

**Report to Overview & Scrutiny
Committee
Date of meeting: 30 January 2006**



Portfolio: Finance and Performance Management

Subject: Public Consultation and Engagement Policy and Strategy

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Committee Secretary:

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Scrutiny Panel consider the Council's draft revised Public Consultation and Engagement Strategy and the proposed development of an annual Consultation Plan.

Report:

1. As the Scrutiny Panel will be aware, the Audit Commission recently undertook an assessment of all Essex local authorities, looking at User Focus and how effectively individual councils engaged with their respective communities. Although the results of this exercise confirmed that the Council's strengths in its approach to public consultation and engagement outweighed weaknesses, the Audit Commission identified a number of possible areas for improvement such as ensuring engagement in relation to corporate issues and with minority communities and other hard to reach groups.
2. User Focus was an important element in the methodology for the recently completed second-round of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) for upper-tier authorities and, although the new CPA arrangements for district councils have not yet been published, consultation and engagement is an issue that is expected to also feature significantly in the next round of second-tier assessments due to commence later in 2006.
3. The Council's existing Consultation Strategy was originally published in 1999 in response to the introduction of Best Value legislation, and has not been reviewed or updated since that time. As a result of the User Focus assessment, the need to develop robust consultation proposals in relation to the new Council Plan for 2006-2010, and the likely future CPA focus, the opportunity has been taken to review the current Consultation Strategy. A draft version of a new Public Consultation and Engagement Policy and Strategy is attached as an appendix to this report.
4. The review of the Consultation Strategy has provided an opportunity to set out an overall corporate approach to consultation and engagement. The new policy and strategy will to be embedded across the Council as part of the authority's constitution, and seeks to address the issue of inclusivity amongst minority groups and communities that may not always be fully engaged or represented.
5. As part of the review of the Consultation Strategy it is intended that from 2006/07 onwards, an annual Consultation Plan will be developed as part of the yearly business planning process, to focus consultation on priorities and operational issues to be faced

in the coming year. The Consultation Plan will be agreed by the Cabinet at the commencement of each financial year, setting out the issues on which the Council will consult during the next year, the overall objectives for each consultation exercise and how such exercises will be undertaken. In establishing this approach it is recognised that the need for some consultation exercises will arise subsequent to the development of the annual consultation plan, as a result of unforeseen specific or priority issues.

6. An annual report will be produced for the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panel and the Cabinet, reviewing the Consultation Plan for the previous year and detailing the results of all consultation exercises that have been undertaken during the previous twelve months, enabling members to scrutinise consultation results and processes. This information will also be summarised within the annual Best Value Performance Plan. A consultation toolkit is also being produced, in order to standardise consultation approaches and methodologies wherever possible.
7. The Panel is requested to consider the draft revised Public Consultation and Engagement Strategy and the proposed development of an annual Consultation Plan.

Reason for decision:

8. To address the findings of the Audit Commission's User Focus assessment and to develop an overall corporate approach to public consultation and engagement in preparation for the next round of second-tier Comprehensive Performance Assessments due to commence in 2006.

Options considered and rejected:

9. None. The Council is expected to address the results of the Audit Commission's User Focus assessment. User Focus was an important element in the methodology for the recently completed second-round of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) for upper-tier authorities and, although the new CPA arrangements for district councils have not yet been published, consultation and engagement is an issue that is expected to also feature significantly in the next round of second-tier assessments.

Consultation undertaken:

10. Consultation in relation to the recommendation contained in this report has been undertaken with Management Board, the Senior Management Team and the chairman of the Scrutiny Panel.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: The proposals set out in this report can be met from within existing budget provision

Personnel: None

Land: None

Community Plan/BVPP reference: The Council's Customer Charter sets out a commitment to consult service users and residents

Relevant statutory powers: None

Background papers: None

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: None

Key Decision reference: (if required) None