



Consultation and Engagement Strategy

2016 - 2019

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1. Overview

Working closely with local communities has been an increasingly important issue for Cheshire Fire Authority in recent years and the Authority's commitment to accessible communication and community engagement is set out in one of its key corporate objectives: "Inform and involve our communities and our staff in developing services and policies which are open, transparent and accountable."

The move from a strong emphasis on emergency response to putting equal resources into prevention and protection work has ensured greater involvement with local communities on a daily basis. This involvement will continue to increase as the Authority works collaboratively with partners to deliver an expanding range of services.

The current Government and previous administrations have been clear in demanding that public services be transparent and accountable to the communities in which they serve. This has seen new legislation introduced such as the establishment of directly-elected Police and Crime Commissioners as well as the development of increased transparency and accountability of public services.

The key tenets of increasing transparency and accountability are to provide increased choice for local people over the services provided for them, devolving power to the lowest possible level, giving everyone fair access to public services and making those services accountable to users and taxpayers.

Through the use of consultation and engagement, local people are able to access and exercise their influence over service providers as well as communicating how they would like the services to be delivered.

Fire and Rescue Authorities also have to meet requirements set out within the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework. The Framework states that fire and rescue services must be transparent and accountable to their communities for their decisions and actions, and provide help to plan their local service through effective consultation and involvement.

The Framework also requires Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs) to be easily accessible to the public and reflect effective consultation with the community, staff representative bodies and partners throughout their development (and at all review stages). Additionally, services must set out the principles and approach it will take on consultation activity.

Effective consultation and engagement will also provide communities and decision makers such as elected Members, with the opportunity to scrutinise the services provided to them, via various methods of feeding back views and comment and opinions on the organisation. Through ensuring that there are effective methods of reporting back the outputs and outcomes of consultation and engagement to the relevant parts of the organisation, the Authority can be more accountable to those it serves and reflect the diverse areas of Cheshire, Halton and Warrington.

This strategy will set out how the Authority will approach engagement with local people and also outline standards to meet when undertaking formal consultation. Recognising and applying these principles and standards will ensure that the Authority engages effectively with local residents and consults in a sound manner compliant with recognised best practice.

Together this will ensure that local people can exert influence over how local services are provided and have fair access to voicing their views and comments. This will help to embed the organisation within the community it serves, protecting its reputation and minimising the risk of potential legal challenges. It will also help to ensure that the Authority is accountable as the programme for reform of the Fire and Rescue Service develops

2. Engagement

Engagement is an on-going process whereby the Authority will develop and maintain relationships that involve local people and stakeholders so that they are empowered to share their views and opinion on the organisation or changes and developments that are, or may be, considered.

While engagement is a more informal process than that of consultation, it is helpful to outline a small number of key principles that will assist in facilitating effective engagement and securing useful feedback and the best outcomes for the Authority.

Community engagement by the Authority should be:

- Relevant – the Authority should identify and involve those in the community relevant to the issue at hand.
- Inclusive – the Authority should ensure that those who wish to be involved can be and that support is given to seldom-heard groups to enable their voice to be heard.
- Accessible – the Authority should identify and overcome any barriers that may prevent people engaging. It should also present issues in an understandable manner.
- Collaborative – the Authority should work with other partners where appropriate.
- Honest – the Authority should be clear how and as to what extent those it engages with can shape the delivery of services. It should also communicate feedback to those engaged with and other parts of the Authority and partners who may have an interest.

3. Types of engagement

Engagement is a fairly fluid term and therefore there are many aspects of the organisation's work and activities that can be termed as engagement. Engagement covers visits by staff into the community to residents and businesses, as well as activities such as station open days or events in areas across Cheshire, Halton and Warrington.

Engagement activity such as home visits, open days or visits to station or local schools etc are carried out by service delivery and prevention staff as a routine and core part of the business, as are visits and audits of non-residential premises by protection staff. There are other occasions where it may be necessary or beneficial to engage with local communities in order to find out views of the service or other information not specifically covered in the activities listed above; the Planning, Performance and Communications department can assist in providing guidance or facilitation for activity such as this.

It is important that our engagement covers all sections of the community so that those who may not regularly access or have difficulty accessing our services can find out about the Authority and how they can access services if needed.

The Authority, through the Equality and Inclusion team, will be able to co-ordinate engagement with seldom heard groups such as those of different faiths, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientation or those with a disability. It will also continue to work with external organisations such as the Cheshire, Halton and Warrington Race and Equality Centre (CHAWREC) and other interested parties.

4. Stakeholder engagement

Engagement with key local stakeholders is a crucial part of maintaining and enhancing the Authority's brand and reputation. Often consultation with key stakeholders will require more considered management; the Service has a range of tools available, such as Public Affairs Plans, to ensure that the organisation consults effectively and is alert to particular issues that may be encountered.

Engagement with key stakeholders, particularly elected officials such as councillors and Members of Parliament, should be co-ordinated with the Policy and Inclusion Manager who will develop Public Affairs Plans where necessary.

The Planning, Performance and Communications department maintains a list of key stakeholders that are contacted for major (often statutory) consultations. This list contains contact details for a range of individuals and organisations including elected members, local statutory agencies and partners, local community groups and faith networks and businesses and representative organisations. The department will coordinate formal consultation with these stakeholders, though it will also be beneficial to liaise with the department when conducting other engagement with key stakeholders.

5. Consultation

Consultation differs from engagement in that, strictly, consultation is a specific process that lasts for a set period of time and should be followed in accordance with certain rules. In some cases, organisations may be required by law to consult when proposing changes to the provision of services, whereas there are no set regulations concerning engagement. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive, as effective engagement can complement the facilitation of good consultation.

The six standards outlined below will help to ensure that the Authority continues to undertake consultation programmes in line with recognised best practice. Conducting a consultation exercise in line with these standards will serve to provide a clear and robust process, protect the reputation of the organisation and reduce the risk of possible legal challenge to a consultation.

6. Consultation principles

The following principles outline what the Authority aims to achieve through its consultation processes. These principles have been influenced by the Cabinet Office's Consultation Principles as well as through emerging legal precedent and recognised best practice.

Following these principles will ensure that consultation activity is carried out to a high standard that is meaningful for both the Authority and those it consults and reduces the risk of a legal challenge to the consultation.

6.1 Our consultations will enable people to have an influence over our final plans and policies.

This means:

When we consult, we consult on plans and options at a formative stage i.e. before it has decided which proposals to adopt or enact. We will - where feasible and practical - outline a range of options for consultation. Sometimes we may have already developed and disregarded certain options before the start of the process and would therefore not consult on these. We may also have a certain proposal that we would prefer to enact; where this is the case we will make this clear.

6.2 Our consultations will enable people to understand the issues being consulted upon.

This means:

We will explain why a consultation is taking place and provide enough information to enable people to understand the proposals or plans being consulted on. Information will be made available in a range of formats and in 'plain English' so that people can provide considered responses to a consultation. We will make use of developing online technologies to assist us in providing this information, including our website, intranet and social media platforms.

To this end, all corporate consultation and engagement will be coordinated by the Planning, Performance and Communications Department to ensure consistency and make use of the existing skills of staff within the department to undertake communications, consultation and engagement.

6.3 Our consultations will be inclusive.

This means:

We will value equality and diversity and seek to ensure that no individual or group is precluded from taking part in a consultation because of their age, gender, ethnicity, religion, ability or disability, sexual orientation or domestic circumstances. We will work with organisations and representative groups to help us gather views and comment from seldom-heard groups.

This also means where necessary we will proactively go out into the community to consult and may also liaise with local partner agencies, such as Cheshire Constabulary and the Police and Crime Commissioner, where beneficial.

We will keep records of our key stakeholders and actively seek to engage with them both before and during a consultation process.

When consulting externally on major proposals and initiatives across the Service area – such as IRMP and other strategic consultation – it is important to ensure that the feedback received is as representative of the local population as possible and therefore we will aim to have a representative sample size and secure enough responses to provide a margin of error of at most +/- 5%.

6.4 Our consultations will allow people enough time to respond.

This means:

We will hold our consultations for long enough to enable as many who wish to submit a response to do so; for statutory consultations such as those on Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs) this will be for 12 weeks. We will also endeavour to make allowances for certain times of the year such as major holiday periods, where people may be unable to respond.

6.5 Responses to our consultations will be taken into account.

This means:

The results from a consultation will be considered by the appropriate decision makers within the organisation and taken into account when a decision is being reached. It is important to note, however, that while the results of a consultation will be considered, they are not binding upon those making the decision.

Where decision makers require summaries and reports outlining the process or results of a consultation, these will be provided in a clear and transparent manner and will contain an accurate reflection of the consultation.

6.6 We will let people know what happened as a result of our consultation.

This means:

We will provide feedback on the results of the consultation, the decisions that were made and what has happened or will happen as a result. We will do this through a range of existing communications channels and in several formats.

7. How we will consult

The Authority uses a range of methods to consult with stakeholders and interested parties. The matrix below outlines the main reasons for engaging and the methods that can be used. The matrix should be used as a general guide, as methods and techniques will vary according to whether the organisation is seeking to inform, engage or consult and depending on factors specific to the activity in question.

	Statutory and strategic consultation	Measuring customer satisfaction	Engaging with the local community	Engaging with staff	Engaging with key stakeholders
Informing					
Media relations	X		X		
Advertising			X		
Annual Report	X		X		
Website/intranet	X	X	X	X	X
Social media	X	X	X	X	X
Direct correspondence	X			X	X
Email	X			X	X
Engaging					
Briefings	X			X	X
Community events	X		X		
Focus groups	X	X			
Direct correspondence					
Stakeholder meetings			X	X	X
Consulting					
Postal survey	X	X	X		
Online survey	X	X	X	X	X
Use of response panel	X	X	X		
Public meetings	X		X		

8. Online technology

Social media and online technologies will form part of consultation activity and the organisation will keep pace with diversifying online technologies. The Authority already has an established social media presence and using these channels will enable the Authority to both raise awareness and reach a diverse range of interested parties.

Social media and online technology will play an active part of the organisation's consultation and engagement programmes. The Authority will monitor and manage its own platforms to moderate and also to correct any factual inaccuracies that are presented.

Where surveys and questionnaires are used as part of a consultation, then these will also be distributed online via the organisation's social media channels and through online tools like email. The Authority already subscribes to a SurveyMonkey account which can be used by the Planning, Performance and Communications Department to create and distribute online surveys.

Where comments have been provided on social media platforms, then this will be included within any feedback reports. Reports will also be made available online so that those who have engaged through social media or the internet can view feedback.

9. Feedback and evaluation

Feedback is a key component of the consultation and engagement cycle as it enables those who have taken part in the process to learn of the outputs and outcomes that they have contributed towards. It also facilitates accountability and transparency as it allows those involved in the consultation or engagement process to see how their views have led to changes in the organisation.

Feedback on the output of a consultation process (i.e. the results) should be presented to the appropriate decision making body and should be in a clear and understandable format which accurately reflects the results of the consultation.

Feedback on the outcome of a consultation process or engagement event (i.e. the decisions taken after the consultation or engagement event) should be produced in a format and style that is easy to understand, particularly for the lay reader. It also needs to be distributed in a timely manner following any decision(s) being made.

Particularly when providing feedback to members of the public it will be necessary to publish the relevant documents online and ensure that arrangements are available to provide feedback in a range of formats, such as easy-read or in an alternative language.

Evaluation helps to ensure the consultation activity undertaken is appropriate and effective. It is also a useful tool to help refine and improve aspects of consultation in

line with recognised best practice and to ensure that the service engages with a wide range of stakeholders and interested parties.

Following each major consultation programme such as an IRMP consultation or public satisfaction consultation, it is appropriate to evaluate aspects of the consultation to identify particular strengths and weakness and to improve the approach for future events. For smaller-scale or one-off events it may be appropriate to gather evaluation through feedback forms or online surveys/emails.

10. Assurance and guidance

At times it may be necessary to acquire external, independent accreditation and assurance for the Authority's consultation process. Assurance ensures that the Authority and external stakeholders can be confident that the consultation processes used are robust, fair and effective. The Consultation Institute is a nationally recognised body which promotes the development and enhancement of best practice within the consultation sector and can be utilised to accredit both staff and processes.

In addition, committing staff to continuing professional development in the subject area – through making use of training and development offered by recognised independent providers – will ensure that those conducting consultation (and engagement) on behalf of the Authority are aware of emerging requirements and best practice.

Some staff within the Planning, Performance and Communications Department – such as the Consultation and Engagement Officer – have sought professional development with independent providers and are well placed to provide internal assurance and guidance on best practice for other areas of the Service for a range of consultation and engagement activity.