

INTERIM REVIEW OF CONSULTATION STRATEGY – MAY 2018

REPORT OF THE COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 As part of the 2017 District Wide Survey, residents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with various perceptions of the Council. The highest proportion of residents agree that NHDC services are of good quality (74%). The lowest level of agreement was in relation to the statement NHDC makes an effort to find out what local people want (35%), and this has seen a 13 percentage point decrease since 2015. Similarly, only 46% of residents agreed that NHDC is involved and engages with the local community and only 41% agree that NHDC fully involves or consults residents on important issues. Satisfaction with the way the Council runs things has also dropped from 82% in 2015 to 75% in 2017.
- 1.2 It should be noted that the timing of the survey could have influenced how people responded to these particular questions, as the fieldwork was carried out in October / November 2017, following a consultation and subsequent decision to introduce a charge for green waste. As 85% of people disagreed with introducing the charge, this could have influenced how people responded to questions on consultation in the survey. Similarly, the survey was carried out following the submission of the Council's draft Local Plan to the Planning Inspector.
- 1.3 Whilst the factors in 1.2 above may have influenced the response, upon consideration of the results the Senior Management Team agreed that the Communications Manager should carry out an interim review of the Council's Consultation Strategy and identify any actions which may help improve perceptions of consultation activity among residents. This is only intended to be a light touch review, as SMT are aware that the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee are due to schedule a Task and Finish Group on Consultation, which will also come up with its own recommendations on consultation.

2. ISSUES

- 2.1 **Internal awareness of the Strategy:** The Council's Consultation Strategy 2016-2020 was approved by Cabinet in September 2015 and is designed to be used as guidance for staff when considering carrying out consultation exercises. It was discussed at a Senior Management Team meeting and is available on the Council's Intranet and Internet. It hasn't however been publicised to staff since, which could mean that some staff are unaware of it, or not sufficiently aware of its content, when considering their own consultation needs.
- 2.2 **Use of Council's Citizens Panel:** The Council keeps a database of residents who have indicated that they are willing to be contacted by the Council to take part in surveys. The panel is refreshed at least every two years, as residents who respond to the District Wide Survey are asked whether they wish to be part of the Citizens Panel. Historically the entire Citizens Panel has been contacted by post every two

years (in the alternate year to the District Wide Survey), as well as being contacted on an ad-hoc basis to take part in online surveys or in focus groups. However, technology has moved on significantly in recent years and with 92% of residents now having access to the Internet, there is a significant question mark over how cost-effective it is to continue to contact the Panel by post as the primary method of contact and then have to manually input responses. However, reviewing our approach to the Citizen's Panel is unlikely to impact on the wider issues identified in the DWS.

- 2.3 **Considering best practice in Citizens Panels:** With only limited resource in the communications team and no dedicated consultation officer, the use of the Citizens Panel in recent years has been limited. However, this could be a very valuable resource for the Council as a whole and particularly for service areas when considering any potential change they might be considering making to their services. The Communications Manager is currently gathering feedback from other Local Authorities on how they manage their Panels and there are some excellent examples of engagement. For example, one Council currently contacts their Citizens Panel Members approximately once a month and recently they have asked Panel members to stress test a new website, feedback on a new magazine format and provide community commentary on town regeneration, service branding, environmental health policy and tourism events. They also plan to invite their panel to an annual informal get-together to thank them for their involvement to ensure members feel engaged. If the Council adopted this type of approach we could actively promote the work of the Panel and raise its profile, in turn this might help with the perception of lack of consultation.
- 2.3 **Publicising consultation exercises:** When carrying out consultation exercises, managers are asked to consider using a range of methods to publicise their consultations. The extent of publicity will depend on the scale of the consultation and the audience that needs to be reached. For example, the recent consultation on options for the waste and recycling contract was publicised via a flyer directly to all households, through social media, press release and website.
- 2.4 **Publicising the results of consultations:** One of the key recommendations of the Consultation Strategy is to ensure that the results of any consultation and any resulting decisions are appropriately publicised. In particular, where a consultation has been carried out, managers should produce a report which shows the results and how that feedback has been acted upon. The report should be published on the Council's website and other appropriate channels. Further work needs to be done to ensure this is happening across the board on all consultations. Further to this, we currently don't have a standard mechanism for reporting back to those people who have taken part in consultation activity, as it is likely they would be interested in being informed of the results.

3. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- 3.1 Communications Manager to organise 'Consultation' session of Senior Managers Group (consisting largely of service managers, service directors, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Executive) to refresh managers of the principles of the Consultation Strategy. Also to encourage managers to consider how they might be able to utilise the Citizens Panel for their own service needs. As part of the session, managers will be reminded that the 'You Said We Did' approach to publicising the results of a consultation should be adopted as best practice.
- 3.2 Discontinue the biennial postal survey of the Citizens Panel, as it is no longer a cost effective means of carrying out corporate consultation exercises. An individual service area may still make a request to use the Citizens Panel to carry out a survey for their own needs and the merits of this would be considered at the time.
- 3.3 Retain the budget for the Citizens Panel (£7,700 every other year). This can then be used to seek expert advice on consultations and / or to carry out face to face focus groups. It could also be used to boost social media posts to encourage more people to participate in surveys. This budget could potentially be evenly spread across the two years, although this would limit any focus group activity. For service specific consultations, services would need to factor in the cost of consultation from their own budgets.
- 3.4 Communications Manager to continue to seek examples of best practice in management of Citizens Panels, to consider how our own panel can be used most effectively and to devise an annual plan of activity.
- 3.5 Plan to be put in place to recruit new members to the Citizens Panel through social media, website, new e-newsletter and email footers. In particular we are interested in capturing email contacts wherever possible, as online surveys are the most cost effective and least resource intensive.
- 3.6 When carrying out online consultations, where appropriate, respondents will be asked if they want to provide us with their email address so that they can be provided with the results when they are released and any resulting reports / decisions. This would help ensure we can be seen to continue to engage with those people who have taken the time to give us their opinions.

4. Contact Officer

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5. Background Papers

NHDC Consultation Strategy 2016 – 2020

www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/customer-services/publications-and-consultations/consultation-strategy-2016-2020