

## **CORPORATE CONSULTATION STRATEGY**

### **A review of requirements**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 Milton Keynes Council has a strong record of consulting and involving local people in its decisions and activities and one its strategic aims is to be an “open, accessible and consultative council”. The design of the Council itself and the development of the strategic aims were rooted in an extensive public consultation process. Consultation is a key component of the Council’s Quality Management Framework and notable consultation initiatives over the past few years include; major “benchmark” surveys in 1995 and 1997, the “citizen’s panels” which have been used for numerous service-related and corporate consultations, and the 1999/2000 budget referendum.

1.2 Consultation plays a key part in both the corporate and service review dimensions of Best Value. In April this year the Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) produced a check-list of actions that all local authorities should be undertaking to prepare for Best Value. Included in this list was the need to draw up a consultation strategy.

1.3 Consultation is also at the heart of the Council’s community leadership role. Community views and priorities need to be influential in every aspect of the Council’s activities. Additionally, consultation is typically a requirement in the development of the many plans that national government now requires of councils and other public services.

#### **2. SUMMARY**

2.1 The paper identifies a range of consultation needs in respect of:

- Best Value
- Annual budget
- New Political Management Structures
- Ongoing service-related issues

2.2 The nature of the consultation needs suggests that a corporate consultation strategy be developed comprising four key elements:

- annual citizen survey
- standing citizens panel
- focus group database
- corporate consultation framework - including proposals for “hard-to-reach groups”

### **3. CORPORATE CONSULTATION NEEDS**

3.1 Significant corporate initiatives that have a major public consultation element are considered here. This is not an exhaustive list, but is sufficiently comprehensive to understand the implications for a corporate consultation strategy. For each issue the consultation needs are considered, including timing and the most appropriate methods.

#### **Best Value**

3.2 “Consult” is one of the fundamental principles of Best Value and is especially important in respect of the following activities.

##### Reviewing the Council’s objectives and priorities.

3.3 The Council’s Best Value Performance Plan (to be published by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2000) should include a statement of strategic objectives and corporate priorities and DETR guidance notes that “*this will require widespread public consultation*”. This links the Best Value process to the Council’s wider community leadership and community planning role.

3.4 The Council has an established set of corporate aims developed through the consultation for the design of the new unitary authority in 1997. The advent of the Performance Plan means it would now be timely to consult the local community in order to revise or re-affirm the existing aims.

3.5 Such a consultation should be undertaken in the autumn in order to establish a high-level framework for the development of the Performance Plan.

3.6 The relationship of this exercise to the developing Milton Keynes Community Partnership Plan would need to be carefully managed.

##### Assessing service performance

3.7 Service performance can be measured in a variety of ways, including through the views of elected members, from local and national performance indicators, and by professional judgement. Service performance will be an important criterion in deciding how to structure the Council’s five-year programme of Best Value service reviews.

3.8 In making judgements about service performance it is important to include community and user inputs via some form of consultation. Such consultations can be especially powerful if they are systematic and involve the collection of accurate quantitative data that will allow comparisons between services, over time, and with comparable councils in other areas.

3.9 The Council commissioned “benchmark” surveys in 1995 and 1997 that included service performance questions. Given the advent of Best Value it would be appropriate to build on this by establishing an annual survey that will allow accurate tracking of community views of service performance over time and also enable comparisons with other councils. Data on community perceptions of service performance and appropriate comparisons could be featured in the Council’s Performance Plan.

3.10 Such a survey would need to be conducted at the same time each year, ideally when judgements are being made about resource allocation and when other performance data such as that from the Audit Commission performance indicators is also available. This suggests that normally a survey should be undertaken during the summer with results, although this year it will not be possible and a survey during the autumn is the next preferred option.

3.11 Whilst a major public opinion survey is the preferred method for corporate aspects of this issue, qualitative (eg. focus groups) and other methods, such as user surveys, can also play an important role in reviewing service performance. It is suggested that the choice of methods and their application is a matter for individual services but that corporate guidance might be produced to assist managers and help ensure quality standards across the Authority. To complement this a more active approach to co-ordination across services needs to be considered to ensure that individual consultees do not suffer “consultation fatigue” and to identify the scope for shared initiatives.

#### Conducting service reviews

3.12 There will be a legal requirement to consult as part of a Best Value service review. Consultation may play a role in the following:

- deciding what the community/users think about the service
- reviewing service standards and setting performance targets
- exploring options for service improvement
- exploring options for future service delivery

3.13 The Council’s 1998/99 pilot best value reviews made use of a range of consultation methods, including:

- involving the public and other stakeholders in “reference groups” for individual reviews
- surveys of users
- citizens panel focus groups

3.14 In future, as now, it will be for each review team to decide the most appropriate mix of methods to meet the consultation requirement. However, experience to date suggests that the existence of corporate arrangements that review teams can utilise, as and when required, is essential and cost-effective, especially where representative views from the whole community are required.

#### **Annual budget process**

3.15 Each year the Council undertakes a major consultation on its budget proposals for the next financial year. The most spectacular example of this was the referendum on the 1999/2000 budget conducted in February 1999.

3.16 Survey research has a role to play in budget consultations, especially if questions about budget priorities were repeated each year, so allowing changes in the community’s views to be tracked over time. One-off surveys typically show a pattern of support for individual services that reflects the extent of the user base or an established consensus about the service’s “worth”. This limits the usefulness of an isolated survey and reinforces the value of regular polls that allow significant year to year changes within these patterns to be identified.

3.17 A survey that includes budget priorities would need to be planned to deliver results at the time when major budget decisions are made. This year the authority has brought forward the process for developing the budget and this means that a survey conducted during the autumn cannot form part of this year’s consultation. In future years a survey during the summer would suit the budget timetable, allowing an early public input to discussions about priorities.

#### **New Political Management Structures**

3.18 The draft Local Government (Organisation and Standards) Bill, “Local Leadership, Local Choice” was published in March 1999 and is primarily concerned with new forms of political management for councils and ensuring high standards of conduct. Three broad models are advanced for new political management structures:

- a directly elected mayor with a cabinet
- a cabinet with a leader
- a directly elected mayor and council manager

3.19 Every council must consult its local community - local electors and other interested parties, including business, other public bodies and the voluntary sector - about how they are to be governed. A range of options must be presented.

3.20 Legislation will require that where consultation leads a council to conclude that a directly elected mayor is wanted, then this must be put to local people in a binding referendum. Alternatively, if 5 per cent or more of local electors petition for an elected mayor, this will also trigger a referendum. A council can only continue with its traditional way of working where local people have rejected all new forms of local governance in a referendum.

3.21 The following outline timetable has been established for developing and implementing new political management structures in Milton Keynes:

- August/September - identify issues and tasks
- Early September - public focus group discuss issues
- mid-September - member workshop to explore issues
- October - public consultation
- November - individual political groups consider options
- December - Council meeting
- February - implementation

3.22 A mix of qualitative and quantitative methods will be used for the public consultation and the timetable would allow the proposed survey to be included among these.

### **Other Consultation Needs**

3.23 Additionally, a quick trawl across the Authority has revealed that a good deal of consultation activity is taking place across the authority at any one time during the year and that a wide range of methods is employed, including:

- conferences
- focus groups
- postal surveys
- face-to-face surveys
- involving residents in project teams

3.24 Further, consultations aim to involve:

- local areas within the borough
- specific stakeholder groups
- the whole population

3.25 The variety and volume of consultations indicates that it would not be possible to develop a consultation strategy that seeks to tightly control all consultations. Whilst expertise in consultation techniques exists to some degree across the authority, it is suggested that stronger direction on the conduct of consultation is required. The most appropriate approach is to develop a consultation framework that will promote minimum standards and help managers decide the most appropriate methods to use in particular circumstances. As noted earlier there is also a need to achieve better co-ordination in order to avoid “consultation fatigue” on the part of consultees.

3.26 Since March 1998 a total of 16 citizens panel focus groups have been held covering a range of topics including the local plan, elderly people, community safety, waste, the budget. Groups were run for three of the 1998/99 Best Value pilot reviews. The number of focus groups conducted to date and planned shows a continuing high demand for quantitative research support across the Authority.

**Figure 1: Summary of Key Corporate Consultation Needs**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Consultation methods</b>
<b>Best Value</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reviewing the Council’s objectives and priorities</li> </ul>	Autumn (by November)	Survey (whole population) Focus groups Leaflet mailings + other methods?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service performance</li> </ul>	Autumn - then ongoing	Survey (whole population) + other methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service reviews</li> </ul>	Ongoing	Panel surveys Focus groups + other methods
<b>Annual Budget</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Round one consultation</li> </ul>	September 1999	Public meetings Leaflet mailings Focus group Press adverts and articles
<b>New Political Management Structures</b>		
	October 1999	Survey (whole population) Focus groups + other methods
<b>Other Consultations Needs</b>		
Wide variety across the Council, including consultations on statutory plans etc.	Ongoing	Panel surveys Focus groups + other methods

## **4. ELEMENTS OF A CORPORATE CONSULTATION STRATEGY**

4.1 The previous discussion suggests the need to develop a corporate consultation strategy that has four key elements:

- annual citizen survey
- standing citizens panel
- focus group database
- corporate consultation framework - including proposals for “hard-to-reach groups”

### Annual survey

4.2 The cornerstone of the consultation strategy would be an annual citizens survey conducted on the Council’s behalf by a market research agency during the period June to July. This would involve face-to-face interviews in respondents’ homes and each year the following main issues would be covered in the survey:

- performance of council services
- effectiveness of communications
- future priorities, including budget-related issues
- topical corporate or service issues

4.3 The strength of such a survey would be that the data collected would have a high degree of accuracy meaning that changes in service performance can be accurately tracked over time. The views of sub-groups within the population (eg. young people, council tenants) could be analysed but only limited analysis by geographic areas would be possible.

### Standing Citizens Panel

4.4 An annual survey can be used to recruit a standing citizen’s panel that is representative of the borough’s wider population. This would allow postal surveys to be undertaken throughout the year, so meeting the need for a flexible method that suits the various timetables for Best Value reviews and other service and corporate consultations.

4.5 Each person interviewed during the course of the main survey would be asked to be a panel member. Such initiatives in other council areas have yielded a volunteering rate in excess of 90 per cent. Each year the panel members would be discarded and a new one recruited through the next annual survey. This would help counter the problem of over-familiarisation that can occur with such panels and, over time, would lead to many thousands of local citizens being involved in such consultations.

4.6 The market research agency would maintain the database of volunteers on behalf of the Council and send the panel members a series of postal questionnaires throughout the year, as the Council requires. Such surveys typically achieve response rates of up to 50 per cent and the market research agency is able to re-weight the data to compensate for any bias due to non-response by certain population groups. This ensures that whilst the accuracy of the postal surveys is not as good as that achieved on the main annual survey, they are still an adequate method for obtaining quantitative data from the whole population. The response rates achieved mean that the final sample would number 400 to 500 people - too small for some sub-group analysis.

4.7 The cost of each individual postal survey of the panel would be borne by the commissioning service(s) – or even external agency – whilst the establishment and administrative overheads would be covered by the corporate budget. Panel surveys would be very cost-effective and available throughout the year. They could also be run at relatively short notice, allowing consultations to be undertaken about issues that arise suddenly.

## Focus Groups

4.8 The number of citizens panel focus groups that have been undertaken shows a high demand for qualitative research. It is proposed that the current corporate approach to focus groups continues, but that the pool of volunteers from which these groups are drawn be expanded as the members of the current pool are limited in number and have participated several times.

4.9 New members can be drawn from the citizens panel database established from the annual survey. A further opportunity has been developed through the extensive housing needs survey. A question was included on this borough-wide survey inviting respondents to volunteer for further consultations and the results are awaited.

4.10 As before, the Corporate Policy Unit will co-ordinate access to the database and make arrangements for each individual focus group, the full cost of which must be borne by the service(s) or external agency. It will also continue to be possible to engage an external consultant who could, if desired, recruit members of population groups under-represented in the overall pool, facilitate the focus group and produce a written report.

## Corporate framework

4.11 Consultation is now an intrinsic part of the management task across all the Council's services and a large number of consultations are being undertaken or planned at any one time.

4.12 A corporate framework should be devised to establish minimum standards for consultation across the authority and to assist individual managers decide on the most appropriate method(s) to choose. Such a framework would also apply to Best Value service reviews and should also include guidance on consulting "hard-to-reach" groups within the population. The framework should be complemented by training courses, and some have already been included in the corporate training programme.

4.13 It is suggested that the Quality Management Programme Group be tasked with taking forward the production of a corporate framework.

## The multi-agency dimension

4.14 The April Best Value guidance from the DETER notes:

*"... the need for a co-ordinated approach to consultation within, and often between, authorities as well as with other organisations (eg the police and health authorities) to ensure that the most is made of existing consultation exercises ... "*

4.15 Partnership activity is well established within Milton Keynes and there is consequently significant scope for consultations that relate to the activities of more than one agency. Additionally, Government initiatives, such as the crime and community safety partnerships, can include statutory requirements for joint consultations.

4.16 Should the proposals for the corporate consultation mechanisms be taken forward it is suggested that discussions be held through the MK2020 Steering Group about the potential for allowing access to other agencies. Such discussions would include consideration of cost-sharing and co-ordinating access.

**Figure 2: Summary of Consultation Strategy Elements**

<b>Proposal</b>	<b>Needs addressed</b>	<b>Timing</b>
<p><b>Annual citizen survey</b> Face-to-face sample survey of c.1,000 local residents.</p>	<p><b>Best Value</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewing corporate objectives and priorities</li> <li>• Accurate data for measuring performance</li> </ul> <p><b>Topical issues</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New political management structures</li> </ul> <p><b>Other needs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess effectiveness of communications</li> </ul>	<p>Autumn 1999 - then June/July annually</p>
<p><b>Citizens Panel</b> Large scale panel of all those interviewed in survey. Sent postal questionnaires throughout the year.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultations of whole community throughout the year for relevant Best Value reviews and other service, corporate and multi-agency consultation needs</li> <li>• Provides reasonably accurate quantitative data</li> </ul>	<p>Late autumn 1999 onwards</p>
<p><b>Focus groups</b> Small scale discussion groups of 12-20 people</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In depth qualitative discussions about complex issues</li> <li>• Consultation on issues of relevance to whole community or specific community groups throughout the year.</li> </ul>	<p>In place and ongoing</p>
<p><b>Corporate Framework</b> Written corporate guidance on approaches to consultation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To ensure selection of appropriate techniques and adherence to minimum standards across the authority</li> </ul>	<p>Autumn 1999</p>