

CONSULTATION ARRANGEMENTS

PRINCIPLES OF CONSULTATION

- 1
 - i) The Council set out to do more than simply consult on the three options for political arrangements under the Local Government Act. Its first objective was to inform, consult and engage all interested parties in a process of evaluation, all this ahead of a decision being made on which option to accept.
 - ii) The Council has set out to develop good working relationships with the media to ensure more than adequate coverage of the issues in all parts of the County.
 - iii) Through consultation the Council has sought to set political structures in a wider context of local governance, a vision for the future and priority setting.
 - iv) To ensure that there would be sufficient rationale for whatever option the Council decided upon, it took an early decision that the success of the pilot would be judged against predetermined criteria. The evaluation process has also included external validation (by the IDeA) and the views of partner organisations alongside those of the electorate, Council members and staff.
 - v) It was only after it had been established through the residents' survey that there was sufficient support for the model, that the Council decided to adopt the Leader/Cabinet model.
 - vi) The Council will continue to canvass views and opinions as it moves through transitional arrangements and has undertaken to formally review the supporting organisational structure, which has been put in place to support the political arrangements, to assess the benefits to service delivery and effective decision making.

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION PROCESS

Process

- 2 Since the Autumn of 1999 a full range of consultation events and information activity has taken place. The detail of this is set out in the accompanying table. In addition to these main respondent groups we have made contact with "hard to reach groups" by the following methods.
 - Holding of a visioning conference, consisting of 50 people who were selected to represent the population as a whole, organised with Office for Public Management.
 - A youth conference, organised through the Buckinghamshire Youth Council.
 - Involvement of the local Race Equality Councils.
 - Making documents available in other formats and languages and providing access to interpreters for those who needed them.
- 3 Information has been provided in a way and in situations aimed at generating debate on the issues.

- 4 Throughout the period of consultation (and this is ongoing) we have used the local media to encourage further engagement in the process, ie via local radio, the local press and various newsheets put out by the County Council (the latest of these being the "Buckinghamshire times", published in March 2001).
- 5 Most recently an evaluation questionnaire has been distributed to staff, schools, parish and town councils, district councils and statutory and voluntary sector organisations.
- 6 The widespread consultation exercise carried out with residents in the summer of 2000 was conducted on behalf of the County Council by consultants, KPMG, with their partners, BMG. The overview findings contained in the full report issued by the consultants are appended.

Who	When	How
Residents 8,500	August and September 2000	Mailing to households. 1,000 face-to-face interviews
Voluntary and private sector organisations	Summer 2000	Mailing of consultation document
	Autumn 2000	Partners' seminar
	March 2001	Mailing of evaluation questionnaire
Business community (60 organisations)	Summer 2000	Mailing of consultation document. Various meetings
	Winter 2000	Partners' seminar
All staff Senior staff through departmental cascade	Summer 2000	Distribution of consultation document
	Autumn 2000	Road shows at all main Council offices
	March 2001	Evaluation questionnaire
Trade Unions	From Autumn 2000	Three separate meetings
Governance Agencies	Autumn 1999	Joint seminar – District and County Council members.
		Regular discussion at Chief Executive meetings
Parish Clerks	Autumn 2000	Presentations
Local Committees (comprising District Council and Parish Council members, partner	January 2001	Presentations

Who	When	How
organisation representatives as well as County Councillors)		
Town Councils	March 2001	Evaluation questionnaire
Schools	March 2001	Evaluation questionnaire

- 7 All residents have recently (April) received a newspaper called "Buckinghamshire times" which included the results of the public survey and confirmed the decision to adopt the Cabinet and Leader model.

EMERGING THEMES AND ISSUES ARISING FROM THE CONSULTATION

- 8 The key issues and themes which emerged were as follows:

- Need for any new arrangements to demonstrate proper accountability.
- Need to address local issues adequately.
- Need for a strong and adequately informed and supported scrutiny function.
- The new working arrangements should involve all Council members.
- There should be decisive, speedy, but responsible, decision making.

Issues Specifically Arising from the Evaluation Questionnaire

- 9
- Concerns over the separation of responsibilities in some cabinet portfolios.
 - Possible blurring of accountability through a lack of clarity regarding the scrutiny process and the roles and responsibilities of second tier officers
 - External partners generally looking for assurances about opportunities for forging closer partnerships and a better understanding of the Council's business objectives and aspirations. Concern to ensure that voluntary organisations will continue to be able to contribute to policy development.
 - Responses from staff focussed around the need for a greater understanding amongst staff of the changes that would be taking place and the impact of those changes.
 - Support for local area committees, and the opportunities these provided for partnership working and for County Council members, to be more engaged on local issues.

THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE ISSUES AND THEMES SET OUT ABOVE

Issue/Theme: Ensuring Accountability

Summary position in terms of structures/Constitution:

- 8 member Cabinet with clear responsibilities
- Cabinet members submitting reports to and being questioned on, at Council meetings

- Protocol on decision making

The Council's Detailed Response:

The responsibilities of the Cabinet members, both collectively and individually are enshrined in the Constitution that the Council adopted in May. This shows the contents of each of the Cabinet members' portfolios, including the Leader and Deputy Leader. There is a one-to-one relationship between the Cabinet members and the most senior level of officer – the Strategic Manager – and below them a recent review of officer structures has resulted in clear lines of management between Heads of Service and Strategic Managers. The responsibilities for each Head of Service reflects both operational efficiency (in some instances services within different portfolios are managed by the same Head of Service) but where it can be shown that there is no loss of operational efficiency services are managed within the portfolio where they naturally sit. In all cases – particularly where cross cutting project teams have been set up to deliver "flagship projects" a senior staff member has been identified to take responsibility for the project and ensure a satisfactory outcome.

Strict adherence to the legislative requirements to give advance notification of, and publish reports about, and subsequent decisions made on, all matters dealt with by the Executive (with the requirements being fully set out in the Decision Making Protocol included in the Constitution) makes it clear at each stage of the process who the responsible person, or persons, are. The Forward Plan is an important part of this process. The structural arrangements, timetable of meetings and details about the Cabinet members, their portfolios and how to contact them are all available on the Council's web site for the benefit of the general public.

A recent innovation to ensure personal accountability by each member of the Cabinet has been the introduction of "Cabinet Member Question Time" at County Council. The Council meeting on 26 April resulted in over three hours of questioning by non-executive members on the various matters reported by the Executive.

The accountability of officers to deliver the key priorities of the Council (and the flagship projects which enshrine many of these priorities) is achieved through systematic reports being made to the Cabinet member and summary reports from the Cabinet member being given in the public Cabinet meeting itself. All this is supported by a rigorous monitoring system, through which both members and senior officers management team can judge whether adequate progress is being made in delivering the outcomes the Council is seeking and take the necessary remedial action where progress is inadequate.

Issue/Theme: Local Issues

Summary position in terms of structures/Constitution:

- Local Committees
- Area Co-ordinators (officers)

The Council's Detailed Response:

Within the new arrangements the Council is putting a great deal of emphasis on the need to build up its local infrastructure and both free up members (particularly non-executive members) from being overburdened with formal meetings at Aylesbury to enable them to spend more time in their divisions. The main vehicle for this has been the development of local committees, which comprise county councillors, district councillors, parish and town councillors plus partner organisations. Whilst, at the present time focusing on Environmental Services issues, the committees are being encouraged to take responsibility for a wide range of local issues and to come forward with ideas for the improvement in the locality and for solving particular problems. The Council has been working particularly hard, and successfully, to forge close working relationships with the parish and town councils.

Issue/Theme: Scrutiny Function

Summary position in terms of structures/Constitution:

- 5 overview and scrutiny committees and dedicated officer support.

The Council's Detailed Response:

From the outset the Council has been striving to provide parity between the organisation of the scrutiny function and the executive function. Overview and scrutiny committees have been set up to provide at least one seat for any member who wishes one, and they are supported – as is the Executive – by a pool of officers, plus specialist support provided from the service departments. All of the overview and scrutiny committees have already carried out detailed investigations into particular issues and issued comprehensive reports, either to the Cabinet or to the Council. This is, however, very much a learning process still in its infancy and it is likely that changes to the current arrangements will need to be made. The call in procedures set out in the Protocol for overview and scrutiny committees, included in the Constitution, have already been tested and the outcome has been deemed to be successful.

The IDeA have observed the work of the overview and scrutiny committees and in a report have commended them for the way in which members have become engaged in the work; an effective style of working and the professional and committed support they have been given.

Issue/Theme: Involvement of all Council Members

Summary position in terms of structures/Constitution:

- An enhanced role for the Council requiring more frequent meetings, supplemented by regular all member briefings and seminars.
- Expansion of member support arrangements
- Training and Development Programme plus commitment to IDeA Charter.

The Council's Detailed Response:

The political organisational arrangements have been set up deliberately to ensure the involvement of all members, for instance by making a place available on a select committee for all those who want one. Non-executive members are also encouraged to act in an advisory capacity to a Cabinet member. The agenda of the County Council meeting is in a state of evolution as more time is now being devoted to reports on current issues and the questioning of Cabinet members, rather than dwelling on reports on matters which have already been dealt with, which in the past has led to a somewhat sterile debate. It is clear that all these initiatives have been, and continue to be, welcomed by the majority of members.

Another way in which attempts are being made to ensure that all members can contribute is by reviewing and improving the support arrangements provided to members. Following a survey of members, in which they were asked to identify the particular support they would most welcome, plans have been drawn up which will involve different ways of deploying staff and the provision of facilities – particularly IT equipment – to ensure that members can function effectively, particularly at the local level, and can access easily all the information they require to discharge their responsibilities in an effective manner.

Even though there are already more Council meetings than there were under the old arrangements these have been supplemented by all member meetings during those months when Council is not sitting. This provides a further opportunity for members to discuss major topics of interest and to question the Cabinet members about their portfolios. (Also relevant under accountability)

Issue/Theme: Decision Making

Summary position in terms of structures/Constitution:

- Key decisions made by Cabinet members collectively and individually.
- Checks and balances provided through active overview and scrutiny committees and participation in County Council meetings

The Council's Detailed Response:

The Leader and Cabinet arrangement has already shown itself to be an extremely good vehicle for speedy and decisive decision making. The Cabinet is moving from a fortnightly to a three week cycle, which will still provide considerably more opportunity for member decisions to be made than was possible under the old style arrangements. The detailed Protocol on Decision Making, built into the Constitution, and very much based on legislative requirements around access to information etc, has ensured that all decisions are properly recorded and published to the benefit of both non-executive members and the general public alike. The detailed requirements in terms of assembling information and consulting about it before a decision is made – again which is all set out in the Protocol on Decision Making – safeguards the integrity and quality of the decision making, which arguably could be undermined by an over-emphasis on speed.

Issue/Theme: Arrangement of Portfolio Responsibilities

Summary position in terms of structures/Constitution:

- Some re-alignment of responsibilities within individual portfolios

The Council's Detailed Response:

This has been continuously reviewed by the Cabinet since the responsibilities for each portfolio were first allocated at the beginning of the pilot. Practical experience over the last few months has led to some relatively minor changes, eg Rights of Way and Strategic Planning. However one area has prompted considerable debate and feedback. That is the two portfolios with shared responsibility for children, namely Schools Portfolio and the Children and Young People's Portfolio. Concern has been registered by interested groups and parents about insufficiently clear management responsibilities and the allocation of particular services between the two portfolios. Following a thorough consideration of these concerns, and the evaluation of other options, Members wish to continue to share the support to children and young people between two portfolio holders. It is acknowledged that the proposals were not communicated adequately before the start of the pilot, resulting in a lack of understanding and confidence. This is now being put right through more extensive sharing of the proposals and discussion around the detailed concerns. There have also been one-to-one discussions between the Cabinet members responsible and each of the special schools, where the new arrangements are particularly important if the potential benefits are to be realised. Some changes have been made to the way responsibilities have been shared between the two portfolios in response to points raised by clients.

Issue/Themes: Clarity over role of scrutiny and roles and responsibilities of senior officers (Strategic Managers)

Summary position in terms of structures/Constitution:

- Revised senior management structure
- Strategic role confirmed for 2nd tier level of officers

The Council's Detailed Response:

As previously noted the role of scrutiny is still evolving. The focus thus far for the overview and scrutiny committees has been on a number of single issues of immediate relevance. The intention is that the agreed medium term programme for the committees (agreed by the Council) will reflect the Council's priorities and dovetail with the Cabinet's own work programme to achieve maximum benefit for the Council as a whole.

With regard to the role of Strategic Managers, the Council has now confirmed (at its meeting on 24 May) that they will operate on a one-to-one relationship with Cabinet members and be responsible with the Cabinet members for the delivery of the Council's priorities, including the flagship projects. It is now also firmly established that day to day service delivery operations will be the responsibility of the next layer down of senior officers – the Heads of Service – so enabling the Strategic Managers to avoid being

involved in too many day to day matters, with their focus being upon strategic matters and cross cutting issues.

Issue/Themes: Participation of External Partners and Voluntary Organisations

Summary position in terms of structures/Constitution:

- Working in partnership enshrined in Council's Aims and Supporting Policies document as part of Local Performance Plan.

The Council's Detailed Response:

The Council's partners have played an important part in evaluating the success of the pilot and there was a seminar devoted to such bodies, during the consultative programme. The Council's commitment to working with all partner organisations finds expression in Aim 2 of the Council Plan, which commits the Council to:

"Work in partnership with others to secure integrated public services which meet the needs of our individual customers"

A further signal of the importance the Council attaches to good working relationships in this sphere is the fact that the first major event, following the County Council elections, will be devoted to individual presentations by partner organisations to the new Council. This event will take place immediately following the first meeting of the newly established County Council in June.

At a recent meeting, the Cabinet let it be known that they welcomed contributions to policy development and ideas about the work of the Council from voluntary and partner organisations and confirmed that the route for this would be via the appropriate Cabinet member. The fact that external bodies are being encouraged to approach directly a member of the Executive once again signifies the importance the Council attaches to maintaining these important external links.

Issue/Themes: Staff understanding of changes and their impact

Summary position in terms of structures/Constitution:

- Communication framework in place. Commitment to give early notification to staff who may be directly affected by change.

The Council's Detailed Response:

Much time has already been invested in communicating with all levels of staff, in a variety of ways, to explain the changes and extent to which staff may be affected. Regular meetings are being held with the Council's 100 or so most senior staff, whose understanding of the need for change and various processes to be followed is vital to ensure adequate support for members in their new role and that the changes result in better service delivery. In operational terms the vast majority of staff will not be directly affected by the changes and this message has already been communicated to them. To supplement the normal and well established forms of communication to staff –

departmental newsletters, E Mail bulletins etc – the Council has recently introduced a dedicated newspaper, known as "Changing times", which will now be produced on a regular basis to keep all staff up to date with what is going on, whether it directly affects them or not.

Issue/Themes: Local Committees and Engagement in Local Issues

Summary position in terms of structures/Constitution:

- 4 local committees established.
- Dedicated officer support through area co-ordinators.

The Council's Detailed Response:

The importance the Council attaches to dealing with local issues as far as possible locally (and providing sufficient member support to enable members to do so) has already been explained. The workings of the local committees has already been examined by an overview and scrutiny committee, which has commended them for the work they are doing. The overview and scrutiny committee identified a number of short term improvements to strengthen the working of the committees, all of which have been accepted by the Cabinet. Options for changes for the medium to long term, including widening the scope of committees beyond Environmental Services, have also been identified by the overview and scrutiny committee and these will be considered by the Cabinet in due course. Dedicated staff have been appointed to work with the area committees (Area Co-ordinators) and these staff, together with the recently appointed Member Support Manager, have as their priority to identify, in close consultation with all members, their needs at the local level and to implement the necessary support arrangements to suit.