

Consultation Audit Report

East Herts District Council
& Dacorum Borough Council



Report on the 2009 Consultation Service audit for East Herts District Council
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1. Introduction

As part of a reciprocal agreement between Dacorum (DBC) and East Herts (EHDC) district councils, audits of consultation activity were carried out during 2009 across both organisations.

The audits were carried out by Lorna Georgiou, East Herts' Performance & Improvement Co-ordinator with Dacorum, and by Sara Hamilton, Dacorum's Consultation Manager, at East Herts. This ensured an independent viewpoint.

The audits aim was to give insight into more efficient working with a clearer focus in order to deal with increasing organisational demands and decreasing resources.

This report focuses on the findings for the East Herts audit and gives some recommendations.

1.1 Scope of audit

The review aimed to gain an understanding of:

- the consultation function within the authority
- expectations of key internal stakeholders, including those Directorate heads receiving consultation support.
- existing methods of consultation
- current working methods
- perceptions of service provided and the importance placed on consultation
- workflow / processes
- software usage
- responsibilities and roles

1.2 Methodology

East Herts and Dacorum Borough Council are both members of the 'Hertfordshire Public Engagement Partnership'. The Partnership is made up of the County Council, 8 of the 10 Districts, and Police and Health Authorities. The aim of the partnership is to jointly commission consultation work, direct future countywide activity to meet targets, and to share best practice. As such, it was felt that member officers from the two authorities, wishing to achieve an up to date review of their consultation activity, could carry out the audits within *each other's* Councils at nil direct cost but with no loss to effectiveness of the reviews.

The audit fieldwork commenced at the start of 2009 and was largely completed by spring.

Heads of service were interviewed face to face (with one exception where a telephone interview was carried out). Each was asked a similar group of questions (see appendix 1) that aimed to assess their current consultation activity, perceptions of the consultation service at East Herts, and their future aspirations. The response to the audit was, in the main, positive; Heads of Service were keen to be involved and express their views.

Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of the interviews in that names are not linked to any individual comments.

2. Current Consultation

There is a diverse range of consultation that is carried out at East Herts. The audit showed that this activity includes one-off and ongoing research, statutory obligations, and in-house and agency led research.

Most services view consultation and research as an integral part of their work and everyone interviewed mentioned at least two large, statutory, or on-going consultation activities as part of their role or techniques for managing their service.

The need for consultation as a support function to their tasks was evident but in addition there was also a strong desire to gain more data and intelligence to help in the day to day management as well as longer term, strategic elements of their work.

The consultation methods cited by interviewees covered most of the available traditional methods; postal surveys, meetings, benchmarking groups, web consultation, forums, resident magazine questionnaires, and follow-up surveys. There were no examples given of the newer techniques within consultation, for example participatory budgeting, or social media methods.

Most people interviewed as part of the audit are aware of the contract with Opinion Research Services but were unclear on the detail and what this means for their service. There was less awareness of the Hertfordshire Public Engagement Partnership and those that did know about it saw no links to their own services.

Average annual spend on consultation was not known by the services. No-one cited a specific consultation budget or having their own consultation software (some had data software).

3. Perception of consultation service

Consultation as a function is seen as important to the Council with all interviewees supporting the view that it is a vital business process and that 'knowing the customer' is crucial. Heads of Services had examples of where *not* asking the public had led to bad decision making as well as projects that had clearly benefited from consultation.

However, there seems to be no consistency in the perception of the consultation *service* at East Herts with Heads of Service being unclear about the role, its capacity, and what support can be given. And one interviewee had no experience or knowledge of the consultation service at all. Where Consultation *had* been involved in a project their support was welcomed and the professional knowledge appreciated.

There was a tendency to call the service "Comms" rather than seeing consultation as a separate function (not necessarily a perception that should be changed). No-one referred to the Performance service as part of this audit.

Some expressed an opinion that the 'run of the mill', service specific consultation was a service responsibility and that statutory, corporate, one-off or 'unusual' consultation was within the remit of the consultation service.

Other Heads of Service held the assumption that all consultation is done by the consultation service albeit in collaboration with the service in question.

There was some awareness of the Consultation Toolkit but this was basic and no-one reported using it to help their service regularly.

Another perception held by some interviewees was that the Consultation service is a 'gatekeeper', checking projects, and pointing out when something is wrong.

There was a general feeling that the Consultation service could be more proactive in its offers of support and take more of a lead role. Conversely however, one or two Heads of Service described their own competence in carrying out their consultation and would see the Consultation service leading as too heavy-handed.

When asked if training would be welcomed, some agreed that their service managers would benefit whereas others said this would feel like an extra burden of responsibility on an already stretched manager.

Where Consultation is involved in a project, it was felt that roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined so that the service knows what part Consultation will undertake and what they are to do themselves, and where the cut-off or handover is.

3.1 Verbatim comments

The following example quotes from the interviews are to further illustrate the review findings.

“If we need consultation we do it ourselves, there’s limited capacity within Consultation”

“There needs to be a clear remit, what skills can they offer?”

“A service could survive without the consultation function”

“Yes, of course consultation is important, we need awareness of what people think”

“We need professional advice and added value”

“Periodic meetings would really help to set the consultation agenda...then come back to us with a plan.”

“They’re a gate keeping service, and reactive”

“Data for our service would be useful, but not if in isolation, benchmarking data would be useful”

“They would not be treading on any toes if they were more proactive in coming to us”

4. Conclusion

The interviews carried out have demonstrated that consultation as a support service to the business activity of East Herts District Council is essential, and almost inextricably linked in some cases.

The Heads of Service that *had* used the service could see its value and welcomed the input. This working relationship has created trust and understanding and increased the likelihood of involving Consultation again in the future.

However the 'self sufficiency' of many services with some of their consultation means that the understanding of what the Consultation service can and should do is limited. This leads to the need to build internal awareness of the possibilities and added value of involving Consultation at the outset of a project.

This review suggests then, that the service itself, and what its function is, needs little alteration. However, it is the *awareness* of those that have the greatest need for consultation and information to aid decision making that needs attention.

5. Recommendations:

The following are suggested actions that the service could take (resource and capacity dependent) and are split into short, medium and longer term. Some recommendations need further consideration of their likely effectiveness and impact within EHDC.

Short term (this financial year):

- Clearly define the role of consultation at EHDC (what is its purpose, where does it 'sit' within the organisation and why, what value can involving Consultation add)
- Promote an understanding of how Place Data will be used within the authority. Who will drill down into the information and make it meaningful / actionable for EHDC.
- Investigate feasibility of aspirations from the service managers:
 - Exit interviews are managed solely by managers, should this change?
 - Could Consultation be the lead on benchmarking data gathering? (would this lead to better data quality)
 - Equalities – what can Consultation add to move this agenda forward
- Consider joining (and if already a member, publicise) the Market Research Society or Consultation Institute – this will give access to current thinking, reduced cost training opportunities and emphasis the professional element of consultation as a function, aiming to put it on a par with the other 'traditional' professional support services within the Authority (e.g. Legal, accountancy)
- That both authorities share their audits with our Partners and see where collaborative work can be undertaken.

Medium Term (2010/11):

- Using a case study / testimonial approach, publicise where Consultation has already impacted positively on services (using own internal communications methods, attendance at meetings and so on)
- Profile the Consultation service and Toolkit as widely as possible (team meetings, intranet, staff magazine, new-starters event.)

- Publicise the benefits of using ORS (and consequences if fail to = breach of contract, ORS may seek to reclaim lost income or sue organisation)
- Set up regular face to face meetings (quarterly?) with key heads of service (the first meetings could ask exactly what support desired, to lead or to assist, for example. Who would like training and what should this be?) Use these meetings to inform a consultation forward plan.
- Consider a project to assess the effectiveness of using social media as a form of consultation.
- 'Record' each consultation activity that occurs across the organisation for one financial year, with information such as methodology, response rates, incentives offered, how results affected decision making, and cost.

Long Term (2011 – 2014):

- Consider setting up a central repository for consultation results that can act as a mechanism for sharing data and to highlight gaps.
 - Implement consultation standards / protocols / policy with the aim of getting all services to equal performance
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Appendix 1 – Interview Questions

- What is your experience or knowledge of the consultation function / support here at East Herts. e.g., are you aware of / used the consultation toolkit on the intranet?
- What is your understanding / perception of the role of consultation?
- Has your service carried out any consultation in the past 12 months / used consultation support?
- These projects...where they carried out by your service / consultation / a combination? How did this work, what went well, what could have been improved?
- These projects – are they ad-hoc or regular?
- Statutory or voluntary?
- What consultation do you have planned for the coming financial year? Or is there anything you don't have planned but have aspirations to carry out?
- What would you say is your average annual spend on consultation? Do you / your services have a specific budget?
- Do you have any specific software that you use for consultation purposes.
- Do you have any examples of where consultation you have carried out has influenced decision making? How do you tend to feedback / disseminate results of consultation.
- How do you think consultation support should be carried out / improved? What are the strengths and weaknesses?
- Do you see consultation as an important business function? Why?
- Are there any of your managers you would like me to interview for the purposes of this audit
- Any other comments about consultation?