

## **Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission**

**Date: 7 March 2017**

Wards: All

### **Subject: Consultation and Community Engagement**

Lead officer: Caroline Holland, Director Corporate Services

Lead member: Councillor Mark Allison, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

Contact officer: Kris Witherington, Community Engagement Manager x3896

Reason for urgency: the Chair has approved the submission of this late report so that the Commission may respond to the reference made to it by Council on 23 November 2016

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### **Recommendations:**

A. To discuss and comment on the report

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## **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1.1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Commission of the about the Council's approach to consultation and engagement and provide an update on community engagement activities.

### **Executive summary:**

1.2. Merton Partnership, including the Council agreed a common Community Engagement Strategy, called Get Involved, in 2010. This was then refreshed in 2014 and is due to be reconsidered for 2018.

1.3. As part of Get Involved a mapping exercise was undertaken to identify the ongoing engagement routes for residents and other stakeholders. This was updated in 2015 when 40 distinct mechanisms were found.

1.4. The council also created an online consultation hub in response to the Community Engagement Strategy that hosts the council's and partners consultation activity.

1.5. The Council continues to deliver a wide range of ongoing engagement activities, as well as time limited consultations.

## **2 DETAILS**

### **Get Involved - An Engagement Strategy for Merton Partnership**

2.1. In 2010 Merton Partnership set out a new strategy, for working with Merton's communities to make the decisions that affect their lives. The strategy set out the commitment of Merton Partnership to high quality and co-ordinated engagement essential to improving the quality of life for everyone in Merton. The Strategy was considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission in January 2010 and agreed by Cabinet in March 2010.

- 2.2. The 2014 refresh of the strategy reviewed the progress made since 2010 and reconfirms the partnership's commitment to the vision and values set out in the strategy.
- 2.3. The Principles of Engagement agreed by the Partnership and set out in the Strategy are as follows:

**We will be clear about our purpose**

- There will be a clear reason for any engagement activity
- We will present information in a clear and understandable way
- We will be clear about what influence people can have and what choices can be made
- The limits of any influence will also be set out and explained
- We will be clear about the time scale for activities and make sure enough time is allowed to meet the purpose
- We will make sure what we do is relevant to those involved

**We will be open and transparent**

- We will ask people to be engaged in a decision at the earliest opportunity, and always before a decision is taken
- We will make sure people can make an informed choice about when, how and if they want to engage with us
- We will use a range of activities to encourage different people to get involved
- We will be creative and use best practice to engage those traditionally excluded from decision making
- We will ensure our activities are inclusive for example by making sure activities are accessible to those with disabilities

**We will work together**

- We will avoid duplication by delivering joint activities
- We will make the most of existing groups and networks
- We will share the information we get with each other
- We will not ask questions that we already know the answer to

**We will provide feedback**

- We will report what happened as a result of the engagement as soon as possible, both what was said and what we did with the information
- We will ask participants to evaluate what we do
- We will thank those who take the time to get involved

- 2.4. An outstanding action from the 2014-17 Strategy is to add the ongoing engagement mechanisms identified in the mapping exercise to the online consultation hub to ensure there is a single source of information that can be kept up to date rather than periodically reviewed.
- 2.5. Within the council the strategy is supported by a Framework for Community Engagement which provides additional guidance for how consultation and engagement should be considered, planned and delivered. This will also need to be refreshed for 2018.
- 2.6. The Consultation and Community Engagement team provides support to services to plan and deliver consultation activities. We work with services to identify their key stakeholders and then assess which consultation methods will be most appropriate for reaching that group. This can involve using existing mechanisms as well as undertaking new activities.

- 2.7. Delivering consultation activities involves a number of challenges that impact across all councils. In particular these include changing legal frameworks, changing public expectations and the impact of reduced resources on service change.
- 2.8. The last decade has seen a combination of frequent legislative changes and increased case law that impacts on how consultation is considered and delivered.
- 2.9. The current Best Value Statutory Guidance places a 'Duty to Consult' representatives of a wide range of local persons on councils. "Authorities must consult representatives of council tax payers, those who use or are likely to use services provided by the authority, and those appearing to the authority to have an interest in any area within which the authority carries out functions". Some service areas also have their own specific legislative framework that defines the type of consultation that is required.
- 2.10. Recent case law, often based on the 'Gunning Principles', has also demonstrated the courts willingness to strike down national and local government decisions because of a lack of appropriate consultation.
- 2.11. Public expectation of both private and public sector services have also changed with people expecting to engage on their own terms and on their timetable. Developing flexible, responsive approaches that allow citizens to set the agenda is a challenge for big organisations with formal, set decision making structures. This especially true in areas like planning; with its own specific legislative frameworks.
- 2.12. Consultations that focus on service change where services are reducing in scope present a particular challenge for councils. The decision makers are left to balance the needs of those using different services with the needs of wider groups of council tax payers who may not know the importance of those services.
- 2.13. Service change consultations also need to adopt consultation methods that are appropriate to the range of service users. Large scale open consultations will often tend to attract responses from those more motivated and capable of responding so for other groups a wider range of methods will need to be used. This can often include using existing ongoing engagement mechanisms where established relationships exist and trust has already been built.
- 2.14. As well as supporting services to deliver consultations the Consultation and Community Engagement team also delivers a number of corporate activities on behalf of the organisation including the online consultation hub, the residents' survey, community forums, and e-petition system.

### **Online Consultation Hub**

- 2.15. Since the system was installed in June 2012, 205 consultations have been registered on the online consultation database. 137 consultations have included an online survey element supported by the system.
- 2.16. Not all of the registered consultations are available for public view, as the system has also been used to consult with staff and to target specific small groups of service users.

- 2.17. Consultations by local partners as well as relevant regional and national bodies have also been listed on the system.
- 2.18. 61 individuals have registered for consultation alerts. Those who register receive a short email each time a new consultation that matches their interests is added to the system.
- 2.19. The consultation database can be found at [www.merton.gov.uk/consultations](http://www.merton.gov.uk/consultations)

### **Residents' Survey**

- 2.20. The results of the 2014 residents' survey have been reported to Cabinet, Merton Partnership, and Merton Youth Parliament as well being communicated to staff and residents. The Survey of Londoners on which our questionnaire was linked to was discontinued by the contractor in 2015, resulting in a need to reconsider and recommission a survey of residents for 2016.
- 2.21. Following a procurement exercise the council is now working with BMG to deliver a new residents survey, largely based on the recommended question set from the Local Government Association. The fieldwork is taking place in February and March 2017 with results expected by the end of March 2017.
- 2.22. Included in the new survey are a number of relevant questions to consultation and engagement. These include residents preferred communication channels, and whether respondents agree Merton Council acts on the concerns of local residents; keeps residents informed about the services and benefits it provides; and involves residents when making decisions. The results from this survey will be used to inform future plans.

### **Community Forums**

- 2.23. The Consultation and Community Engagement team continues to support the five community forum meetings. The meetings have evolved differently in the five areas, based on the input from Chairs, local groups and residents attending. Attendance has been consistent in most areas in recent years but continues to be predominantly from a relatively narrow demographic. Issues around public space, in particular town planning and highways tend to dominate the agendas.
- 2.24. Colliers Wood remains the most challenging forum in terms of attendance. Historical factors including the geographical disconnect between Colliers Wood town centre and the other wards in north east Mitcham as well as the popularity of the Colliers Wood Residents Association have meant that the annual meeting of the forum is rarely as well attended as the other areas.

### **E-petition system**

- 2.25. The Council's e-petition system uses a module provided by Moderngov, as part of the wider contract for committee management. Since the growth in high profile national e-petition systems many residents prefer to use these alternative systems to generate their e-petitions. Generally the alternative systems do not feature a time limit so a number of petitions have not been submitted to the council despite considerable time periods passing.

### **3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

3.1. This report does not require decisions

### **4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED**

4.1. No consultation has been undertaken for this report.

### **5 TIMETABLE**

5.1. Not applicable

### **6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS**

6.1. There are no financial implications resulting from this report.

### **7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

7.1. The report sets out the Council's approach to consultation where necessary to discharge its obligations further to the Gunning principles which state:

7.2. (i) consultation must take place when the proposal is still at a formative stage;

7.3. (ii) sufficient reasons must be put forward for the proposal to allow for intelligent

7.4. consideration and response;

7.5. (iii) adequate time must be given for consideration and response; and

7.6. (iv) the product of consultation must be conscientiously taken into account

### **8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS**

8.1. There are none resulting this report.

### **9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

9.1. None

### **10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

10.1. None

### **11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT**

- Get Involved - An Engagement Strategy for Merton Partnership 2014-2017  
<http://www.merton.gov.uk/council/getinvolved/getinvolvedstrategy.htm>

### **12 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

12.1. Best Value Statutory Guidance 2015

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