

Getting The Message

A Consultation Strategy for the Vale of White Horse District Council

**“A process of dialogue that leads to a decision.”
(Audit Commission 1999, “Listen Up”)**

Why Should We Consult?

Effective consultation can be the difference between an organisation winning plaudits for its work or losing the respect of those who use its services. Any organisation which provides services to customers or communities cannot afford to ignore the people it serves and consultation is the best way of getting the message from them and getting the service right.

Members consult on a daily basis. Every time they listen to their constituents or to the Council's stakeholders they are monitoring reactions, opinions, desires and needs, and then using those feelings to shape their decisions. It is important to stress that consultation shapes decisions; it doesn't make them for you. Neither does consultation replace or depose strong leadership, it enhances it. Leadership and consultation are not mutually exclusive, as it is not a weakness to listen to what people are saying and thinking but a strength. Strong leadership requires rational decision-making based on the evidence of what is needed, not just on what is wanted.

As a Council we consult regularly. In some cases this is a statutory requirement, for instance on planning applications and the Local Development Framework, or the Best Value Performance Indicator General Satisfaction survey every three years. The way this is done is usually heavily prescribed. We also consult on the provision of our services but this is usually discretionary.

Consultation can challenge assumptions and lead to new ways of thinking. Sometimes this can be uncomfortable but it can protect an organisation from mistakes and misperceptions. In the Council's case, it can help ensure that we are delivering what the community needs or wants in the most effective way. This means that consultation can support the requirement to deliver best value from our limited resources.

In the White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities" the Government sets out its vision for Local Government, based on best practice evidence from Councils across the country. The Government wants Local Authorities to be responsive and inclusive. This means making sure the people a council serves feel more in control, more involved in running services and more informed about the quality of service in their area, with a clear idea of what the Council will do if services fail to meet their needs. This in turn should give people a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for local services.

The White Paper says that the new "Community Call for Action" will require Councillors to demand answers if their local community feels an issue is not being addressed, placing increased emphasis on an individual Councillor's responsibilities and the need for constant dialogue with constituents.

If we do not consult effectively we miss opportunities to deliver higher levels of satisfaction, as the more involved and informed a community feels, the more satisfied they become. It has to be said that research by Ipsos MORI shows the

link with satisfaction is stronger with communication, but as Ipsos MORI says: "Given that good communications are an initial and valuable step towards securing higher levels of participation it can be argued that authorities with good scores are well placed to motivate and engage with the public." The communications strategy "You Heard It Here First" will work towards better informing our residents and this consultation strategy will complement that. The more we involve our communities the better informed they become, as consultation can at the very least inform citizens about the decisions we have to make and the context we have to work in.

Where are we now?

Consultation is a developing skill in the Vale of White Horse District Council and is not yet fully embedded as part of day-to-day running in some parts of the Council.

The Audit Commission has been critical of the Vale in the past because of its failure to demonstrate the part consultation plays in the decision-making process. This is not to say that the Council does not consult, or that when it does it is not done well, but we sometimes fail to demonstrate how consultation shapes what we do.

According to the 2006/07 Best Value Performance Indicator General User Survey, those who express satisfaction with the Council and feel well informed are more likely to think they can influence decision making. Seven in ten residents do not feel they can influence decisions affecting their local area but only two in ten residents say they would like to be involved in local decision making. The majority (60 per cent) say their involvement would depend on the issue. There may be some issues which are more important to some individuals than others and it is our task to ensure we are giving people the opportunity to comment on those that are important to them. Those that would like more involvement are most likely to be working full time and are aged between 25 and 64, which presents a challenge in itself as these are likely to be people with busy lives and family commitments, limiting the time they have available to attend workshops and events.

There is a lot of information within the Vale about our “customers” but it is kept in different ways by different service areas. As a result we do not have a cohesive idea of who they are and what they want. This means we are missing out on opportunities to gather vital information which can help shape our response. For instance, our comments, complaints and suggestions information is not circulated, apart from a brief report to the Executive once a year. The customer information collected by the LSP as part of their customer relationship management system stays in the LSP and is not analysed.

Consultation with our staff is limited and tends to focus on the mechanical (office moves) rather than the influential (vision and objectives). This was demonstrated by the Staff Survey, conducted in 2006, in which staff said they felt disengaged from the Council’s aims, objectives and future plans.

In terms of formal consultation we have a citizens’ panel, Vale Voice, which includes around 1,000 residents and aims to demographically represent the Vale in terms of location, gender, ethnicity and disability. We also have a Youth Forum, made up of two representatives from each secondary level school in the Vale (both state and private) but this is generally used to download information, rather than shape decisions. This may change with the introduction of a Youth Forum Executive but this opportunity to interact with people aged under 18 should be utilised more.

The four area forums are consulted on issues which affect their area directly. Housing also does consultation with its clients but was criticised by the Audit Commission for not demonstrating how this has shaped policy and decisions. Also, the data captured remains with housing, even though the information may be of use to other areas.

The Planning Service has a statutory responsibility to consult, both on planning applications and planning policy, in particular the Local Development Framework, which will replace the Local Plan and will bring forward new areas for work, housing and commercial developments, but again this information tends to stay in Development Control and is not shared though it could be valuable as it goes some way towards identifying what the community values about the area and what it desires in the future.

The LSP does quarterly surveys on customer satisfaction and our leisure contractors conduct regular customer surveys.

Perhaps most importantly our Members are daily gathering information about our communities and have a much greater understanding of the men, women and children who make up the Vale, but there is no formal mechanism for gathering this intelligence.

The Vale is represented on the Oxfordshire Countywide Consultation Officers Forum, which comprises Oxfordshire County Council and the five District Councils. The Forum has signed a consultation pact which provides for sharing information, co-ordination of activity and joint commissioning of consultation.

With regards to the Council's approach to providing inclusive and accessible consultation opportunities the Vale's Equality and Diversity Scheme (currently in draft, due to be adopted in December) sets out how we currently provide inclusive consultation opportunities and actions for improvement.

Where do we want to be?

Consultation needs to be much better co-ordinated and consistent. We need to be able to identify if all sections of the community have had a say. We need to be clear about why we are consulting, setting objectives and deciding what we will do with the results before opening dialogue. We need to strike a balance between resource limitations, statutory requirements, community demands and the Members' decision making role and we need to communicate the results and the outcomes, being clear about why decisions have been made, particularly if they contradict consultation results.

1. Any external consultation should aim to:
 - a. Inform Council direction on real issues
 - b. Improve customer services so we are delivering the right services to the right people in the right time and in the right way
 - c. Improve customer satisfaction
 - d. Improve Audit Commission inspections
 - e. Complement the communications strategy
 - f. Raise the Vale's profile in the community
 - g. Complement the Equality and Diversity Scheme
2. Any consultation with staff should aim to:
 - a. Make staff part of the decision making process
 - b. Improve satisfaction with the Senior Management Team
 - c. Influence the direction of travel of the Council

What should consultation in the Vale be like?

1. **Honest** about what information we want and what responders can influence – if we have already made a decision we should not consult, unless it is to help determine how best to deliver the service affected by that decision
2. **Involving and inclusive** giving everyone the opportunity to take part and giving enough information to help people make informed decisions.
3. **Active not passive** – any consultation should be actively promoted, not just hidden away on a website or a dusty corner of the LSP
4. **Improving** – it should be aimed at improving our service delivery or decision-making
5. **Accountable** – we should have a firm commitment to pass on results to participants and the wider public, as well as the outcomes, explaining why we have reached the decisions we have, to give the consultation process credibility
6. **Credible** – to encourage take-up people need to believe their opinions are being heard, even if we do not follow their choices we must explain why
7. **Coordinated** to make sure consultation by the Council is joined up and avoids duplication
8. **Done in partnership** where appropriate to reduce costs and consultation fatigue

How are we going to get there?

1. To achieve this we need to (in order of priority):
 - a) Structure and plan consultation from a central point to ensure consistency and co-ordination
 - b) Have effective tools to support the consultation process
 - c) Build consultation into the planning process of any project
 - d) Help officers and Members understand the value of consultation
 - e) Be clear about who is being consulted and why
 - f) Ensure any consultation is inclusive with particular regard to groups who are more likely to have difficulty accessing consultation opportunities and services (including people from ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, older and younger members of the community).

Aim one: Structure and plan consultation from a central point to ensure consistency and co-ordination

Action	Responsibility	Completion Date
Conduct an audit and review of existing consultation measures	Communications Team	May 2008
Produce an annual consultation plan with the support of Deputy Directors and their service area teams	Communications Team	April 2008
Ensure consultation requirements are built into service planning	Communications Team	Ongoing
Revise and re-launch the comment, complaints and suggestions procedure	Head of Communications	September 2008

Aim two: Have effective tools to support the consultation process

Action	Responsibility	Completion Date
Set up a database to include any consultation exercises and its outcomes and make it available online (though planning applications will be subject to a different process).	Communications Team/ICT	Initial scoping by September 2008
Purchase an online survey tool to help with the process and provide training to relevant members of staff.	Communications /ICT/Development Control	Initial scoping by September 2008
Expand the consultation section on the intranet and website to keep staff and the public informed about what we are doing.	Communications Team	December 2008
Conduct an audit of existing customer databases to understand who our audiences are	Communications /LSP	December 2008

Aim three: Build consultation into the planning process of any project

Action	Responsibility	Completion Date
Work with Service Areas and the Projects Team to ensure consultation requirements are built into the early stages of the planning process	Communications /Organisational Change	Ongoing
Work with Service Areas and Organisational Change to ensure consultation and communication are part of the Service Standards process	Communications /Organisational Change	Ongoing

Aim four: Help officers and Members understand the value of consultation:

Action	Responsibility	Completion Date
Produce a guide to consultation for Members and officers	Communications /Equalities Officer	April 2009
Offer Member and officer training	Communications /Equalities Officer	First training session with Members due in January 2008
Offer continuous guidance on consultation and engagement activity	Communications Team	Ongoing
Work with the Staff Action Planning Group and Senior Management Team to develop internal consultation standards and an SMT Charter for staff consultation.	Communications /Staff Action Planning Group	December 2008

Aim five: Be clear about who is being consulted and why

Action	Responsibility	Completion Date
Ensure any consultation has a properly documented plan including the target group or groups, outcomes and communication of results.	Communications Team/ Equalities Officer	Ongoing

Aim six: Ensure any consultation is inclusive with particular regard to groups who are more likely to have difficulty accessing consultation opportunities and services (including people from ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, older and younger members of the community).

Action	Responsibility	Completion Date
Work with the equalities officer to build up a database of groups more likely to face difficulties in accessing consultation and services. Identify relevant access channels and seek to address any gaps.	Communications /Equalities Officer	March 2008
Where appropriate include equalities data questions on surveys and analyse data accordingly.	Communications /Equalities Officer	Ongoing
Work with the Youth Forum to build in mechanisms for feedback on Council issues	Communications /Youth Development Officer	Ongoing
Work with the Youth Forum to build in youth representation on the Vale Voice Citizens Panel	Communications /Youth Development Officer	April 2009
Regularly monitor the response to Vale Voice surveys to ensure they are representative.	Communications Team	Ongoing
Include any relevant actions within this strategy from the Consultation Equality Impact Assessment currently being conducted (due to be complete by February 2008).	Head of Communications	March 2008
Produce a checklist for staff on how to run an accessible event (including consultation events).	Communications Team/Equalities Officer	March 2009
Review guidance for staff on how to consult with ethnic minority communities, disabled people and women.	Communications Team	March 2009
Develop the corporate complaints process in order to capture equalities data and flag any complaints which relate to equality and diversity.	Communications Team	July 2009