

Consultation Code of Practice

Which way now?



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Introduction

Public engagement and consultation lies at the heart of Aberdeenshire Council's approach to service improvement and development. By consulting and engaging with our communities, citizens, customers, employees and other stakeholders we can utilise the information received; this ensures that our plans, priorities and actions are informed by understanding and, when appropriate, responding to those needs.

Aberdeenshire Council's vision is to provide excellent services for all by involving, responding and enabling. In order to achieve this there needs to be early and meaningful consultation which includes clear and effective feedback to all relevant parties.

Our Code of Consultation has been developed to ensure that all consultation undertaken by the council is effective, efficient, and consistent. The outcomes of each consultation will be used in planning, designing and improving services.

These guidelines are just one of the resources available to assist with consultation, and should be read in conjunction with the Corporate Communications Strategy, Consultation Toolkit, Consultation Action Plan and the Youth Engagement Strategy.

Aim

The aim of our Code of Practice is to ensure that all citizens of Aberdeenshire are effectively consulted and that there is real opportunity to influence the way in which services are developed and delivered.

This will be achieved by developing:

- An ongoing dialogue with Community Planning Partners (such as NHS, Police etc), the local business community, voluntary and community groups & the wider public
- Consultation procedures (including identifying target audiences & consultation methods), which are open, fair and inclusive thus meeting our commitment to equal opportunities.
- How we co-ordinate consultation exercises and share the results and provide information on the actions we intend to take
- Resources that guide and support best practice for consultation
- Links between the consultation results/ outcomes and the regular planning cycles undertaken by each service to ensure the results are used in the planning, designing and improvement of services.

Why & when we will consult

Aberdeenshire Council values the opinions of its service users, communities, partners and citizens. The main benefits of consultation are:

- Demonstrating that Aberdeenshire Council values the opinions of its citizens
- Helping the council to plan, prioritise and deliver better services
- Creating a better working partnership with citizens to encourage genuine engagement in the activities of the council.

Aberdeenshire Council will consult:

- To collect user views on service delivery in order to make improvements and tailor service delivery to meet changing needs
- To be inclusive and empower people by increasing the involvement in decision-making
- To govern by consent: i.e. if there has been a full and fair consultation about a policy, with careful consideration of all views, then those that are not in favour of the final decision may be more willing to accept the legitimacy of the prevailing view
- To access new information, ideas and suggestions
- To comply with various statutory obligations
- To identify the priorities of its stakeholders for service provision

Aberdeenshire Council will not carry out ‘token consultations’ with its stakeholders if a decision on the matter has already been made.

Our Roles & Responsibilities

Our consultation with the citizens of Aberdeenshire is a natural and routine part of our activities. This approach will be supported and driven by a council wide commitment from councillors and managers through to frontline staff delivering services. Accordingly there are key roles and responsibilities at different levels in the organisation:

Councillors

The role of councillor is central to the success of a consultation. Councillors have a democratic responsibility, and will be kept aware of consultations occurring in their area and have access to the relevant information to support their communities through the process.

The role of the councillor will include:

- Supporting systems and procedures developed for involving the public
- Feeding in their own local knowledge and experience
- Finding ways of involving the public in their own work in the community and participating fully in Aberdeenshire Council's consultation processes
- Representing Aberdeenshire Council on special interest groups and outside bodies
- Chairing public meetings and forums as appropriate.

Management Team

The Chief Executive, directors and area managers are responsible for driving this code forward by actively and demonstrably applying its principles to all aspects of work.

Directors will take responsibility for ensuring the successful implementation of this code within their service by supporting staff involved in consultation. This will ensure that a consultative culture is embedded into Aberdeenshire Council and its way of working.

Area managers are responsible for ensuring that communities are empowered to participate in consultation activity and feedback following the process.

Service Consultation Co-ordinator

Each service within Aberdeenshire Council has a designated member of staff who takes on the role of a 'service consultation co-ordinator'. This member of staff has the responsibility to co-ordinate and audit consultation exercises carried out by that service.

In addition, for each consultation that takes place, a lead officer will be appointed who will be responsible for ensuring adherence to the principles set out in this code and Aberdeenshire Council's Consultation Toolkit.



Corporate Communications

The Consultation and Engagement Officer is responsible for ensuring that service consultations do not duplicate one another and that all consultation activity is logged in a central database which populates the external council website. This allows members of the public to view all of the council's upcoming, current and closed external consultations.

March 2010 saw Aberdeenshire Council launch its brand new Consultation Email Alerts system on the website. The system allows website visitors to register for the alerts and choose from a list of local areas and topics on which consultations taking place would interest them. Subscribers are then instantly notified by email when details of upcoming consultations in any of their chosen options become available on the website.

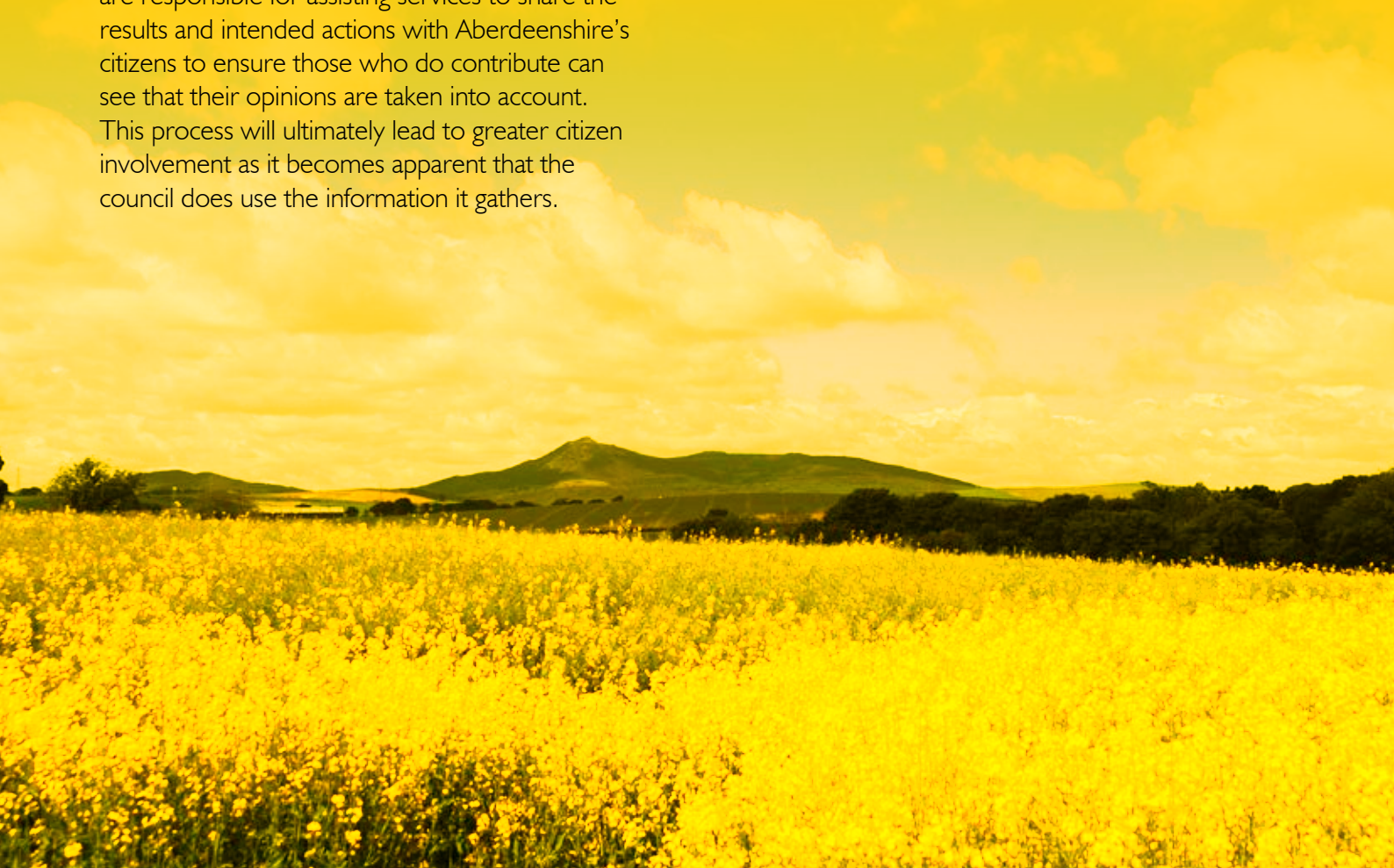
The website also hosts a quarterly round-up of all external consultation activity (up coming, current, recent results) which is available as an e-newsletter.

Consultation and Engagement Officer is responsible for ensuring the alerts system is working correctly and creating and distributing the quarterly newsletter.

The communications officers within the team are responsible for assisting services to share the results and intended actions with Aberdeenshire's citizens to ensure those who do contribute can see that their opinions are taken into account. This process will ultimately lead to greater citizen involvement as it becomes apparent that the council does use the information it gathers.

Who is consulted?

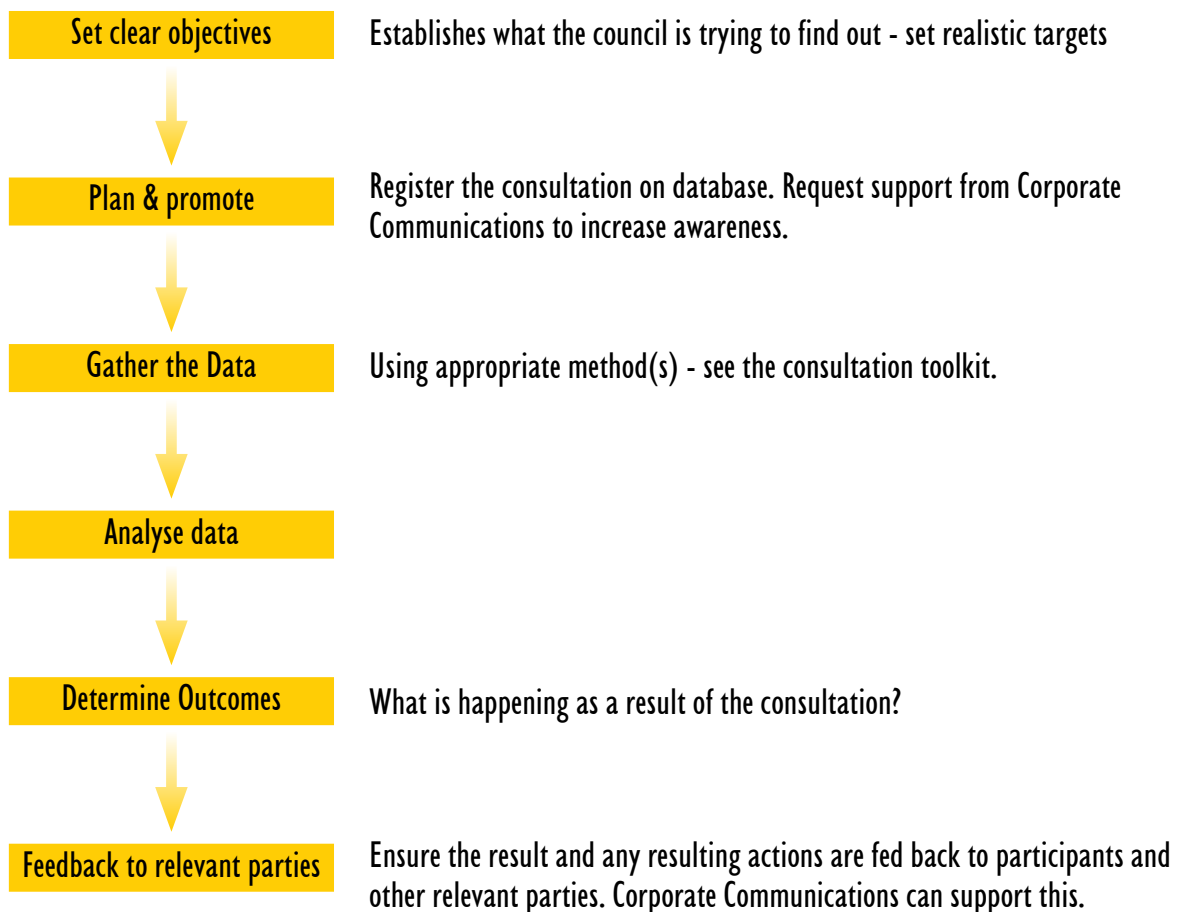
In all situations where consultation is felt to be the most appropriate way to engage with sections of the population we will identify who we should consult with and why. A comprehensive list of individuals and groups can be found in our consultation toolkit.



How we will consult

Consultation exercises will have clear objectives in terms of what the council is seeking to find out that. Following the data gathering and subsequent analysis, the outcomes must be clear recommendations for decision or action. The consultation process will be clear and easy to understand. The main stages to be followed are:

It is essential that participants fully understand what is being asked of them and the potential outcomes



– e.g. is this an opinion gathering exercise, a statutory ‘consultation’ or is the information received going to be part of a decision making process? We will ensure that we clearly describe how participants’ input will be used, what options are on offer and what could potentially change as a result.

Once the consultation is completed the feedback must be communicated to all relevant parties – this will include the participants, however there may be a number of other groups that need to be

informed. This could include, for example, local residents in the area, partner organisations and/or management teams.

There will be occasions when consultations take place over an extended time scale and it is important that the consultation is planned to stages to keep the momentum going and the participants fully informed of the progress. Further guidance can be found in the Consultation Toolkit.

Consultation Standards

Aberdeenshire Council has adopted the National Standards for Community Engagement to be used to develop and support better working relationships between communities and organisations delivering public services. More information about each of the National Standards can be found on the Scottish Community Development Centre's website

1) Involvement

Aberdeenshire Council will identify and involve people and organisations with an interest in the focus of the engagement.

2) Support

Aberdeenshire Council will identify and overcome any barriers to involvement.

3) Planning

Aberdeenshire Council will gather evidence of the needs and available resources and use this evidence to agree the purpose, scope and timescale of the engagement and the actions to be taken.

4) Methods

Aberdeenshire Council will agree and use methods of engagement that are fit for purpose.

5) Working Together

Aberdeenshire Council will agree and use clear procedures that enable the participants to work with one another effectively and efficiently.

6) Sharing Information

Aberdeenshire Council will ensure that necessary information is communicated between the participants.

7) Working with Others

Aberdeenshire Council will work effectively with others with an interest in the engagement.

8) Improvement

Aberdeenshire Council will develop actively the skills, knowledge and confidence of all participants.

9) Feedback

Aberdeenshire Council will feedback the results of the engagement to the wider community and agencies affected.

10) Monitoring and Evaluation

Aberdeenshire Council will monitor and evaluate whether the engagement achieves its purpose and meets the national standards for community engagement.

On occasion, as an evaluation activity, we will ask staff who have recently undertaken a consultation exercise to demonstrate the ways in which their consultation met the national standards.

Further information and guidance on the national standards for community engagement is available in the Consultation Toolkit.

Equalities

Equalities issues must be considered to ensure that all consultation promotes equality of opportunity for all people.

Advice on equalities can be obtained from the Policy Officer (equalities) or service representatives on the corporate equalities group. Further guidance can also be found in the Consultation Toolkit.

Consultation Toolkit

Consultations should be carefully planned. There are many approaches to consultation and the toolkit provides guidance on planning a consultation and the stages to be followed in carrying out a consultation. The toolkit contains information and guidance on suggested consultation methods that may be used. It also includes guidance on the promotion of consultations and the sharing/informing of results, outcomes and actions.

The consultation toolkit is available on consultation section of the council's website for citizens to read and as a resource for employees the toolkit is available on Arcadia, the council's intranet.

Publishing the Results

It is essential that there is a clear link made between the decisions taken by Aberdeenshire Council and the outcomes of the consultation. If, as a result of the information gathered, it is not possible to fully address stakeholder views, the reasons why will be included in the feedback.

The central consultation database on Arcadia will be updated with the results and the outcomes of the consultation as soon as they are available. This will allow for the results of the consultation to be shared across the council, its stakeholders and its community-planning partners.

In addition, this will allow the consultation results to be published alongside the consultation details on the website. Any reports or additional information which covers the results or actions being taken will also be published.

The e-newsletter produced on a quarterly basis will summarise results and actions from consultations and is be distributed to the management team, councillors and community planning partners. An electronic version will also be available on the consultations section of the website for public access.

Evaluation

The Code for Practice for consultation forms part of the overall Corporate Communications Strategy and there are measures in place for monitoring improvements in Aberdeenshire Council's approach to consultation.

The Code of Practice, Consultation Toolkit and database will be continually evaluated on an ongoing basis, by use of methods such as staff focus groups and service co-ordinators meetings. This will allow for the development of these resources to ensure our approach to consultation continues to support the council vision.

Strategy Prepared by:
Consultation and Engagement Officer
Corporate Communications. August 2010

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