



Code of Good Practice On Consultation

Whenever Bristol City Council makes a decision about improving or changing its services, it needs to be confident the decision is properly informed by public opinion.

For nearly a decade, the council has maintained a Corporate Consultation Strategy setting out the principles that should underpin consultation and engagement with the people of Bristol.

Those principles remain true today and this new code of practice document seeks to reaffirm and refine them - and strengthen their consistent application.

The code also seeks to support strengthened partnership working and reflect the growing use and potential of the internet to capture the opinions of people on local issues and encourage them to get involved.

In producing this code, we have also listened to feedback from a range of consultations and your ideas on how we could improve public consultation in the future.

All councils consult on controversial issues and whilst we can't guarantee you're always going to agree with proposals and policy changes, this code is designed to improve the way we carry out public consultations, involve you in decision-making and respond to your views.



Aim of this code

- To state the 7 consultation principles the council follows.
- To ensure their consistent application to council consultations.

What is consultation?

For the purposes of this code, we define consultation as a process of dialogue with citizens and stakeholders which has a defined start and end date and informs a decision about a new proposal or a policy or service change.

Longer-term engagement work carried out by the council is not covered by this code.



What can effective consultation achieve?

- Encourage greater public involvement and interest in local democracy
- Deliver stronger community leadership
- Plan services and policies based on the needs / views of people
- Identify priorities and improve strategies
- Improve the take-up of those services
- Monitor the performance of services over time

Consultation and the democratic process

Of course, councillors and council officers will always need to weigh the views expressed through consultation against a wide range of other factors: such as legislation and government guidance; demographic data; financial costs and environmental impacts.

And because consultation rarely throws up a single opinion – councillors and officers will often have to make their own judgement about the weight to be given to one or other of the views expressed. They may also have to consider carefully whether the aspirations and needs of future generations - who will perhaps be most affected by any change - might differ significantly from those of today's population.

In other words, the results of consultation are never a substitute for the democratic process – and do not replace the legitimate role of elected representatives in decision-making.

However, effective and consistent consultation can certainly help inform good and responsible decision-making and ensure that, as far as possible, those decisions - and the actions that flow from them - properly reflect and respond to the needs of our city and its people.



Other relevant documents which cover consultation

There are two other documents the council has signed up to which covers how we consult the voluntary / community sector and around planning issues:

The Bristol Compact – includes a consultation code that should be followed when the council works with voluntary / community sector. www.bristolcompact.org.uk

Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) explains:

- how the council will involve the community and key stakeholders in preparing its Local Development Documents to guide future development in the city; and
- how the City Council will involve the community in planning applications as well as the council's expectation for how developers should engage the community when preparing their planning applications

Our seven consultation principles



We will strive to use these principles whenever we run public consultations

1. Time consultations well and allow sufficient time to respond

- Consultations should be timed to allow the results to influence policy / proposal development.
- Wide scale public consultations, e.g. citywide or large parts of it, should run for a minimum period of six weeks.
- The timing of consultations should consider the availability of target groups.
- Consultations that are primarily focussed on the voluntary and community sector (VCS) should run for a minimum period of 12 weeks, in line with the Bristol Compact, to allow VCS organisations a fair opportunity to canvass the views of their members, service users and volunteers.

2. Clearly present information and encourage informed opinion

- The consultation should clearly state: the proposal; why we are consulting; and how we will use the findings.
- The consultation should provide enough information to help consultees give an informed opinion and not just instant reaction.
- This information should be written in Plain English.

3. Be well targeted and reach out to hard-to-reach groups

- The views of those people / areas most affected by the proposal should be sought.
- Attempts should be made to listen to the views of non-users, especially when service changes are being consulted on.
- Attempts should be made to include the views of groups frequently excluded or overlooked.
- Consultations should consider the needs of people with impaired sight or hearing or people whose first language is not English.



4. Offer genuine options and ask objective questions

- Where options are offered, they should be realistic and deliverable. Surveys and questions should be written in an objective way allowing people to express their views.

5. Be well planned, managed and coordinated

- The council's consultation toolkit contains instructions to managers in carrying out consultations and will be followed to ensure this principle is followed

6. Be listed on Consultation Finder and be well communicated

- We will publicise consultations and make attempts to let people know they are happening.
- Consultation Finder lists all our consultations in one place on the web: www.bristol.gov.uk/consultation
- Major consultations e.g. citywide or affecting a large number of people - will be publicised by press release and we will use our publications e.g. Our City residents newspaper - to publicise them.



7. Provide fair, accessible feedback

- We will publish the results of consultations and later how they have been used.
- The results will be reported in a balanced way.

If you think these principles have not been followed

We will use these principles whenever we run public consultations. However, as part of our drive to consult in a consistent and honest way, we are interested to hear from people who believe the code has not been followed.

In the first instance, you should contact the responsible service manager / director for the consultation stated in Consultation Finder for a response, stating the consultation principle which you think has not been followed.

If you are not happy with the response, you may use our 'Fair Comment' procedure to make a comment or complaint: www.bristol.gov.uk/faircomment

Status of the code

This code does not have legal force and cannot prevail over statutory or mandatory requirements. Some consultations will be governed by these requirements and will be administered in accordance with the prevailing rules.

This code does not guarantee that the council will run an open public consultation every time - for example the council may consult on an issue with limited scope very early in the process with a small audience. In these cases, a full public consultation would not be appropriate, however, the results of these exercises will be made available and the rationale for the chosen research method explained.

Deviation from the code will, at times, be unavoidable when running a formal, written, public consultation. For instance, the council may have to deliver a programme of investment within a defined period in line with a government grant or award. In order to secure the investment, the council may need to shorten the length of time given for consultation. In these instances, the council will explain why it is deviating from this code and still give a realistic timescale for the response.

This code will be reviewed in two years following evaluation of its effectiveness. We welcome feedback on it, which can be sent to:

Consultation Research and Intelligence Team
Bristol City Council
The Council House
College Green
Bristol BS1 5TR

Tel: 0117 922 2848

Email: consultation@bristol.gov.uk

