

For Bath City Forum agenda:

B&NES consultation process (excluding planning development system)

Several consultations in the past few years, such as the proposed move of the central library to the One Stop Shop and proposed Park & Ride on Bathampton Meadows, have generated considerable public concern over the consultation process and must have used up significant amounts of Council resources in officer time as well as cost.

Most people's conception of "consultation" is, I suggest, the dictionary definition of the verb "to consult", i.e. to seek information or advice, to gain permission or approval (OED). However, B&NES' [typology of consultations](#) (information giving; information gathering; deciding together; working together, ie with other agencies) does not accord with this and diverges from Central government guidance on consultations ([Consultation Principles](#) (2018)) which includes "Consult about policies or implementation plans when the development of the policies or plans is at a formative stage". When we are responding to consultations as residents, we do not know whether we are merely being "informed" or whether our opinions will be taken into account, though the limited options given on questionnaires to express an opinion suggests that it is often the former.

Guidance for developers on consultation is set out in [My Neighbourhood](#). The [Adopted Statement of Community Involvement \(2007\)](#) states that community involvement via consultation should have a broader remit. See figure 1 below. This information is provided on a Council webpage updated as recently as January 2018.

Figure 1: Bath & North East Somerset Council's corporate values on community involvement

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| What is consultation? | A process by which the Council seeks and responds to the views of members of the general public who will be affected by particular policies or decisions. |
| Why consult? | <p>The Council has certain statutory duties to consult, but it also carries out consultation to improve existing services and to inform planned projects, schemes and policies. A range of methods can be used:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ to assess whether or not services are meeting needs and expectations;▪ to improve relevance and take-up of services;▪ to test options for service changes;▪ to discover what perceptions and attitudes are prevalent;▪ to keep track of perceptions and attitudes;▪ to measure current satisfaction levels;▪ to discuss alternative ways of delivering Council services, and improve delivery;▪ to understand the views of minority community groups;▪ to involve local people in decision making;▪ to weigh up different and conflicting priorities. |
| Benefits of consultation for the Council include: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ maximising the efficiency and effectiveness of services;▪ increasing relevance of services;▪ improving our understanding of communities by collecting views, opinions and experiences;▪ establishing a clearer direction for service development. |
| Benefits for participants include: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ greater knowledge and understanding of the Council and its services;▪ increased involvement, participation and engagement with the Council;▪ contributing to local decision making;▪ opportunity to express views and concerns;▪ opportunity to identify service improvements. |

However, when I asked Democratic Services last year about the status of the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), I was told in an email that the SCI had been replaced by Area Forums under the [Connecting Communities Framework](#). This states:

Our new approach starts from the presumption that the voices and activities of local communities are central to public service design and delivery. This approach can be seen and has been tested through a number of projects supported by the Public Services. However, given the “patchwork” of engagement initiatives that currently exist in our area, there is an urgent need to make it easier for our local communities to collaborate with us and with each other. Connecting Communities therefore is built around a single framework for local engagement to be used by the Public Services Board as well as by other partners and residents. This will be built around “cluster” arrangements and will be rolled out in both the unparished and parished areas of Bath and North East Somerset.

As members of Bath City Forum, this puts a huge responsibility on us to obtain, scrutinise and disseminate information affecting residents in the area, and somehow represent their views. It is essential that the consultation process is transparent.

It would be useful for the Council (Democratic Services? Strategy and Performance?) to explain to BCF:

Who decides what consultations are conducted and at what stage in the development of “a project” they should take place?

What determines which type of consultation is undertaken, and who is consulted and by what methods? Could the type of consultation be made explicit, ie whether residents are being merely “informed” or whether their opinions are truly sought and valued?

When are Vox Pops used, and how are ‘phone correspondents selected?

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