

Motion on Formulating a Public Consultation Policy

Proposer – Cllr Catherine Gray

Seconder – Cllr Elliot Colburn

The Council notes that the Council's current approach to consultation is not working, leading to detrimental effects on local residents and communities. It is clear that many residents are unaware of how the consultation process actually works, or how to find out about matters that interest or affect them. Residents are unhappy with or bewildered by the current processes, or are left out entirely due to either a lack of communication or the methods used to communicate and advertise the consultation not being compatible with their needs.

The primary objective of public consultation should be for the Council to gather the opinions and views of residents, and then take them in to account in the decision making process and should not be employed to pay lip service to the idea of consultation without any tangible benefit to the outcome for residents. A proper and inclusive consultation strategy will help to create a strong two-way relationship between the council and the community, which is currently lacking. A properly-considered consultation strategy will also help to avoid any legal challenges to decisions ultimately taken.

For example, the Council has allowed third party groups to undertake their own unmonitored 'consultation' when disposing of buildings at under-value, while the current parking consultation has alienated many residents while disenfranchising certain sectors of the community who do not have access, or regular access to the Internet and electronic communication channels. Another example is that residents are no longer able to submit comments regarding planning applications even by email, the online public access system must be used, which is often unavailable, and is difficult to navigate at best.

The Council undertakes to:

- Formulate a formal Sutton- and resident-centred consultation policy that reflects the needs of all communities, and recognises the different means of communication required by each, analysing the response rates from each group. Outreach programmes should be used to engage with organisations such as Age UK Sutton in order to formulate the policy and then to see how both the council and the organisation can best engage with those least likely to participate, taking into account known factors such as having a postal vote, which may indicate someone less able to engage with a consultation.
- Apply that policy once agreed, so that alternative, digital and written methods of communication are used to suit all.
- Agree a minimum threshold for the number of responses required before action or further policy on the matters being consulted on can be formulated and agree that

where only a minority of residents respond to a consultation, it isn't fair or honest to take this as evidence that residents in general support what's being done, and that councillors remain responsible for the decisions they make.

- Specifically commit to publishing the demographic breakdown for respondents and response rate for each consultation going forward in the interests of transparency.