

# Scrutiny Review of Public Consultation

## Executive Summary

The aim of the review was to improve performance of the consultation activity itself and of all Council activities that use the results of the consultations. In addition, there was the potential for making savings or meeting growing demand from existing resources through the introduction of new approaches.

It was recognised that individual departments/service areas in the Council decided on what they wished to consult on. The focus of the review was to consider the options that were available to these departments/service areas when undertaking consultations and to ensure that the effectiveness of these various options was maximised.

The Select Committee's key findings were as follows:

- The Town Centre Consultation was praised for its wide reach. The availability of paper consultation forms, as well as online forms, and public meetings meant that residents who did/could not complete the consultation online were still able to contribute their views.
- Members have suggested that public consultation questions or links to current consultations could be added to the start-up screens of public computers in libraries across the Borough.
- All consultation activity is already included within Stockton News. This section is entitled 'Your Views Matter'. This section could be feature more prominently in the future.
- Some consultations were open to all residents in the Borough. These consultations were advertised in various forms. For example, in the press, on the Council website, in libraries, and through residents' groups. In other instances, some consultations have focussed on services which might affect specific groups and so information has been sent to them as a closed group.
- There was a higher response rate on issues residents felt most passionate about and were most affected by.
- With regards to the Viewpoint Panel and the Town Centre Consultation, the category which engaged the least was young people.
- Following the example of other Councils, there is an interest in increasing Stockton Council's involvement with young people. This could be achieved by expanding the Council's engagement activities with Bright Minds Big Futures.
- In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has resulted in a need to increase digital/online services and reduce face-to-face meetings, the Residents' Panel could be utilised more effectively in future as a means of engagement outside of formal consultations for a wider cross-section of people.
- The promotion of the Viewpoint Panel, the Residents' Panel, and 'Your Views Matter' could be increased via social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) to increase engagement with those who prefer to communicate their views online.
- It would be useful to review consultation platforms. The current system requires training

provided by officers to each new member of staff which can be time consuming. It would be beneficial to investigate alternative platforms which are available to Councils.

## Conclusion

Public Consultation is a valuable and effective means of engaging with all residents across the Borough. In addition, the Public Consultation team lead on employee consultation across all Directorates. Both online and face-to-face methods are utilised by the team. External market research organisations have also facilitated larger-scale consultations, such as the Residents' Survey and visitor research of yearly events.

The Committee supported a re-evaluation of the current consultation platform, and an exploration of alternative platforms, following this review. The Committee also recognised the importance of retaining paper consultation forms, and improving print coverage of consultation activity, where appropriate. It was also acknowledged that engagement with young people should be increased.

## Recommendations

1. That, building on the success of the Town Centre Consultation, paper consultation forms and public meetings are retained in future for large-scale consultations, where appropriate, to allow residents who cannot access online consultation to contribute their views.
2. That the Council improve the quality of the information on the consultation pages of the website and in Stockton News, including both activity and feedback. This will help to raise awareness of consultations to all residents and foster trust.
3. That engagement with young people be increased, through the use of engagement activities with Bright Minds Big Futures.
4. That promotion of '*Your Views Matter*', *The Residents' Panel* and regular feedback via social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, be increased.
5. That, as per normal practice, the current consultation platform continued be reviewed regularly to determine if alternative consultation platforms are available to SBC.
6. That links to current consultations be embedded into the start-up screens of public computers in libraries across the Borough.
7. That *The Residents' Panel* be used more effectively as a means of engagement outside of formal consultations and we provide regular feedback to the panel.

\*Activities carried out in relation to recommendations are subject to Covid 19 guidelines and restrictions.