



SOUTHERN MIDLANDS COUNCIL COMMUNITY CONSULTATION POLICY

Policy Aims

The Council is committed to engaging the Community in consultative processes that actively seek the views of the Community and to using the knowledge gained to make well informed decisions about major developments and strategic directions for the municipal area.

This is in addition to the Council's existing formal obligations and mechanisms for public involvement:

- statutory requirements; and
- formal meetings of the Council along with any committees.

When engaging the Community in a consultation process the Council will:

- set out the scope for the process in a consultation plan
- state the purpose and means of the consultation
- allow adequate time and resources for the process to take place
- promote access to the process for everyone
- thoroughly consider all contributions before making a decision
- report to the Community on the findings and recommendations of the process
- provide reasons for the decision
- have regard to the content and the intent of this Policy.

Requirement for Community consultation

Community consultation will be used to:

- provide information
- seek information
- exchange information
- encourage Community participation

The areas where consultation with residents is likely to be conducted are:

- Council policy and strategy
- service delivery and best value

- the needs of the local Community
- particular interest groups

The more people that will be affected by the decision the wider the consultation needs to be. In determining whether or not to consult about an issue, the following will be considered:

- Is it a new issue?
- Is it a complex issue?
- What is the scale and impact of the issue?
- Where in the decision-making process should consultation occur?
- What resources are available?

A formal Community consultation process is required if the issue or proposed change:

- directly and significantly affects a large number of people, e.g. all the residents in a particular street, people living in a particular area, most members of a particular interest group or people who live throughout the municipal area
- will significantly affect the rights and entitlements of local residents
- is one about which there is likely to be strong Community concern, interest or views
- is likely to have a significant impact on the economy, lifestyle or environment of the municipal area.

Community consultation may also be initiated when:

- information is needed by Councillors or staff about Community needs, priorities or values.

A professional and ethical approach will be taken to ensure that consultation is not tokenistic and that information received through the process is considered objectively prior to a final decision being recommended or taken by the Council.

When Community consultation may not be appropriate

There are some precautions to be considered prior to making a decision to consult, as there are a number of situations when consultation can be counterproductive to achieving and maintaining the foundation principles of the Council's Strategic Plan:

- When change is needed quickly

In many cases, change is required due to inequity in the distribution of resources, the need to act quickly to capture an opportunity, or to address an identified problem. To consult prior to making a decision in this situation can obstruct and distort corrective actions. Participants in the consultation who have benefited from inequity and/or are resistant to change may impede the process of ensuring corrective actions can be implemented and a decision made in the interests of the whole of the Community. This does not infer that consultation is not desirable in

some circumstances or that consultation is not a desirable course of action.

- When a permanent decision has already been made

There are times when a decision has been made in the best interests of the Community to undertake a particular course of action. Consulting when a decision has already been made suggests that the decision is open to negotiation. It is better and more appropriate in this instance to call for participation in the implementation of the decision rather than raise expectations in the Community and cause ill feeling. Consultation involves gathering information, alternatives, different values, different views and alternative solutions, in order that the decision made by the Council is informed and well considered. Sound analysis and judgement will determine when a consultation is appropriate.

- When only a small number are affected

If only a small number of people are likely to be affected then negotiations with individuals or small groups may be preferable to a formal consultative process.

Parties to the consultation

Community consultation needs to recognise the many views that may be held on a particular issue. A consultative process should seek to involve:

- residents and businesses
- Community and special interest groups
- other profit and non-profit organisations including State and Federal Government agencies and statutory authorities
- peak bodies, industry groups and professional associations.

Not every one of the above groups/individuals may need to be included in every consultation process. Who should be involved depends on the issue.

Methods of Community consultation

Quality Community consultation is based on trust, transparency, understanding and recognition that not all consultative methods suit all people. There may be a number of steps in the consultation process that involve the Community in different ways at the various stages or involve different sections of the Community in different ways.

Consultative mechanisms that encourage a broad level of input will be used. These may include:

Meetings with interested parties:

- public meetings, forums or briefings
- attendance at resident, trader, business and specific interest group meetings
- project committees, discussion and focus groups
- workshops/seminars
- project sites.

Personal notification:

- letters to property owners and occupiers inviting comments/ submissions
- leaflets distributed to all properties within a certain area inviting participation
- random or targeted surveys.

Media coverage:

- advertisements for submissions/comment
- press releases and interviews
- Community and local radio
- television
- encouraging comment via the Internet/e-mail.

Displays and exhibitions:

- displays at the Council offices or other venues such as Community Halls, project or site offices. These may be attended by relevant staff. The methods to be used will be determined according to the needs of targeted 'parties to the consultative process', timeframes, resources and the intent of this Policy.

Timeframes

The Community consultation process must allow interested parties sufficient time to understand and discuss the issues before responding. It must also occur in time for the results of the process to be taken into account when a decision is being made.

Timing of the consultation, feedback to participants and decision making will be clearly stated to all participants. Timeframes will be communicated in all correspondence and presentations provided to stakeholders.

Timeframes should take into consideration:

- the impact of the issue and decision making to be considered
- the requirement for the exchange of complex information
- the needs of stakeholders
- the expected difficulty of engaging stakeholders
- the availability of resources
- the urgency for a decision to be made.

Notification to stakeholders of the intention to commence a period of consultation will be given no later than one week prior to the opening of the consultation period.

Consultation plans

All Community consultation will require the completion of the Community consultation plan template from *A Guide to Community Consultation in the Southern Midlands*.

All consultation plans will identify the following information

- Rationale for the consultation

- Aim of the consultation
- Stakeholders
- Timeframes
- Strategies to be used
- Feedback plan
- Evaluation strategy
- Feedback

The Council will ensure that its decision-making processes genuinely incorporate consideration of the information gained from consultation, i.e. that the decision has not already been made. This in turn will be communicated to the participants in the consultation process. People are entitled to know how their feedback will be used by the Council. Participants are to be provided with feedback about the questions and concerns raised, ideas and solutions identified, and the nature of Council's determination.

A copy of the plan is to be provided to Councillors prior to implementation and made available for public inspection.

When participants first become involved in the process they should be informed of:

- the content of the consultation plan
- the background to the consultation process
- the anticipated timeframe for the implementation of any actions arising from the process
- who will be making the final decision and when
- how the findings/recommendations from the process will be used.

Analysis of results

The full range of views expressed during consultation will be acknowledged and attention drawn to areas of agreement and disagreement. The results of public consultation will be weighed carefully together with other evidence and considerations before decisions are made.

Feedback

The Council needs to actively inform the Community as to why decisions have been made, how Community views have influenced the outcome and why certain views or ideas may/may not have been adopted.

Informing the Community should be undertaken as soon as possible after the final decision has been made. It will be a matter of judgment as to whether it is practical and possible to respond to each individual participant.

It is appropriate for a report on consultation to be prepared and released for each major consultation program. The report could summarise the issues raised in the course of the Community consultation process and explain how those issues have been addressed in the final decision. In the case of area-specific issues/projects, this could take the form of a leaflet distributed in the area.

In the event that a final decision cannot be made within a reasonable time after the consultation process has ended, or where the consultation process is staged,

progress updates should be given. This may be through direct contact with participants, use of the local or regional media or some other suitable arrangement.

Evaluation

An evaluation of the process used should always be undertaken.

An evaluation might include:

- what methods drew the highest response rate
- whether targeted groups have responded
- whether other parts/members of the Community have responded
- what techniques were most effective in conveying technical information
- the level, type and form of background information supplied to the public to facilitate their input
- timing and costs
- the best ways of generating discussion of ideas and issues among participants.

Review

This policy and its implementation will be reviewed regularly.

Related Documents

A Guide to Community Consultation in the Southern Midlands

Document History

First Council Meeting:	Decision No. C/09/10/119/9947
Final Council Meeting:	Decision No. C/09/11/132/9993
Repealed Council Meeting:	Decision No.
Updated Council Meeting:	Decision No.