

Policy on Consultation

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1.0 Policy Summary

- 1.1 This policy describes Mid Ulster District Council's commitment to undertaking consultation as appropriate to assist it in the development of policy and how. The document is supported with practical guidance for staff who may be required to undertake consultations.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 The Council, as a public service provider, strives to ensure that the services it provides are both responsive and indeed delivered in such a way that the needs of its customers fulfilled. To inform the delivery of its services and functions the Council will on occasion consult with local people and groups about its policies and services to improve the Council's services and ensure that they meet the varied needs of customers. The Council will consider when it is appropriate to consult with different audiences, including individual residents, partner organisations and other authorities. Some of the most common opportunities for consultation arise with the periodic review of an existing service, or the introduction of a new policy or service, and also during the normal day to day contact with customers. Guidance on the type and appropriateness of varying types of consultation will be developed to assist council officers in considering and undertaking same.

- 2.2 In the interests of developing how we do business and in continually improving how the Council does things consultation may be undertaken across a number of council functions to for example ascertain a view on how customers may be affected by their policies and services. The need to ascertain the views of customers through consultation is important to the council which will also go some way to assisting it in meeting its legislative duties. Some duties, amongst others, where consultative arrangements will assist include.

- **Equality and Good Relations:** A key pillar of the Section 75 statutory equality and good relations duties on public authorities is the requirement to consult with service users and others likely to be affected by policies and decisions, and to involve them in the policy development and decision making process. The councils' commitment to consultation is set out in its Equality Scheme.
- **Disability Duties** – Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended) requires the council to have regard to the need to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and to encourage the participation of disabled people in public life.
- **Rural Needs** - Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 places a duty on council to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services.

A policy on consultation is not only necessary to fulfil its duties across various aspects of its activities but will contribute to business planning and improved service delivery.

3.0 Policy Aim & Objective

3.1 Policy Aim:

The aim of this policy is to ensure that Mid Ulster District Council carries out effective and appropriate consultation that enables the public, or sections of the public, to have a say in how we design and deliver services that impact on them.

3.2 Policy Objectives:

- To communicate Council's strategic commitment to appropriate and effective consultation
- To provide guidance to staff to help them undertake appropriate and inclusive consultation that maximizes feedback and improves decision making
- To ensure consistency of approach across Council functions and adoption of best practice.

4.0 Policy Scope

4.1 This policy relates to all consultation, irrespective of scale, where the views of service users or potential service users should be sought to inform and influence the development of a policy/plan/project or decision-making.

Consultation may vary in scope and scale according to the significance of the policy/plan/project or decision consulted on, with the expectation that larger scale public consultation exercises will be required for projects of a strategic nature or which involve significant budgets. All new or revised/updated policies/plans, will be considered for the need for some level of consultation – internal, external or both.

5.0 Linkage to the Corporate Plan

5.1 This policy contributes to the delivery of all five Corporate Themes but has a particular focus on Themes One and Two: 'Leadership' and 'Service Delivery'.

6.0 Key principles for effective consultation

- We will ensure that a commitment to consult as appropriate and necessary is built into work plans for policy/project development and implementation.
- We will set out clearly what we are consulting on, why we are consulting and what we will do with the information or feedback that results.
- We will be clear on who we need to consult and plan effectively to ensure that our consultation is targeted appropriately, accessible, user-friendly and inclusive.
- We will allow an appropriate timescale for responses and take factors that may affect response rates into account. For equality-related public consultations, the suggested timescale is 12 weeks, though this may be shortened to no less than 6 weeks in exceptional circumstances when this timescale is not feasible. Smaller scale, targeted consultation will not need this length of time.
- We will also ensure that consultees are made aware of how their input has been considered and ensure that information gained from consultation is shared across departments and functions as appropriate to inform future work.
- We will ensure that staff who carry out consultations comply with data protection legislation.
- We will monitor who is responding to our consultations so that we can be sure we are getting feedback from a cross-section of the population or the targets of the exercise.
- We will always consider if we should try to consult with individuals as well as representative groups, recognising that not all individuals belong to groups or feel they reflect their specific experience.

In drawing up our principles, the council has sought to ensure consistency with practice and those of [The Cabinet Office Consultation principles 2018](#).

7.0 How We Will Consult

- 7.1 The Council will ensure that consultations are accessible to everyone who wishes to participate in them. This will include identifying and overcoming any barriers to full public participation.

8.1 Roles and Responsibilities

- 8.1 The role of managers in relation to this policy is to demonstrate leadership by ensuring that consultation considered as part of work/project plans and to ensure that staff comply with the policy and associated guidance, as developed.

Assistant Directors and Directors should consider and satisfy themselves that adequate consultation has been undertaken with appropriate evidence is available before any policy or plan is finalised.

Managers should also ensure that information or evidence from consultation is made available and shared across teams and departments for others to use and learn from as appropriate.

- 8.2 All staff should familiarise themselves with the policy and any guidance developed. Advice on its application should be sought from the Policy Engagement and Equality Officer and others as appropriate.

9.0 Impact Assessments

Equality Screening & Impact Assessment

- 9.1. The policy has been subjected to equality screening in accordance with the council's screening process. The outcome was that the policy has been screened out without mitigation as no adverse impacts have been identified. This means that it will not be subject to an equality impact assessment at this time.

However, consultation exercises will be monitored and account taken of any feedback from stakeholders about the extent or quality of Council consultation. If monitoring suggests potential adverse impacts that are not currently obvious, or that Council's approach to consultation is not effective, this will be looked at again.

9.2 Rural Needs Impact Assessment

The policy has been subjected to a rural needs impact assessment. The outcome of this assessment is that people in rural areas should not be disadvantaged as a result of this policy. It aims to benefit all service users/potential service users through appropriate and effective consultation which considers how best to include the needs of all those being consulted.

However, it is recognised that a range of consultation methods will be required to ensure that people in rural areas are not disadvantaged and can participate in Council consultations. For example, people in rural areas will find it more difficult to attend consultation events that may require them to travel a distance. Certain categories of rural dwellers may be further disadvantaged because of a lack of access to transport, caring responsibilities, for example women, older people, disabled people or young people.

If consultation is limited to online methods, people in rural areas who do not have Broadband or mobile coverage may be disadvantaged.

9.3 Staff & Financial Resources

Departments or teams which carry out consultation will need to assess the level of resourcing required to meet their statutory duties as outlined in Section 2, and build this into work plans and budgets.

There is no direct cost to the Strategic Services and Engagement section in implementing this policy although there will be staff resourcing required in terms of advice on its implementation.

10.0 Support and Advice

- 10.1 Advice and guidance on the implementation of this policy should be sought from the Policy Engagement and Equality Officer. At departmental level, staff should seek advice from their relevant Head of Service or Assistant Director or Director.

11.0 Communication

- 11.1 The Policy Engagement and Equality Officer/Strategic Service and Engagement section is responsible for the communication.

12.0 Monitoring & Review Arrangements

- 12.1 Implementation of this policy will be monitored and a formal review undertaken 4 years from its effective date.