Corporate Core

Milton Keynes Council Consultation Toolkit

www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/mkcconsultation

V4
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This toolkit has been developed to help provide council staff with a clear and effective approach to consultation. For more help or information please contact the council's communications team on x2595 or communications@milton-keynes.gov.uk

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This handbook has been produced by the communications team. It is part of a wider suite of communications guidance:

- Communications Strategy
- Media Protocol
- Social Media Policy
- Consultation Guidelines
- Brand Guidelines

1. How we approach consultation: our principles

1.1 What we mean by the term consultation

At Milton Keynes Council we use customer feedback and evidence when making decisions and improving services. Through formal and informal consultation we can understand people's expectations and needs, and in turn they can influence council activity.

We define consultation as a process of dialogue with residents, businesses and other stakeholders, which has a defined start and end date, and informs a decision about a new proposal, policy, or service change.

On page 5 you can find more information about when the council is consulting, compared to when it is communicating with, engaging or involving people. Also consider the flowchart on page 13.

1.2 Our principles

We expect all consultation to be well coordinated and to follow consistent principles and standards across the council, as well as statutory and policy requirements.

Our principles are:

a. All consultations give participants enough time to consider and respond. This should be at least 12 weeks, in line with the Parishes' Protocol. http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/parishes/documents/Parishes_Protocol_update.pdf If it must be shorter, the reasons will be agreed with the Parishes involved in advance, and clearly documented.

b. As wide a range of people as possible are to be consulted. This may mean reaching out in different ways to different groups. We will show respect for equality and diversity within our consultations, and will approach people as we know they wish to be consulted.

c. All our consultation activities comply with the Data Protection Act. http://staffintranet/Information-Technology/Data-protection/

d. Planning consultations follow the guidelines in our Statement of Community Involvement. http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/planning-policy/displayarticle.asp?ID=61284

e. The person consulting will be familiar with the legal requirements for consulting on the topic in hand.

f. Those being consulted will be clear about what they are being consulted on and why (so that an informed view can be provided) and about what happened as a result.

g. We will keep councilors, as the elected representatives of their ward residents, informed and consulted about all matters of concern to their residents including relevant consultations.

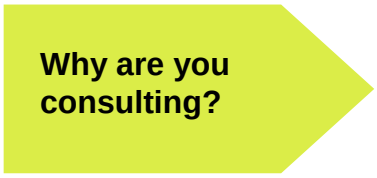
h. We time our consultations carefully to avoid duplication and 'consultation fatigue'.

i. We capture and log any feedback given to us carefully and professionally.

j. All consultations feature on the council's consultation finder http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/mkcconsultation and use the council's preferred software to gather data.

2. The five step consultation process

Consultation planning stage **(template p9)**



2.1 Do you need to consult or communicate?

We consult so that we can consider people's concerns and aspirations when making a decision. Decisions made this way are less likely to be rejected by the community when they are implemented, saving us time and money.

You will need to consult if you have a statutory reason to do so or if you need evidence to support a decision or action. You may want to source evidence which supports a specific choice, or capture more general feedback for decision makers to consider. You must be prepared to act on views expressed, otherwise you shouldn't ask for them.

Sometimes, a service needs to inform people about a change which they cannot affect. This is not consultation, but it is still important to communicate clearly so that people understand and are engaged and involved in the decision.

2.2 Setting objectives: "getting everyone on the same page"

Be clear about what you want to achieve from a consultation at the beginning. Make sure you communicate your objectives to members, officers and the public, so everyone has the same expectations about the outcomes of consultation.

Your objectives should capture what you need to know and what will be influenced by consultation. Record your objectives on a consultation plan (see page 9).

Sample objectives:

- To determine how residents of Parkville would like open space in their neighbourhood to be used until 2025
- To provide evidence for consideration by the Parkville Planning Committee when setting its Community Plan 2012-2025

2.3 Identify who you need to engage

It's not just about who you're consulting, but also who else should know about it. Think about who will make the decision, influence the consultation, and who will help you conduct the consultation.

Use this checklist as a starting point to identify your audience.

- Customers / service users
- Non-users (ex-customers, people who may need the service at a later date, people who are unaware etc)
- Group Leaders
- Cabinet Portfolio Holder
- Councillors (also called Ward Members)
- Parish & Town Councils
- Relevant committee chairs
- MPs
- Council staff
- Schools
- Other authorities
- Voluntary and community groups
- Businesses (service users, landlords, businesses affected by changes etc)
- Youth Cabinet
- People representing others (carers, parents, advocates etc)

2.4 Involving councillors – no surprises

Councillors are community leaders and advocates for their local ward area. They must be kept <u>informed of and involved in</u> consultations that affect their ward or area of responsibility. Councillors have first hand insight into what is going on in their communities, and as such are a useful resource for customer intelligence, and to sense check the best ways to engage their constituents.

2.5 Who else can help?

Groups such as the Housing Forum, residents' associations, governors, carers groups, voluntary organisations and many others can provide ready access to a wealth of experience, helping you reach audiences and providing views on the impact of decisions. Look for opportunities to join up with other services or outside agencies for joint consultation.

2.6 An inclusive approach to consultation

To make sure you are consulting fairly, remember that you will need to reach out to different types of people in different ways. Baffling jargon, slow results and certain processes will put off some groups from getting involved. Remember that the council is full of people who are expert in reaching particular audience groups and the best guidance is to pick up the phone and ask for advice.

Conducting an Equality Impact Assessment may help you understand who you need to reach: http://staffintranet/Home/Policy-performance/What-is-an-Equality-Impact-Assessment.htm.

Contact Jeremy Beake, Equality and Diversity Officer, x4628.

2.6.1 Consulting with young people

The council has a Children and Young People's Participation Charter, which states that we will listen to young people and involve them to improve services in a way that best suits them.

Youth forums, youth groups and the Milton Keynes Youth Cabinet already help us involve young people in key issues. Find out more at: http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/positiveactivities/displayarticle.asp?ID=57823.

2.6.2 Consulting with vulnerable people

Vulnerable people are often excluded from consultation because of a failure to understand their diverse needs. Remember that consultation will need to include people with differing language needs or hearing, speech, visual or writing impairments.

Some vulnerable people are represented by volunteer and community groups. The MK Community Liaison Infrastructure Partnership (MKCLIP) is an umbrella organisation who can cascade your consultation to relevant volunteer groups.

2.6.3 Consulting with 'potentially excluded groups'

We have a public duty under section 149 of the Equality Act to consult with 'potentially excluded people', which can mean everyone from people from a black or minority ethnic (BME) background, carers, and homeless people to lone parents and people who live in remote rural areas. Don't expect people to come to you – instead, go to where the people you want to talk to already meet and feel comfortable.

Design consultation methods

2.7 Selecting your consultation method

See page 10 for a table of consultation methods and advice.

Speak to the council's communications team on x2413 or communications@milton-keynes.gov.uk for help in communicating with your key audiences

The team can help you:

- Create your consultation plan.
- Use plain English, avoid jargon and abbreviations, and keep material concise.
- Create consultation materials that are on brand.
- Find ways to provide information in different languages/Braille/etc.
- Promote your consultation effectively.

2.8 How long should consultation take?

All consultations should give participants enough time to consider and respond. The aspiration set in the Parishes' Protocol is 12 weeks. If it must be shorter, the reasons should be agreed with key stakeholders in advance, and clearly documented.

Statutory consultation has specific rules. For example, some planning applications involving an Environmental Impact Assessment require a consultation period of 16 weeks. However, normally, planning applications require statutory consultation of no more than 21 days. Be aware of the legal requirements for your specific consultation topic.

Think carefully about when you will carry out your consultation. At certain times in the year such as school holidays or religious festivals people may have less time to respond. Consider the timetables of parish councils, organisations, committees or groups you are consulting with who may meet on a monthly or quarterly basis.

2.9 Making sense of your results

When analysing your results, think about the following:

- Ensure all responses are logged accurately
- Try to sort the responses into particular types, for example business groups, employees' representative groups, individual views etc. This will help you identify different perspectives.
- Consider how representative the views of each stakeholder groups are. It's not just about 'who shouts loudest'.
- Consultation need not be a one off event. Further engagement may help you test out your ideas on how to respond to the results.

2.10 Give feedback

By letting people know what was said and what has changed as a result, you're giving them a reason to have their say in a future consultation. A summary of responses should be available within three months of the closing date, ideally sooner. This summary should not include personal data. Read more at: http://staffintranet/Information-Technology/Data-protection/

Ensure that you are aware of the Rights of Access set out in the Freedom of Information Act and how this may relate to any information produced as a result of your consultation.
http://intranet/mk_council/DisplayArticle.asp?ID=6239&r=13766

2.11 Evaluate your success and learn lessons

Through evaluation you can find out what worked/didn't work, and learn lessons. Think about the following:

- How many people took part? Are the responses representative?
- What did participants think of the process? How can we ask them?
- Were there any unanticipated outcomes from the consultation?
- What would we do differently next time?
- Did the consultation meet the objectives set at the start?
- Was there an impact on decision making?
- Who else might find this learning useful and how can we share it with them?

3. Template consultation plan

Consultation plan: **Prepared by:** **Supported by:**	[consultation name] [name of lead officer] [name of communications officer]

Objectives

What needs to be decided? What's the origin of the issue? What information is to be sought?

Audiences

Who will make and influence the decision? Who will be affected by the consultation? What are the starting positions and expectations of these audiences? What other groups can help you reach audiences?

Methods

What are your audiences' preferred communications routes? Is there more than one way for people to have their say? How should you comply with Data Protection Act? Do you have enough resources to consult / undertake specific promotion? How will you capture the results, so nothing is missed?

Timing and milestones

Why is the consultation taking place at this time? What other consultation is going on? Is there enough time for realistic consultation, including for community representatives to pass information on? Is there enough time to make whatever changes may be needed? Do you comply with the Parishes' Protocol (12 wks)? Work backwards from the decision date to set milestones.

Results

Are the outcomes clear? How will results be gathered / used / fed back to those who took part in the consultation?

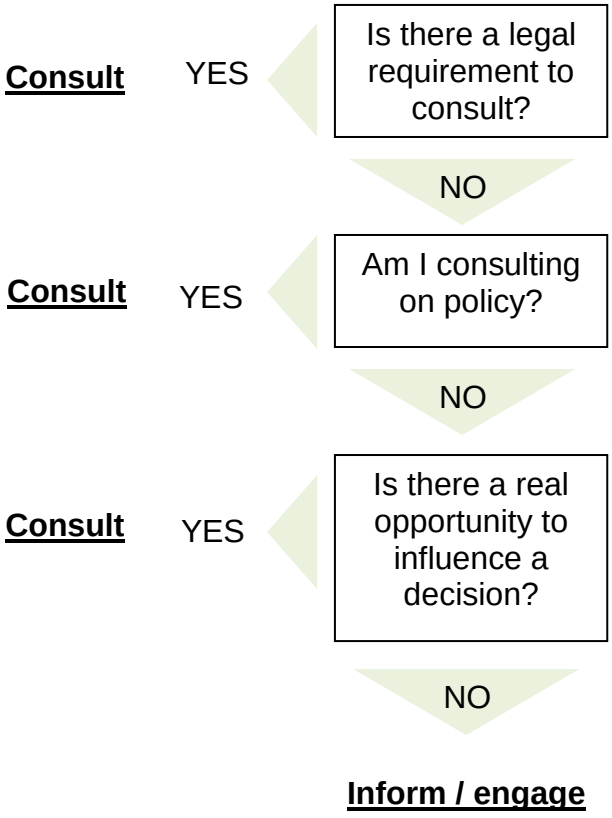
Evaluation

How will you evaluate if the consultation process was successful and achieved its objectives?

4. Quick Guide to Consultation Methods

With any method, agree how you will capture and log the feedback received and make sure all colleagues involved in the consultation understand how this is to happen.

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Involvement in existing public meetings and committees	Direct contact into the policy making process.	Formality may put some people off. Views may not be representative.
Public or 'town hall' meeting called for specific topic	Allows expression of views. Visibly shows you are consulting.	Can be adversarial, and contributions can focus on political concerns. Not always a convenient time or place for audience.
Meeting / user forum for existing group, e.g. neighbourhood forum, parish council meeting	Accesses local knowledge. Can bring consensus of opinion. Visibly shows you are consulting.	May be addressing active minority only.
Face to face events / roadshow	Good for complex issues and questions. Allows people to speak up, especially if you 'go to the audience' – where they live, work, use services. Allows creative options, such as 'have your say sofa' where comments are filmed.	Time consuming.
Paper based survey / flyer	People can answer at leisure. Reaches people without access to PCs.	Response rate can be low.
Email survey	Fast response, low cost. Pictures and documents can be attached easily.	Requires email addresses. Admin heavy.
Telephone survey	Direct access – potential to invite participation when people ring the council, or potential to team up with other services/agencies to share cost.	Costly to set up/to use survey company.
Web based survey	Fast response, low cost. Picture or documents can be attached easily.	Excludes people without access to PCs. People could respond several times.

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Residents' panel survey (the council does not do this corporately)	Can be quicker and cheaper than general surveys.	May be addressing active minority only.
General invitation for comment, promoted through existing channels	Gives anyone the chance to have their say.	Response rate can be low.
Feedback via staff	May be empowering for staff, who already have contact with wide groups of people.	Needs support and training, and a mechanism for capturing information – may be labour intensive.
Feedback via Community Mobilisers	Already have contact with wide groups of people, and mechanism to capture information.	Responses may not be representative.
Social media	Low cost, immediate. Allows you to search for specific terms in existing conversations.	Response rate to specific question can be low, and not representative.
Comments and complaints, including petitions.	Already have information.	Views of minority. Information not necessarily held in format which is easy to share.
Pictures and drama (art walls, digital camera photo story, role play sessions)	Good way to understand people's agenda without constraining views.	Time consuming. May be difficult to analyse response.
Mystery customers	Gathers real experiences.	May not be representative. Doesn't necessarily involve 'real users'.
Diaries	Gathers real experiences and views.	Responses may not be representative.
Observation	Accurate record of what people do rather than what they say, useful when piloting a service change.	Labour intensive.

5. Consultation flowchart