

Feedback on 2012 draft West Berkshire Council Consultation Policy

| Do you agree with the stated policy aim and objectives? Are there any additional objectives which you feel should also be incorporated? Are there objectives you do not agree with? | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It all seems straight forward to me and I cannot think of anything else that perhaps might need to be incorporated. However, the only worry I have - are the public's comments really taken into consideration in the final decision making process? I would hate to waste my thoughts on a subject that had previously been decided merely to satisfy a "consultation process". | <p>Noted. One of the main the thrusts of the policy is to make it plain and transparent how views elicited have been incorporated into the decision-making process. The principles 'clarity of purpose' and 'using the results' emphasise this point.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree with stated policy aims and objectives. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I agree with the aims and objectives and see no reason for change. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I agree with aims & objectives | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yes | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yes, agree with aims and objectives | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yes | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The policy aims have been comprehensively stated. I wonder, however, whether the duty to promote equality is being overstated versus the duty to deliver services at "Best Value". | <p>The general equality duty is referred to on the third page and the role of consultation is emphasised in ensuring that any potential detrimental and unintended impact is taken account of. The general equality duty and the delivery of effective services are mutually supporting.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreed but would add after "consultation is planned effectively": 'and in a timely manner'. | <p>Noted. Incorporated to help strengthen this point.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I agree with the stated aim and objectives. I can't think of any missing objectives. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreed | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The stated policy aim and objectives are clear and I agree with them. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is unclear to me at what level and type of decision making the | <p>The policy makes it clear that the purpose of eliciting views is to ensure that</p> |

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| <p>consultation procedure will be used. Also the procedure itself will take time to complete, thus slowing down the decision making process, and could also be perceived as a reason for delaying decision making. At what point does someone say “we need to consult”.</p> | <p>decisions are based upon the most comprehensive and complete information and evidence available. Any consultative activity is therefore undertaken in order to fill in any gaps in information needed to fully inform a decision. This can only be determined on an individual basis.</p> <p>Similarly, the design of any exercise is dependant on the type of information being elicited (quantitative or qualitative) and the individuals / groups whose input is being sought. As such, it is impossible to be prescriptive as to the need for - or type of - consultative activity required, other than ascribing these general principles.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback: When residents take part in a consultation, they should be entitled to a written response to the points they make; in particular, if a point is rejected, they should be told why it has been rejected. | <p>Noted. To be clear however, the principle ‘feeding back’ covers the minimum requirements: a summary of the key findings published online and sent directly to respondents. As part of this, the policy also states that it should be evident how feedback and evidence elicited has been taken into account.</p> <p>Where consultations elicit a large number of responses it may not be an expedient use of available time and resource to respond on an individual basis. As part of the analysis of responses and summarising feedback – particularly those of a more complex nature - issues and responses would be brought together and categorised on a thematic basis. This would be summarised into a ‘key findings’ document and it would be on that basis, responses to key points would be made. This summary, as a minimum, would be then be sent directly to respondents.</p> <p>For exercises which elicit a relatively small number of responses however (such as this), it may be reasonable for points to be addressed individually.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes | |
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| <p>The policy lists 7 principles which define the Council’s ‘commitment to consultation’. Are there any other principles that the Council should also consider applying when undertaking consultation activities. Are any of these which you do not think important or relevant.</p> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think the policy has been well prepared and written. Hopefully the | <p>Noted.</p> |

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| <p>“sensible” feedback really will be given due consideration.</p> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No others to add. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maybe there should be a final one about continuous improvement. So it might say something like, ‘We will look at our consultation methods at the end of every project to see if there are lessons to be learned about how we can consult more effectively in the future.’ | <p>Noted. The intention of the consultation policy is aid ensuring a comprehensive and robust evidence base and as such is centred around the decision-making process. The evaluative stage of the process is important. However, is not considered critical to the policy’s primary focus and therefore has not been referred to explicitly within the policy. Guidance on evaluating exercises is explicitly provided in the supporting consultation toolkit.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I agree with the 7 principles and do not wish to see others added | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is difficult to strike a balance between an overly heavy approach and one which simply provides the appropriate degree of focus. What you have here is a good and practical approach – which should be more than adequate for most purposes. I'd suggest the key issue is making sure those without direct involvement with the Council get to know that matters are up for consideration and input. Apart from the Council using its best endeavours to communicate directly with any party it recognises, which it appears to do well, there seems to be no real interest by the local media, particularly the press, in publishing Council matters. Ironically, by doing so they may find circulation increased! | <p>We will continue to explore effective means of communicating: working with the local media as well as through alternative mechanisms.</p> <p>In terms of citizens more directly being made aware of what is going on across the Council, our Consultation Finder database allows residents to register an interest in a field (eg. transport, education, social care etc) as well as by locality. This then notifies users when a relevant exercise is published.</p> <p>Equally, all consultations registered on Consultation Finder are promoted through the Council’s Twitter and Facebook pages.</p> <p>The Council is currently developing a Communications Strategy which will look to develop how we can communicate more expediently and effectively.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No changes required | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The bullet points below seem to miss objective 3 if it is intended that they echo or expand on the 7 objectives. The objectives themselves look comprehensive. In 7, you refer to “findings” being fed back to the participants. It would be better to commit to showing how the results have affected the decision making process. This would give participants the motivation to contribute if they thought that the results could affect decision making. | <p>Noted. The ‘using the results’ principle states that ‘we will make it evident how feedback and evidence elicited has been taken into account in the final decision-making process.’</p> |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreed, the feeding back section is very welcome. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am happy with the seven principles as stated. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A reasoned argument in the consultation for any proposal is welcome. However it will help create a fuller and more meaningful consultation if there is a For and Against section in the consultation, much as we frequently see a Yes and No background to any major proposal in the media. | <p>This is a helpful suggestion. Whilst is perhaps too prescriptive for the purposes of the general principles in this policy, this will be included as part of the supporting guidance in the next update of the consultation toolkit.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No they all seem relevant | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no option to appeal. If you seek someone’s opinion, and the decision goes against them because the decision maker has misunderstood the argument then surely they would expect to be allowed to re-submit. If this is not done it is bound make people disgruntled, will become disengaged with the whole concept. | <p>For consultations on more complex issues then there would ordinarily be a number of means of feeding back: written, public meetings, roadshows, workshops etc. As part of this there would be opportunities to meet and discuss any substantive points with the consultor.</p> <p>At the end of the consultation, all responses would be collated, analysed and distilled into a summary report, capturing all key, substantive points. This would be presented as part of the evidence base to inform the ultimate decision.</p> <p>On the basis of this, if a consultee feels that their argument or point has been misinterpreted or not taken adequately into account then this can be taken up with the service area, raised with the relevant elected member, or ultimately through the Council’s complaints process.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The exercise should only be undertaken when meaningful choices are available – no point in being consulted about generic stuff such as “we intend to improve our performance” | <p>Noted. Consider this as being addressed as part of the ‘clarity of purpose’ principle.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow-up: When a decision is made, following a consultation, that is expected to lead to an improvement in a service provided by the Council, there should be a follow-up exercise perhaps 12 or 24 months afterwards, to measure the actual improvement achieved. | <p>Noted. This relates to a wider point about evaluation of service design or delivery. Quality and progress in service delivery is routinely captured within service areas and is reviewed periodically to ensure the council continues to deliver targeted, effective and efficient services.</p> <p>Evaluations of substantive changes to policy or services would be routinely built in to any periodic reviews. This is however beyond the scope of the consultation policy as a means of informing decision-making.</p> |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lot of thought gone into it. Seems comprehensive. | |
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| <p>Within each of the principles we have set out how these should be applied in undertaking consultations. Do you have any comment on how we might also consider applying these principles.</p> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With my limited knowledge, I think how you are consulting the public seems about right. You are adhering to time frames yourselves, you are asking for responses with a generous deadline and presumably you have sufficient time to consider the feedback. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My concern is about how you engage people in the first place. If you genuinely wish to make people feel “involved” and “well-informed” , then you need to address the ‘them and us’ attitude which is prevalent both in national and local government. I suspect this attitude stems from lack of knowledge – when we don’t understand a complex subject we often dismiss it as “boring” (or we don’t want to admit our ignorance about something we feel everyone else understands). Also, there is a feeling of powerlessness – ie.” I’m just one individual, they won’t listen to me”. The subject of local government should be included in the school syllabus – with councillors visiting schools and students perhaps engaging in roleplay to make it more relevant to them. I wish you would include a few pages on your website that would explain how the system works – I mean an interactive type where you present possible scenarios/ problems and how they can be addressed – and then point people to these pages. You could include a leaflet in the annual rates letter to cut down on cost. If you don’t engage as many people as possible then you will only have the views of the minority of residents who don’t represent the concerns of the majority. | <p>These are all helpful points.</p> <p>The Council strives to involve service users - and residents more generally - in the services it provides. There are a range of representative, service user and community groups across the district which the Council regularly works with in the more formative stages of policy / service development. More generally, there a number of ways of being aware of what consultations the council is launching through Consultation Finder (described above), social media and the Community Panel.</p> <p>West Berkshire also has a well established network of parish planning groups whereby local communities define and develop how they would like to see services and facilities provided in their local areas.</p> <p>The suggestion for a simple guide to local government is useful and has been raised with the web team.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have no comment. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When it says “everyone is consulted” it should be made clear who these groups are at the consultation stage | <p>Noted. The principle of ‘inclusivity’ states that ‘everyone who will be affected should have the opportunity to have their views heard’. Part of the planning of any consultation will include scoping out who and which groups</p> |

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| | should be directly. This has been strengthened in the policy. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree and fully appreciate the role of the Councillors. This is really key to their role. Appreciating the politics around this, it might be worth adding something to their best practice guidelines, suggesting they need a more formal mechanism which can demonstrate how they gauge support and involvement from their electorate. | Noted – although this is beyond the scope of the Consultation Policy. Have forwarded this suggestion to the appropriate team. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A commitment to more active feedback to stimulate more participation in future consultations. I am not suggesting that this should be a plebiscite. | Noted. It is considered this is covered through the ‘feeding back’ principle. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No comment. I am happy with the document as it stands. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Clarity of purpose” There is no mention of any mechanism for the transparency of the consultation/no consultation decision process and its result. Although seemingly laudable, the statement: “In essence, in informing the decision making process we will only undertake consultative activity when the views of the decision maker are provisional upon the outcome of that process” appears to my simple eyes to leave it up to the “decision makers” to even decide on the actual consultation process. In the event of no consultation being chosen, where do the public get to see the reasons behind that decision? Especially in the event of that process perhaps culminating in a change to the council service that may or may not have been foreseen by the “decision makers”. They are only human after all. | <p>Noted. The aim of any consultation is to develop the evidence base so that decisions are based on the most comprehensive and salient information available. Any substantive decision made in the authority is subject to a series of checks and balances as it proceeds through the executive cycle. Ultimately, all key decisions are presented and made in public, along with the supporting, documentary evidence upon which they are based. These are therefore open to public scrutiny and more formally through the Overview and Scrutiny Commission.</p> <p>Should it be felt that decisions are not being made on a robust evidence base then there is recourse through the service area, elected members or the Council’s complaints process.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Feeding back” The same applies here. Accountability is only mentioned in the preamble and nothing in the principles shows an accountability for the decisions made. If, for instance, a service is changed which is in opposition or is different to that which is discussed in the consultation, then there should be some feedback to allow the results of the consultation and its effect on the decision making process to be evaluated. How else do you propose to get rid of “bad” decision makers otherwise? Again, they are only human. Consultation should be a visible working tool and not just a convenient show case | <p>Noted. The point of the summary of findings would be to highlight the key, substantive points made respondents and to ensure they have been explicitly considered as part of the decision-making process. The policy makes it clear it should be evident how these have been considered. To be clear however, consultations are not the same of referenda and the point of the exercise is to ensure that decision-makers are appraised of the impact of a decision on those affected, or their more subjective views.</p> |

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| for public involvement. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relevant information: This should include: how the effects of a proposal are to be measured; the available data on those measures. | Noted. Implicitly this should be covered in any relevant supporting information, although have amended to make more explicit. |
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| Is there anything else you would like to comment on, that you have not had the opportunity to do so above? | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> [Thatcham Town Council] considered the West Berkshire Council Draft Consultation Policy 2012 and thought that it was a well written paper and they welcomed the six week consultation period. The Members came up with two suggestions which they felt may further enhance the consultation process: Would it be possible to attach an appendix of consultation where they are statutory? Not everyone one has access to a computer/internet, so other ways of consultation should be available to cover this. | <p>Noted.</p> <p>We will collate and publish a list of statutory consultations for the period 2013/14.</p> <p>Although pursuing electronic means as a cost effective and increasingly conventional way of disseminating information, we are of course mindful that not everyone has access to the internet and continue to utilise more traditional forms of communication.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whilst general rules are intended to provide guidance on the way consultation is undertaken, the document is silent on 'weighting' of responses. There is a hint of this in the 'general principle: inclusive' - taking account of 'seldom heard groups' and specific reference to 'all businesses affected'. Reference is made to the status of elected members, presumably District Councillors. Parish and Town Councillors are also elected members, also representing their local communities. The guidance should be explicit on the status of representations from this group and allow for weighting of such, where appropriate. | Noted. This comment is of a more technical nature and as such is better suited to the more general consultation toolkit. That said, it is difficult to be prescriptive on what weighting to ascribe to directly affected or interested groups as this would be dependant on the salience of the issue under consideration. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think you have made every effort to satisfy probably instructions from Central Government. You have given the subject a lot of thought - I hope my comments help. | Noted, with thanks |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In my opinion the document is very long and wordy – I believe vast swathes could be cut out and condensed into a succinct and 'to the point' document. It seems to be more of a discussion document than a policy document. I also believe a contact telephone number or enquiry email address or contact point should be on the document. | <p>The document has been consciously drafted as a succinct and easy to read document setting out the background, issues to consider and key principles. It currently stands at less than 10 pages.</p> <p>The policy will be posted on our westberks.gov.uk/consultation webpages -</p> |

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| | with all relevant contextual and contact information and links. This web address is cited as a footnote throughout the policy. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syntax / grammatically there are some errors / inconsistencies. NB you need to either take off all the full stops in the bullet pointed areas or put them on all the sentences / bullet points – currently you have a mixture of both. | Noted, with thanks. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under ‘aims and objectives’ should not the statutory obligations be the first point? | We do not agree with this. We cite these objectives and principles as we believe these are the correct manner in which to effectively conduct our business, not simply because we have an statutory obligation to do so. As such, these reasons are given primacy. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should something not be mentioned about the consultation hopefully leading to ‘better use of resources and potential cost savings’? | Noted, however this is referred to under the first bullet on page 3: Effective consultation ... provides an input to ... making the best use of limited resources. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The consultation policy seems fine in principle. I imagine most consultees would like to know how the views received are taken into account in practice. Some quantified feedback would be helpful For example: how many respondents; % in favour of x, percentage in favour of y etc. If consultation is to be worthwhile, respondents need to see in practice how their views have been taken into account and that policy has been changed to reflect their views. | Noted. If a quantitative exercise be conducted then part of the summary of responses would be to provide an numerical analysis on the basis of questions posed. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking 'dipstick' soundings from ad hock residents seems to be a valid method – if only testing! Worth noting that some groups are really nothing more than politically convenient shells. That means any response is likely to be of a very restricted nature. | Noted. The policy states that ‘everyone who will be affected should have the opportunity to have their views heard.’ |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following the return and analysis of responses it would be valuable is a very brief “executive summary” could be provided to those who replied or all recipients of the survey. With possibly a simple graphical representation of those supporting, opposing or offering comments. | <p>As per above, the summary of responses would capture and synthesise all the key, salient points. The content of the summary would depend on the nature of the exercise – be it quantitative or qualitative.</p> <p>As a minimum, the policy states that all respondents should be sent a copy of the summary with information on where they can get further information should they wish.</p> |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm afraid your email left me in a frame of mind you probably didn't expect. Is it actually the case that in the midst of the rampant turmoil in local and central Government, what has reached the top of some 'TO-DO' list is to launch a consultation about your consultation policy? Did you consult anyone about this? Maybe you should hire some consultants who could tell you if they knew of anyone who could borrow your watch off you in order to tell you what the time is. I'm afraid I couldn't find any footage of Nero consulting on the subject of flame-retardent stringed instruments, so I leave you with this: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSid-p0Xlk0&t=6m25s [Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy - B-Ark Management Consultants] Hoping that you may be able to reach out to some of your staff or service users and find possibly more directly active outlets for your department's time and undoubted talents. I remain, Sir, humbly, one of the people who pays your wages, | <p>It is considered necessary to update our consultation policy to ensure we have a robust framework for officers to ensure exercises are targeted, designed appropriately and to ensure that decisions are based on appropriate and robust evidence and information available.</p> <p>It is considered appropriate to elicit the views of residents across the district to ensure that the principles are salient and meet the needs and expectations of communities across West Berkshire.</p> <p>Historically, we believe our processes and past policies to be relatively robust and as such this is seen as a relatively straight-forward updating exercise.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm not sure where it fits within the structure of this document, but I can't find any reference to the fact that any consultation framework needs to allow for it to be part of an iterative process. i.e. that the findings of one consultation may cause some fundamental change to the thing being consulted on, and therefore mean it needs to be changed, and the proposal issued again in modified form for a new consultation. The process cannot (always) be simply "Create proposal", "Consult on it", "Make decision" There needs to be a feedback loop to allow "Modify proposal" and "Further Consultation" before "Make Decision". | <p>This is a good point. Fundamentally, the process being described is the more formative, developmental aspect of policy / service development prior to any formal consultation taking place where the involvement of stakeholder groups would ordinarily be sought. There is, of course, scope to amend a scheme / policy / service as a result of the evidence that comes to light as a result of the consultation.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It goes without saying that West Berkshire must ensure that this consultation process is not seen as a sham whereby comments are gathered , then ignored so that the proposal goes ahead having been "consulted". | <p>Noted</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think there should be some mention of the speed of consultations. | <p>The minimum 'window' proposed is 6 weeks. This is to allow adequate</p> |

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| <p>There is a perception among many people that Councils are slow to make decisions, long consultation procedures will just make this worse.</p> | <p>opportunity and space in which consultees can reasonably be (a) made aware of the consultation (b) consider the proposals and (c) respond. This has been our policy for a number of years and we have had no feedback that this does not provide sufficient time.</p> <p>It is felt that reducing this as a general principle however would lead to instances whereby consultees may feel too hurried and squeezed to submit a considered response.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some of the consultations have been very good – these are the ones where there are choices and preferences. The generic, apple pie and motherhood consultations are worse than useless – we EXPECT people to work harder and try to do better – this should not be a matter for consultation | <p>Noted. The ‘clarity of purpose’ principle states that it is made clear what information is sought and how this will be used to inform the decision-making process.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Above and beyond everything else is the importance of managing this process. Very wise to consult, that is unarguable. But then comes the critical issue of managing that data and all that input. The council management is paid to use their judgement to manage. A lot of the input you will get will be from well meaning but impractical people ,some will come from lunatic fringe, most will come from common sense sources with some value. But committees design camels not racehorses! The great thing about advice is that it can always be ignored! | <p>Noted.</p> |