
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT

Date Written	16 th January 2022
Report Author	Ceri Dinham
Service Area	Communication, Consultation and Engagement
Committee Date	1 st March 2022

To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's Consultation and Engagement Process

1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

1.1 In direct response to public feedback following recent Council consultation activities, Scrutiny is keen to understand the Council's current standard consultation approach and to explore the reasons why some recent consultations have received a significant amount of public challenge.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

2.1 That the committee receives this report, and its content is noted and debated.

3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

3.1 In 2014, MTCBC and RCT received European Funding to source a shared dedicated consultation officer post. During this time authorities were under more and more pressure to include residents' views as part of their decision-making process through public consultation and engagements. When this funding came to an end, both authorities recognised the importance of such a provision and as a result, RCT created a consultation team of 2 full-time posts. MTCBC incorporated the function into their communications team.

3.2 In recent years, there has been a greater prominence across the Council on consultation and engagement as a key principle of service delivery. Activity has shifted away from a focus on formal consultation to a more complete public engagement approach. Without a dedicated consultation team this has proved

challenging, especially with capacity issues within the team and no dedicated budget for consultation.

- 3.3 The average number of consultations produced each year by the team is 20 however there has been a significant increase over the past few years, with an upward trend on the number produced. In 2019 the team undertook 11 consultations however, this was significantly more in 2021, with the team delivering 33 consultations.
- 3.4 The Council has had a Communications and Engagement Strategy since 2015. This is regularly reviewed. The draft Consultation and Engagement Framework will accompany the Communications and Engagement Strategy and will be presented to Council in March 2022 for approval. A copy of the draft Communications and Engagement Framework is attached as **Appendix 1**.
- 3.5 Our strategy provides the Council with an overall framework for meeting our Consultation and Engagement requirements, providing guidance and direction on:
- When we should consult and engage stakeholders
 - Level of consultation and engagement required
 - Principles to consider when undertaking consultation and engagement
 - Use of consultation and engagement results
- 3.6 The framework builds on the good standard of consultation and engagement activity currently taking place across the authority.
- 3.7 In 2018, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's Communications and Consultation Team was awarded with a Certificate of Good Practice for its consultation standards and quality assurance by the Consultation Institute for the 21st Century Schools Programme Ysgol Y Graig Public Consultation.

4.0 RESPONSIBILITIES AND IMPLEMENTATION

All members of staff have a responsibility for the successful implementation of the Consultation and Engagement Strategy. For the Strategy to be effective, it has to be part of the Council's culture and there needs to be a genuine commitment to engage with the local community.

Specific responsibilities for implementation lie with:

4.1 Elected Members

Members play an essential role in the Council's consultative processes. In particular, they form a link between the community and Council, having a positive influence on the level of participation by the local community. The representative nature of elected members' position remains crucial and the more information they have available on the views of local people the better they will be able to represent their views. Members should make every effort to inform consultation officers of any potentially contentious issues before consultation takes place.

The implementation of the Strategy should enhance the availability of consultation information for elected members. Elected members have an important role in ensuring that policy development takes account of consultation findings.

If conducting an engagement activity that affects particular wards or a particular portfolio area, ward members should be fully briefed on proposals that affect the areas they represent. Efforts should be made to ensure that relevant cabinet members, scrutiny chairs and vice chairs, committee chairs and ward members are aware of and have the opportunity to input into engagement activities. Cabinet members, committee chairs or scrutiny chairs and vice chairs will have an interest in any activities affecting their remit and should be kept informed of the consultation progress.

4.2 Corporate Management Team

Corporate Management Team have a key role in providing a high level of commitment to the corporate consultation and engagement strategy and driving forward its effective implementation. They have specific responsibility for ensuring that effective consultation takes place within their directorate, that consultation findings are used to influence strategic direction, and that policy development takes account of consultation.

4.3 Heads of Services

Responsibility for undertaking specific service-based consultation will lie with the appropriate officers under the guidance of their service head and Chief Officer. Service heads will have responsibility to ensure:

- All staff are aware of and act on the Strategy.
- Consultation activity is planned using the principles outlined in the Council's Consultation and Engagement Strategy.

5.0 MTCBC's CONSULTATION PROCESS

5.1 A consultation / engagement exercise will initially be requested by the service area. At this point officers will have an idea of when and how they want to consult, as well as who they want to consult with.

5.2 An online consultation request form is available on the intranet, which asks questions such as:

- Why are we doing this?
- What do we need to know?
- What questions do we need to ask?
- Could this consultation be deemed contentious?

5.3 The consultation request form is then submitted to the consultation team to take forward and the following process is followed:

PLANNING

Consultation request form submitted

Review of request

Project plan set up

Challenge group meeting

To determine:

- If consultation could be deemed contentious
- Any associated risks to reputation
- Who we need to consult with
- Duration of consultation
- Start date
- End date
- Appropriate comms channels
- Agree questions

Relevant Councillors to be advised

SURVEY DESIGN

Questions to be finalised

Smart Survey set up

Survey to be tested by Consultation Team

Amendments to be made

Survey to be sent to Lead Officer for testing

Amendments to be made

Translation

Welsh version input to Smart Survey

Test responses to be deleted

Set consultation close date

GO LIVE

Information uploaded to Council website:

Have Your Say section

News item

Eye-catcher

Email to all Councillors

Email to all staff

Social media posts

Live Social Media sessions

Face-to-face sessions

Focus groups / listening sessions

Consultation packs / paper copies at strategic locations

MID-CONSULTATION REVIEW

Meeting to discuss:

How the process is going.

Number of responses.

Do we need to do more to increase participation?

Identify groups we may/may not be reaching.

POST-SURVEY

Data input – paper copies into Smart Survey

Reports:

- Word doc. overview
- Excel doc. raw data

Content analysis

Distribution of data reports: CO to send reports and overview to LO

Meeting to be organised to go through data and decide next steps

FEEDBACK

Report to be prepared for Council with recommendations

Results shared with Service Area

Results shared with SLT / CMT

Publication of results:

- Press Release
- Feedback to interested parties
- Feedback to consultees (where personal data has been captured)
- Social Media posts
- Contact Newspaper

EVALUATION

Review of process:

- Lessons learned
- Things we did well
- Things we could do better next time

5.4 A copy of the consultation process project request form is available as **Appendix 2**.

6.0 RESPONSE RATES

6.1 Nationally, consultation response rates are typically no higher than 1-2% and a response rate of 4-5% would generally be regarded as high. There are exceptions where a consultation is very local (confined to a few streets) and the impact direct and immediate (e.g. A controlled parking zone). In one of our last consultations, a response rate of 10% was achieved for both residents and parents and just over 20% for staff and parishioners – this would appear to be a good result.

It is understandable that those overseeing a consultation want to see the highest possible response rate from their target audience.

While they can be influenced by the amount and targeting of publicity and the ease of responding, response rates can also reflect the level of inherent interest in the subject matter of the consultation among certain sections of the target population.

Experience of consultations tells us that people who are opposed to a proposal appear often to be more motivated to register their opposition than supporters are to show their support. On some occasions, lower response rates may simply reflect a general acceptance of what is proposed, rather than a failure to provide an adequate opportunity to respond or to publicise a consultation properly.

7.0 DATA ANALYSIS

7.1 Once a consultation closes the lead consultation officer will run data reports and do a content analysis.

There are two types of report: a Word document overview of the results and an Excel document with the raw data from each response.

Once the reports have been run, the officer will analyse the content, looking for key words and common themes in the responses. Once this content analysis is done, the information is sent to the Lead Officer from the requesting service area, as well as any other officers who may have been involved in the consultation process, and a follow-up meeting is organised to determine next steps.

8.0 THE CHALLENGES / LESSONS LEARNED OF CONSULTING DURING A PANDEMIC

8.1 Delivering public consultation exercises during the pandemic has presented its challenges.

8.2 The team has been unable to conduct face to face consultations, which would usually be a standard practice for most consultations.

8.3 Paper copies of consultations would usually be available in all Council buildings, however they have been closed to the general public for almost two years, meaning that this option is no longer available.

8.4 With limits on face-to-face interactions the team has been unable to undertake listening and engaging sessions, which help shape the questions asked.

8.5 The team has been incredibly busy responding to the pandemic and capacity and resources have therefore been an issue.

8.6 Capacity due to self-isolations and illness during the pandemic has also been a challenge.

8.7 A more stringent business continuity plan needs to be in place.

8.8 Look at alternative uses of digital media / digital platforms.

- 8.9 Publicise the availability of paper copies more widely, with the support of elected members and community groups.
- 8.10 Increase the volume of direct mail recipients.
- 8.11 More discussions required with lead officer and ward members as to whether the subject of the consultation is likely to be contentious in any way, and to discuss the demographic of the local population to make sure that difficult to reach residents, i.e. digitally disadvantaged, are properly consulted.

9.0 MTCBC's CONSULTATION PROCESS COMPARED TO OTHER LOCAL AUTHORITIES

- 9.1 There is a range of legislation and statutory guidance requiring local authorities to consult on issues connected to the services they provide.
- 9.2 The Council has endorsed the [National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales](#), which is followed by all Councils in Wales. See Appendix 3.
- 9.3 These principles and standards have been developed and endorsed by the Welsh Government to make sure that participation happens in consistent and effective ways.
- 9.4 Like other neighbouring local authorities in Wales, the Council must refer to the above principles when consulting.
- 9.5 Partners under the Cwm Taf Collaboration Board had developed a Joint Public Engagement Strategy. The Strategy was underpinned by the National Principles of Public Engagement in Wales and is currently under review.
- 9.6 MTCBC and RCT continue to work closely, sharing information in relation to the process, advice, guidance and legislation around consultation and engagement.
- 9.7 MTCBC's consultation project plan is closely aligned to RCT's.

10.0 FEEDBACK ON THE CONSULTATION OUTCOMES

- 10.1 Once the content analysis has been completed the results are shared with CMT and Cabinet.
- 10.2 Where appropriate, a report is prepared for Full Council, with recommendations for Council approval and to agree next steps.
- 10.3 Consultation results and next steps are then shared internally with all Elected Members and Officers.
- 10.4 Once shared internally, the results are publicised externally through all our channels, including the Council's website, social media and Contact Newspaper. Feedback will also be shared directly to any consultees, if we have captured personal data and they have requested to receive the outcome of the consultation.

- 10.5 If there is significant feedback from consultees that the consultation was not deemed as meaningful, a review of the process will be undertaken, and consideration will be given to running the consultation again.

11.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW

- 11.1 Following some challenges on some recent consultation and engagement exercises, a review of the Council's consultation strategy is underway with a view to embedding more robust processes to ensure that all the Council's consultation and engagement activities are deemed meaningful.

12.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT

- 12.1 The Council's revised Communications and Engagement strategy is due to be presented to Full Council in March 2022.

Incorporated in the strategy will be a more robust evaluation process to ensure that people's experiences of the Council's consultation process can be captured, shared and applied in future engagements.

- 12.2 To identify further resources to increase capacity for a dedicated consultation officer.

13.0 CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES

- 13.1 The improvement activities identified in this report directly contribute to our wellbeing objective:

- 13.2 **Best Start to life:** Children and young people get the best start to life and are equipped with the skills they need to be successful learners and confident individuals.

13.3 Working Life

(Community Regen/ Housing/PASS)

People feel supported to develop the skills required to meet the needs of businesses, with a developing, safe infrastructure which makes Merthyr Tydfil an attractive destination.

13.4 Environmental Wellbeing

(Neighbourhood Services/Planning)

Communities protect, enhance, and promote our environment and countryside.

13.5 Living Well

(Children's & Adults Services) People are empowered to live independently within their communities, where they are safe and enjoy good physical and mental health. Environmental Wellbeing.

**ALYN OWEN
DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**COUNCILLOR CHRIS DAVIES
PORTFOLIO MEMBER FOR
GOVERNANCE AND CORPORATE
SERVICES**

BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Title of Document(s)	Document(s) Date	Document Location
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• MTCBC's Consultation and Engagement Framework• Consultation and Engagement Request Form		Communications, Consultation and Engagement Office.
Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?		No