningful and efficient methods of consultation. This includes:
- **Island Voices**– the council’s Citizens Panel (see 2.2, Paragraph 2)
 - **Town and parish council databases** accessed through the Rural Community Council
 - **Chamber of Commerce database** accessed through the Chamber
 - **Local Strategic Partnership** database comprising the Island’s public, private, voluntary and community organisations and agencies
 - **The Island Panel** this comprises of representatives from the 34 community partnerships, one member of which sits on the Cabinet of the Local Strategic Partnership. They provide a ‘grass roots’ forum that can be used for strategic consultations in the form of both focus groups and postal questionnaires.
 - **Corporate consultation database** A database containing details of parish and town councils, Island groups, private and voluntary agencies, organisations and individuals and which maps major council consultations and results.
- 4.10** **Staff consultation**– Annual and key staff consultations will be pursued, as far as possible, through the Intranet Forum. This is a cost-effective method with the widest possible access for gaining staff views. Results from this process will be linked into the employee surveys, undertaken annually, which are also available on the Intranet. The Forum has been modified to enable consultees to register and be identified, information which is vital for verification and feedback. Provision will be made for staff who are currently unable to access the Intranet through The Vine, the council’s staff newsletter.
- 4.10.1** The Young Employees Forum tends to use e-mail as a means of consulting their membership that will easily link into this approach.
- 4.10.2** Key messages and information about, and resulting from, staff consultations will be made available on the Intranet and on the consultation database. Results will also be fed back to staff through The Vine, and to directors and heads of service through Directors Group briefings. This will provide an improved method of involving staff in the service planning and improvement process.

4.11 Children and young people children and young people are tomorrow's citizens and are therefore key to any consultations that the council undertakes. With the development of the children's trust and the children and young people's plan, in particular, a charter for the involvement, consultation and participation of children and young people will form an integral part of this strategy.

4.11.1 There is no one most effective method of interacting and consulting with children and young people. Methods will differ and depend on what is being consulted on, and will benefit from an individually tailored approach for each consultation. Children's services are developing more innovative methods of consultation to capture the imagination of young people. Methods include SMS texting, electronic 'talk-back' boards (push-button consultation) and other electronic forms of consultation.

4.11.2 The key annual consultations the council undertake, such as the budget consultation, face-to-face meetings and interactive focus groups with the Youth Council and the Youth MP, have been successful in the past and are recommended. Both of these are administered and supported through youth and community services.

4.12 Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and faith groups consultations involving the community at large are to be truly representative, they should always include representation from minority groups. A mapping exercise carried out on behalf of the council in June 2004 identified where the hard to reach BME and faith communities were on the Isle of Wight and what support was available to them.

The exercise also identified champions who are willing to work on joint projects with the council, to promote and celebrate diversity. We will consult with BME and faith groups through the champions to find the best way to ensure all members of the community are involved in consultation.

Advice on reaching and consulting with BME communities and faith groups should be sought from either the community partnership team or the council's diversity officer who will have up to date information on groups, contacts and most appropriate methods of consultation.

4.13 E-consultation – increasingly, the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) process will take account of how well the council is achieving their e-government targets. E-consultation can and will make a significant contribution to these targets.

This will be achieved through an evaluation process that will consider, wherever possible, using e-consultation and promoting the uptake of access to the Internet via council outlets. Working in partnership with the web team, we will support the potential of this approach.

4.13.1 E-Government targets (2005) require 100 per cent of a council's services to be delivered electronically. Effective text messaging software would enable effective consultation and communication between the council and the community, allowing the council to inform and solicit opinions.

4.13.2 This form of communication can be used in a number of effective ways:

- mobile voting
- community consultation feedback
- information dissemination
- promoting council and community achievements
- promotion of council services.

4.13.3 The following highlights some of the methods of e-consultation, which the council will endeavour to implement:

- SMS texting for youth consultation
- online focus groups
- online local area neighbourhood forums
- online petitions
- online surveys for local residents
- online magazines and newsletters
- text alerts
- junior consultation website
- interactive e-consultation and feedback through iwight.com
- e-voting
- audio/Powerpoint information supporting current consultations through iwight.com
- future use of digital television consultation.

4.14 Communications – consultation will form an integral part of the council's overall communications strategy. Effective communication should be a key priority, ensuring that we communicate effectively with all stakeholders, particularly the public.

All communication between the council and its audiences should:

- focus on corporate objectives and messages
- be clear, honest and open
- be easily understandable, timely and up to date (applying to all written, spoken, visual and electronic communication)
- be shared and made available to support service excellence.
- conform to corporate standards in the council's communication strategy.

4.15 The community partnership team based in the policy and communications unit, the team sits at the heart of the council and is well placed to co-ordinate the consultation programme in a timely and cost-effective manner. All proposed consultations should be filtered through the team. This action will not preclude individual sections/directorates undertaking consultations, when and where appropriate, but will provide them with a central point of information, support and evaluation. This will ensure that:

- duplication is avoided
- best use is made of existing data and council resources
- the risk of consultation fatigue is minimised
- there is co-ordination of consultation and feedback
- meaningful data is regularly fed into the performance management/service plan process
- efficient, cost-effective approach to consultation is maintained.

The community partnership team will produce an annual consultation plan, which will form an integral part of the annual planning cycle. The plan will set out details of principal consultations scheduled to take place.

Co-ordination of consultation exercised through the annual 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 combined where appropriate
- enable results to become an integral part of the service planning and performance management process.

Conclusion

- 5.1** This consultation strategy reflects the Isle of Wight Council's commitment to effective consultation and to open and accountable local government. It will foster an enhanced working partnership between the council, the voluntary and community sector, Island residents, service users including children and young people and all relevant stakeholders.
- 5.2** The strategy reflects, from within the council, a corporate and departmental impetus to use consultation as a key feature of the decision-making process. Practical implementation measures have been identified to ensure that consultation initiatives are co-ordinated, successful and ensure results are used to maximum effect. The council will continually evaluate how consultation is being undertaken and applied. We will also seek to identify innovative ways of ensuring maximum participation of all those who have an interest in life on the Isle of Wight.



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