

Middlesbrough Council Corporate Consultation Strategy

PURPOSE

The *Corporate Consultation Strategy* outlines the way Middlesbrough Council consults with the local community and citizens in making decisions that affect their lives.

The *Corporate Consultation Strategy* also seeks to outline how Middlesbrough Council manages its consultation program consistent with Council corporate objectives, the Local Strategic Partnership's *Community Strategy and Framework for Engaging with Communities*, best contemporary consultation practice in local government and central government requirements.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Consultation in Middlesbrough is designed around the following guiding principles:

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| Effective | The outcomes of consultation inform decision-making and service delivery. |
| Appropriate | There should be an identified need for consultation. It should be proportionate and undertaken with the relevant sections of the community. Duplication should be avoided. |
| Inclusive | Every citizen of Middlesbrough, including hard-to-reach groups, should have the opportunity to express their views and have them considered. |
| Co-ordinated | There should be a consistent and co-ordinated approach to consultation. |

BACKGROUND

Central Government Policy

Councils have a statutory duty to provide relevant, cost effective and efficient services and to consult with the community on service delivery. In order to achieve and maintain the best quality services at least cost, stakeholders must have the opportunity to provide feedback on current service provision and a say in the planning and delivery of future services.

The Modernising Local Government agenda and Best Value regime places consultation at the heart of achieving informed decision making in local government.

Central government consultation requirements have been wholly embraced by Middlesbrough Council. Consultation forms part of an extensive community and stakeholder participation process involving understanding community needs, working in partnership and informed decision making.

Middlesbrough Partnership and the Framework for Engaging with Communities

The Middlesbrough Partnership is the local response to the central government's requirement for every area of England to have a *Local Strategic Partnership*. The Partnership comprises key organisations and communities across Middlesbrough who share a common objective to:

- Improve the quality of life and well-being of local people making all it has to offer accessible to all, and
- Narrow the gap between Middlesbrough's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, other areas and the rest of Britain.

The aspirations of the partnership, which are based on shared national and local government priorities, are communicated in the *Middlesbrough Community Strategy*.

The Middlesbrough Partnership has produced a *Framework for Engaging with Communities*. The *Framework* is a best practice guide that aims to ensure that citizens, visitors and other key stakeholders in Middlesbrough, have a voice to influence the development of policies and strategies, that will affect their lives and to inform the way in which services in Middlesbrough are planned and delivered.

The *Middlesbrough Community Strategy* and the *Framework for Engaging with Communities* are available from the *Local Strategic Partnership* website www.middlesbroughpartnership.org.uk.

Middlesbrough Council Policies

The elected members of Middlesbrough Council agree the policy framework that determines what Council does. Members also ensure that there are measures in place to allow proper scrutiny of the Council's Executive.

The Council's *Corporate Performance Plan* identifies Council priorities and how they contribute to the delivery of the *Community Strategy* and the Mayor's *Raising Hope* agenda. The Plan is a development of the annual *Best Value Performance Plan*.

The Council also has an overarching fit for purpose theme. This theme identifies the Council's organisational commitments and objectives that help to ensure the Council is organisationally fit for purpose to act as community leader and contribute effectively to the achievement of the Community Strategy themes.

Engaging the local community is essential if the Council is to achieve its regeneration aspirations and deliver efficient, effective, targeted services.

Cross-cutting activity aimed at promoting user focus, community cohesion and access to services encourages positive community engagement. Consultation provides a further means of engagement and allows the community to shape services.

Tasks, targets and performance indicators are incorporated in service performance management arrangements and within specific corporate strategies.

TAKING A STRATEGIC APPROACH

To achieve consistency with its guiding principles, Middlesbrough Council is building a strategic approach to consultation by establishing cross-organisational structures to plan, co-ordinate and integrate consultation activities. Effective planning and evaluation will ensure that consultation processes used by the Council are user focussed, open and transparent and improve communication between the Council and citizens and within the Council.

A strategic approach will also allow the Council to share information more effectively with our partners. This will facilitate joint working to support information and evidence for service improvements, performance reporting and project/funding bids.

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A key improvement will be a strengthened capacity to monitor, evaluate and review our consultation activities. This will ensure continuous service improvement and better feedback on consultation outcomes for the community, service users and other stakeholders. Other benefits include preventing community 'consultation fatigue', better sharing of knowledge and good practice and the further development of consultation techniques and mechanisms within Council.

The key features of Council's strategic approach to consultation are:

Corporate Team

A corporate team has been established within the Council's Performance and Policy Group to manage the strategic approach in partnership with Council service groups. The team will lead corporate consultation activities for Council and provide consultancy advice, technical support and training across the Council.

Consultation Network

The planning, management, evaluation and feedback of public consultation activities will be supported by the Council's cross-organisational, Consultation Network. The Consultation Network consists of officers with responsibility for consultation from the various service groups of Council, co-ordinated through the Performance and Policy Group. The network will provide a strong focus for continuous improvement in public consultation, reinforcing the culture of information sharing, evaluation and feedback to the community and service users of the outcome of consultation activities.

Consultation Program

Effective planning of consultation activities is the key to joining up activities and avoiding duplication and consultation overload. The Consultation Program sets out the Council's planned consultation activity for the year ahead, providing a calendar of planned consultation activities. Other consultation not on the Consultation Program may be undertaken as and when required during the year in response to Council and community requirements. The Consultation Program will be published on the Council website www.middlesbrough.gov.uk and updated regularly.

Best Practice Toolkit

The *Toolkit* contained in the Middlesbrough Partnership's *Framework for Engaging with Communities* provides best practice guidance for Council and other key partners in the application of consultation methods and techniques and the delivery of consultation projects to a consistently high standard. The *Toolkit* is published on the Local Strategic Partnership website www.middlesbroughpartnership.org.uk.

Consultation Database and E-Library

The Consultation Program and consultation data, reports and information will be stored on a Council database accessible to Consultation Network representatives. As the database develops, it will be possible to search for activities that have already been carried out in certain neighbourhoods or wards or about certain topics. This will assist with research, avoid duplication and provide opportunities for joint consultation activities.

An e-library of public consultation / survey questionnaires and reports will be collated and maintained centrally by the Performance and Policy group. This will enable better corporate use of information, helping to avoid duplication and improving communication between the various service groups within Council.

Database of Consultation Fora

This database will hold information about the various residents / community groups, public meetings etc that are held regularly and offer residents an opportunity to get involved in their community and have their say over issues that affect them. The Database of Consultation Fora will be published on the Council website and updated regularly.

Consultation News in *Middlesbrough News*

A regular contribution / section will be published in the Council newspaper *Middlesbrough News* to inform residents and other stakeholders of the results and outcomes of public consultation initiatives and to advise of forthcoming consultation activities.

Consultation Section on the Middlesbrough Council website / portal

Incorporated in the rollout of the revised Middlesbrough Council website / portal over the next 12-18 months will be enhanced information on public consultation including:

- Corporate Consultation Strategy
- Annual Consultation Plan
- Database of Consultation Fora
- E-library of questionnaires and reports
- Feedback / consultation outcomes
- E-surveys
- Contact information.

KEY CONSULTATION METHODS

The Council uses a wide variety of consultation mechanisms to ensure that all citizens and stakeholders in Middlesbrough can influence the development of policies and inform the way in which services are delivered. Council led consultation projects may be either managed by the Council's corporate team or directly by a service group.

Some of the key consultation methods regularly used by Council are:

Elected Members

Elected members play a key role in Council's consultative processes through their representative, scrutiny and community leadership functions and in furthering the development of democratic processes within local government.

In particular members form a link between the community and Council. Through their regular consultation with constituents, citizens, groups, Community Councils and other stakeholders, members are able to positively influence the level of participation and impact of consultation outcomes on the local community.

Members also provide citizens with a members 'one stop shop' service for consulting with Council on any issue of interest or concern via personal contact, telephone or e-mail. Through their interaction with the community, members will be instrumental in the successful implementation of the Corporate Consultation Strategy.

Implementation of the Corporate Consultation Strategy should enhance the availability of consultation information and its use by members. For example, if a scrutiny panel wished to examine a particular issue then information on all recent Council consultation on that topic should be available through the consultation database. Members should be able to easily access the relevant background information to help their understanding of an issue and also identify whether new consultation is required.

Surveys

The Council conducts numerous surveys during each year depending on corporate and service group requirements. Survey techniques may involve questionnaires, telephone or face to face interviews. Focus groups and forums are also used. From time to time comprehensive large-scale surveys such as the Neighbourhood Survey or Town-wide Survey are conducted as key consultation exercises for Council.

Citizen Panels – Voiceover

Voiceover is the name given to the Council's citizen panels. The panels comprise 1,200 residents who are consulted on a range of strategic and service issues via postal surveys approximately four times per year. The results are analysed centrally and fed back into Council decision making processes. Panel members are provided with feedback via a regular newsletter. The membership is refreshed on a regular basis and Council aims for the panels to reflect the diversity of the people of Middlesbrough.

Public Meetings

A more traditional but still highly significant public consultation method is public meetings. The Mayor's series of public meetings covering transport and law and order issues in Middlesbrough is an example of this method.

Contact Centre

Middlesbrough Council through its partner, HBS operating as Service Middlesbrough, manages the one stop shop for Council services at Middlesbrough House. A single telephone, e-mail and personal contact point is provided for the Middlesbrough community to access all Council services.

The Contact Centre is at the front line of Council's information and communication interface with the community. The Council and HBS will be working collaboratively to further develop the Contact Centre as a front line public consultation mechanism as well.

Website / Portal

The Council website / portal www.middlesbrough.gov.uk is emerging as a key component for delivering consultation services within Council. The website / portal is undergoing an extensive refresh over the next 12-18 months to deliver the central government's e-government agenda to provide on-line 24/7 access to all key Council services.

Partnerships

Partnership working is a key element in the Council's approach to delivering its agenda of community renewal and it is a leading participant in many effective partnerships. Effective partnership working requires extensive consultation between partners to deliver partnership goals.

The key partnership for Council is the Middlesbrough Partnership, our local strategic partnership. This partnership brings together agencies and stakeholders from all sectors of the community. The partnership acts both as a tool/forum for consultation as well as a procurer of consultation services.

The Council is also involved in a range of partnerships, again both as a tool/forum for consultation as well as procurers of consultation services, that support the delivery of the six Community Strategy themes outlined below:

Community Strategy Themes	Partnerships
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All Community Strategy Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Middlesbrough Partnership
Supporting children and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Middlesbrough Learning Partnership• Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership
Promoting healthier communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Middlesbrough Health & Social Care Partnership• Middlesbrough Drug Action Team (DAT)• National Service Framework for Older Peoples' Local Implementation Team• Older Peoples' Partnership
Creating safer and stronger communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Crime & Disorder Partnership "Safer Middlesbrough"
Transforming our local environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Environmental & Sustainable Transport (EAST) Partnership
Meeting local transport needs more efficiently	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transport Thematic Action Group
Promoting the economic vitality of Middlesbrough	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One NorthEast• Government Office North East• Arts Council England• Tees Valley Partnership & Tees Valley Vision• Tees Valley Regeneration• Stockton/Middlesbrough Initiative (SMI)• West Middlesbrough Neighbourhood Trust• Middlesbrough Town Centre Company

Community Councils / Area Community Consultation Clusters

Since the 1980s Community Councils have been empowering residents to work collectively for the benefit of their neighbourhoods and to influence the way in which services are planned and delivered in town. They provide a forum for residents to discuss and debate issues at a very local level and are extremely important in facilitating the exchange of information between local communities and public service providers in Middlesbrough particularly the Council, Police and the Middlesbrough Partnership. Councillors also value them as an effective means of interacting with their wards.

Area Community Consultation Clusters (ACCCs) enable Community Councils to link into the Middlesbrough Partnership and influence its work. The clusters will become a means of service providers consulting with local people on service provision and changes to services. Local residents can also access the ACCCs to bring issues to the attention of service providers.

DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY

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Diversity and community cohesion are crucial to promoting greater knowledge, respect and contact between various cultures and to establishing a greater sense of citizenship. A diverse and cohesive community is one with a common vision, a diversity of people, similar life opportunities and positive relationships.

Middlesbrough Council is firmly committed to providing and promoting equality for all its employees and the community and to avoiding all forms of discrimination. The Council aims to ensure that the services it provides are non-discriminatory and free from prejudice.

The Council's Corporate Equality Plan provides the framework by which the Council will be measured towards its achievement of the Equality Standard.

By taking a corporate approach, equality, access and diversity requirements will be integrated into all Council consultation activities. The service-planning framework for the Council also provides mechanisms to ensure that equality issues are built into service planning and review. This means delivering services that are user focused, quick and easy to access, convenient and cost-effective to all residents and community stakeholders. This includes hard-to-reach groups such as young people, old people, people with learning and physical disabilities, people whose first language is not English and people from minority ethnic groups.

In planning consultation activities, the Council seeks to integrate the objectives of equality, service access (including hard-to-reach groups) and diversity to deliver truly representative and inclusive consultation processes, outputs and outcomes.

FEEDBACK TO CITIZENS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

For consultation to be effective it must include the effective communication of the outcome of the consultation activity to the participants and other stakeholders. People who have taken the time to participate in Middlesbrough Council consultation activities should be informed of the outcome of the consultation activity, how this information will feed into the decision making process and how participants views have influenced Council.

How, what and when Council provides feedback on individual consultation activities will depend on the consultation subject, method and the target group(s) involved in the consultation. For example, feedback may take the form of a summary of participants' responses to a questionnaire, an explanation of how this information will be used and what decisions this information has influenced.

Feedback may also be part of an ongoing communication and dialogue between Council and the community.

Feedback may involve:

- Direct mailing
- Newsletters
- Media – newspaper, radio, television

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- Public meetings or meetings with participants
- Council's Contact Centre
- Council website / portal.

DATA PROTECTION

Middlesbrough Council is required by law to collect and use personal information about people with whom it deals in order to perform its statutory functions. Personal information obtained by Council as part of its community consultation responsibilities will be dealt with properly irrespective of how it is collected, recorded and used – whether on paper, in a computer, or on other material.

Middlesbrough Council regards the lawful and correct treatment of personal information as critical to successful operations and to maintaining confidence between those with whom it deals. The Council will ensure that, as an organisation, it treats personal information lawfully and correctly.

Middlesbrough Council has adopted strict safeguards to ensure that data is treated properly in accordance with the *Data Protection Act 1998*.

IMPROVING CONSULTATION

Middlesbrough Council is committed to demonstrating its user focus and improving its consultation with the local community and its citizens. By taking a corporate approach to consultation Council is seeking to avoid duplication of effort and 'consultation fatigue' with the community. A corporate approach will also allow us to better co-ordinate and share information within the Council and with the community.

The further development of the Council Contact Centre and the Council website / portal will provide greater opportunities to join-up services, co-ordinate consultation activities and provide feedback to the community.

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Council will undertake regular evaluation of whether our public consultation is meeting its objectives and what service improvements are being achieved as a result. Council will build on the lessons learnt to continually improve our consultation and regularly review and update our strategy, policies and procedures.

The implementation of the Corporate Consultation Strategy will help Middlesbrough Council to continue to grow and develop to meet the changing needs of service users and citizens.

NEXT STEPS

The Council has a plan for rolling out the implementation of the Corporate Consultation Strategy. The Implementation Plan has the following key milestones:

23/09/04	Corporate Consultation Strategy considered by Council's Corporate Management Team
13/10/04	Corporate Consultation Strategy considered by Council's Overview and Scrutiny Board
09/11/04	Corporate Consultation Strategy considered by Council Executive
12/11/04	Corporate Consultation Strategy – deployed
31/12/04	Consultation Plan 2004/05 – compiled
	Consultation Network - established
	Initial Consultation Fora database – established
	Initial Consultation Database & E-library – established
	<i>Middlesbrough News</i> – section on consultation -established
	Website / portal – section on consultation - established
Ongoing	Council Members and Corporate Management Team to be regularly updated on implementation of Corporate Consultation Strategy