

TITLE OF REPORT: CONSULTATION STRATEGY 2005-2010**REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE****1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To provide an evaluation of the original Consultation Strategy, highlighting key strengths and weaknesses.
- 1.2 To outline the proposed Consultation Strategy for the 5-year period 2005 to 2010.
- 1.3 To gain endorsement from CABINET for the proposed Consultation Strategy.

2. FORWARD PLAN

- 2.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key decision and has not been referred to in the forward plan.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 For members information, the Consultation Strategy has been endorsed by CMT and also by PARC on 10 March 2005. It was resolved at PARC that the detailed costings for the Consultation Strategy in the years 2005/2006 to 2009/10 as presented at Appendix A to the report be agreed and that the consultation strategy as presented in Appendix B be endorsed. Recommended to CABINET that the Consultation Strategy be endorsed and that the Consultation Strategy is forwarded to Council for approval.

3.2 Consultation Strategy 2000-2005

In October 1999, the Examination, Review & Improvement Committee (ERIC) agreed a 5-year corporate consultation strategy to prepare the Council to meet its statutory duty to consult as part of the requirements of Best Value. The Consultation Strategy was originally built around the concept of an annual Citizens Panel, created to cater for the consultation element of Best Value and a biennial District Wide Survey. Focus Groups were also budgeted for on a biennial basis to allow for qualitative research, which is not possible through the Citizens Panel or District Wide Surveys due to using a quantitative approach. The actual programme of consultation, and resulting expenditure, has varied over this period. The Consultation programme agreed by ERIC, together with the working budget for 2004/05, is shown below:

Year	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05	04/05 Working Budget
District Wide Survey		£35,000		£25,000		£25,000	£30,000
Citizens Panel (six monthly)	£23,000	£15,000	£15,000	£15,000	£15,000	£15,000	£15,000
Focus Groups (biennial)	£8,000			£8,000	£8,000		
BVPI Survey (every 3 yrs)	£15,000				£10,000		
Totals	£46,000	£50,000	£15,000	£48,000	£33,000	£40,000	£45,000

The key purposes for all these consultation exercises are highlighted in the table below:

Consultation	Purpose
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens Panel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service the Best Value FSR process • Monitor satisfaction trends for those services consulted on in the triennial BVPI General Survey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Wide Survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To gain residents views on the council and the services it provides, perceptions of councillors, Outlook magazine, quality of life indicators and numerous cross cutting issues.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BVPI User Satisfaction Survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A government required and controlled survey that` covers quality of life, anti-social behaviour and Best Value Performance Indicator questions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To engage in qualitative research which helps us understand the reasons why residents hold particular views about the council and its services.

3.3 Concerns with the Strategy

Consultation	Problems experienced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens Panel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to lack of panel refreshment, panel sample is no longer representative of the district. Over subscribed in the 45-64 and 65+ age range and under represented in Black Minority Ethnic and young people. See Appendix C for breakdown of Citizens Panel sample compared with that of the District Wide Survey and the Census 2001. • Panel set up to cater for Consult aspect of Best Value FSR process. Majority of FSR's now internally focused rather than customer based services. • Panel results providing only limited influence on service and financial planning and strategic objective / priority setting at the Council
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Wide Survey 	<p>Although it used a face to face methodology, questionnaire restricted to tick box responses that did not allow for probing questions to ascertain why residents held a particular view.</p>

4. CONSIDERATIONS

4.1 Available options

Citizens Panel

If the council wished to continue with a Citizens Panel, we will need to recruit from scratch. To ensure a representative sample of the district a panel would need to be recruited using a face to face methodology. Total cost for a Citizens Panel for the 5-year duration of the consultation strategy, based on 2 surveys a year; including set up costs and annual refreshment by a third would be £135,000. This equates to £27,000 a year. It is recommended that the council does not continue with the Citizens Panel in its current format.

District Wide Survey

The District Wide Survey has been shown to be a powerful decision making tool at the council. The results from the surveys are directly linked to the strategic objectives and priorities and also feed into the service and financial planning process. Also, the District Wide Survey does identify key service priorities for the council that can be considered in conjunction with those priorities from the visioning exercises. As it uses a face to face methodology the use of probing questions needs to be explored in more detail in any future surveys. It is recommended that the council continues to use District Wide Surveys in the future.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are useful in determining the why factor behind residents feelings and attitudes towards services. However they are currently expensive costing £8000 for approximately 8 hours consulting with around 40 people. The process was, in the original strategy managed by external consultants. This was necessary as participants for the focus groups came from the Citizens Panel database, which was managed and owned by the consultants. External consultants were also seen as the most appropriate facilitators of focus groups as there is a perception that respondents would feel uneasy about engaging in open and honest discussion with council staff. It is recommended that the council continues to use focus groups but that they are managed using council staff rather than external consultants. This will provide savings of £6000 for each round of focus groups run at the Council.

4.2 Recommended Consultation Strategy

As previously highlighted the District Wide Survey was the main component of the original Consultation Strategy and will remain so in the new 5-year consultation plan. The survey should continue to use a face to face methodology and core questions should remain to maximise benchmarking. However amendments do need to be made to allow for more probing questions. The District Wide Survey should remain a biennial survey. A Citizens Panel should be recruited for as part of the face to face District Wide Survey. This will ensure that the council has a representative sample of North Herts residents that can be used by council staff for ad hoc consultation exercises as well as in-house focus groups. The consultants owned the original Citizens Panel database but a new panel would have shared ownership, which would enable us to tap into the database for consultations throughout the year. The focus groups are to be used to assist with the action planning process for the biennial District Wide Surveys. Themes for the focus groups will arise from the areas of concern highlighted by the District Wide Survey. Once actions have been drafted the full panel of people can be consulted via a postal questionnaire to gauge their views and support of the action plan and to assist with the prioritising of actions. The group that is consulted with as part of the District Wide Survey will also support the action planning process making a more streamlined approach. To ensure the representativeness of the sample, this will be recruited from scratch for each District Wide Survey. The new consultation strategy also develops stronger links and closer working between the Consultation and Communication functions at the council. By consulting we learn about residents needs and

expectations from the council and through Communication we feedback actions from consultation. This will enable us to meet our strategic objective of listening to our citizens and delivering high quality, value for money, customer focussed services. The detailed cost breakdown of the new Consultation Strategy is shown in Appendix A. A diagram showing the consultation strategy is included in Appendix B.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

6. FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The budget provision for 2005/06 is £19,000 if the recommended programme is approved this will result in a saving of £17,000. The following year's budgets will then have to be realigned to meet the new programme costs. Over the five year programme shown in appendix A there is an overall cost saving of £16,200 compared to the current programme.

6.2 There are no direct HR implications arising from this report.

7. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS (If appropriate)

7.1 This strategy has been drafted following consultation with the district councils in Hertfordshire and also external consultants to ascertain the effectiveness of the proposed consultation strategy. Corporate Management Team and PARC have also endorsed this strategy on 10 March 2005.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 That CABINET endorse the costing detailed in Appendix A

8.2 That CABINET endorse the Consultation Strategy as detailed in this report and Appendix B.

9. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 A consultation strategy is essential to ensure that we continue to listen and deliver services that meet the needs and expectations of the residents of North Hertfordshire. It is also a statutory duty to consult as part of the requirements of Best Value The proposed consultation strategy will provide a cost-effective framework for consultation and will ensure effective public involvement in both the consultation exercise and the action planning process.

10. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

10.1 Not applicable

11. APPENDICES

- 11.1 Appendix A – Detailed breakdown of costs for Consultation Strategy.
- 11.2 Appendix B – Consultation Strategy Diagram.
- 11.3 Appendix C – Sample profiles for the Citizens Panel, District Wide Survey compared with 2001 Census.

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13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1 None.

APPENDIX A – COSTS FOR CONSULTATION STRATEGY

Costing for Citizens Panel

The table below shows the costs for the Citizens Panel, based on recruiting a new panel face to face, two panels a year for the next 5 years and annual refreshment by a third. Face to face recruitment and annual refreshment is essential to ensure a representative sample.

Activity	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/2010
Face to face recruitment of a new 1000 strong panel	£25,200				
Two Panel Surveys (annually)	£14,000	£14000	£14000	£14000	£14000
Citizens Panel Feedback Newsletter sent to panel members	£500	£500	£500	£500	£500
Annual refreshment of panel by a third	N/A	£8700	£8700	£8700	N/A
Total	£39,700	£23, 200	£23,200	£23,200	£14,500

Costing for Consultation Strategy

Activity	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Launch of Consultation protocols / Internal SNAP training programme / SNAP maintenance / SNAP publications	£1000	£500	£500	£500	£500
District Wide Survey consultation including the recruitment of NHDC panel that can be consulted with internally for localised issues and focus groups		£27,900		£27,900	
Feedback newsletter of key findings from District Wide Survey to panel members. One page on key findings also to go in Winter Outlook.		£500		£500	
Focus Groups (facilitated in-house using panel recruited as part of District Wide Survey)		£2000		£2000	
Biennial Citizens Panel survey to pick up Best Value FSR process and to test possible actions arising from Focus Groups due to District Wide Survey consultation exercise.		£3500	£3500	£3,500	£3,500
Feedback Newsletter of actions arising from District Wide Survey to panel members Also one page on key action to be included in Summer Outlook.			£500		£500
BVPI General Survey		£15000			£15000
Ad hoc consultations (using panel database for service specific or location specific consultations)	£1000	£1000	£1000	£1000	£1000
Totals	£2,000	£49,400	£5,500	£35,400	£20,500

Comment [ap1]: £500 to be allocated each year for payment of upgraded SNAP User guides and training needs

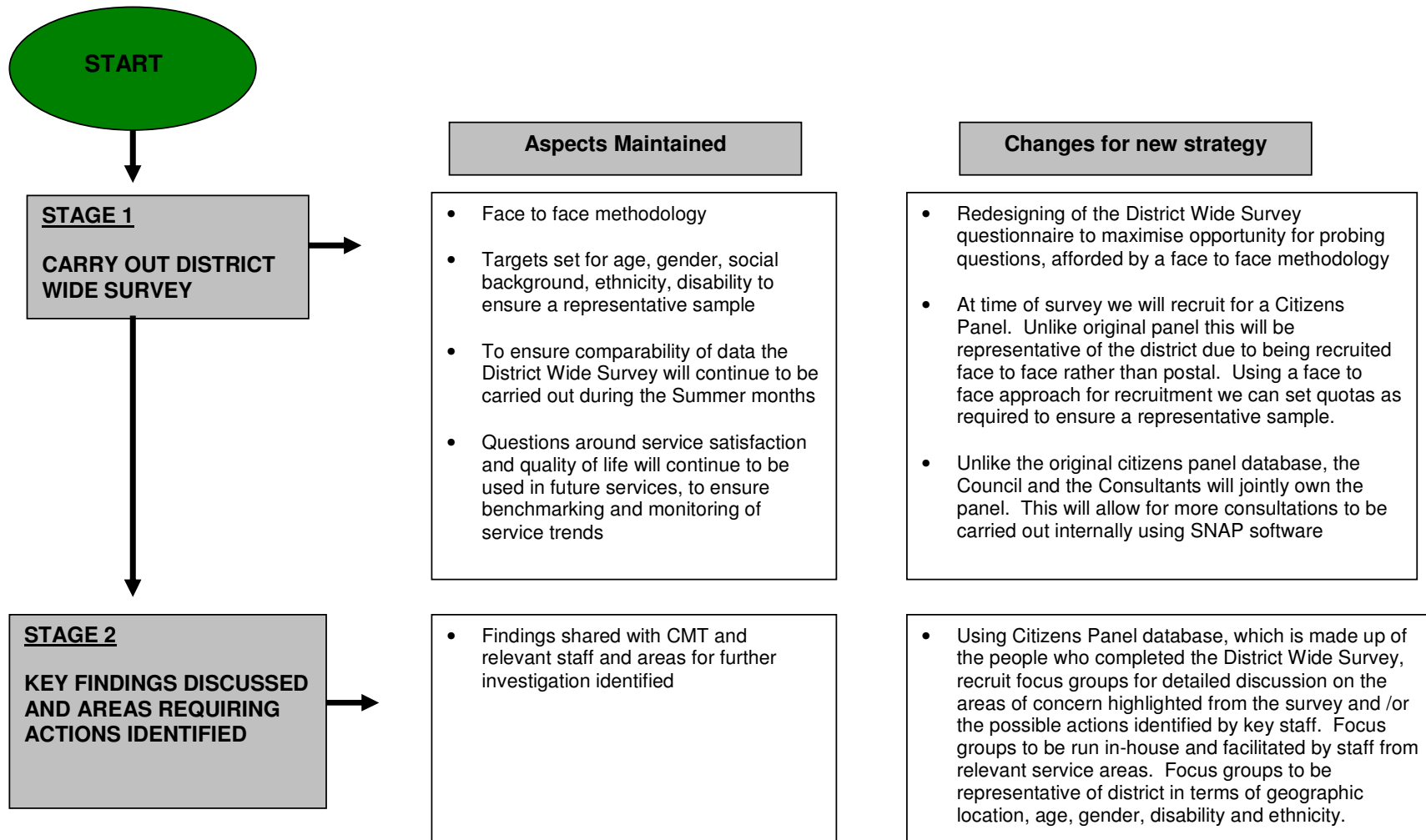
Comment [ap2]: £2000 to be allocated on a biennial basis for internally run focus groups to ascertain reasons for dissatisfaction and to determine possible actions to improve satisfaction levels. Focus groups to be recruited from panel database which was set up as part of the District Wide Consultation Exercise. The £2000 set aside for focus groups is considerably less than would be charged by external consultants. External consultants charge £8000 for 4 sessions.

Comment [ap3]: In the lifetime of the proposed Consultation Strategy, it is likely that the council will carry out two citizens panel surveys which will be used for FSR work and as part of the action planning process for the district wide survey which is carried out biennially. The Citizens panel is likely to be carried out in late February and March so although the cost of a survey is £7000, the cost would be shared between 2 financial years.

Comment [ap4]: The £15,000 budgeted for in the 2009/10 financial year is subject to government instruction as they may choose to disband the exercise.

APPENDIX B CONSULTATION STRATEGY DIAGRAM

The diagram below highlights how the new consultation strategy would work, clearly demonstrating the strong link between the council and residents throughout the process from initial fieldwork to action planning.



STAGE 3

ACTION PLANS ADOPTED



- Proposed action plans are produced by key staff and then taken to Corporate Management Team for agreement. Once agreed by CMT action plans are taken to PARC for endorsement. Actions are then fed back to staff

- Focus groups are a valuable resource for finding out the reasons why someone holds a particular view. However they are based on a small sample. Before publishing action plans, proposals should be considered by Citizens Panel members before implementation to ensure they represent the views of the district. Action plans then to be submitted on the council website so actions can be monitored over the course of the year leading up to the next survey.

APPENDIX C – SAMPLE PROFILES FOR CITIZENS PANEL & DISTRICT WIDE SURVEY

The table below shows the sample profiles for the Citizens Panel and the District Wide Survey compared with the 2001 Census figures for the district. Column 1 shows the percentage breakdown for age, ethnicity and disability from the census 2001. Column 2 shows the breakdown from the Citizens Panel and Column 3 the breakdown from the District Wide Survey. The table clearly shows that the District Wide Survey sample is more in line with the census 2001 data than the Citizens Panel. In particular the District Wide Sample is representative in terms of the 'hard to reach groups' such as young people, BME residents and those with a disability in the household. This table clearly illustrates the advantage of face to face recruitment for consultation exercises over postal recruitment.

Description	Census 2001	Citizens Panel* Recruited via a postal survey	District Wide Survey* Recruited using a face to face approach
16-24 year olds	12%	3%	11%
25-44 year olds	30%	24%	37%
45-64 year olds	24%	47%	34%
65+ year olds	16%	26%	18%
BME residents	6.8%	1%	7%
Disability in household	10%	Not recorded	10%