

‘Wirral’s Future: Be a part of it’ Consultation

1. Executive Summary

This report sets out the extensive work undertaken to deliver the Council’s consultation process ‘Wirral’s Future: Be a part of it’. The report documents the different stages of the project, the overall methodology used, and the next steps in the process. It highlights the underpinning commitment to make the process inclusive and accessible to the widest possible audience.

2. Background

- 2.1. ‘Wirral’s Future’ is the largest and most far-reaching consultation exercise ever undertaken by the Council. It was initiated at a meeting of Cabinet on the 24th June 2010 by a resolution that instructed the Director of Corporate Services to:

“...develop, as a matter of urgency, a consultation programme that will enable us to truly engage with Wirral residents, community and voluntary groups and businesses in the future. The programme will be approved by the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council and should be implemented at the earliest possible opportunity.”

- 2.2. This decision reflects the Progressive Partnership Agreement set out by the new Administration which emphasised that:

“The Partnership will be inclusive in its decision making; committed to meaningful, open and transparent public consultation and to ensuring that no part of Wirral is ignored.”

- 2.2. This decision was taken in response to the existing budgetary challenges faced by the Council and the anticipated impact of the autumn Comprehensive Spending Review. This decision was also consistent with the prior agreement of Council at its meeting on 15th February 2010 where it was requested that the Director of Corporate Services

“...bring forward proposals for enhanced community engagement to ensure that major policy decisions include more robust processes of public consultation, as appropriate, before decisions are taken. Such proposals shall encompass a flexible system of engagement and consultation at appropriate points in the process in order to aid decision making.”

3. Consultation Design

- 3.1. The structure of the consultation programme was determined by the Director of Corporate Services in consultation with the Leader and the Deputy Leader of the Council and founded on the following principles that it must be:
- Innovative using new engagement methods
 - Based on comprehensive and accurate data
 - To inform the setting of Council priorities and budgets
 - Swift and inexpensive but well-executed
 - Delivered annually to inform the corporate plan
- 3.2. The consultation has four distinct phases:
- (i) The establishment of independent task forces with a remit to review the Council's Service priorities and delivery around four distinct themes that correspond with the Council's corporate objectives: Economy and Regeneration; Living in Wirral; Adult Social Services and Children and Young People's Services. Task Forces were charged with developing options papers to form the basis of the wider public consultation.
 - (ii) A wide-ranging public consultation on the options put forward by the Task Forces. As far as practicably possible, a comprehensive and far-reaching programme of engagement with residents, staff, businesses and stakeholders in the voluntary, community and faith sector.
 - (iii) Collating the results of the consultation and reporting this back to the Task Forces in order for them to review and refine their options before these are reported as a series of recommendations to Cabinet.
 - (iv) Reporting back the results of the consultation process to the public once Cabinet has made decisions on the Council's future direction having had regard to the recommendations put forward by the Task Forces and feedback from the consultation.
- 3.3. In order to meet the timeframe to influence the corporate planning and budget setting process for 2011/12, a multi-disciplinary core project team led by Emma Degg was quickly assembled with the necessary expertise and skills to manage and deliver this programme of work. The core project team officers are Rose Boylan; Mike Callon; Kevin McCallum; Jane Morgan and Tracey Smith. Weekly core project team meetings were instigated to monitor and review progress.
- 3.4. A detailed project plan and timeframe was developed setting out a 20 week programme of activity with an associated risk assessment and equality impact assessment in line with normal protocols. A research methodology was developed setting out the overall approach and the various methods of engaging stakeholders at different stages of the process. A communications and marketing plan was also produced to ensure the widest possible level of public awareness and involvement in the circumstances.

- 3.5. Additional communications and engagement plans were developed in relation to accessing known 'hard to reach' sections of the community including young people, older people, people with physical and learning disabilities and people from black and minority ethnic communities. An initial focus group with representatives from each of these groups was facilitated at the start of the process to ensure that any tailored approaches to maximising engagement could be factored into the overall process.

4. Task Forces

- 4.1. The chairs and individual members of the Task Forces were identified on the basis of having the necessary expertise and experience to ensure a comprehensive review of Council services and the options for change. To emphasise this, invitations were specifically made to individuals and not organisations and this was set out in the terms of reference for the Task Forces which were approved by the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management.
- 4.2. The project team was responsible for putting together a long list of potential candidates for the Task Forces. This included service-users, staff and strategic partners in the public, private and voluntary, and community sectors and to reflect the diversity of Wirral's communities.
- 4.3. Some Task Force Members were identified or volunteered through existing engagement mechanisms such as the Older People's Parliament, Executive Youth Board and Children in Care Council. Young people participating were supervised and supported at all times by officers from the Children and Young People's Department. Voluntary, community and faith sector representatives were drawn from the Third Sector Assembly (3SA) delegates in accordance with their thematic roles. At their first meeting, Task Forces were asked if they would like to invite anyone else to be involved to ensure appropriate representation. Lists of all Task Force members can be viewed on the consultation website.
- 4.4. The Terms of Reference state that Task Forces will make proposals to the Council's Cabinet relating to the future priorities of the Council and options for meeting the budget challenge. The Task Forces are therefore independent advisory groups and not decision-making bodies. Any decisions regarding setting the budget will be subject to the Council's usual scrutiny and decision making processes.
- 4.5. Given this, the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management advised that those involved were not subject to the Council's Members Code of Conduct or any requirement to register or declare interests.
- 4.6. There was an opportunity to discuss the Consultation process with the District Auditor, and his views are set out in the attached letter.

5. Task Force Supporting Information

- 5.1. A series of issues papers were developed to provide background information to the Task Forces. These were largely drawn from existing Corporate and

Departmental plans and strategies, and contained information about services and associated budgets along with the future challenges for the Council. Task Forces also received presentations from Council officers and additional information to support their discussions about the options available and to enable Task Force members to understand the impact of any potential recommendations to address the budget challenge.

- 5.2. All the Task Force meetings were open to the public, and the information relating to the Task Force meetings has been made publicly available on the consultation website including the issue papers, agendas, minutes, presentations and additional information provided. The four options papers summarising the Task Force proposals and which form the basis of the questionnaire are also posted on-line.

6. Consultation Questionnaire

- 6.1. Each Task Force met on three occasions to review Council services in depth and to develop a series of options as the basis for public consultation. An options paper was drafted and approved by each of the task forces following a consistent format based on what the Council *must* continue doing, *should* consider doing differently and *stop* doing.
- 6.2. The questionnaire was developed by officers from the project team based on the rationale set out in the research methodology and the various options put forward by the Task Forces. The questions relating to the respective themes were agreed with relevant departmental officers and then circulated to Task Force members for comment and approval.
- 6.3. In line with best practice, questions were reviewed by the project team to remove jargon and ensure a consistency of style and approach. The questionnaire was also tested within the marketing and PR team from a perspective of clarity and plain English. In addition to this, before the project began we held some pre-consultation focus groups with 'two groups of young people – the Children in Care Council, and the Youth Executive Board. These focus groups informed our plans for how to engage with young people. Following receipt of the options papers from each task force, we then invited representatives from those same groups to input into the wording and layout of the questionnaire. Both groups made useful suggestions to numerous questions contained in the questionnaire – all of which were taken on board, and led to changes being made.
- 6.4. To make it widely accessible, the questionnaire has been made available on-line and in paper format. In line with good practice, we have publicised the fact that it can also be made available in alternative formats where requested. In consultation with Adult Social Services an easy read version of the questionnaire has been designed for people with learning disabilities.
- 6.5. In order to gain as diverse and informative range of responses as possible, the questionnaire contains both quantitative and qualitative questions. People can give a simple yes/no response, and also have an opportunity to provide their own comments and additional feedback throughout.

- 6.6. The survey is also divided into clear sections so that respondents can either choose to complete all of it, or to concentrate on the themes and issues that they have most interest in or understanding of.

7. Community Engagement and Programme of Events

- 7.1. The project team has also pulled together a database of contact lists from various sources across all Council departments. This single list of over 1500 people and organisations includes statutory partners, voluntary organisations and small community-based groups. A mail out has been coordinated to everyone on the list with a copy of the questionnaire included.

- 7.2. As part of the marketing and communications plan, a full programme of activities and events is being delivered to raise awareness of the consultation through face-to-face contact with the public and stakeholder groups and forums. This includes outreach work at a range of obvious locations such as libraries, one-stop-shops and leisure centres but also includes locations and events such as supermarkets, coffee mornings, day centres, schools and shopping centres. Events have also been delivered in conjunction with our partners through existing engagement processes and to access hard to reach groups through facilitated group discussion and workshops.

- 7.3. An outreach team of over 30 staff has been assembled to deliver this programme of work. By the end of the seven weeks of activity, the team will have handed a questionnaire and spoken to over 10,000 people at 140 events. In total, 40,000 questionnaires will have been distributed through partner organisations.

- 7.4. In addition to outreach activity, there has been a communication strategy to maximise coverage of the consultation through the local press, TV and radio. We have encouraged partners to promote the consultation through internal staff newsletter and through community publications. We have also mapped on-line activity to target local, social media interest groups to encourage their members to access the Council's website to find out more and complete the on-line survey.

- 7.5. Wirral's approach is generating considerable interest from the Local Government Group (LGG) and other Councils across the country. An increasing number of local authorities are undertaking consultations with residents about setting priorities and future budgets. Comparative analysis of these suggests that Wirral's is one of the most extensive and wide ranging processes, already involving the highest number of residents, and using open ended questions to invite comment and suggestions (rather than simply using a tick box approach).

- 7.6. The consultation closes on 31st October 2010, and we continue to receive responses on a daily basis. At the time of writing, over 4,500 questionnaires have been completed, representing an above 10% return rate on the 40,000 questionnaires that have been distributed.

8. Consultation Feedback

- 8.1. A robust system for capturing and analysing feedback has been implemented. A dedicated team of officers from across the council is in place to input all of the responses from the paper questionnaire into the database.
- 8.2. A structured framework for analysis has been produced and is being used by officers to ensure a consistent and in-depth approach. This will enable quantitative and qualitative analysis and reports to be produced, giving a comprehensive and very detailed level of evaluation.
- 8.3. After the consultation has closed, officers will produce reports to go to the 4th meetings of the Task Forces. These will enable task force members to consider the survey results and review the initial proposals that were set out in the Options papers. The task force recommendations will then form the basis of the report to be considered by Cabinet at the end of November.
- 8.4. In line with the principle of openness and transparency that runs throughout the process, all of the comments and feedback will be publicly available.

9. Consultation evaluation

- 9.1. The original project plan included a proposal to evaluate the whole process in order to learn from it. This will include structured feedback from those involved in the process. The intention is to produce a formal evaluation report with recommendations for future consultations.

10. Financial implications

The Consultation findings will be used to inform future budgetary decision making by the Council.

11. Staffing implications

No implications arising directly from this report.

12. Equal Opportunities/Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

An initial Equality Impact Assessment has already been completed.

13. Community Safety implications

There are no direct Community Safety implications arising from this report.

14. Local Agenda 21 implications

There are no implications arising directly from this report.

15. Planning implications

There are no direct planning implications arising from this report.

16. Anti-poverty implications

There are no implications arising directly from this report.

17. Human Rights implications

There are no implications arising directly from this report.

18. Social Inclusion implications

There are no implications arising directly from this report.

19. Local Member Support implications

Residents from across Wirral have an opportunity to respond to the consultation.

Recommendations

Members are asked to note the information provided in the report.

Jim Wilkie

Interim Chief Executive