



St. Helens Council Consultation Code

The Consultation Code for St. Helens describes how we engage with our residents and communities. It reflects the importance of actively involving the whole community to ensure that our services meet the needs of our customers.

The code also seeks to support strengthened partnership working as well as using more online tools such as social media to capture the opinions of people on local issues and encourage them to get involved.

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 seven consultation principles.
- To ensure their consistent application to council consultations.

What is consultation?

In 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, 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.

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 borough and its people.

Other relevant documents that cover consultation

There are two other documents the council has signed up to. These cover how we consult the voluntary / community sector, and consultation on planning issues.

1. The [St Helens Compact](#) includes a consultation code that should be followed when the council targets a consultation to the voluntary / community sector.
2. The [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 borough.

- How the 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

1. Time consultations well and allow sufficient time to respond.
2. Clearly present relevant information and encourage informed opinion.
3. Be well targeted and reach out to seldom heard groups.
4. Offer genuine options and ask objective questions.
5. Be well planned, managed and co-ordinated.
6. Be listed on Consultation Suite and be well communicated.
7. Provide fair, accessible feedback.

We will use these principles whenever we run public consultations.

- 1. Time consultations well and allow sufficient time to respond.**
 1. Consultations should be timed to allow the results to influence policy / proposal development.
 2. Wide scale public consultations, such as borough wide or large parts of it, should run for a minimum period of six weeks.
 3. 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, where possible and appropriate, in line with the St Helens Compact, to allow VCS organisations a fair opportunity to canvass the views of their members, service users and volunteers.
- 2. Clearly present relevant information and encourage informed opinion.**
 1. The consultation should clearly state: the proposal, why we are consulting, and how we will use the findings.
 2. The consultation should provide enough information to enable consultees to give an informed opinion and not simply an instant reaction. This information should be written in plain English.
- 3. Be well targeted and reach out to seldom heard groups.**
 1. The views of those people / areas most affected by the proposal should be sought.
 2. Attempts should be made to listen to the views of non-users, especially when service changes are being consulted on.
 3. Attempts should be made to include the views of groups frequently excluded or overlooked.
 4. 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.**
 1. Where options are offered, they should be realistic and deliverable.
 2. Surveys and questions should be written in an objective way allowing people to express their views.
- 5. Be well planned, managed and coordinated.**
 1. The council's consultation toolkit contains step-by-step instructions to enable managers to effectively manage consultations and avoid unnecessary duplication.
- 6. Be listed on consultation finder and be well communicated.**
 1. We will publicise consultations and make attempts to let people know they are happening.
 2. [Consultation Suite](#) lists all our consultations in one place on the web.
 3. Major consultations e.g. borough wide or affecting a large number of people - will be publicised by press release and we will use our publications such as St Helens First - to publicise them.

7. Provide fair, accessible feedback.

1. We will publish the findings of consultations and later how they have been used.
2. The findings 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 or 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 [comments](#) procedure to make a comment or complaint.

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 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 should make it clear why it is deviating from this code and be mindful of the need to give a realistic timescale for the response.
- These guidelines will be updated following evaluations of the council's effectiveness in ensuring improved consistency and quality in running public consultations

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