



FORDINGBRIDGE TOWN COUNCIL

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CONSULTATION POLICY

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WHY WE CONSULT

Fordingbridge Town Council appreciates the importance of public participation to inform policy and decision making. Whilst Members are elected to represent the views of the people through their daily contact with constituents, Members cannot be aware of the views of all the people they represent on every issue. It is therefore essential for the Council to undertake additional forms of consultation.

To encourage public participation, we wish to make information about our services and how we work freely accessible. Consultation can enable us to:

- Target our services effectively
- Improve awareness and use of our services
- Monitor user satisfaction
- Help make decisions about policies, priorities and facilities
- Represent the views of Fordingbridge's residents
- Improve our stock of local knowledge

WHEN TO CONSULT

We recognise that consultation is not always appropriate, e.g. where the council is limited by statutory or budgetary restrictions. It is also important to avoid "consultation fatigue". Therefore, consultation will only be used (a) where it is possible to influence decision-making or (b) when we need to identify user satisfaction or add to our stock of knowledge. Priority areas for consultation include:

- Major policy decisions where not much is known about people's views
- Controversial decisions where there is likely to be a high level of public interest
- Services or facilities that account for a significant proportion of overall spending
- New services or facilities
- Services or facilities with low user satisfaction

HOW TO CONSULT

All consultation will be carried out as part of a coherent strategy and following an agreed procedure (please see our Consultation Strategy (Appendix 1) and Consultation Procedure (Appendix 2)).

EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES

Whilst consultation should have a strong influence on decisions, it should not dictate them. The results of consultation will be considered alongside other factors, such as available resources.

When consulting, we will make clear what the purpose of the consultation is and what options are available to local people, to prevent unreasonably raising the public's expectations.

We are committed to providing feedback on the results to those we consulted and explaining how these results have been considered.

Evaluating the effectiveness of consultation can help us to:

- Know whether consultation is genuinely helping us to listen and respond to the public
- Plan how to improve consultation
- Use consultation resources wisely
- Know whether a consultation reached a representative sample of the population

We are committed to evaluating our consultations as part of the consultation procedure.

CORE STANDARDS

The Council has agreed to a number of core standards for our consultation work. We will:

- Only undertake consultation where it is possible to influence decision-making, or when we need to identify user satisfaction or add to our stock of local knowledge
- Be clear about what we are asking the public to comment on
- Give sufficient time for people to respond and be clear about the timeframes. The target will be between 6 – 12 weeks or an explanation will be given if the period is shorter.
- Listen to and respect all opinions received
- Give consideration as to how the views of people who do not normally participate can be obtained
- Use plain language in all documents and presentations
- Involve particular user/interest groups on an on-going basis
- Provide a summary of large documents
- Give a named contact person for returns and further information
- Give feedback to those consulted on the final outcome and explain why decisions were taken
- Publish feedback on the Town Council website with an explanation of how the responses influenced decisions
- Publish a log of consultations

POLICY REVIEW

Fordingbridge Town Council is committed to reviewing its policies on a four year cycle.

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Appendix 1

Fordingbridge Town Council's Consultation Strategy

1. Introduction and Objectives

We are committed to consultation. We want to ensure that Fordingbridge's residents, our service users, and all other interested parties have the opportunity to be involved in planning and prioritising our services.

Our objectives for consultation are to:

- Monitor user satisfaction
- Inform decision making
- Target services effectively
- Involve local people in the democratic process

The implementation of this strategy will assist:

- The council to be open and responsive to the views of all stakeholders
- The public to be involved in decision making
- Awareness that the council actively seeks and values the public's input

2. Target Audiences

The stakeholders to be consulted will depend upon the purpose of the specific consultation. Stakeholders will fall into the following groups:

Key Customers

- People who pay directly (users)
- People who pay indirectly (non-users: e.g. council tax payers/residents)

Others

- Businesses
- Interested organisations/agencies

3. Key Elements of Consultation

Please refer to our Consultation Procedure for details of our consultation methods. The key elements of our procedure are listed below:

- Identifying whether consultation is necessary
- Identifying the objectives – why are we consulting?
- Check what consultations have already taken place and use these/build on these as appropriate
- Identify the stakeholders to be consulted
- Decide what questions to ask
- Ensure that data processing is compliant with UK Data Protection law
- Determine what consultation methods should be used
- Start the consultation
- Analyse and use the results
- Disseminate the results
- Evaluate the consultation
- Keep a record of the whole consultation process

4. Standards and Data Protection

In the council's Consultation Policy, we have agreed to a number of core standards for our consultation work.

We will make every effort to ensure that the consultative process is anti-discriminatory and does not preclude participation on the grounds of any protected characteristic.

We will gather and process information in accordance with UK Data Protection law.

5. The Role of Members

Their role as community leaders gives Members a major input into the consultation process.

Members will play a key role in the implementation of this strategy through:

- Instigating consultation initiatives
- Feedback from their involvement in local groups and partnerships
- Their relationship with residents

6. Evaluation

All consultation initiatives will have clear objectives set, which are Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic and Time-bound (SMART). Each consultation exercise will be evaluated against its objectives in order to help us to improve our consultation work.

Appendix 2

Fordingbridge Town Council's Consultation Procedure

This is the agreed procedure for the council's consultation exercises. The purpose of the procedure is to ensure that we carry out appropriate consultation in an inclusive and effective manner.

1. Is Your Consultation Necessary?

We have agreed that we will only consult where it is possible to influence decision-making, or when we need to identify user satisfaction or add to our stock of local knowledge. If the proposed consultation does not do any of these things you will need to reconsider whether consultation is necessary.

2. Defining Objectives

Before carrying out any consultation, it is essential to work out **why** you are doing it. You need to set objectives for your research which are:

1. Specific – exactly what do you want to know? The target must be clearly defined.
2. Measurable - what proportion of the community are you looking to consult? E.g. What will be the size of your survey?
3. Accepted – that everybody involved in the consultation understands and accepts the objectives.
4. Realistic – that the consultation is within the availability of resources, knowledge and time.
5. Time-bound – that a realistic schedule has been set for consultation, with a clear deadline for consultees.

2.a. What Do You Want To Know?

Below is a list of common reasons for conducting consultation:

- To compare and challenge the existing service or facilities
- To look for unmet needs
- To shape the way the service is delivered
- To measure service satisfaction
- To prioritise future spending
- To set targets for the service
- Find out reaction to new ideas
- Look for quality improvements
- Check opinions and views
- Assess potential interest in something

3. Build on Existing Work

Check whether any consultation work has already been done. Do you need to do further consultation? Can you build on the existing work?

4. Identify the Stakeholders

Who you consult will depend on what you want to find out. You will need to prioritise who you will consult with, starting with your main customers/users of your service. You will need to consider which of the following it is appropriate to consult:

Key Customers

- People who pay directly (users)
- People who pay indirectly (non-users: e.g. council tax payers)

Others

- Businesses
- Interested organisations/agencies

You will need to make particular arrangements to find out some people's views. For example:

- People who have problems reading, writing and speaking English
- Some people on low incomes
- Some people from ethnic minorities
- Time-poor people
- Older people
- Younger people
- People with disabilities

5. Decide What Questions to Ask

The objectives of your consultation exercise will determine what questions you need to ask. Typical questions might include:

- What do people like most and least about the service or facilities?
- Is the standard or level of the service right?
- What takes too long?
- Is the service reliable?
- What about comfort, convenience and safety?
- How good is your customer service?
- Is the range of services available appropriate?
- Is the service equally accessible by everyone?
- Is there enough information available about the resource?
- Is the service good value?

6. Decide What Type of Consultation Method(s) to Use

There are two main sorts of consultation:

1. Direct Consultation with a sample of people
2. Delegate Consultation with people representing the views of others, e.g. representatives from a community organisation

Consultation may either be a one-off exercise, e.g. a survey, or you may undertake ongoing consultation with consultative groups, e.g. a local neighbourhood forum.

Consider whether it would be appropriate to undertake the consultation in partnership with other bodies. Does the subject of the consultation involve/affect other organisations in addition to the town council?

You will need to consider:

- **who** you are consulting
- **what** you are consulting on
- the **resources** available
- the **time** available

in order to decide the most effective method of consultation.

You will need to give consideration as to how the views of people who do not normally participate, or who find it difficult to participate, can be obtained. It may be helpful to use a mixture of consultation methods. Some of the most common are:

Postal Surveys – these often get a result of <20%, but can be good if you wish to provide information also

Focus Groups – helpful for considering complex issues in detail

Telephone or Online Surveys – ideal for a quick response on basic questions

Personal Interviews – often the most statistically reliable method

Consider the need for statistical analysis to determine the significance of your results.

Depending upon the method and scale of the consultation, it may be appropriate to use an external contractor.

7. Start the Consultation

When collecting information, ensure that the consultees know:

- The purpose of the consultation
- Who is being consulted
- Deadline for response
- What decisions will be influenced
- Who will take the decisions
- When the decisions will be made
- How the results will be fed back to them
- Anonymity will be respected, if requested
- Who they can contact about the consultation, or for more information

7a. Data Protection

We will collect and process information in accordance with the UK Data Protection law and the council's Data Protection Policy. This applies to data that identifies a living, individual, natural person and does not apply to data once identifiers linking it to a natural person have been removed (e.g. anonymous survey data).

If personal data, i.e. that identifying someone, is to be collected, you must ensure that you have a legitimate reason for collecting and processing this data. You must determine the lawful basis for processing the personal data and record this within the council's Information Asset Register. Consultees must be given a clear explanation of what will happen as a result of

providing the information. If the basis for processing is consent, we are committed to offering people genuine choice and control over how we use their data.

Our consent requests will:

- be kept separate from other terms and conditions
- require a positive opt-in
- provide the name of the council and any specific third-party organisations who will rely on this consent

We will:

- keep records of what an individual has consented to, including what we told them, and when and how they consented.
- tell individuals that they can withdraw consent at any time and how to do this.
- keep data securely
- only use the data for the purpose that it was obtained

If you are asking for sensitive data (also referred to as Special Category Data), you must determine a lawful basis for processing the data, plus you must satisfy a specific condition under Article 9 of the General Data Protection Regulation (such as explicit consent). These types of data include:

- Race or ethnic origin
- Political opinions
- Religious beliefs
- Physical or mental health
- Sexual orientation

Please see the Information Commissioner's Office web site for further information.

Data collected during consultation should only be used for the purpose it was collected and data should be retained for periods specified within the council's Document Retention Schedule.

7.b Timing

If you are asking about satisfaction with your service, it is usually best to do this as soon as possible after the service has been delivered.

7.c General Considerations

Make your consultation as accessible as possible. It is important that the consultative process is anti-discriminatory and does not preclude participation on the grounds of age, race, disability, gender or sexual orientation.

Ensure that you:

- Use plain language – don't use jargon
- Avoid leading or ambiguous questions
- Think about 'hard-to-reach' groups
- Give plenty of time to respond

Classification/personal questions are best left until last.

If you are using a written consultation method, e.g. a survey, consider the following:

- The survey may need to be provided in multiple languages
- You should provide an introduction explaining what the consultation is for, along with the required Data Protection information and a confidentiality notice where appropriate
- Ensure that the design is in line with the RNIB's Clear Print Guidelines
- Provide a deadline, a contact name and a return address

- The survey should end with a thank-you message, including how and when the results will be disseminated
- Pre-paid envelopes will increase response rates

It is worth running a **pilot consultation** on a small sample of people to test the accessibility and time needed to complete the consultation.

8. Results & Dissemination

Once you have your results and have analysed them, you need to identify:

- findings that do not require action, e.g. low priority, or good results
- things that cannot be changed in the short term
- results that highlight the need for communication – who to, what, where and how
- results that highlight the need for action and the next steps to take

It is essential to act on these results and disseminate them. You may need to provide different levels of information to different audiences. Key stakeholders are likely to be:

- Consultation Respondents
- Councillors
- Front Line Staff
- Partner Organisations
- Users, Residents

You will need to provide a summary for lengthy documents.

Ensure that dissemination takes place within the agreed timeframe.

9. Evaluation

After the consultation exercise is completed, you should evaluate the consultation against the SMART objectives that were identified at the beginning of the process.

Factors to consider when conducting your evaluation include:

- Were the objectives understood by all stakeholders?
- How many people took part – did it meet expectations?
- Were a representative set of views obtained?
- Was the timescale transparent and was it kept to?
- Was the consultation accessible (e.g. translation, large print, plain English)?
- Did you reach hard-to-reach groups?
- What were the costs?
- Has it lead to a change in policy or service?
- Has it influenced a decision?
- How many people will be affected by the changes?

Evaluation will enable you to identify areas of success and areas needing improvement.

10. Documentation

Ensure that you keep a record of the consultation, why it was undertaken, how it was conducted, what the results were and the outcomes of the consultation.