

Minutes

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION TASK AND FINISH GROUP

**MINUTES OF THE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION TASK AND FINISH GROUP
HELD ON FRIDAY 17 DECEMBER 2010, IN PHOENIX ROOM 3, GROUND FLOOR, OLD
COUNTY OFFICES, AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT 10.02 AM AND CONCLUDING AT
1.48 PM.**

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr B Allen, Mr M Appleyard, Mrs M Baldwin, Mr P Cartwright and Mrs A Davies

IN ATTENDANCE

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies were received.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

3 DRAFT MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 15 NOVEMBER 2010

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2010 were agreed as a correct record.

4 INTRODUCTION OF THE REVIEW

Members discussed what they wanted from this review and how public engagement and consultation should be done in the future. It was agreed that discussion should centre on issues raised by consultation, when there should be engagement with the public, what officers hope to get out of consultation and what the reflections are on success.

5 DEPUTY LEADER

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Bill Chapple, Deputy Leader and Sarah Ashmead, Head of Policy, Performance and Communications



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



It was noted that members of the Group had been tasked to each carry out 10 interviews with members of the public, asking if they had ever been involved in consultation. Mr Chapple had been invited to the Task and Finish Group because his portfolio responsibilities included consultation. It was noted that whilst the County Council has a consultations policy and a Consultation Officer, services are responsible for carrying out their own consultations.

The following was noted:

- More members of the public should be engaged in consultation. Interviewing just 10 members of the public may skew the figures because they may all say they are not interested in consultation.
- Sarah Ashmead stated her remit is to bring communications under one section within the Council. This is not just a cost saving exercise, but to ensure there is a corporate view of communications. This is improving but there is still work to be done, particularly on the consultation side.
- Bill Chapple considered there were too many uncoordinated consultation exercises.
- In relation to budget consultation, there is a requirement for services to consult if there is a significant change of policy or redesign of service. The Chairman stated that this was of concern and that rather than consult with the public, there should first be a dialogue and it is how we differentiate these processes. Where consultation takes place without discussion it can put the Council on the wrong footing and may raise public expectation regarding the outcome. Bill stated the need to show the public through deeds that the Council is listening.
- Peter Cartwright stated that in his opinion he did not feel that the Bucks Debate was done well, although others did not feel the same way. He felt it could have been delivered through the Local Area Forums. Bill Chapple stated that all events were widely publicised and much of the cost was taken up through sponsorships. He also stated that some Local Area Forums had opted to take part. It was suggested that it should have been publicised through parish magazines. Members discussed the possible loss of Buckinghamshire times through cost cutting and agreed that the best way to advertise county wide events was through community magazines and the local members.
- With regard to the Bucks Debate, Sarah Ashmead said the first stage is about dialogue around the issues and getting a better understanding of them. The second stage is the January post budget discussion and there will be formal consultation options.
- Avril Davies stated that whilst the Bucks Debate was professionally conducted, it needed advocates from services or councillors to provide more information. The issues were not always clear and the public were making decisions without necessarily having an understanding of the issues. An advocate would have been able to better explain the information on the cards. Bill stated that the cards were a fast way to put the information across, it may have been done differently if there had been more time and this comment will be taken on board for the future.
- Members discussed ways of communicating with the public, including the use of websites and alerts. However, it was recognised that not everyone has access to a computer.
- More emphasis needed to be placed on communicating with those people who use the Council services and the need to ensure that those who do not use the services do not dominate any debate. Time needed to be spent on how best to communicate with communities and it was suggested that County Councillors needed to be briefed about local issues on a regular basis. The Chairman stated that any revision of the communications strategy should ensure that communication with local members be paramount. Bill Chapple stated that all Members were informed about the Bucks Debate via email. He agreed that email communication should be used and databases were being built to include County, District and Parish Councillors, but was uncertain about whether email distributions lists could be kept under the Freedom of Information

Act. Mike Appleyard suggested that information could be cascaded in each area by emailing the top communicators and asking them to pass on any information.

- It was agreed that communication is a two way process and people have to want to be engaged. Whilst the message is sent to all households, there is no guarantee it is read. It was also noted that because there are cross border services, some responses were received from cross border residents.
- The evidence from Dawn Hands suggested that engagement should not be carried out if users cannot influence the decision. Therefore, once a decision has been made to make cuts to a service, consultation should be based on asking where the public considers the cuts could be made.
- Sarah Ashmead said it was made clear that the Debate was not decision making, but asking the public for their views. When the budget is put together, it must contain information on what is being done and why. She felt that this feedback would make people more confident about decision-making.
- The Chairman asked Sarah Ashmead how the service would tackle those services who are still carrying out their own consultations. Sarah stated there was an efficiency drive to bring communications together and have an overall marketing budget. Consideration of whether to centralise consultation has been delayed pending the outcome of the Task and Finish Group. However, it was hoped to co-ordinate all service budget consultations in January and take a consistent approach. The Chairman suggested that once all the evidence had been gathered they may be able to help with regard to evaluation of the process. Sarah agreed to submit in writing where she sees the communications strategy going.

Action: Sarah Ashmead

In summary the following was noted:

- A culture change was need with regard to discussing issues prior to any consultation. There was a need for more engagement prior to consultation.
- To ensure there was enough planning prior to any engagement and consultation.

6 CABINET MEMBER FOR TRANSPORT

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Val Letheren, Cabinet Member for Transport and Rosemary Bryant, Transformation Manager. The purpose of the meeting was to ask what type of consultation and engagement the Transport Portfolio uses and how it fits in with corporate policy and the results.

The following was noted:

- With regard to how corporate consultation fits in with the Portfolio, Val Letheren stated that each Portfolio understands its own issues and centralising the service does cause problems. She expressed concern that Central Communications may not be as up to date on service issues and often altered her press statements and, whilst there is tension between the two services, they are now working together better.

12.15 Mary Baldwin joined the meeting

- Whilst there is agreement that corporate guidelines should be used, there is a need still a need to tailor consultations to the needs of the service.
- More information is provided for the public in relation to claims forms for damage to vehicles caused by potholes. This had been a concern. There is now a disclaimer on the front of the form.
- Work has been undertaken with IT to ensure that all messages to the public, including consultations are on the same webpage. The web page looks the same as the corporate pages but is produced by Transport and has more functionality. However, it

was noted that this was not the case with the intranet and Rosemary Bryant agreed to look into this.

Action: Rosemary Bryant

- Other forms of public engagement were through the transport symposiums and the local area forums. Transport staff are encouraged to engage with the public at meetings, but it was acknowledged that sometimes the wrong message may be given.
- The Transport Service also sends out a customer survey each year in order to gauge public opinion.
- When new members of staff are inducted, they are encouraged to talk to and inform the local member. The Chairman said she was aware that the Highways engineers do respond to members of the public but do not necessarily inform the local member. She considered that since the Communications and Consultation Team were revising the guidance this would be a good opportunity to look at this culture and improve communication with the local members. Val Letheren said they were trying to improve communication between the local members and the Local Area Technicians and were working on streamlining the team and improving their communication skills.
- In answer to a member's question about how the public will be informed about the outcome of Local Transport Plan 3 (LTP3) it was noted that information will be published on the website and there will be press releases and radio interviews. Consultation with smaller groups generally takes place face to face. It was noted that there is a strategy in place for everything they do.
- Discussion took place with regard to the Swan Rider consultation. Val Letheren stated that they must be firm but fair with regard to consultation outcomes and they cannot make promises they cannot keep. If cuts are made, how you make the cut is important and not all the public can be pleased all the time. Decisions can be varied if possible but there is a need to learn to say 'no'. There was a great deal of pressure with regard to the street lighting switch off. Here they were honest and robust in their responses and if a problem was identified they would look at whether the lights would be switched back on. With regard to closure, Mike Appleyard said that closure had not occurred with the Street Light trial because nothing had been put in writing. He also expressed concern that as a local member he had not been involved. There was a need to involve the local member as early as possible so that they can engage with the public in their areas.

The Chairman thanked Val Letheren and Rosemary Bryant for their presentation.

7 CABINET MEMBER FOR PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT

The Chairman welcomed Martin Tett, Cabinet Member for Planning and Environment and Marcus Rogers, Acting Head of Planning, Environment and Development.

The following was noted:

- Martin Tett referred to the report on the Minerals and Waste LDF Consultation, attached to the agenda, and stated that the report did not sufficiently emphasise that two rounds of consultation had happened for this item. This demonstrated the importance of consultation, responding to comments and giving people the opportunity to raise further issues if they wished. These were taken into account and significant changes were made to the Plan.
- With regard to statutory consultations there was a requirement to consult on the MWLDP.
- The public were also consulted about the new contract for the Management of Household Waste and Recycling Centres and possible changes to service levels. It was considered important to engage with the public and this was done at the sites, as well

as through LAFs, direct communication with parish councils, the website and press releases and radio interviews. Through the engagement period it was identified that sites were not used early in the mornings, but the public considered early closing to be an issue. As a result of this feedback and information from the traffic count, officers are looking at revising opening hours in the morning and extending opening times in the evening. Through this savings can also be made. This was a hybrid approach by engaging in dialogue with the public prior to consultation. The Chairman agreed that this hybrid approach was successful and even though there is a financial saving, public perception is that a better service will be provided.

- Members discussed whether this hybrid approach could be used with regard to consultation on bus services. Martin Tett expressed his thanks to Peter Cartwright for his work and expertise in looking at the 305 bus service. As a result of this there is not only a better timetable but also a financial saving.
- Mary Baldwin asked how the Localism Bill may change the way things are done now. Marcus Rogers said that members of Think! Burnham and the Burnham Trust had attended a meeting with officers as a result of which some funding had been provided to address local issues. This was a good example of the Big Society approach and getting to understand the needs of local people. The Localism Bill also looks at a New Homes Bonus and a Community Infrastructure Levy, a large proportion of which will be passed onto local neighbourhoods. To achieve this, knowledge of neighbourhood priorities will be key as well as debate to determine how to engage local communities to understand what their needs are.
- It was noted that the Service does not have its own communications team, but has a dedicated communications officer based in the corporate team who understand the work of the service. However, there can be difficulties with advice received about proposed consultations.
- When the DPD and EfW work began there was no corporate policy or strategy relating to consultation and communications was more embedded in Services. In this connection a central database was set up to record and respond to letters and other correspondence received. The Service needed to be clear that although it was responsible for both procurement and planning, a 'Chinese Wall' had to be established to ensure that both processes were entirely independent. Information and queries from the letters were separated and responses collated by each of the teams, to show that legally the processes remained separate. The Service could not have depended on a generalist approach, but needed expertise to ensure the formal process was maintained. However, there was liaison with the Communications Team and whilst there was tension initially this soon settled. More recently the Service has insisted on having one person to deal with communication in order to avoid confusion and inappropriate responses.
- The Chairman asked where consultation fitted with the corporate team. Marcus Rogers said he did not consider that 'one size fits all' and can be issue specific particularly when the subject is highly technical. He agreed that there may be a need for an independent person to ensure that all the right general consultation processes have been followed. Martin Tett said that it would be useful to have a checklist but would it need to be audited and by whom?
- With regard to the Bucks Debate the Chairman stated she considered there was a need for service advocates to be involved. Martin Tett said there had been a lot of discussion over many months about the role of the centre versus the service and it is only recently that this has begun to function more effectively. He envied Val Letheren because she had more control and cited the fact that his Service has provided CCTV cameras at HWRC sites, but yet these images have yet to be made available on the Council's website owing to a lack of support from the corporate ICT team.
- There was a need to ensure that any consultation documents are written in plain English by someone with customer understanding. Mike Appleyard suggested that members of the public could be asked to make an input in this regard.

- Marcus Rogers stated that engagement was key and consultation was only successful if the service involved was prepared to make changes. Otherwise it could create bitterness and disillusion.
- The ability to make rapid responses was also important. Martin Tett also suggested the need to judge whether a response is the right thing to do and it should be the Cabinet Member that makes that decision and the service that writes the response to ensure accuracy. The Chairman suggested that consultations could be available on line and at libraries, but Martin Tett expressed concern that if they are not received individually people may not have the opportunity to read them.

The Chairman thanked Martin Tett and Marcus Rogers for their input.

8 SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

The Chairman stated there could be a role for central communications as the corporate gate keeper, but that Services should be responsible for putting together consultations. Any consultation should be tested to ensure it was in plain English and the consultation could be carried out either in-house or outside. We must be more flexible in our approach.

Members discussed the presentations and the following was noted.

- Departmental roles needed defining.
- The need to differentiate between engagement and consultation, and when to do each and in what order, as well as what each is expected to achieve.
- The possible need to drive forward less consultation and more engagement.
- Clear central and service roles as well as clear roles for experts involved.
- The HWRC hybrid approach was a positive way forward
- Communications Team could be the generic gate keeper for the consultation process.
- A corporate checklist for all Services.

9 CLOSE OF MEETING

CHAIRMAN