

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council consultation and community involvement framework

Summary

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council has developed a corporate consultation and community involvement (CCI) framework.

CCI is at the heart of the council's approach to policy making, service delivery and community leadership. It is integral to the new shared vision for the borough that is set out in Rotherham's Community Strategy. This seeks to ensure that "active citizenship and democracy will underpin how Rotherham works" and "that there will be many opportunities for people to be involved in civic life and decision making".

The framework sets out the council's vision, aims and objectives and a range of actions to ensure that CCI is built into everything the council does. It will help to align and coordinate activity; identify the key principles of CCI; and ensure that the results of consultation are used effectively. This will enable the council to approach CCI in a coordinated and consistent manner.

The framework identifies why community involvement and consultation is important and where new approaches are needed. It draws on good practice identified by the Audit Commission and Yorkshire Forward.

Background

The 'community involvement and consultation position statements' have influenced the CCI framework. Each statement examined the effectiveness of the council's approach to CCI and made recommendations on how these can be improved.

The main recommendation was to develop a CCI framework with an action plan setting out the future direction of community involvement in the council. This will seek to address CCI on a corporate level by identifying key objectives to deliver improvements; identifying good practice; managing performance and making strategic improvements on CCI across the council.

Key issues and problems

Rotherham undertakes hundreds of CCI activities, but there has been a lack of coordination and communication on a corporate level. So the chief executive's department recruited a principal community involvement officer and a corporate consultation officer to address CCI.

These officers assessed CCI across the council by producing position statements on consultation and community involvement. The council also identified areas for improvement in its consultation and community involvement position statements.

It was recommended that the council:

- strengthen mechanisms so that people who are participating can see their contribution is influencing decisions, policy and service development
- improve and make more transparent the planning and timing of CCI
- strengthen the links between CCI and decision making, ensuring that exercises relate to a decision the council is intending to make and that can be influenced by the results of that activity
- strengthen structures and procedures to share the results of CCI across programme areas and with members and partners
- improve structures to ensure that those taking part in CCI are representative and inclusive
- enhance the evaluation and performance management of CCI, and ensure that service and policy developments are being achieved as a result

The framework seeks to continue the good progress made and take forward these identified areas for improvement.

What we did?

During the development of the community involvement position statement, the principal community involvement officer undertook a mapping exercise of the programme areas to do a critique of community involvement across the council.

Meanwhile, the principal community involvement officer undertook a series of good practice visits to other local authorities who were renowned for their excellent work in involving communities such as City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council; the London Borough of Croydon; the London Borough of Tower Hamlets; Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council and Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council.

The consultation position statements were shared and agreed by relevant officers and members. It was agreed that a joint CCI framework was needed to address areas for improvement.

Key outcomes

The framework is divided into two main parts. The first sets out the context and the council's approach to CCI. The second outlines specific areas of activity necessary to achieve the required improvements in CCI.

Initially a council document, it is intended to share and develop with partners. Eventually it will be extended to a joint partnership framework subject to Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) approval with shared aims and standards. The Local Area Agreement (LAA) includes an objective to develop the framework into a partnership document.

Impact

To meet the aims of the framework we identified five priority areas for improvement, which are to:

- continue to improve the quality, effectiveness and coordination of consultation and community involvement by the council
- raise awareness of the principles of effective consultation and community involvement, and ensure staff and members have the training and support they need
- ensure that all communities are involved in the planning and provision of services and policies to meet their needs
- ensure that consultation and community involvement shapes and influences service and policies
- manage performance by improving satisfaction with consultation and community involvement, and evaluating the impact

Resources

The CCI process will determine what needs to be done to deliver CCI. This will be delivered through the programme area's existing budgets. The development of the framework has been funded through the chief executive's budget.

Who was involved?

Internal consultation was carried out by:

- programme area executive directors
- corporate consultation coordination officers' group
- corporate community involvement officers' group
- cabinet members
- members' consultation advisory group,
- community cohesion members' panel
- the democratic renewal scrutiny panel

External consultation took place with South Yorkshire Police, Rotherham Primary Care Trust, Voluntary Action Rotherham (VAR) and the Rotherham Ethnic Minority Alliance (REMA).

Barriers and how they were overcome

There were no barriers as members, officers, partners and the communities agreed that a CCI framework would drive improvements in community consultation and involvement across the council.

Critical success factors

The framework will help bring about a culture in the council where involvement and consultation with communities is encouraged, recognised and used for improving services.

It is the result of detailed analysis and research, and draws extensively on best practice, particularly the work of the Audit Commission and other local authorities. It has been developed against a national, regional and local policy context that continues to prioritise CCI.

As the Audit Commission stated in 'User focus and citizen engagement' (2003): "Where user focus works, the positive benefits for the council have been increased from user engagement, greater trust between individuals and councils, and a greater sense of ownership of services by users and a willingness to participate among citizens."

The framework is not intended to replace existing work and good practice, such as the council's 'Good practice guide to consultation'. It builds on and refines this. It is a working document and, as such, will be constantly monitored and changed in light of experience and developments.

How would we do it better?

It is difficult to analyse at this stage, but we will have a better idea when we review and evaluate the framework after a year.

Key contact

Asim Munir, Principal Community Involvement Officer
Chief Executive's Department
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
Tel: (01709) 822786
fax: (01709) 822792
Email: asim.munir@rotherham.gov.uk