



HaveYourSay

Your voice, your community



*Community Engagement and Consultation Policy
Ashford Borough Council
July 2011*

Community Engagement

Ashford Borough Council's community engagement and consultation activities have been brought together into one overarching framework for the borough so as to better coordinate how we consult and engage with our customers, citizens and communities and to give Ashford residents more opportunities to have their say on the services the council provides.

This policy builds on good practice (see i: [What has been achieved so far?](#)) which already exists in the borough and acknowledges the council's genuine desire to place consultation and engagement at the heart of our role in championing the needs of our communities and involving them in decisions that affect them. We are committed to delivering services, policies and strategies that reflect local priorities, requirements and aspirations.

Crucially, it seeks to establish the minimum standards we will follow when developing a consultation and engagement exercise to ensure that the many different "communities" in the borough have a voice in the debate around how services are delivered. It acknowledges the need to provide appropriate opportunities for customers and communities to participate at whatever level they wish to influence how services are provided, decision making and policy development.

This policy, is supported by an action plan (see ii: [Action plan for the Implementation of this Community Engagement and Consultation Policy](#)) and sits alongside the Council's Statement of Community Engagement which sets out the minimum consultation standards specific to the development of statutory planning documents and planning applications. Where statutory consultation guidelines are in place, such as on Traffic Regulation Orders etc, those minimum standards apply.



1. Background

Ashford Borough Council recognises its essential role to work more closely together and with local people to:

- **shape public services according to what local taxpayers really want**
- **work with a greater range of organisations that provide public services in the borough**
- **provide good value for money**

This builds on Governments Big Society aspirations and the 1st April 2009 "Duty to Involve" policy states that authorities should consider, as a matter of course, the possibilities for provision of information to, consultation with and involvement of representatives of local people across all the council's functions.

This policy sets out a framework of how we will work with residents and partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors to give local people more of a say on what services they want and need and how they would like them delivered.

It sets out:

- **Our objectives for community engagement and how these will be achieved**
- **Our guiding principles for consultation and community engagement**
- **The key tasks, we as an organisation will undertake to implement our approach to community engagement and consultation**

2. Our Objectives

We have set out objectives for what we wish to achieve from engaging and consulting with our communities:

- **Strengthen, develop and sustain opportunities for local people and groups to influence what happens in their communities**
- **Provide opportunities for communities to shape and influence the development and delivery of quality services and policies that reflect local needs and priorities**
- **Manage and co-ordinate community engagement activities to ensure consistency, quality and partner participation and avoid duplication**
- **Ensure that community engagement activities provide opportunities for participation for all sections of the community, particularly people and groups that are often missed out of community engagement activities**
- **Listen to communities and ensure feedback to participants about the outcomes of the community consultation and engagement**
- **Listen and learn from our own and others' experience and share community engagement skills and knowledge of putting the citizen at the heart of decision making**



3. Our Guiding Principles:

- **We will follow a consistent approach to planning for community engagement and consultations:** Our consultations will be planned in advance, have a clear purpose and outcome, consider carefully the target audience that needs to be engaged with and the methods used to engage them.
- **We will actively seek to bring the voluntary and community sector on board:** With more than 850 organisations providing local services in the Ashford borough, this sector has huge potential for making a consultation work. They can reach parts of the community that we may find hard to reach.
- **Elected councillors will lead involvement:** Encouragement from elected councillors is crucial to the success of a good consultation. They are strategically placed in the community to build relations with residents and are often well-respected.
- **We will listen and feed back:** Consultation results will be properly analysed and used to inform decisions about how we deliver services. We will feedback the overall responses from consultations, the council's subsequent decision (where specific to a service) and how the consultation influenced it.
- **Recording and sharing information with relevant stakeholders:** Information from consultations will be captured in a structured way and this, and summary key messages and outcomes, will be shared with councillors, officers, partners and other audiences as appropriate.

Further guidelines about consultation and engagement can be found in the Have Your your Say toolkit. (under development as part of the action plan in 2 below)

4. Who is this Policy for?

We recognise that the council alone cannot achieve the ambitions set out in this policy. Everyone has a part to play in community engagement and consultation particularly:

- **All residents in the Ashford borough**
- **Elected councillors, who play a key role in actively encouraging involvement at a very local level**
- **Council staff everyone is involved in community engagement activity in various forms**
- **Community and voluntary sector organisations, who provide local services, work directly with local groups and organisations and with members of usually excluded groups and represent the view of their sectors**
- **Partners, by working with other organisations and partnerships to make sure services across the borough complement each other.**

Through the Ashford LSP and other partnerships, we will work with other organisations, such as the police, schools and colleges, health service providers and groups and individuals from the community, voluntary and private sectors to make sure that community engagement activities influence the future direction of the borough.



5. How Will We Measure our Achievements?

It is important to understand how we're doing when it comes to evaluating the success of this policy. We will use a variety of methods to measure this, including:

- **Perceptions of residents who feel Ashford Borough Council involves local residents in its decision making**
- **Evidence of information from consultation and engagement that influences council services**

i. What has been achieved so far?

Ashford Borough Council already engages and consults on wide ranging issues utilising many different forms of engagement. The purpose of this policy is to introduce a consistency to the way in which we plan, develop and share learning from consultations to influence the way in which we provide services in the future.

Some examples of what we already do include:

Ashford Borough Council issued a Statement of Community Involvement was formally reviewed and adopted in 2009. Its main objective is to encourage wider involvement in the land-use planning process by setting out when and how people can have their say on both the councils statutory planning documents (Local Development Framework) as well as planning applications (Development Control).

Housing Services use a wide range of methods to consult with their customers, partner organisations and other stakeholders. Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum, formed in 1995, is the key group representing Ashford's council tenants. More than a simple stakeholder group, the forum plays an active role in shaping service provision and scrutinising performance. It helps form policies and decisions and is consulted widely on a range of issues and initiatives. Housing officers regularly meet with forum members as well as attending the monthly forum meetings. Forum members also meet senior managers on a monthly basis.

The Ashford Youth Forum was set up in 2002 to provide a way for young people in the borough to have their say on key issues that are important to them. It provides a formal structure for their views and opinions to be discussed and shared with public service providers across the borough. The Youth Forum runs issues based focus groups on crime, health, entertainment, transport and communications and hosts an annual conference, attended by over 100 young people.

Ashford Borough Council worked with the LSP to conduct an on-line and paper survey with residents across the borough. Over 1000 people participated. The consultation was widely promoted through the media, roadshows in shopping centres and supermarkets, work shops with local schools and presentations at Parish and Community forums. The results of the survey helped the LSP to prioritise the services that are important to the people of the Ashford borough.

A participatory budget consultation, Have Your Say and Save 1million, took place in the Summer of 2010 to help the Council decide upon where to focus savings in their budget. Over 300 people participated in the survey which contributed to decisions being made about where the council prioritises its spending and cuts to future services.

Ashford Borough Council's Cultural Services department engaged with more than 1,000 people in a special consultation to establish how Ashford Borough Council can "grow the arts in Ashford". The Council's arts team attended July's major Summer Sounds events to gauge how residents of all ages think the arts events and venues could be improved or enhanced in the town. Grow the Arts in Ashford questionnaires were handed out at a range of arts, music and community festivals held over the summer. Once completed, answers could be posted into the team's giant travelling flower pot.

Feedback will inform the focus of future arts provision in the borough.



<p>Create a central place on the www.Ashford.gov website where all Council and partner consultations and engagement activities will be hosted. Visitors to the site will be able to see at a glance what consultations are taking place in their area, how they can be involved and what the results of the consultation were</p>	<p>Corporate approach to hosting consultations</p>
<p>Provide guidelines and advice to ensure the Council's guiding principles on consultation and engagement are adhered to</p>	<p>Guidelines hosted on the website</p>
<p>Develop a Citizens Panel, that is representative and reflects MOSAIC neighbourhood data to provide a ready source of Ashford residents who wish to be engaged with and have their voice</p>	<p>Recruit 1600 people</p>
<p>Develop a deeper understanding of how to engage groups that are not normally involved in community engagement activities (seldom heard)</p>	<p>Conduct research with key contacts in the voluntary sector to establish a better understanding of how to reach these members of the Ashford population</p>
<p>Develop a plan for corporate engagement of key corporate research requirements over the coming 12 to 18 months</p>	<p>Work with service heads to identify a plan of key research requirements</p>
<p>Engage, consult and report to the internal policy group on the implementation of key elements of this action plan.</p>	<p>Report to the group at least twice yearly</p>
<p>Work with the East Kent Community Consultation Network, the LSP and other public service providers to maximise opportunities, minimise duplication and "consultation fatigue" and reduce costs of engagement and consultation activities</p>	<p>Participation in twice yearly network events Share information/opportunities to participate in Ashford consultations</p>

Notes 1: How we developed this policy:

- Review of existing consultation and engagement activities
- Analysis of key national policy drivers such as the Local Government White paper and Duty to Involve
- Analysis of local residents reviews and perceptions
- Gathering the views of the council's Community Engagement Working Group* and the internal Ashford Borough Council officers group**
- Desk based analysis of good practice from other high achieving authorities

Observations and feedback from the Community Engagement Working Group to inform this strategy:

* Members of this group comprised: Cllr Michael Claughton; Chair; Brigid Burnham, (ABC Communications), Alastair Dutch (Community Representative and Chair of Find a Voice); Steve Ive (Community Representative, Head Teacher, Kennington Junior School); Sue Sawyer (Community Representative, Chair of the Volunteer Bureau); Jo James, Director and Chief Executive of the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce; Cllr Woodford (Ashford Independent); Elizabeth Leonard (Communications); Tim Macknelly (Communications); Cllr Sue Heaton (Lib Dems); Cllr Naughton (Labour), Alan Stamp (Ashford Youth Forum); Christina Fuller (ABC Cultural Services). Cllr John Holland (Independent);

Some local people want to be regularly involved in engagement activity or at least advised of when there are opportunities to participate. Other residents are less interested in ongoing or regular involvement but feel strongly that they should be given the opportunity to have a say on issues that are of particular importance to them.

It is clear that people want a variety of ways in which they can engage allowing them involvement to a greater or lesser extent and reflecting different levels of interest.

Important to many residents is that the decision making process is open and transparent and that the Council is able to justify decisions by evidencing the factors that contribute to decisions such as community engagement.

As well as capturing the views of those people who are keen to be engaged with the Council needs to ensure that it is listening to residents and service users who may not actively participate unless asked directly.

The voluntary and community sector are keen to be involved and engaged with and there is work to be done to understand better who these groups are and how they can be engaged with.

Communications and how consultations and engagement activities are promoted and publicised are critical. Together with the usual channels of local newspapers, residents' magazines and the council websites, information should be provided to, parish council's, schools and community groups to encourage participation. Social networking sites should also be utilised.

** Members of ABC's informal internal sounding board for Community Engagement and Consultation comprised: Brigid Burnham, Elizabeth Leonard, Christina Fuller, Sheila Davidson, Keith Fearon, Julie Rogers, Simon Cole, Ian Grundy, Daniel Carter, Tracey Kerly.



Notes 2: Delivering Effective Community Engagement:

This policy provides a clear model for delivery so that everyone understands how we are organised to undertake community engagement activity and to ensure that information is shared across the organisation and with external partners.

For community engagement to be meaningful it needs to be targeted at the right individuals, groups, service users etc. and at the right time. The purpose of the engagement activity and the information it is gathering should be clear and coherent to those being engaged with. This ensures that the engagement activity will be successful and provide information that can then be used to influence and improve services and policy.

As a result of this most of the engagement activity that the council undertakes is service or issue specific. This requires those responsible for the delivery of services to identify the need for engagement on a particular service or issue and then plan and execute the engagement in a timely and meaningful manner.

It is the responsibility of every service area to ensure they are engaging with residents and service users and using this information to improve the services they provide. As with other key issues for effective service delivery such as equalities, budget and performance management, community engagement is a core function of each service.

The role of Strategy, Partnerships and Communications is to:

- Provide oversight and a framework to the development of corporate engagement activities, for example, managing engagement programmes on key corporate activities. Examples include the recent Have your Say, Its Your Borough and Save a Million surveys and the management of a Citizens Panel for the council.
- Build the capacity of the organisation to undertake effective engagement
- Examples include the provision of toolkits and training programmes (eg facilitation skills).
- Host the council's "Have your Say" (working title) consultation portal to ensure all consultations conducted across the council are documented, promoted where appropriate and the results shared.



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