

Report from the Office of the Chief Executive

Consultation & Engagement

Summary

1. At the last meeting of the Corporate & Scrutiny Management Policy & Scrutiny Committee, Members asked for an overview paper on the council's consultation and the differences between "consultation" and "engagement". This followed a discussion about the consultation on older people's homes. This paper seeks to clarify the difference between consultation and engagement and provides an overview on how consultation takes place.

Understanding Consultation & Engagement

2. There are three key council interactions with residents and these are informing, consulting and engaging. Each of these uses different techniques and tools and is aimed towards different outcomes.

Informing

3. This is a one way process from the council to residents to notify them about local services, events and issues (such as flooding). The council's communications team usually leads this activity and it is primarily for alerting residents or visitors to what is available and happening in the city. On occasions it is used to update residents on the progress of council initiatives.
4. Examples of 'informing' would include press releases, leaflets, posters, social media, council website, television and radio interviews.

Consultation

5. There are several definitions of 'consultation'. In the council we understand it to mean a process of dialogue, which may be electronic, that leads to a decision. It is the primary way of ensuring that all council services respond to and reflect the needs of residents. Sometimes the

consultation is statutory, for example the council is required by law to consult with businesses on its proposed budget. The council is also obliged to consult on planning issues. On other occasions the consultation is non statutory but is being undertaken because the council wants to actively seek views on a particular topic, for example devolution.

6. There is a range of ways in which the council consults and this is driven by the need to reach as many residents or businesses as possible who may be impacted by a specific decision. The council uses a mix of online and face to face meetings to consult on its budget. In 2014 it used an external agency to undertake consultation with landlords. Frequently partners are used, for example health services, to capture the views of residents. Specific groups, such as younger people can be difficult to reach and the council will actively work with schools and colleges to reach them. Service Managers will determine who they wish to consult with and work will be undertaken to determine how best that particular group can be reached; survey, focus group, public meetings, online etc.
7. The challenge with good consultation is managing the expectations of those taking part in the process. It is crucial to be clear at the outset what residents are being asked to comment on and what will happen to the information provided. Equally important is an explanation about how the decision will be made. Ultimately members make decisions and these may not always be what the majority of those taking part in the consultation exercise prefer.
8. So in summary, consultation is more than just providing information. Residents comment on a range of options rather than propose alternatives.
9. The council publicises all consultations that are either live or planned on its website. These are also promoted through social media.

Engagement

10. Engagement requires much more active involvement with residents than consultation. Rather than comment on specific options and plans, residents instead work with the council to come to a decision. This usually means that we provide far more information on a specific issue/problem to allow residents to help generate different options/ideas. As we have seen in York, this can work well for finding solutions to problems faced by communities, such as crime.

11. The council tries to make engagement as inclusive as possible. During the recent work on children's centres, clear messages were sent about why and how the council was engaging to give people options about how they wanted to be involved. The engagement was also open and accessible; not limited to a survey through their letter box. Equally important is designing engagement around the profile, needs and lifestyles of groups that the council is trying to engage with. When targeting those in employment, the council offers evening and weekend opportunities to engage. Location is also important and the best engagement happens when it is community based.
12. The council also uses partners who have more in-depth knowledge or contact with specific communities of interest to ensure that the views of all residents are sought.
13. Over the last few years, the council has increased the amount of engagement it undertakes with residents in order to shape how services are delivered. But it does require an emphasis on building relationships with local communities so that residents remain involved on an ongoing basis. Engagement implies an ongoing dialogue with residents and not a one off conversation.
14. The council has guidance available for its managers to support their engagement activities and this is supplemented with training.

Ongoing Review

15. The council continues to review the effectiveness of its consultation and engagement activities. At a time of significant change and spending reductions, it has become even more important to work together with residents and communities, including 'hard to reach' groups to ensure that we make the most of the opportunities available to the council. We continue to review new and innovative ways of reaching people such as social media and smart phone apps.

Recommendation

16. As this report is for information only there are no specific recommendations.

Reason: To provide Members with details of the differences between the Council's consultation and engagement activities, as requested at the last meeting.

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Annexes - None