

Report to the Cabinet

Report Reference: C/075/2006-07.

Date of Meeting: 13 November 2006.



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Finance, Performance Management and Corporate Support Services.

Subject: Consultation Plan 2006/07.

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Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 56 4470).

Recommendation:

That the Consultation Plan for 2006/07, setting out those issues on which public consultation is planned to be undertaken during the remainder of 2006/07, and detailing those public consultation exercises completed during 2005/06, be noted.

Report:

1. During the latter part of 2005, the Audit Commission undertook a User Focus assessment across Essex, looking at how effectively councils engaged with local communities, the results of which have previously been reported to the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel. Although the assessment confirmed that the Council's strengths in relation to public engagement outweighed its weaknesses, the Commission identified a number of possible areas for improvement in relation to the Authority's approach to public consultation, particularly in respect of ensuring engagement with minority communities and other hard to reach groups.

2. The Council's existing Consultation Strategy was originally published in 1999 in response to the introduction of Best Value legislation. 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 a likely future Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) focus, a new Public Consultation and Engagement Strategy was adopted in April 2006, setting out how the council will plan and undertake future consultation exercises. All consultation and engagement exercises undertaken by and on behalf of the Council are now required to comply with the provisions of the Public Consultation and Engagement Strategy. A revised consultation toolkit is also currently being produced in order to standardise consultation approaches and methodologies wherever possible, and this document will be issued to Heads of Service and relevant staff in due course.

3. As part of the new Public Consultation and Engagement Strategy, the Cabinet has previously requested that a Consultation Plan be developed as part of the annual business planning process from 2006/07 onwards, in order to focus consultation and engagement on priorities and operational issues to be faced in the coming year. The Consultation Plan will also incorporate the results of consultation exercises undertaken during the preceding twelve months, through a Consultation Register that will enable members to scrutinise consultation results and processes. The Consultation Register has previously been produced for consideration by Overview and Scrutiny, and will therefore now form part of the development of the annual Consultation Plan, which will be submitted to both the Cabinet and the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel on an annual basis. This information will also be summarised within the annual Best Value Performance Plan.

4. The Consultation Plan for 2006/07 is attached as Appendix 1 to this report. In future this will be reported to members at the commencement of each financial year, and will set out the issues on which individual services will be consulting or engaging residents or customers during the year, the overall objective for each consultation exercise, and how each exercise 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 Consultation Plan each year, as a result of unforeseen circumstances or priority issues. In addition, it should be noted that regular on-going satisfaction surveys such as housing report cards, or consultation carried out in relation to planning applications, will not be included within the Consultation Plan.

5. The Cabinet is requested to note the Consultation Plan for 2006/07, and the details of those public consultation exercises completed during 2005 (Appendix 2) and to date during 2006 (Appendix 3). These documents are to be considered by the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny at its meeting on 14 November 2006.

Statement In Support Of Recommended Action:

6. To address the findings of the Audit Commission's User Focus assessment and to develop an overall corporate approach to public consultation and engagement that promotes inclusivity amongst minority groups and communities that may not always be fully engaged or represented.

Other Options Considered And Rejected:

7. None. The Council is expected to take action to address the results of the Audit Commission's User Focus assessment. User Focus was an important element in the methodology for the second-round of CPA for upper-tier authorities and is expected to also feature significantly in the next round of second-tier assessments.

Consultation Undertaken:

8. The development of an annual Consultation Plan has previously been agreed by the Cabinet and the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel.

Resource Implications:

Budget: None.

Personnel: None.

Land: None.

Council Plan/BVPP reference: Section 8 – 'How we Measure Our Achievements'.

Relevant statutory powers: None.

Background papers: None.

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

Key Decision reference: (if required) None.