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# Consultations Strategy

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2021-2025



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## 1. Introduction

1.1 Bedford Borough Council is committed to delivering excellent services to all its residents. Before we make a decision about changing our services, we will consult our residents and service users so that we can be sure that decisions are properly informed by public opinion. With the ongoing reduction in resources across the whole public sector it is even more important that consultations are conducted in a professional and open way.

1.2 By ‘consultation’ we mean:

*“A process through which the views of citizens and customers are sought about a particular issue, with the aim that those views should inform and influence decisions, policies, or programmes of action”*

1.3 Each consultation project will be unique. However this Strategy provides advice and guidance to ensure a high quality co-ordinated approach is always taken.

1.4 Bedford Borough Council like all local authorities continues to go through a period of significant change as we face ongoing pressure on our resources and services. We are tackling these issues through a transformation programme. As we develop new service models it is important that we consult with our residents, businesses and other service users.

## 2. Why Do We Consult?

### A Listening Council

- 2.1 In order to provide services that are best suited to our customers we will listen to our residents and stakeholders. Consultation around an issue will help tailor services, and meet the needs of our community.
- 2.2 Consultation will help gather views and preferences, help understand possible unintended consequences of a policy or decision, or to get views on implementing change. All this ensures that our decisions and policies are made from a strong evidence base.

### Duty to Consult

- 2.3 There is a range of legislation and statutory guidance requiring local authorities to consult on issues connected to the services they provide. Also there have been many examples of legal challenges to public bodies on the grounds of there being inadequate consultation.
- 2.4 The Equality Act 2010 also requires that consultation is undertaken with people who have protected characteristics where they may be adversely affected – for more information on the Equality Act see below.

## Role in the overall process

- 2.5 Consultation rarely results in a single opinion. Councillors and officers will often have to make a judgement about the weight to be given to one opinion, or another. In making final decisions councillors and officers will often have to weigh views and opinions gathered through consultation against a range of other factors, including financial cost and environmental or social impact.
- 2.6 Consultation can never be a substitute for the democratic process. However, understanding the views of our residents and communities will inform and improve the decision-making process, and help strengthen involvement in civic life.



## 3. What Do We Consult On?

### Deciding whether to consult

3.1 Where an activity (e.g. policy, service procedure or potential decision) will have an impact on members of the public or stakeholders we will always consider undertaking a consultation exercise. Consultation will only happen when there is a real scope for change, and decisions have not already been made.

### Equality Act 2010

3.2 The Equality Act 2010 addresses discrimination and inequalities and protects all individuals from unfair treatment. The Council has a number of statutory duties arising from the Act to better advance equality into our business planning and decision-making processes. The duties require the Council to consider how the decisions we make, and the services we deliver, affect people from different equality groups who share a 'protected characteristic'.

3.3 The key way in which the Council demonstrates compliance with this is by conducting an equality analysis. This is an evidence led process that involves using relevant information to understand and make judgements about the impact of a Council 'activity' on equality. Information from our consultation projects can form a key part of the evidence used in an equality analysis; this is particularly important where our services are specifically delivered for a protected equality group, such as older people receiving Adult Social Care services.

### Providing the right information

3.4 If our consultation is to be meaningful, it is important that 'consultees' have sufficient information available to make an informed response. We aim to present information in a way that is appropriate to stakeholders and those likely to have an interest in the subject matter.

#### **Our consultations will clearly state:**

- The dates of the consultation;
- The ways in which people can take part (i.e. online, meeting etc.);
- The scope of the consultation;
- Different options that are available including the advantages and disadvantages of each;
- How and when decisions will be made, and how the consultation will inform the decision;
- How respondents and the wider public will receive feedback, and news on the decision itself. This can include any relevant possible means of appeal.

**Your Voice, Your Views**



## 4. Who Do We Consult?

### Public or targeted?

4.1 Identifying who is being consulted is central to understanding how we approach the project. Many consultations are general and will be available to all residents of the Borough and all people and groups who have an interest in the area. Other consultations may be more focused, and only certain groups will be targeted.

### Stakeholder Mapping

4.2 A process called stakeholder mapping will be undertaken as part of the consultation planning process. This involves looking at all those who may have an interest in the subject, and how best they can be engaged in the consultation process.

4.3 When we identify stakeholders we think widely around the issue, and not simply approach 'the usual suspects'. A decision, policy or programme of action can affect a diverse range of people and organisations and it is our duty to identify them.

4.4 There are many communities of interest covering lots of different areas, such as faith, ethnicity, politics and neighbourhood. Every effort will be made to identify groups that may have an interest in the topic, and which need to be made aware of the consultation. Special attention will be paid to the different protected equality groups covered by the Equality Act.

### Voluntary and Community Sector

4.5 Consulting with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) is an integral part of the consultation process. We are signed up to the Bedfordshire & Luton Compact which highlights how best to interact with the VCS.



## 5. How Do We Consult?

### Methods Available

5.1 There are a large number of different consultation methodologies, and it is vital that the correct types of method are used. Part of our ongoing transformation programme includes increasing the availability of digital means for our residents to contact and interact with us. The way we consult will evolve in line with this increase in digital whilst ensuring all sectors of our community are heard. The methods used will depend on many factors such as the scope of the project, who we are consulting with, and the time and budget available.

#### Methods include:

- Public Meetings;
- Virtual meetings;
- Surveys (online, paper, face to face, telephone);
- Documentary (putting a document to the public for comment);
- Focus Groups;
- Exhibitions;
- Stakeholder Meetings;
- Social Media (Twitter/Facebook);
- Email Bulletins.

### Making it appropriate for the audience

5.2 Different communities and stakeholders will have different levels of knowledge and experience of the service and levels of information on which to base their responses. Some methods may not be appropriate for all. The method(s) we use will account for this. For example, young people may not respond well to a postal survey but may be more receptive to social media or a workshop. This is

particularly important when consulting online. The Council has a Digital Inclusion Strategy which needs to be considered.

5.3 All those identified as having an interest in the issue will be able to access the information and take part in the consultation. Measures we will take include making documents available in large print and ensuring venues are accessible to people with disabilities. Providing information in other languages will also be considered.

### Pre-consultation

5.4 Informal dialogue with key stakeholders about an upcoming consultation (referred to as pre-consultation) is sometimes appropriate. The advantages are that the stakeholders may have a good idea about the methods of dialogue and the questions that should be asked and also we can gauge the volume and type of responses that will be received.

### Costs

5.5 It is important that consultation projects represent value for money. A key consideration will be ensuring the resources needed are proportional to the issue being consulted on. We will, wherever possible, explore the possibility of joining up consultations to reduce costs and the burden on consultees.

#### We will use the following where possible:

- Encourage online participation;
- Using internal mail instead of the postal service;
- Hiring Council owned facilities rather than privately owned ones;
- Printing in black and white or on lower grade paper.
- Explore the possibility of using volunteers

## 6. Timing of a Consultation

### Length of Consultation

- 6.1 An appropriate amount of time will be given for people to submit their responses. We recognise that organisations may need to conduct secondary consultation with their members before submitting a response, and this can take time.
- 6.2 The time of year that the consultation takes place is also relevant. The consultation period should be extended if it runs over Christmas or other holiday periods. This is especially true if the consultation involves schools or other educational settings.
- 6.3 The Government Consultation Principles 2016 states:  
*“Consulting for too long will unnecessarily delay policy development. Consulting too quickly will not give enough time for consideration and will reduce the quality of responses.”*

### Analysing the Results

- 6.4 For a consultation to play a meaningful role in the decision-making process, enough time will be made available to analyse, interpret, and consider the data. Stakeholder mapping and pre-consultation can give an indication of the expected level of response. This can inform how much time and resource is required to analyse and report the results, and this should be factored into the timetable.





## 7. Getting the Message Out

### Publicity

7.1 Good publicity is one of the best ways to get the message of a consultation out to the people and organisations that may wish to have their say. We have a dedicated Communications Team who ensure that the Council's communications with the media are done in a consistent and efficient manner.

7.2 Common means for publicity include: Press Releases; Newspaper Adverts; Leaflets; online by creating a dedicated website; social media; using community contacts (Equality and Diversity Network, town and parish councillors and clerks, community groups); word of mouth (via staff and service users). The Council also has a dedicated e-Bulletin 'Your Voice, Your Views' for sending out details of consultations.

### Feedback

7.3 Feedback is a vital part of good consultation, and consideration will be given at the outset as to how people are to be informed of the results of the consultation, as well as any decisions made.

#### **Feedback can take a number of forms including:**

- Publishing the report online or via email;
- Re-contacting all respondents;
- Press releases;
- Through formal meetings - e.g. Council, service users groups.

7.4 In providing feedback we will explain what has changed as a result of the consultation and (where appropriate) the factors, other than the consultation responses that informed the decision made. Respondents will be made aware of how they will receive feedback.

## Finding out more

If you would like further copies, a large-print copy or information about us and our services, please telephone or write to us at our address below.

Për Informacion

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Per Informazione

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তথ্যের জন্য



01234 228435



**Bedford Borough Council**

Borough Hall

Cauldwell Street

Bedford MK42 9AP



[consultingbedford@bedford.gov.uk](mailto:consultingbedford@bedford.gov.uk)



A database of consultations is available at [www.bedford.gov.uk/yourvoice](http://www.bedford.gov.uk/yourvoice)