

Consultation Task and Finish Group

Background

The original terms of reference of the task and finish group were:

- **to contribute to the review of the council's Communication Strategy (reporting back to a future Overview and Scrutiny)**
- **to review and approve associated policies – such as social media, consultation, advertising and sponsorship.**
- **to consider the options around how the council consults with residents, businesses and visitors.**

The task and finish group all agreed that they were satisfied with the council's current communications and felt that the group needed to focus on purely consultations.

Outcomes

The consultation function moved to the PR team in April of last year, with one full-time member of staff moving across. Since this time, the Consultation Officer has worked closely with the PR Manager to link the two functions together and further enhance the service. The Consultation Officer has worked incredibly hard to make significant improvements to the service and has achieved excellent results. The task and finish group has been involved in this process by testing new approaches and making further suggestions.

Through this process the PR and consultation team has:

- **carried out a benchmarking exercise against neighbouring authorities.** This showed that when comparing similar consultation exercises with those carried out by neighbouring authorities, our response rates were higher than those of our neighbouring authorities. Please see appendix 1. We have also carried out research and met with other councils to see how they approach consultations.
- **monitored our progress against previous consultations.** The results from this demonstrate that new approaches are helping to increase response rates to consultations. Please see appendix 2.
- **raised the profile of consultations and increased participation.** This includes a consultation toolkit for internal services (please see appendix 3); bespoke communications plans for each consultation; increased promotion; use of incentives; the introduction of the 'Let's Talk Panel' (please see below) and new 'Let's Talk' branding and publicity material. Please see appendix 4.

- **fully utilised the council's communication channels to promote consultations.**

We now use initiatives; our social media sites; web advertising; web banners; customer care screens; car park advertising; media relations; staff; councillors; partners; promotional materials; and further channels, in order to better promote consultations. Details of the approach taken can be found within each bespoke communications plan.

- **monitored response rates throughout each consultation.**

Additional monitoring is now carried out during consultations – rather than at the end of a consultation. This has led to using different approaches during a consultation and the final evaluation results are helping us to identify the best communication channels to use for different target groups.

- **launched a consultation panel.**

We have launched the 'Let's Talk Panel', which aims to encourage people to sign up to alerts for future consultations, events and forums. This has been really successful, with over 300 people signing up. This has also helped to increase response rates.

- **significantly improved the consultation area on the website.**

We have redesigned and rewritten the web area dedicated to the consultation function on the council's website. We have tested the changes with the task and finish group and have identified further improvements – some of which have already been made and some of which need further investigation. We did outline that the planning consultations are processed through a different system that are managed by the planning policy team.

It was also agreed that:

- future consultations would account for the amount of people each response represents. For example when groups respond through one person.
- the timings of consultations should be considered, to avoid school holidays and other key dates. Where this can't be avoided, the consultation period would be extended.
- we would explore having a permanent button on the front page of the website that would link directly to the consultation web area.

Future plans

The team aims to:

- make further improvements to the website;
- develop forums where residents will be asked to get more involved in the development of specific projects or service areas;

- explore the use of the council's phone system to consult with people;
- further promote the 'let's talk' panel;
- introduce a refer a friend scheme for members of the 'let's talk panel'.
- target businesses through linkedin;
- develop an events programme where we talk to people face to face either to promote let's talk, or current consultations.

It is worth noting that the council only has one member of staff dedicated to consultations. By introducing this role into the PR team, we have been able to link the consultation and communications functions together, which has been very successful. However, we also aim to provide further training to council staff and encourage them to dedicate more time and resources to their specific consultation.