



Consultation/Involvement **Strategy**

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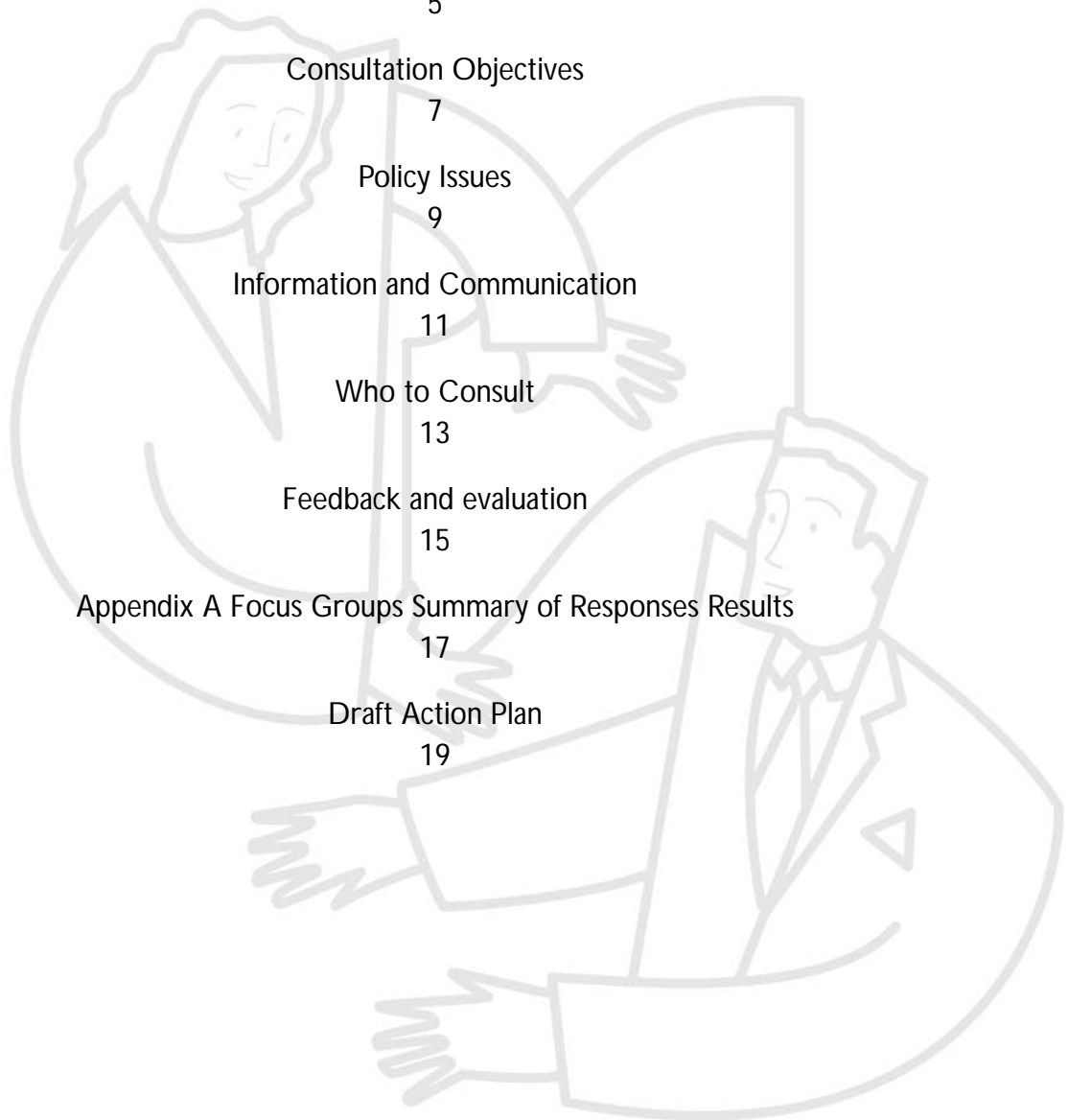
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INTRODUCTION

The Chief Officers Management Team identified a working group to undertake a number of tasks in relation to consultation/involvement and to develop a strategy and action plan as follows:-

- Undertake a mapping exercise of current consultation activity both internal and with partners
- Research best practice including both primary and secondary sources
- Involve stakeholders through focus groups
- Agree a working definition for consultation together with partners
- Draft an Angus Council's consultation and involvement strategy and action plan

The mapping exercise has been finalised internally within the Council. An interim report was prepared detailing best practice through primary and secondary sources.

A number of stakeholder focus groups were held across Angus and these are outlined at Appendix A.

While the Council recognises the importance of consultation and involvement it is also aware that there are situations when there are opposing views. Clearly, when this is the case it is not possible to satisfy all of the interested parties and difficult decisions need to be taken. There are also views of service delivery or policy development where the Council's ability to respond to the views expressed is limited by its statutory powers, by financial constraints, or indeed the Council's own political view on a matter. It is important that when this happens, it is not seen as negating the process of consultation, but is simply a recognition of the complexities of many issues. However, within this context the Council is committed to providing wide opportunities for consultation and involvement with the aim of improving service delivery.

A working definition has been agreed internally within the Council and it is understood that some work has been undertaken separately with partner organisations in relation to consultation and involvement. The definition does not conflict with this work.

The Working Group agreed that:-

"a response consultation is by definition more than a judgement on what is or has been, in that it may suggest an appropriate course for future action or comment on a particular course of action. Consultation does provide the information necessary to make decisions and should provide views on what or how something should be done in future. Researching customer or citizen satisfaction falls short of consultation if it does not provide an opportunity to contribute views on future activities."

Within the context of the work of Angus Council, to be effective consultation and involvement should:-

- improve public awareness about available services
- gather information about views and needs

- obtain feedback about service delivery
- check organisation priorities against those of the public
- enable people who use services, their carers and their representatives, to participate in the planning, development and delivery of services
- enable organisations that provide services and other relevant organisation/ agencies to participate in the consultation processes
- monitoring and evaluating consultation process
- taking account of, and being responsive to views and needs, and use them to inform decision making
- provide feedback

Angus Council recognises that:-

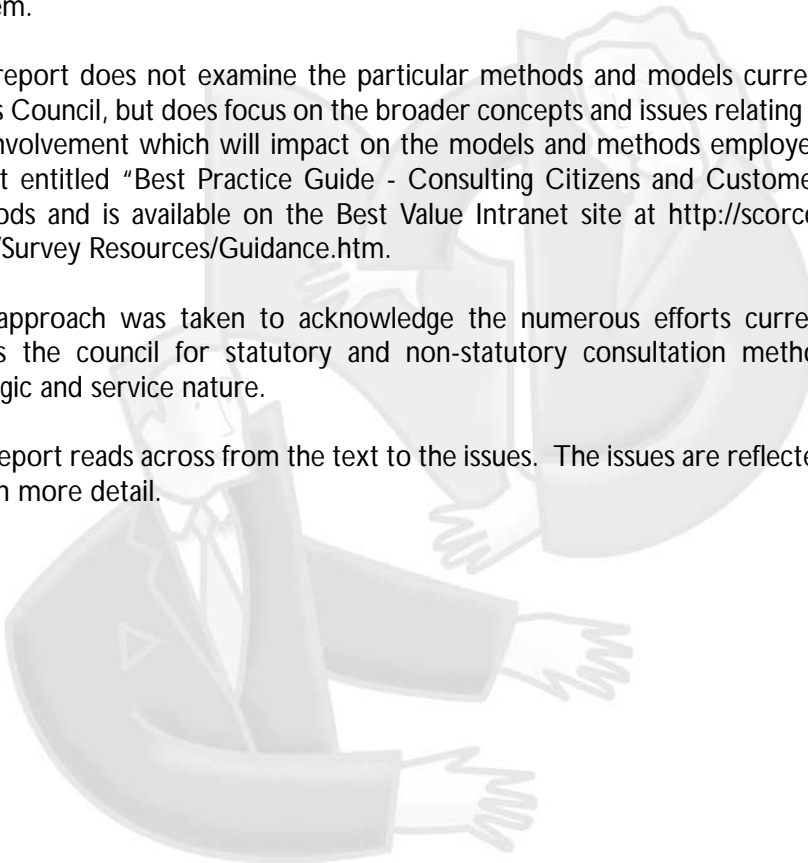
“There is no right way of consulting and involving the public. The choice of methods should be matched with the purpose and circumstances in which it takes place”. (Barker, Bullen, De Ville, 1999)

Each approach has its own strength and weaknesses, some work better in certain circumstances and for particular purposes than others. Consultation and involvement are not just a matter of using different forms and models, they need to be placed in a political, policy and personal context. There is a need for clarity as to what is expected from different forms and models of consultation and involvement and what can be obtained of them.

This report does not examine the particular methods and models currently utilised by Angus Council, but does focus on the broader concepts and issues relating to consultation and involvement which will impact on the models and methods employed. A separate report entitled “Best Practice Guide - Consulting Citizens and Customers” deals with methods and is available on the Best Value Intranet site at <http://scorcountyt01/best value/Survey Resources/Guidance.htm>.

This approach was taken to acknowledge the numerous efforts currently underway across the council for statutory and non-statutory consultation methods of both a strategic and service nature.

The report reads across from the text to the issues. The issues are reflected in the action plan in more detail.



PLANNING CONSULTATION

Consultation can either be part of a statutory requirement or be taken as best practice. This document encompasses both. It is recognised however, that for many statutory consultations e.g. local plan, issuing of Traffic Regulation Orders, procedures are in place to seek comment or views based on requirements established outwith Angus Council.

The first step in any consultation exercise will be identifying the need for input. It maybe that a policy initiative in external agencies requires a decision by the Council, and it will effect the public, or that a management suggestion has been made that would do likewise. Finally, it may be that the public wish to see something change and the Council wishes to consider the implications fully. Whatever the impetus, a decision is required about an issue or service.

It is important to recognise that consultation will be used in helping to lead to a decision. The results of consultation are an input to decisions, but having consulted the public does not free local authority officers and members from their duties to offer advice on and to make, decisions. Local authority members need to consider a range of factors when making decisions, and the outcome of consultation is only one of these factors, albeit an important one.

It is necessary to establish the extent and timing of consultation exercises required across the Council in order to appreciate both the nature and level of expectations placed on the people we wish to consult. In Angus, these should mainly be identified through the service planning process. However it is recognised that some consultations will occur in an ad-hoc or untimed basis, due to the nature of our work and the pace of change with which we all live.

It is therefore essential to ensure that participants are not overwhelmed by the consultation exercise through either too much consultation activity at any given point in time or by shortened time limits.

In addition to consultation exercises, the Council also conducts a significant amount of research which in turn provides background information for decision making including consultation. Currently research exercises are notified to the Policy & Performance Unit. Details of which are then published on the Council's corporate intranet site.



PLANNING CONSULTATION

Issue 1

All interested parties should have the opportunity to suggest issues, which the Council may wish to consult on. The existing ways of suggesting issues through Councillors and Area Forums should be supplemented by the development of customer comment, compliment and complaint forms, which can be completed through Council offices, the Internet or ACCESS Line.

It is recommended that the Group or individual contributing comments should be able to:-

- Indicate whether they wish their views to be passed to relevant council employees for action
- Indicate whether their views should be made publicly available
- Make an anonymous comment on the understanding that the Council reserves the right not to publish
- That all suggested issues will be welcomed and considered, but, will not necessarily result in a consultation exercise

Issue 2

Service Plans should identify all research and consultation exercises planned during the coming year, including those required for Best Value Service Reviews and Corporate Initiatives. The Consultation Strategy should be fully incorporated in service planning guidelines and the service review model.

Issue 3

Details of planned consultation exercises should be made available on the Council's corporate internet site.

CO-ORDINATING CONSULTATION

It is important to develop co-ordination mechanisms for consultation activity. Establishing an initial list of potential consultation as recommended within the service planning process, leaves open the possibility of encouraging corporate and partnership working, minimise duplication of effort, and can streamline the process of consultation.

Where partnership arrangements can be co-ordinated, each agency can contribute resources to undertake the consultation activity, and thereby spread the effectiveness of each agencies contribution.

Community Planning is particularly important in this regard, and is highlighted by the Scottish Executive as potentially being the most effective mechanism to co-ordinate local inter-agency working. Early discussions with partners will therefore be important in progressing Angus Council's consultation and involvement strategy and action plan.

The development of a work plan co-ordinating consultation should be compatible with the needs of participants. The time required for consultation exercise is therefore crucially important.

Clearly, the needs of community and voluntary organisations in terms of timescale may differ significantly from other forms of consultation activity. Account should be taken for this when developing timescales. The Scottish Executive currently recommend that an allowance of at least 12 weeks should be made for consultation whenever possible. It is recognised that this will not be the case for many statutory consultation exercises.

CO-ORDINATING CONSULTATION

Issue 4

The initial list of potential consultation exercises generated within the Council should be examined with a view to combining exercises where possible and thus avoiding wasteful duplication and consultation fatigue.

Issue 5

Work is needed in conjunction with Community Planning partners to establish mechanisms to improve the co-ordination of consultation activity across all organisations.

Issue 6

The timescale for the various types of consultation exercise should be broken down into discrete stages and timescales. Each particular element should be developed following evaluation of similar exercises.



CONSULTATION OBJECTIVES

It is vitally important for every consultation exercise to be clear about what is intended from the exercise at the outset. Consultation and involvement activity are not an end in themselves but rather a mechanism to assist in arriving at a decision. Without clear objectives, not only will the exercise be likely to fail, but evaluation will also be impossible. For every consultation exercise it will be necessary to consider a range of questions at the outset e.g.

- Why you wish to consult
- How you will use the result
- What are the limitations
- When would be the best time to consult and where
- With whom you wish to consult
- Is relevant information already available
- What resources (staff and budget) are required

You will also need to consider what will happen to the results when you have completed your exercise. In other words, how will they be fed into the relevant decision making arena.

Developing objectives, it is necessary to frame them in SMART (Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic, Timebound) terms. This will enable a clear measure to be taken as to whether the consultation/involvement exercise was effective. Guidelines for framing SMART objectives are currently on the councils corporate intranet site.

Setting clear objectives at the outset of the exercise will also reduce the likelihood that the consultation exercise will fail. Also, there is an expectation in any consultation endeavour by participants that their contribution is of value. Failing to take their contribution into account could result in (a) a loss of credibility with the likelihood that future participation will be reduced, (b) greater likelihood of ineffective and unpopular decisions and (c) cynicism about local democracy.

CONSULTATION OBJECTIVES

Issue 7

In order to provide assistance, a simple checklist should be designed to ensure that consultations are based on SMART objectives. The checklist should cover the questions to be answered, methods to be used, details of literature to be reviewed, basic information to be collected, identified limitations, options, the timetable and costs. It is recognised, however, that the questions to be answered will vary depending on the nature of the consultation.



POLICY ISSUES

Public consultation should relate to the decision that is intended to be made and which can be influenced by the result of the consultation. Consultation and involvement should not occur where a decision has already been taken and cannot be changed by the outcome of the consultation.

That is not to say that the outcome of the consultation exercise will be wholly endorsed in every situation. It is important to acknowledge limitations at the outset of the exercise and thereby not raise expectations unrealistically. Being clear with people who are being consulted is essential.

Where possible consultation should be linked to policies, and also allow for linkage to service planning and thus implementation. In this way there is a clarity of process and decision making. A lead officer in service departments can assist this process.



POLICY ISSUES

Issue 8

Consultation objectives should be drafted with a view to assisting in choosing policy options.

A lead officer should be identified for each consultation.

Issue 9

Support should be available for all named officers in determining consultation objectives.

Issue 10

Policy options should be implemented through the performance management framework, and service delivery, from community plan, to corporate plan to service plans to individual Personal Action Plans.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

Clearly, consultation and involvement cannot be considered in isolation from information and communication issues.

There is a need to make potential participants aware of their ability to influence consultation agendas, their ability to participate in exercises both generally and specifically, and to make them aware of the objectives and limitations and potential decisions. The need for information and communication, however, extends beyond these areas.

Many participants or potential participants simply do not have the time to go through extensive documents. A summary covering the key issues of consultation, for all but the shortest written documentations, should be published.

For the whole process of consultation and participation to be effective the Council has to provide information in order that users and citizens are able to play their part. The Council needs to provide information in a range of ways:-

- So that users understand what services are available and how to access them
- So that users and the Council have common, realistic expectations about services, which can be challenged and proved over time
- So that consultees understand what they are being asked about, and are able to give an informed response
- To provide feedback on the results of consultations so that citizens are able to monitor what is being done of their behalf

It becomes clear that there is a need to develop an information and communication management system that ensures all sections of the Council provide information about their services.

There is also a need to ensure that documents are available in a number of formats including print and electronic versions that potential participants could choose to access these for themselves. Associated issues relate to providing documents in electronic format which would allow them to be distributed through all council public contact points.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

Issue 11

For all but the shortest written documents, a concise summary should be provided for each consultation exercise detailing objectives, options, opportunities to contribute and timescales.

Issue 12

The Council's information management capabilities should be developed to ensure that participants have full access to service information, performance information and statistics.

Issue 13

Information that needs to be regularly collected needs to be identified, and mechanisms set up to ensure collection and dissemination occurs. An information audit should be conducted to identify information supply and demand.

Issue 14

The Policy & Performance Unit should manage information and communication including consultation, research, provision of information including performance information and statistics, co-ordination of research, consultation and public reporting, and a strategic review of information and communication management.

Issue 15

Continue to develop standards in relation to information and oversee and manage the implementation of these standards.

Issue 16

The viability of quarterly or monthly newsletters incorporating news, public performance reporting, marketing materials, consultation lists, feedback and any other Council communications to the public should be considered.

Issue 17

The e-government group should continue to develop methods to publish council documents and geographically referenced information. This will allow users of the internet and intranet to access information either electronically or in print.

WHO TO CONSULT

The Audit Commission's "Listen Up! Effective Community Consultation" identifies three main groupings of potential participants in a consultation exercise as follows:-

- As consumers, when people are asked for their views about particular service that they either do or may use.
- As tax payers, when consultation focuses on the balance between the level of services provided and their cost.
- As citizens, when consultation focuses on what people think about policy questions, such as the type of development that might take place in their town centre or the relative priority that is given to different aspects of policing.

In order to be inclusive in consultation/involvement efforts, then additional efforts must be made to reach certain hard to reach groups and individuals.

Other stakeholders in the business of Angus Council and include other statutory, voluntary and private sector organisations.

WHO TO CONSULT

Issue 18

Due to the broad nature of citizenship, all consultation should be open to all interested parties and mechanisms to contribute views should be widely available.

Issue 19

Appropriate methods should be used to enable hard to reach groups to participate.

Issue 20

A list of regular consultation participants should be established across the Council in electronic format. Individuals and organisations on the list should be notified of all consultations. The compilation of this list will require input from a number of groups.



FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION

It is essential to feedback to consultees so that they know that their time and effort has been worthwhile, and that their input is being used constructively.

It can be hugely frustrating for people who give up their time to make comment and then hear no more. It is often assumed in this scenario that nothing has happened and that their time has been wasted.

In order to break this cycle, it is suggested that it is good practice to publish the results of any consultation exercise. In this way, trust between participants and the council can begin to build. Where the decision to be made is likely to take time to be taken or implemented, it may be necessary to provide feedback at various stages in the process. In this way people are kept up to date with progress and again trust is enhanced.

Evaluation is not something to think about only at the end of an exercise. Deciding how the consultation/involvement exercise will be assessed in terms of its effectiveness is a fundamental part of the consultation design. Judging whether an individual exercise has been a success depends largely on its objectives. However, there are two main dimensions to consider:-

- The quality of the exercise, including the extent to which target audiences were reached; and
- The cost.

A number of questions can be considered in this regard as follows:-

- Were the aims and objectives of the consultation achieved?
- Was the consultation exercise effective?
- Was a representative sample of the target group reached?
- Were all consultees given equal opportunity to participate?
- What resources were used (planned and unplanned)?
- Was the consultation value for money?
- What feedback was given about the consultation?
- What were the direct and indirect impacts of the consultation?
- Were the timescales kept to and appropriate?

FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION

Issue 21

Policy decisions should ensure that all those who have contributed to a consultation exercise are made aware of the outcome.

Issue 22

Evaluation should be carried out for all consultation exercises according to clearly established objectives. They should always cover:-

- Total number of responses
- Issues with regard to timescales
- Any complaints as to procedures
- Costs
- Evaluation should be published

APPENDIX A

Focus Groups Summary of Responses Results

Focus groups were conducted with the following groups:

- Arbroath Food Co-op, 20, November 2000
- Carnoustie Youth Council, 22 November, 2000
- Angus Council staff based at Bruce House, 27 November, 2000
- Lundie, Muirhead & Birkhill Community Council, 7 December, 2000
- Brechin Housing Office, 13 December, 2000

Each group was asked to provide views on the following:

- 1 What should you be consulted about by the Council?**
- 2 What information/support do you need to be involved?**
- 3 How should we feedback?**

The following provides a summary of the responses.

1 What should you be consulted about by the Council?

All groups wanted to be consulted on what they felt mattered to them and each wanted to be able to suggest areas for consultation that could form a consultation timetable or agenda. As all groups were clear that they didn't want to respond to every consultation a timetable was felt to be important. On core principles all of the groups mentioned the relevance of both Angus-wide and local consultations, although they were clear that they did not wish to participate in all exercises. Each group felt it was important to be able to find out the geographic area each consultation exercise. All groups stressed that when initiatives were introduced without consultation they often failed.

2 What information/support do you need to be involved?

All groups felt that clear information about current and future activity was essential. A timetable of consultations open to suggestions from groups would allow them the opportunity to decide just which consultations were worth being involved. The groups agreed that information had to both be accessible and detailed and would need to be provided at a variety of levels of complexity to allow all groups and individuals an opportunity to understand the issue. Suggestions included localised newsletters, information points, localised information, clear language, glossaries, use of the Citizens' Advice Bureau, 'What's new?' summaries of developments, concise summaries of the exercise, and facilitated small group discussions.

All groups felt that the timing and time allowed for consultation was crucial. Where groups held regular meetings it was essential that the initiative could be discussed at the meeting to allow a collective response, this required sufficient time prior to the meeting to investigate the issue. It was also suggested that timescales avoid particular times of the year, notably exam times.

All groups raised issues relating to the ways comments could be provided. There was a demand for both regular public meetings with advance notice and small facilitated local meetings, arguably the Area Forums have some role here, and there is also an issue concerning the resources required to support small group discussions. None of the groups suggested that it was necessary for the public to be directly consulted but all felt that they should be directly consulted. One group stressed the need to ensure that when a questionnaire was used at a transaction point pens were available and another suggestion was to use Social Education class-time to undertake supported consultations.

Most groups identified the need for support often seen in the form of facilitation. Other support may include issuing tailored information and advice or providing training. Advice and information could be delivered in a number of ways and would provide the two way communication that most groups wanted. The stated preference for paper rather than e-mail, phone or the net suggests that any electronic systems must be capable of producing suitable paper versions for distribution.

Finally all groups suggested that trust needed to be established, this strategy should ensure that trust is built over time.

3 How should we feedback?

The main feedback mechanisms suggested by the groups were local meetings and newsletters. Stress was placed on making feedback understandable to participants, with mention of A4 summaries and the use of the internet to facilitate communication. Some groups suggested that feedback should occur at a number of stages including the end of scoping or qualitative work, quantitative or survey work, the drafting of documents outlining potential decisions and finally following a decision. It should be stressed, however, that the biggest single complaint was that at present virtually no feedback is provided.

DRAFT ACTION PLAN	TIMESCALE	RESPONSIBILITY
<p>1 Produce a draft form for use by councillors, Area Forum support staff, and the public, together with suggested procedures for recording and disseminating comments. Following consultation a final design should be agreed. A comment recording and communication system should be introduced.</p> <p>Suggest mechanisms for listing measures of public concern raised in the media to be included as potential consultation issues.</p>	<p>December 2001 January 2002 March 2002</p> <p>December 2001</p>	<p>P&P Unit P&P Unit P&P Unit</p> <p>PR</p>
<p>2 The Strategic Issues Team should take account of the aims of the Consultation Strategy when reviewing or revising service planning guidelines and service review model.</p>	<p>February 2002</p>	<p>SIT</p>
<p>3 Bring together those planning individual exercises to produce a consultation programme to be agreed by Councillors.</p>	<p>February and August Annually</p>	<p>P&P Unit</p>
<p>4 The issue of co-ordinating consultation and research exercises and managing information should be raised with Community Planning partners through the Community Planning Steering Group.</p>	<p>December 2001</p>	<p>Chief Executive</p>
<p>5 Draft guidance to be made available to those planning a consultation exercise detailing the consideration to be given to the periods required for responses to qualitative, suggested minimum 8 weeks, and quantitative exercises, suggested minimum, 4 weeks, and consultation documents, suggested minimum 12 weeks. If stages are to be combined this is to be explicitly stated in the objectives.</p>	<p>December 2001</p>	<p>P&P Unit</p>
<p>6 To ensure that consultation objectives include SMART targets and are effectively planned, design a pro-forma to record:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a summary of the topic of consultation; • information to be collected prior to the consultation period; • the questions to be consulted upon; • the methods to be used; • a list of relevant consultees; • any identified limitations; • potential decisions; • potential Service Plan amendments; • the consultation timetable; and • costs. 	<p>December 2001</p>	<p>P&P Unit</p>
<p>Following consultation an agreed pro-forma should be implemented.</p>	<p>March 2002</p>	<p>Chief Officers</p>
<p>7 The information and communications management strategy currently under development should take full account of the consultation/involvement strategy.</p>	<p>March 2002</p>	<p>Chief Executive/E-government Group</p>
<p>8 Ensure that all consultation exercises include evaluations.</p>	<p>April 2002</p>	<p>P&P Unit</p>