

STATE OF THE DISTRICT CONSULTATION WORKING GROUP
(Report of the Working Group)

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report summarises the findings of a study by the State of the District Consultation Working Group and contains Members' recommendations arising from the study.

2. STUDY REMIT

- 2.1 In the course of the last review of the Constitution, the full Council referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel a detailed proposal to introduce a biennial state of the District conference. The proposal was that every two years a "State of the District" half-day conference should be held on the second Saturday in September. The public would be invited to attend and would be able to speak. Specific invitations would be sent to Parish Councils, local businesses and various representative bodies, including those for young people. The following Council meeting, at the end of September, would consider the views expressed. These views also would inform the budget and MTP processes. In addition, the conference might generate issues for the Scrutiny Panels to consider.
- 2.2 During initial discussion the Overview and Scrutiny Panel acknowledged the difficulty in engaging with the public, particularly on a District level and, as a result, Members were keen to investigate the use of smaller area consultation groups involving all tiers of local government in the process. A Working Group was established comprising Councillors Mrs M Banerjee, K J Churchill and P J Downes to consider the proposal. The Working Group was, therefore, originally asked to discuss the concept of local area forums, together with potential subject areas for discussion. The Working Group has held meetings on a number of occasions, the last being 11th January 2008, and interim reports have been submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.
- 2.3 On receipt of one such report, at the meeting on 4th December 2007, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel's Members expressed doubt that significant numbers of members of the public would attend four meetings. This gave rise to concerns over the costs of advertising events and hiring venues. It was felt that initially only one of the area consultation events should be held in order to determine the level of public interest in such an event.
- 2.4 The Working Group has noted the views expressed. Members have, however, decided to proceed with recommending that four area events are held. The Overview and Scrutiny Panel's initial justification for this format was that members of the public would not be prepared to travel to a distant venue to attend a single District-wide meeting and this still applies. In addition, the purpose of the pilot exercise is to evaluate various mechanisms so as to establish the most effective means to carry out consultation in future. Finally,

the argument that holding four events would be excessively costly is not supported as the marketing costs would be similar whether one or four events are held and, as Appendix B shows, the costs of hiring venues are negligible.

2.5 In the course of the study the Working Group held discussions with:

- ◆ I Brandstatterova, Policy Officer,
- ◆ H Gilling, Communications and Marketing Manager,
- ◆ I Leatherbarrow, Head of Policy and Strategic Services, and
- ◆ L Sboui, Senior Policy Officer.

3. ENGAGEMENT EVENT PURPOSES

3.1 The Working Group has discussed the potential benefits of holding events to engage Huntingdonshire residents in discussing the Council's strategies and services. Members have concluded that holding engagement events could potentially provide forums:

- for Councillors to obtain an understanding of the state of the District;
- for two way information exchange and mutual learning;
- to enable County, District, Town and Parish Councils to engage in a joint debate on local authority services; and
- for direct contact between Councillors and members of the public.

3.2 On the basis of these discussions the Working Group has concluded that there could be merit in holding engagement events. Details of a similar exercise planned in Bristol appear at Appendix A.

3.3 In order to ensure the events are effective, however, Members are of the view that they should be introduced initially on a trial basis. The implication of this is that the Working Group does not recommend at this stage that the Council's Constitution is amended to include a state of the district consultation mechanism.

4 THE COUNCIL'S CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

4.1 In the course of their deliberations, Working Group Members have reviewed the draft Consultation and Engagement Strategy. It has been concluded that engagement events could help to deliver the Strategy's aims and the Council's commitment under it by ensuring a strategic approach is taken to consultation and that the outcomes are used to inform policy and decision making by contributing to the variety of methods used, which will enable as many people as possible have the opportunity to give the Council their views. These events will fit with the emerging Consultation Engagement and Strategy.

4.2 The Working Group suggests that the Action Plan to the Consultation and Engagement Strategy is amended to include reference to Member state of the District engagement events. The Strategy will be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Corporate and Strategic Framework) on 6th February 2008.

5 ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

5.1 In compliance with its original remit the Working Group recommends that four area events are held in Huntingdon, St Ives, St Neots and Yaxley. Details of suitable venues together with costs are attached at Appendix B.

5.2 As part of the pilot study various formats have been discussed that might be used at each of the proposed area consultation events. Members are of the view that a different approach to engagement should be adopted at each area event. Each of the formats identified will be assessed as part of the trial for their ability to:

- a). attract local residents to the forums, and
- b). generate “fine-grained”, qualitative information.

This will enable the Council to assess the effectiveness of each for future use.

5.3 Each event format commences with statements by the Leader of the Council and the Leader of the Opposition. Each Executive Councillor will then make a brief statement on their portfolio responsibilities. Following the opening statements four models will be employed, one for each area event:

- a question and answer session involving all those present;
- groups will be formed to discuss Cabinet Portfolios. A stand might be provided at the event that discusses Cabinet portfolios for each Cabinet Member to provide information and an opportunity for 1:1 dialogue.
- groups will be formed to discuss topics that have been identified in advance, which are within the remit of the Council; and
- groups will be formed to discuss broad cross-cuttings issues – members of the public will be invited to suggest the issues for discussion. Invitations may be extended to the Police and health bodies to attend. Representatives of the Council’s partners should form part of the audience as this will prevent the event becoming dominated by issues that are not relevant on the night but will provide the Council with the opportunity to find out more about its partners. Online measures should be employed only for this format. The existing “have your say” page on the Council’s website should be used for this purpose. It should be prominently displayed on the home page

A plenary session will be held at the end of each event.

5.4 It is suggested that Cabinet Members might use power point for their presentations. A rehearsal and briefing should be held in advance. The Communications and Marketing Manager might provide advice to Cabinet Members on their presentations/language and research if required. The cost of this work appears in Section ??????.

- 5.5 Engagement events should take place on consecutive weeks in late September / early October 2008. An independent Chairman should preside at each event.

6 PROMOTING EVENTS

- 6.1 The advice of the Communications and Marketing Manager has been obtained on the general principles of promoting engagement events. Her view is that the approach adopted should emphasise consistency of message on a "little and often" basis. She also has suggested:

- Start early! Little and often works better than one 'big bang.'
- Make use of channels that people are familiar with in their own local networks.
- Make sure there is a consistent message - familiarity breeds content.
- Brand all communications in the same way.
- Make sure the messages are relevant to the respective communities.
- Messages should be tailored according to the particular area – highlighting or offering to discuss items of local interest or concern.

- 6.2 The Communications and Marketing Manager also has made specific suggestions on marketing events, including:

- Publicity in the March, June and September editions of District Wide.
- Half page ads in local papers in the two weeks in advance of events.
- Radio stations' community programmes to be approached.
- Fliers to be produced for shops, doctors, leisure centres, fetes, shows etc.
- The mobile unit to be located in town/villages.

- 6.3 The suggested timetable for publicity is:

- **March:** District Wide published Monday 24 to include 'teaser' that the events are happening - 'look out for more details in the next issue'.
- **June:** District Wide published Monday June 16 – more detailed information about the events, venues etc. could include a coupon for people to supply their question or nominate a topic – whether or not they are coming to the meeting. Could post responses in District Wide.

Website – replicate information in District Wide and use this as a medium for people to post questions/comments again offering feedback facility.

Write to town and parish councils at the same time as District Wide is produced. Write to voluntary organisations, community groups etc. Circulate to local community newsletters ---

timescale to be confirmed according to their publication dates. Ensure relevant ward members are informed and onsite to encourage constituents to come along.

Produce posters/flyers for distribution locally – post offices, shops, schools, our buildings, libraries, health centres, supermarkets, parish notice boards and the Council's community information centre in Yaxley.

- **August:** 'holiday month' – people are away, groups don't meet – but can take advantage of the quiet time of the newspaper 'silly season' for editorial coverage.
- **September:** Advertisements in local press. The item in District Wide will be distributed during the week commencing 15th September 2008.

Hand out leaflets the weekend before – set up mobile unit in local centres.

Seek radio publicity. Including events programme the Saturday before and interviews with the Leader of the Council immediately before the events.

7 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

7.1 Such an intensive publicity campaign will not happen without being carefully managed and monitored to check its effectiveness. This will have implications on existing resources (unless it is deemed appropriate to employ outside help to manage the process).

7.2 Estimated time spent by communications and marketing representative:

Researching and booking venues	4 hours
Researching topics/issues	8 hours
Preparing items for District Wide	3 hours
Preparing posters and flyers	4 hours
Researching audiences	3 hours
Researching media	2 hours
Preparing press statements	2 hours
Preparing letters	4 hours
Distributing promotional material (more if hand delivered)	4 hours
Follow up calls to media	2 hours
Briefing for radio interviews	1 hour
Preparing material for website	4 hours
Researching answers to questions	8 hours
Mobile unit promotions (x4)	32 hours
Attendance at events	<u>12 hours</u>
Total	<u>93 hours</u>

Estimated costs for the above activities: £2,000 using in-house resources (£3,000 using consultants)

Cost of advertisements in local papers. Suggest half page full colour for maximum impact

Town Crier	£260 per insertion
Hunts post	£500 per insertion
	(all exclusive of VAT)

Cost of producing posters/flyers – approximately £1,500

The total cost (without using consultants) is £5,020

- 7.3 The Working Group recommends that the cost of the pilot for 2008 only is met from the Overview and Scrutiny Panel's budget. This will enable the potential benefits of engagement events to be ascertained. If successful and events are held in future years the cost would have to be met by the Cabinet.

8 EVALUATION

- 8.1 As a pilot there is a need to carry out evaluation of each format to ascertain their potential benefit to the Council. It is suggested that the Working Group should undertake this evaluation. It is, however, also recommended that independent evaluation should be carried out. As it is rare for district councils to hold such events and it is being largely prompted by Overview and Scrutiny, it is suggested that the Centre for Public Scrutiny might be approached to do this work. Failing this Members suggest that a councillor or officer from another local authority, a representative of the Local Government Association or an academic is approached. Any of these would probably be require payment.

9 CONCLUSION

- 9.1 The Working Group has considered the principle and potential outcomes of holding state of the District engagement events and has concluded that they are likely to have some benefit for the Council. A range of options by which consultation events might take place also have been considered and a number of conclusions have been reached on the format of events.
- 9.2 It is the Working Group's view that holding engagement events will contribute the Council's Consultation and Engagement Strategy and also with the emerging Sustainable Community Strategy. A series of proposals has been produced to implement these events. The proposals have been fully costed.

10 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Working Group RECOMMENDS that the Cabinet is advised

- a) that the Corporate Governance Panel is informed of the findings in respect of the Council's Constitution;
- b) that four area engagement events are held in Huntingdon, St Ives, St Neots and Yaxley at the venues identified in Appendix B initially on a trial basis;

- c) that the Panel notes that engagement events could help to deliver the Consultation and Engagement Strategy's aims and endorses the suggestion that the Action Plan to the Strategy is amended to include reference to Member state of the District engagement events;
- d) that the formats set out in Section 5 be adopted for engagement events;
- e) that the general principles of promoting engagement events, specific marketing suggestions and timetable for publicity are adopted;
- f) that the total cost (without using consultants) of £5,020 be met for 2008 only from the Overview and Scrutiny Panel's budget;
- g) that the Working Group be requested to evaluate the events; and
- h) that the Centre for Public Scrutiny be approached to carry out an evaluation of the events and failing this the assistance of another independent individual be sought.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Notes of meetings of the State of the District Consultation Working Group.

Reports and Minutes of the Corporate Governance Panel, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) and the Council.

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