

RMBC CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT POLICY

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RMBC CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT POLICY

1. Strategic Objective

Public consultation and engagement is an important part of improving the quality of services provided by Rotherham Council and its partners, and needs to be given a high priority. A modern council engages with its residents and listens to their views to help shape and design services and inform policy making.

With an increased demand for services coupled with a reduction in public sector budgets, there is a need to change the way in which Council services are delivered. There is now an emphasis to deliver more streamlined services with greater efficiency, with a focus on multi-disciplinary working and increased involvement from communities in shaping local services.

The policy meets with a number of the Council's strategic objectives, including the Council Plan's priority of being a 'modern and efficient Council,' by contributing to 'responsiveness to local need and accountability to citizens'. It also ties in with the Thriving Neighbourhoods Strategy, which is about the Council and residents working together to achieve better outcomes and improve the quality of life in Rotherham.

This policy also links with one of the Rotherham Together Partnership's main underlying principals in The Rotherham Plan 2025: 'engaging and involving our communities in everything we do'. In addition, the policy will support the Rotherham Compact and comply with the Equality Act 2010.

Rotherham MBC will aspire to and apply the standards and principles established in this policy document.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to set out guidelines for Council staff to follow when undertaking any type of public consultation and engagement activity. The policy should be read alongside the Consultation and Engagement Toolkit ([link](#)) which offers a step-by-step guide on the process.

3. Aims

This policy sets out the Council's commitment to consult and engage with the public. To enable the Council to engage effectively with our residents we will:

- Listen, inform and work in partnership with service users and stakeholders, and wherever possible include their views in the shaping, commissioning and delivery of services

- Comply with the public sector equality duty
- Comply with current legislation around consultation and engagement
- Embed a clear and consistent approach to consultation and community engagement
- Ensure all staff adhere to the RMBC Standards for Consultation and Engagement when engaging with the public and stakeholders
- Make the best use of resources by building on existing community engagement exercises and share across the Council and partners, as far as possible, the results of community engagement which will help to avoid duplication and consultation fatigue
- Maintain a corporate overview of consultation and engagement to ensure alignment between different areas of the Council, that the content of consultations are appropriate and that the process meets Equality and Diversity standards
- Provide feedback on consultations in a timely manner and in an appropriate format, including how the council has responded to the findings of consultation

4. Roles and Responsibilities

Continuous engagement with the public is essential in the current climate of austerity and reductions in public sector budgets, where services are increasingly having to be delivered in new and innovative ways. It is important to maintain close working relationships with the public to keep them informed throughout the process and build trust when difficult decisions have to be made.

The Council will sometimes have a statutory requirement to consult residents, particularly for issues such as planning, redevelopments or major service changes. Statutory consultations are bound by legal requirements, such as Best Value legislation, and can have strict rules surrounding how they should be conducted. If there is a failure to run a statutory consultation in line with those rules then the Council could be liable for a judicial review so it is important to check the guidelines surrounding specific consultation plans.

Engagement activities are embedded within all aspects of the commissioning cycle. It should be standard practice to engage service users and stakeholders regularly to seek feedback, opinions and ideas to inform the way we work. Engagement can help to inform change by gaining an understanding of what people think, what they need and what they prefer. We can also explore which changes are acceptable to people, or understand how certain changes would impact on particular service users.

Sometimes Cabinet decisions will be needed before services can be changed or reduced. This is when a formal consultation process is required.

It is important for Council officers to consider when to consult with the public and how formal the consultation should be. It is the responsibility of the relevant service to plan and undertake the consultation, analyse the results and provide sufficient feedback.

The Corporate Consultation and Engagement Group will be responsible for overseeing the development, delivery and evaluation of consultation and engagement activity across the Council. This will include providing challenge to consultation and engagement practice where necessary, as well as increasing awareness and understanding of good practice. A toolkit has also been developed to sit alongside this policy to provide step-by-step guidance for officers. This will aim to embed a robust approach and ensure that consultation and engagement plays an integral role in change proposals and decision-making.

Forward Plan

If a consultation or engagement proposal impacts on two or more wards or will incur/save £400,000 or more, it is a key decision and should be included on the Council Forward Plan. The Forward Plan contains all the key decisions the Council expects to take over the next three months. It is refreshed monthly and will give at least 28 days' notice of any Key Decisions and, if applicable, the Cabinet's intention to discuss an item in private. It provides the opportunity to submit relevant documents to the decision maker concerning any individual Key Decision and draws attention to any relevant constitutional process.

Where proposals contained in a report have a significant impact on communities living or working in an area, details of the nature, extent and results of how those communities (and ward members) have been consulted in the development of the proposals must be included in the report. Any consultation document must be clearly referenced as a background document.

Equality Analysis

An Equality Analysis (EA) is vital in identifying particular groups that may be affected by a proposed change to a policy, procedure, function or service.

In most cases, as part of the decision making process, an EA will need to be completed in connection with any planned changes.

The EA process and consultation process are linked and it therefore helps to plan them together. Further information about RMBC's Equality Analysis is available on the following link: [RMBC Equality Analysis](#)

5. Definitions

Consultations

Consultation allows us to ask people what they think about a particular service area or strategy or asks what their needs are and what could be done about them. This can help us make the right decisions and ensure we are providing services in the right way to the right people at the right time. Consultations also enable the Council to understand what is important to residents when developing policies and strategies. The Council will sometimes have a statutory requirement to consult residents, particularly for issues such as planning or redevelopments.

Community Engagement

For those who carry responsibility for public services, engaging with the community means ensuring that everyone in their local area is given the opportunity to comment on the issues and services that affect them. It also means involving communities in major decisions that are intended to improve their quality of life. Community engagement can involve individuals, voluntary and community organisations and public sector bodies working together to address local issues. Community engagement includes community involvement, consultations, community development and participation.

Community Involvement and Empowerment

Involving people at a local level allows them to influence decisions about their communities, and encourages them to take responsibility for tackling local problems. Community involvement and empowerment is at the heart of the Council's Thriving Neighbourhoods Strategy, which is about the Council and residents working together to achieve better outcomes and improve the quality of life in Rotherham. It will do this by bringing together those who care about the local neighbourhood to co-operate and make a positive difference. The aim is to engage a wide and diverse range of local people, to build the capacity of community groups and voluntary sector organisations, and to draw in support from Council departments and other agencies.

Community Development

Community development is about working with individuals in the community to develop their skills and knowledge, to enable them to respond to their shared needs and problems. Examples of local organisations who provide community development support include Rotherfed and Kimberworth Park Community Partnership. Information about organisations that provide community development support can be sourced through Voluntary Action Rotherham.

Co-design and Co-production

Co-design is an approach which acknowledges that all people have something to offer. It is a participatory approach which seeks to actively involve residents and partners in the designing and shaping of services leading to improvement and innovation.

Co-production is an approach which enables individual service users or groups to influence the support and services they receive, and the way services are designed, commissioned and delivered.

6. RMBC Standards for Consultation and Engagement

Rotherham Council has adopted a number of nationally recognised standards for consultation and engagement which Council officers should adhere to when planning and delivering consultation and/or engagement activity. The below standards will help to ensure that RMBC consistently applies high standards when engaging with communities, which have been identified as good practice nationally.

RMBC Standards for Consultation and Engagement	What do the standards mean?
1. Inclusiveness	It is important to ensure that community engagement seeks to be inclusive as appropriate: Understand Rotherham's communities, their composition, future trends, needs and priorities. Identify the target audience for consultation and also identify those that will be affected by the outcomes of the consultation – which might not always be the same group of people. Recognise that communities can be defined in a number of ways, the most obvious of which is by geography, as well as communities of interest defined by the 9 protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010 which are: • age • disability • gender re-assignment • marriage and civil partnership • pregnancy and maternity • race • religion or belief • sex (gender) • sexual orientation It is important to identify and mitigate potential barriers that some people may face, when engaging them in activity.

2. Clarity of purpose	To achieve the most from consultation and engagement as a Council, we need to be clear about what we are seeking to achieve from the Consultation: • Ensure that we understand the views of communities • Be clear how results will influence services and priorities
3. Timely and Planning	Consultations will need to be carefully planned, with adequate time given to the design, undertaking of and feedback from the consultation activity. It is recognised that the standard 12 week consultation period may not always be possible or appropriate, particularly where extensive engagement has occurred before or where activity is bound by statutory timescales which may be shorter.
4. Communicating, Consulting and Involving in appropriate ways	When using more than one channel for consultation, the Council should ensure that the questions are consistent across all channels and include enough people to give reliable results. The Council will take responsibility to find ways around the barriers to involvement or communication; such as: • Conducting focus groups • Carrying out in-depth interviews • Provide drop in sessions • Material should be provided in appropriate formats using plain English and avoiding jargon All the above are subject to the available budget for the activity being undertaken. It is good practice to involve the target audience in the co-design of the consultation and to test it with a small group to ensure any issues or potential barriers can be identified. However, bear in mind that this will add additional time to the consultation process. The information contained within the ward plans may add value to the consultation. Conversely, the results from the consultation may also be useful for inclusion in the next ward plan refresh.

5. Feedback	Feedback is key to carrying out effective community engagement. The Council should: • Listen to the messages we receive and respond appropriately. • Give feedback to participants on the consultation and explain why a certain course of action has (and in some cases hasn't) been decided or recommended. • Publish results on the Council website or give written feedback through emails. • Provide feedback in a timely manner and in a suitable format • Keep feedback simple and comprehensive and avoid using jargon In terms of publishing the results of consultations, the Communications Team can advise on the available options.
6. Delivers change and improved outcomes	Ensure that community engagement results in positive change and better services by incorporating the results into policies and service delivery. The Council will communicate the outcomes and key messages to Elected Members, officers and communities through internal and external communications, newsletters, emails or the website.
7. Capacity and Resources	It is essential that those responsible for facilitating involvement and carrying out community engagement have the knowledge, skills and resources to do it well. The Council will ensure this happens by making sure that the relevant officers and members have access to advice, training, resources and support as well as having the knowledge and skills to undertake effective consultation and engagement.

7. Related documents

RMBC Consultation and Engagement Toolkit

The Consultation and Engagement Toolkit is designed as a step-by-step guide and should be used alongside this policy. The Toolkit relates mainly to formal consultations, and is aimed at helping Council staff to plan, design and deliver a robust public consultation.

Contained within the toolkit are examples of tools and techniques to use within each step, and should be referred to as and when needed during the consultation process:

[Link to the toolkit](#)

Rotherham Compact

The Rotherham Compact is an agreement between public sector organisations (public services) who are members of the Rotherham Together Partnership (RTP) and voluntary and community organisations in Rotherham (referred to collectively as the voluntary and community sector: VCS). It sets out commitments on both sides to improve the way in which public organisations and the VCS work together for the benefit of communities and citizens.

The target audience for consultation may be broader than voluntary and community sector groups, for example it may include individuals or businesses, but there are some important principles in the Rotherham Compact which should be understood and implemented to ensure that RMBC is compliant with its commitments in the Compact.

The Rotherham Compact is available here: <http://rotherhamtogetherpartnership.org.uk/>

Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010, Section 149)

Engagement and the Equality Duty

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has published guidance on Engagement and The Equality Duty. This states: “While there is no explicit legal requirement under the general equality duty to engage with people with different protected characteristics, the general equality duty requires public authorities to have an adequate evidence base for their decision-making, and engagement can assist with developing that evidence base. Engaging with stakeholders and employees will help public authorities to base their policies on evidence, rather than on assumptions.

The Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty require all public authorities to have due regard for the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation, and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Case law from the previous equality duties states that engagement is important in ensuring public authorities understand the impact of their decisions on different people. A failure to engage has been at the heart of findings that a public authority has not complied with its equality duty.

New Conversations: LGA guide to engagement

The Local Government Association (LGA) have produced a useful and comprehensive guide to engagement which will help to give further ideas and can be found here: [New Conversations Guide](#)

The guide is useful for people throughout the local government sector – whether looking to improve statutory consultation practices to avoid legal challenges or wanting to engage in more creative ways. It provides advice on how to rebuild trust in relationships that have broken down and help the Council to become better at listening and responding to resident concerns.

The government has published a revised set of government consultation principles for 2018. These principles give clear guidance to government departments on conducting consultations: [Consultation Principles 2018](#)

8. Policy Control Statement

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