

15 SEPTEMBER 1999**CITIZENS SURVEY AND CONSULTATION STRATEGY**

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1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the committee on progress in commissioning a citizens survey and in developing a corporate consultation strategy.

2. Summary

2.1 The tendering process for a contract to undertake a citizens survey and establish a 1,000 - strong standing panel has been completed. A process is required for approving the survey questionnaire and a range of options is suggested. An approach to devising a corporate consultation strategy is described along with proposals for the contents of such a strategy. These are explained in detail in the discussion paper, **Annexed** to this report.

3. Recommendations

3.1 The Committee is recommended to:

- (a) note progress in commissioning a citizens survey and standing panel;
- (b) agree an approach to approving the survey questionnaire (paragraph 5.8); and
- (c) endorse the approach to a consultation strategy and request that a formal strategy document be prepared and brought to the November meeting of this Committee (paragraph 5.13).

4. **Background**

- 4.1 The Policy and Resources Committee, at its meeting on 13 July 1999, agreed a budget to support the implementation of Best Value, including the establishment of appropriate consultation mechanisms.
- 4.2 One of the core requirements in relation to Best Value is the need to collect regular data about service performance, as judged by the public, to complement other measures. An annual survey was accordingly planned and invitations to tender issued early in August, with a deadline of 31 August 1999.
- 4.3 At the time of planning the survey it became clear that an overall strategic context for the survey was required in order that its relationship to other consultation methods and the Council's longer-term needs would be clear.

5. **Issues and Choices**

Survey commissioning

- 5.1 Whilst a long-term strategic approach is being developed, the pressing need to commission a survey to meet the Council's various consultation requirements during the autumn has been progressed. The survey timetable was set as follows:

13 August	-	Despatch invitations to tender
31 August	-	Deadline for tenders
15 September	-	Policy and Resources Committee
By 1 October	-	Finalise questionnaire
End October	-	Results available

- 5.2 Invitations to tender for a survey were issued on 13 August 1999 to three nationally renowned companies drawn from the Market Research Society's list of members:

- (a) MORI;
- (b) NOP; and
- (c) Harris.

- 5.3 In addition, Norma Wilburn Associates (NWA), who conducted the 1997 benchmark survey, were also invited to tender.

- 5.4 The tender document set out the following key objectives for the survey:

- (a) Performance and Communication
 - (i) Assess use, knowledge and expectations of the main council services.

(ii) Assess knowledge and image of the Council and its services.

(iii) Assess communication between the council and the public.

(b) Strategy

(i) Future direction and priorities of the Council.

(ii) New political management structures.

(c) Topical and Service-Specific Issues

Of relevance to the whole population.

5.5 The potential for the survey to be used to establish a representative standing panel of 1,000 residents has been explored in the tendering process. This is an approach that has been used successfully in other local authority areas, the panel typically receiving four or five postal questionnaires throughout the year.

5.6 Four tenders were received by 31 August 1999. The outcome of the tendering process and early discussions will be reported orally at the meeting.

5.7 Work on developing the survey questionnaire has already begun and is due to be completed by the end of September. The views of the relevant groups from within the Council will feed into this process and will need to be reconciled with each other and the limitations of the survey methodology and budget.

5.8 Therefore, a need for flexibility in developing the questionnaire. Further, there is no appropriate committee meeting at the point when the questionnaire must be finalised. There are, therefore, a number of options for approving the questionnaire:

(a) delegate decisions to officers;

(b) delegate decisions to officers in consultation with the Chair of Policy and Resources Committee; and

(c) delegate decisions to officers in consultation with an all-party group of Members.

5.9 The Committee is asked to identify its preferred approach.

Consultation strategy

5.10 As noted earlier, the survey planning highlighted the need for a corporate consultation strategy. The discussion paper, attached as **Annex**, concludes that such a strategy should comprise four key elements:

(a) annual citizens survey;

(b) standing citizens panel;

(c) focus groups; and

(d) consultation framework and guidelines.

5.11 Such a strategy would support the consultation requirements of Best Value in particular.

5.12 Progress in pursuing the first two elements of this strategy is reported above and work is planned for developing the other two elements.

5.13 The Committee is invited to endorse this approach and request that a formal strategy document be prepared and brought to its meeting in November 1999.

6. Implications

6.1 Environmental

The survey may include questions related to environmental services and issues.

6.2 Equalities

The survey methodology will allow sub-group analysis of the views of ethnic minority people, disabled people and women. The planned survey strategy will include guidance on working with hard-to-reach groups

6.3 Financial

The overall budget for the survey and establishing the panel is £30,000.

6.4 Legal

None.

6.5 Staff and Accommodation

None.

7. Conclusions

7.1 The planned survey and consultation strategy will ensure a flexible range of both quantitative and qualitative consultation mechanisms are in place to support the Council's needs, especially those relating to Best Value.

Background Papers: 1997 Milton Keynes Council Benchmark Survey