

# Consultation & Engagement Annual Report 2009-10

*"Citizenship isn't a transaction – in which you put your taxes in and get your services out. It's a relationship – you're part of something bigger than yourself and it matters what you think and feel and do."* **David Cameron speaking about The Big Society (Oct 2010)**

Over the last year we have worked hard to listen to local people and work closely with them to identify their needs and aspirations. In this way our residents, visitors and workers are increasingly involved in decision making through local partnership structures and neighbourhood forums. This level of consultation and engagement is vital if we are to enhance community cohesion and people's quality of life. It allows diverse voices to be heard and brings everyone together at a local level.

The Sustainable Community Strategy and Comprehensive Area Assessment seek to find out what would make a real difference to people's lives and how their lives are changing. Priorities must express community needs and aspirations, as well as show how good we are at engaging, involving and empowering local people. The Communities in Control directives talk about shifting power away from traditional structures and into the hands of communities and individual citizens, thus making them active participants in determining what is best for their communities.

Two trends drive change. One is the growth in transparency and the other is an increase in popular participation, to enable more people to express an opinion on important issues. Recently, the government has launched its "Big Society" drive to empower communities still further. There is likely to be a shift from consultation alone to increased citizen and social sector participation within policy development and design, commissioning and co-delivery of services. Groups will be able to run such services as post offices, libraries, transport services and shape housing projects. The concept will be a big advance for people power and we, as a council, will need to respond to this in the way we engage with people and deliver services in the future.

## Consultation and Engagement

We use a variety of methods to talk and listen to the public – from producing a council newspaper, Borough Update, to asking people personally what they think about our budget. It is important that in all our consultations that we don't raise people's expectations unrealistically. As well as collecting and acting on people's opinions, we also need to ensure

that respondents and the public receive feedback on the outcome of their input.

Over arching strategies and plans that have gone out for consultation this year:

### **Local Development Framework**

The local development framework (LDF) is the set of policies that determines where and how development takes place in Maidstone. Consultation has been undertaken into the town centre, the settlement hierarchy, a water cycle study and a strategic flood risk assessment. This has been done through meetings, workshops, liaison groups, discussions and walkabouts. Partners and other stakeholders have been consulted. The results of the consultations have been fed into the various documents. All that remains is the completion of evidence before the publication of the core strategy for public consultation later in 2010.

### **2010-11 Budget**

Consultation focused on finding out which services people felt were important and those where they felt reductions could be made. Over 1,300 participants were asked in a face to face survey for their opinion on future charging for parking, park and ride, waste removal and the Hazlitt theatre. They were also asked for their preferences for increases in council tax or cuts in services. We placed features in the council's newsletter Borough Update in the Downsmail newspaper and on our website. We also carried out meetings with stakeholders. The most common suggestions were for cuts in service centred on economies in council salaries and staff. As a result the Cabinet made £700,000 of staff savings in the 2010-11 budget.

Over the year consultations have been carried out into:

### **High Street Improvement Project**

This project will reinforce Maidstone's position as the premier town centre retail centre in Kent. It will increase the attractiveness of this area to shoppers, visitors and residents, and contribute to town centre investment. The plans for the area were chosen as a result of a RIBA architectural competition. Two large pedestrian squares will be created outside the Town Hall and in the Lower High Street to enable events to take place and restaurants to spill on to the street. New paving, seating, lighting and tree planting will contribute to a softer more welcoming environment for shoppers.

Stakeholder consultation was carried out with bus operators, taxi representatives, disability groups and the town centre management. A public exhibition was held in January and February 2010 in the Gateway

and in the Mall. Designs were also placed in shop windows to give the public a real sense of what is being planned for the area.

As a result of consultation changes were made to enhance disability access, increase soft landscaping and better integrate public transport provision.

Work is planned to start on the scheme in 2011.

### **Mote Park Heritage Lottery Funding**

This £2.5m project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund will improve our 500 acre Mote Park as a place for the public to enjoy by improving pedestrian access, create two local centres with toilets, catering and parking, re-instate the wetland wildlife habitats, restore the parkland trees, enhance wildlife with the possible grazing of cattle and spread the park's heritage to the widest audience.

Pre-consultation for the application for funding was undertaken early in 2010 which included statutory bodies and stakeholders as well as interviews with hard to reach groups and Maidstone Borough Council staff. An open day was held for members of the public, on Saturday 23rd January 2010, at Mote Park Leisure Centre. The event was attended by 350 people and they were invited to feed back their comments on the proposals via a questionnaire. The displays along with the questionnaire were also made available for viewing at Maidstone Borough Council's Gateway reception and on the website.

As a result of consultation the following changes were made prior to submitting the stage 2 bid:

1. Reduction in the proposed tree clearance, focusing on reinstating historic vistas with a sympathetic long term 10 year plan.
2. Incorporation of cycle racks.
3. Improvements to entrances that maintain security from unauthorised motorcycle access but permit wheelchair entry.
4. Agreement of vehicle restriction points.
5. Improved provision for disabled parking.
6. Re-alignment of footpaths away from sensitive areas.
7. Kiosk improvements, incorporating baby change and a fully accessible disabled toilet.
8. Relocation of the model boat platform.
9. Ensuring that fish can swim pass the new spillway.

A second open day was held on Saturday 15th May 2010, at Mote Park Leisure Centre to present the amended and final plans.

The stage 2 bid has been successful and the project is programmed to start in Spring 2011.

### **Urban Neighbourhood Planning: Park Wood**

Taking place in one of most deprived and challenging neighbourhoods this innovatory project was aimed at finding out what issues mattered most to local people. It was led by the borough council in partnership with residents and revolved around a 'Planning for Real' exercise. Local schoolchildren built a 3D model of Park Wood upon which people placed their concerns and wishes. The model visited 16 different locations around Park Wood including parent and toddler groups, an older people's day centre, local schools and streets throughout the area.

The project was supported by Maidstone Borough Council, Golding Homes (formerly Maidstone Housing Trust) Kent County Council, Maidstone Housing Trust, the police and other local organizations. Issues will be feed into a 5 year action plan.

### **Play Areas**

Consultation has been carried out this year on two play areas. Mote Park Natural Play Area which will be installed close to the new Willington Street Hub as part of the Mote Park Regeneration plans. The consultation carried out in July provided valuable information on what users and local residents wanted to see included when the play area is built. This information will be used to design the final scheme which will be built in the park in 2011.

The consultation on Arundel Street Play Area was carried out in April this year, following the consultation, a design was produced and the installation of the new play equipment has recently been completed.

### **Park & Ride Service**

Passengers were asked for their reaction to service changes on the London Road route in April and July 2009. Around 650 people were interviewed. People's views were taken into account and a dedicated service to the London Road site was restored when an opportunity arose later in the year. This resulted in an increase of customers which has continued on into 2010. No complaints have been received about the service since the change was made.

### **Public Conveniences**

The Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee carried out a review of public conveniences in Maidstone. Consultation was carried out by asking people to respond to articles in the press as well as considering the results of other consultation carried out by the council. As a result of the review, some toilets were closed and a community toilet scheme was introduced in the town in partnership with shops, businesses and bars.

## **Homelessness**

This consultation was undertaken to identify gaps in our service for homeless people. A questionnaire was sent to all stakeholders that resulted in a near 100% return rate. 60 service users were surveyed that resulted in a 50% response rate.

The consultation identified the need for move-on housing and a more flexible rent deposit scheme. As a result, we were awarded £20,000 by Supporting People to fund move-on to settled accommodation for those individuals previously in supported accommodation.

We consulted with service users prior to our housing stakeholder event (held at Lenham Community Centre on 30 June). Users said that they liked the rent deposit bond scheme, but asked that it be made more flexible. We are reviewing the Rent Deposit Bond Scheme – the most successful in Kent with 50 Rent Deposit Bond Scheme agreements made April-Sept 2010 – with the aim of making the scheme more attractive to landlords, more flexible for tenants and better value for money for the council.

## **Strategic Housing Market Assessment**

This assessment (or SHMA) was the third piece of evidence to be used to develop our 2010 housing strategy. The SHMA aims to identify how Maidstone's housing market – both public and private – works, and what will be the housing needs of Maidstone people for years to come.

Meetings of stakeholders and councillors were undertaken together with a postal survey to 8,000 random households. 1,728 completed forms were returned (giving us a response rate of 22%). The assessment assisted us in the following ways:

- The SHMA project was delivered on time and on budget
- The SHMA has informed the development of the Housing Strategy and the Core Strategy. (The Housing Strategy is due to be approved by the Council in December).
- Since the new coalition government revoked Regional Spatial Strategies and with them housing targets, the SHMA has provided an excellent evidence base to develop our own housing building targets
- The SHMA has informed our thinking around housing market flows, the needs of vulnerable groups and housing affordability.

## **Waste and Recycling**

A Best Value Review looked at how services were delivered and if they offered value for money. 5,000 questionnaires were sent out asking people to look at the range of waste and recycling services provided by the Council, and give their comments and any improvements they felt could be made to the service. 40% of these questionnaires were returned. A further questionnaire was sent to businesses with a 20% response rate. Stakeholders were also contacted by email, telephone and through meetings.

The key results of the consultation were:

- The majority of respondents were happy with the frequency of waste and recycling collection and the collection staff. Respondents were less happy with the quality of refuse sacks and how we deal with missed bins.
- 49% said their bin was half full, 11% hardly full and 37% said completely full.
- Almost 90% of people knew their nearest recycling point. 71% of people had taken glass to their recycling point in the last 6 months.
- People said they would recycle more if items were collected from their doorstep.
- 85% of people wanted the council to collect more materials for recycling.
- 70% of people wanted to collect glass for recycling.
- 53% said they would use a food and garden waste service with 10% using the food waste collection only.

These results were incorporated into the final report to Cabinet and the final recommendations were incorporated into the agreed action plan including simplifying the charging structure of the bulky waste collection service, introducing a tetrapak collection services, finding more location for glass sites and introducing a separate food collection service.

### **Sustainable Communities Act: Ideas into Action**

The government's new Sustainable Communities Act gave people the opportunity to suggest changes and improvements that make a real difference to their lives. Ideas could include a change to the law, a new government policy or the transfer of responsibilities from one public body to another.

A number of ideas were put forward for consideration by the Local Strategic Partnership. A small number of suggestions are now being worked up in detail ready for submission when the next national round is announced.

### **Street Cleaning**

This consultation was undertaken to provide views on our street cleaning service. A number of focus groups were held with councillors and partners. An internet poll produced 109 responses. Parish and borough councillors were asked for their views and 100 customer satisfaction cards were sent to each ward on a rolling annual basis – with an average response rate of around 20%. The consultation exercise came up with the following key findings:

- The majority of residents (about two thirds) were satisfied with the service.
- There is a need for ongoing campaigns and education together with visible and targeted enforcement activities to help address the perception of those who either have no opinion or who are dissatisfied with the service. This will also help bring other land owners up to the standards which are being maintained by the council on land which it does control.

- High visibility, both in cleansing and enforcement, is likely to have the strongest influence on public perception and satisfaction.
- The role of partners is essential to improve perception of the service and every effort should be made to engage partners to improve their areas. However if they will not respond then the council should use all related powers to ensure improvement occurs.
- Recent developments have begun to address these issues, in particular with operations becoming more outcome based, greater use of customer engagement and research that has sought out good practice in delivering value from other similar councils.

These responses were fed into the report on the development of the street cleaning service.

Ongoing consultation includes:

### **Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans**

Consultation has been carried out with borough and parish councillors, Kent County Council, English Heritage and the Council for the Protection of Rural England. Recent consultations have been carried out for Bearsted, Detling, Linton and Maidstone Holy Trinity Conservation Areas. Methods used have included advertisements, public meetings, exhibitions and press releases. The results have informed our development plan documents.

### **Other ways in which we receive feedback...**

We are always interested in hearing people's views of services and this is done through individual service surveys as well as through the compliments/complaints system and the letters we receive from customers.

### **Lessons Learnt & Ways to Improve**

- Be realistic when consulting and merge consultation wherever possible to save resources.
- Develop the consultation module within our computerised system Modern Government so that all decisions are backed by evidence.
- Feedback should be rigorous and all consultations must feedback to the public.

### **Mayor Consultations Over the Next Year 2010-11**

1. Budget Consultation for 2011-12.
2. Continuing consultation for the Local Development Framework.
3. The replacement to the former Place Survey last undertaken in 2008.

For more information on our consultations please visit the consultation pages on our website [www.maidstone.gov.uk](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk) or contact our Consultation Co-ordinator, Vronni Ward at [vronniward@maidstone.gov.uk](mailto:vronniward@maidstone.gov.uk) 01622 602351.

