

Worcester City Council

Let's Listen

A Consultation Strategy for Worcester City Council 2013

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Foreword

As a local authority we value the diversity of our citizens and recognise the importance of ensuring our residents, service users, partners and staff have a voice. This Consultation Strategy provides a commitment to continue to - 'Put Customers First' - and sets out the key principles of engaging with our local communities. That is, continuing to use their views to guide our policies and further improve service provision.

Worcester City Council already consults widely with service users, the public and others. This strategy, however, is intended to ensure that all of the Council's consultation is as effective as possible and offers a consistent and coordinated approach. The Consultation Strategy will help us to do this by setting out the good practice to which we aspire. Taken together the Consultation Strategy and Consultation Toolkit will further strengthen our work in engaging with local people and help us to achieve our aim of 'Putting Customers First'.

Statement from Lucy Hodgson, Cabinet Member for Customer Service and Communications

1. What do we mean by consultation?

We define consultation as:

"Dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views and with the objective of informing decisions, policies or programmes of action."

1.1 The national policy context

Nationally there is a continued drive for citizens and communities to have a say in the services they receive, the management of their communities and the facilities within them. This has been referred to by central government as the "Big Society"

Our long standing commitment to community involvement and engagement means we are well placed to deliver this exciting agenda alongside our vibrant voluntary and community sector and other public and private sector providers.

1.2 The local context

At Worcester City Council, effective consultation is at the heart of our commitment to the community. We want to ensure that residents of Worcester, our service users, partners and all other interested parties have the opportunity to be involved in the planning, prioritising and monitoring of our services and are involved in the Council's decision-making processes and activities. We will strive to put the customer at the heart of everything we do.

2. Aims of the Consultation Strategy

The Consultation Strategy, first developed in 2000 under the title "*Thinking about Consultation*", sets out our approach to consulting with local people, as well as establishing the processes by which it will be managed and evaluated.

It also details our commitment to consultation and the principles that will underpin our consultation and engagement activity. Guidance to support the delivery of the strategy has been produced as a Consultation Toolkit and contains advice on key consultation methods, as well as guidelines and tips for conducting effective consultation. In addition a Register of Consultees has been developed giving local contacts.

2.1 Our commitment to consultation

As a Council we will:

- Continue to develop different mechanisms for community consultation and involvement as part of our role as a community leader
- Continue to support our partners from the voluntary, community and other public sectors to deliver high quality effective consultation activities

- Ensure that expectations and limitations of consultation are clearly defined at the outset and conveyed in an effective manner to those being consulted
- Undertake reliable, purposeful and effective public consultation in order to clearly inform policy decisions, strategic planning and service improvements
- Take a revised approach to consultation, resulting in reduced quantity and increased quality by ensuring that activity is coordinated and meets consistent quality standards
- Ensure that all results of consultations are robust and reliable
- Ensure that staff have the necessary support, mechanisms, equipment and training to undertake effective consultation
- Ensure the results and outcomes of consultation are communicated effectively
- Ensure staff are aware of and comply with protocols, ethics and processes relating to all aspects of consultation

3 Our principles:

Let's Listen is one of a suite of documents that outlines and supports our approach to consultation and engagement. The other documents are:

- Communications Strategy
- Community Engagement Strategy

All of these documents can be accessed via www.worcester.gov.uk

Each document shares a commitment to the following principles:

Co-ordination and Partnership:

- We will avoid duplication of effort
- We will share best practice with our partners
- We will ensure that the direction and nature of our engagement and consultation activities influences our services and plans

Inclusivity

- We will use all our skills and experience to ensure that there is equal access to consultation opportunities
- We will reach out to all communities within Worcester City
- We will include work to support residents and groups that do not normally engage with the Council – sometimes referred to as “hard to reach”

Clarity of Purpose

- We will ensure that our consultation activities stand firmly on all of these principles
- We will only implement specific community engagement and consultation processes when there is real opportunity for people to inform, influence, or change what we do and how we do it

- We will be open and honest
- We will not prejudge our intended actions
- We will be clear about why specific options have been chosen

Integrity and confidentiality

- Community participation in our consultation activities will be valued and nurtured by the Council
- We will honestly interpret any information we receive
- We will respect the rights of our residents and others participating in consultation to decide how much information they want to reveal about themselves
- We will ensure that in respecting confidentiality we are taking into account relevant legislation

Communication

- We will make effective use of our Communications Strategy
- We will ensure that measures are taken to not only encourage residents to respond to council proposals with their views but to ensure that doing so is easy and clear
- We will reduce the number of occasions when residents feel under pressure to respond with undue haste to surveys and other consultation activities
- We will ensure that our written communication is checked so it is easy to read and understand
- We will have clear and strong feedback processes in place
- We will explain what has been done as a result of consultation and engagement activity.

4 Why do we consult?

All Local Authorities have a statutory duty to consult on a variety of services. In the City of Worcester we go far beyond any statutory duty and aim to consult local people on many aspects of our service planning and delivery. Consultation is crucial in helping the Council and its partners make decisions which will affect the City. The Council considers consultation to have a key role in informing and influencing its decision-making and activities.

4.1 When consultation is effective, it can help the Council to:

- Make better decisions and improve the quality of our services
- Deliver services people want in the way they want them
- Respond to the needs of our service users
- Identify any problems caused by changes, or potential changes, to services
- Demonstrate our commitment to openness and accountability by helping people understand how we work and how we reach decisions that affect them
- Involve local people more thoroughly in the democratic process
- Help ensure we are achieving value for money

4.2 Effective consultation increases our ability and capacity to:

- Understand the social, environmental and economic needs of local communities
- Understand the problems and needs of local communities
- Improve awareness of different ways of doing things, as a basis for innovation, change of policy or service delivery
- Understand the views of local citizens and other stakeholders about the services and activities of the Council
- Promote involvement and participation of citizens and partnership working with other stakeholders
- Develop stronger local democracy through local accountability and responsiveness and by showing that they really can make a difference
- Understand the impact of strategies, policies, programmes and services on the well-being of communities and the locality
- Gain greater acceptance by local people of Council decisions because people understand what is being done and why
- Provide better services that are more responsive to local needs
- Increase satisfaction with services, service providers and the local area
- Improve the quality of decision-making because the people affected by the decisions are directly involved