

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Mr Bill Sellicks
Chairman, Hitchin Forum

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Date: 23 May 2016

Dear Mr Sellicks,

Re: Consultation at North Hertfordshire District Council

Further to your presentation at the March Hitchin Area Committee meeting and subsequent Hitchin Forum newsletter article on consultation at the Council, I thought I should write to set out the Council's position.

Firstly I can confirm that the Council does have a five year Consultation Strategy in place for the period 2016-2020, which was agreed at a meeting of Cabinet on 30 September 2015. The Strategy was also referred to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to Cabinet. You can find it here: <http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/customer-services/publications-and-consultations/consultation-strategy-2016-2020>

In your newsletter article you refer to a Code of Good Practice which Bristol City Council has adopted. As part of our own Strategy we also have adopted various principles in relation to effective consultation – which have been determined both through the Government's own Best Value Statutory Guidance and through previous case law on carrying out a fair consultation, primarily referred to as 'The Gunning Principles.' The Council has adopted these principles:

- The consultation must be at a time when proposals are at a formative stage
- The proposer must give sufficient reasons for any proposal to permit intelligent consideration and response.
- Adequate time must be given for consideration and response.
- The product of consultation must be conscientiously taken into account in finalising statutory consultations.

Alongside the Gunning principles, the Council must also consider a number of practical considerations, such as the timing of consultations and importantly ensure that any consultation is proportionate and provides best value for money for council tax payers. The Strategy sets out a five stage process for Council officers to follow in conjunction with the relevant Executive Member, to help them determine the appropriate consultation approach for their particular area.

Ensuring we take a proportionate approach does mean that on occasion, consultation is not deemed necessary for some initiatives and of course consultation should in no way replace the critical role of Councillors, who are elected to represent the views and opinions of their constituents, through both the formal decision making process and by being the 'face' of the Council for residents.

Our own recent District Wide Survey does recognise that 30% of people disagree that the Council makes an effort to find out what local people wanted and 24% disagreed that the Council fully involved or consulted residents on important issues. This is an issue which the Leader of the Council referred to in her presentation to Cabinet of the District Wide Survey, as she pointed out the potential reputational impact that this could have for the Council. Importantly however, she did also point out that this does not necessarily mean we need to increase the volume of consultation undertaken, but could mean that existing opportunities need to be publicised more widely or made more accessible using a wide range of methodologies. She also acknowledged that it could also mean that the Council needed to publicise how it has utilised feedback from consultation – adopting a 'You Said We Did' type approach to reporting on consultation responses. All of these points have been considered as part of the Consultation Strategy, which is being widely embedded across the organisation.

I hope this puts your mind at rest that the Council does already have a way forward on the future of Consultation for the Council. If you have any further comments or queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely

Sarah Dobor
Communications Manager