

Council Overview Board
21 September 2016

Surrey County Council's approach to consultation

Purpose of the report: Policy Development and Review

An overview of consultation practice, how officers are supported to undertake consultations and how this can be strengthened.

Introduction

1. One of the goals of Surrey County Council's Corporate Strategy is to ensure that residents experience public services that are easy to use, responsive and value for money. To support this goal the strategy says we will 'Enhance opportunities for residents to influence and shape council services'.
2. A key way to do this is by consulting with residents on the strategies, plans, policies and service changes that are developed and delivered by the council.
3. Consulting with those likely to be affected by a proposed change can help the council to make more informed decisions, as well as helping residents to understand why changes need to be made.
4. In addition there are some scenarios where the council has a statutory duty to consult, with residents and/or appropriate stakeholders.

Current situation

5. Currently, consultations at the council are managed by the officers working within those directorates and services responsible for developing and delivering the various strategies, plans, policies and services under consultation.
6. The various directorates and their services all employ officers with differing degrees of experience, expertise and qualifications relevant to the conduct of consultation. These officers are typically not in roles dedicated to the conduct of consultations and were not recruited for their consultation and research skills.
7. A proportion of consultations are planned and delivered by officers with the additional advice, guidance and support of either qualified research & intelligence professionals in the Strategy & Performance Service and/or communications professionals within the central Communications Service, both part of the Deputy Chief Executive's Office.

Available support

8. Research & intelligence officers in the Deputy Chief Executive's Office offer a range of support, advice and guidance to officers conducting consultations across the council. This covers aspects of consultation such as identifying stakeholders; choosing the most appropriate method(s) of engaging with them; sample design, question design; data collection methods; data collation, analysis and reporting. The offer from the team includes:
 - Face-to-face advice and guidance on all those aspects of consultation;
 - Guidance published on S-net including links to directorate-specific guidance;
 - A half-day introductory training course 'Social Research Methods' which is run several times a year according to demand and can be commissioned on demand by services with content tailored to their requirements;
 - Online consultation tools such as the council's consultation portal Surrey Says, which has hosted 511 surveys and has 299 registered users across the council, and also Survey Monkey.
9. Communications officers in the Deputy Chief Executive's Office provide advice and support on how best to engage the relevant audience(s) in the consultation and encourage them to participate. This includes:
 - Bespoke advice on the development of the questions to be asked and the supporting information that will be provided to enable people to make an informed response;
 - Copy editing or drafting of the above;
 - Development of a communications plan and tactics to ensure maximum awareness with residents and other audiences. This typically includes a mix of advertising, media releases, digital and social media activity, creation and distribution of printed collateral such as posters and banners, and articles in Surrey Matters magazine or e-newsletter;
 - Support for consultation events, such as any materials required and creating awareness of the events.
10. Officers utilising the available advice and support from the Deputy Chief Executive's Office benefit from this and are more likely to deliver consultations that are planned and conducted to a high standard, especially if those officers are inexperienced in this field. The case study below is an example of when officers sought advice and support at an early stage and the resulting consultation benefited from the input received.
11. These existing support arrangements are subject to ongoing review and improvement by the officers involved in offering them. This includes full evaluations of the success of consultations so that the learning can be fed into future activities.

Case study

12. A best practice example of a consultation that was supported in this way was the Local Transport Review (LTR), managed by the Directorate

Programme Group (DPG) working with the Travel and Transport Group (T&T) in Environment & Infrastructure.

13. The LTR is a three year programme of change to local bus services, which aims to make vital savings to the council in the face of significant funding pressures.
14. Proposals developed by council officers in liaison with bus service operators were publically consulted on with stakeholders and bus users, who had an opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed changes. This feedback would then inform the final proposals that were submitted to Cabinet for consideration, before any changes to local bus services came into effect.
15. The outline plan for the public consultation was put together by the DPG and T&T. However it was strengthened following advice from professionals in the Strategy and Performance Service, who assisted with the development of the consultation survey, gave advice on how to analyse responses and acted as a 'critical friend' on the ensuing consultation report.
16. Professionals in the Communications team also provided a vital support function to the LTR in developing and executing the communications plan to help deliver the public consultation.
17. The number of responses to the LTR consultations in Surrey compare well with those of consultations on similar subjects conducted by local authorities of a similar population size to Surrey.
18. The feedback gathered by the LTR consultations played an important role in informing the final proposals submitted to Cabinet and realising the savings targets required. One example was the decision taken by Cabinet in Year 1 of the LTR not to remove the non-statutory extra local concessions available to Surrey bus users as part of the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme. These include the no time restriction on travel for disabled pass holders and Companion + passes issued to pass holders who cannot travel without assistance. Feedback collected, following the consultation, suggested that if these extra concessions were withdrawn, this would cause isolation, frustration and depression and reduce independence for vulnerable members of the local community. As a result, Cabinet decided not to remove these concessions.
19. In terms of the cost of consultation on the LTR, a relatively small amount of £28k was spent on publicising the public consultations during Years 1 and 2 of the LTR, with resources focused on areas where there were proposed changes, although materials were also widely available for other areas too. This money was spent on producing the consultation material, which consisted of consultation brochures in standard print, large print and easy-read versions, and posters, digital advertising and social media and various press advertisements. This helped to ensure that as many Surrey residents and stakeholders as possible were able to have their say on the proposed changes to local bus services. The public consultations enabled changes which will contribute full year savings of £1.766m by the end of 2016/17.

What could be improved?

20. As a consequence of consultations being service-led and managed there is no standard council-wide approach nor minimum standards for conducting consultations. Despite this, use is made of the various good

practice advice and guidance resources on offer (paragraphs 8 and 9) and it has been demonstrated that officers benefit from government guidance and requirements for conduct when these are in place for statutorily required consultations.

21. A 'One Council' approach in which consultations are still managed and delivered by officers in the directorates and their services but are routinely guided by 'central', experienced research & intelligence and/or communications professionals can ensure consistent good practice in design and delivery across the organisation. This 'networked' approach would help to identify and eliminate duplication of effort across the council. It would provide a whole-council overview of major consultation and research.
22. This would also facilitate better planning and sharing of insight generated by these activities throughout the council rather than that insight remaining within its individual organisational units.

Proposed actions

23. Officers managing significant consultation activities should routinely make Strategy & Performance and Communications officers in the Deputy Chief Executive's Office aware of their intention to consult at the earliest possible stage of the process in order that they can offer appropriate advice, guidance and support.
24. Efforts to improve the quality and consistency of consultation can be further facilitated by the creation of a network of research 'champions' who will oversee consultation activities, principally online consultations, within their Directorate and provide advice on using online consultation tools. Research & Intelligence officers in the Deputy Chief Executive's Office will in turn support the champions in their role with training and guidance in using online tools and in designing high quality consultations.

Recommendations

That the Council Overview Board considers whether, given the increasing need for the council to find savings from changes to services, including changes that will be consulted upon, it would benefit from a centralised approach to co-ordinating those consultation activities.

That the Council Overview Board consider whether the quality and co-ordination of consultation activities would be strengthened by assigning responsibility for overseeing these activities across the whole council to a nominated Cabinet Member.

Next steps

1. To set up the champions' network.
2. A process for planned consultations to be co-ordinated by Strategy & Performance and Communications officers in the Deputy Chief Executive's Office for their advice and guidance to be determined and developed following discussion.

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Sources/background papers:

[Snet guidance on consultation and engagement](#)

[Consultation in Adult Social Care - Good practice guide](#)

[Consulting and engaging with children and young people](#)

[Surrey Says consultation portal](#)