

Consultation and Research Strategy and Action Plan



Our vision

Delivering high quality, inclusive consultation and research activity that empowers our residents and stakeholders to get involved.



Background

The [Corporate Plan](#) is the council's overarching strategic document. It is the only plan which covers the full range of the council's responsibilities and is an important tool to help focus our effort and resources on the right things.

We have an aim within the plan to be an '**open and enabling**' organisation and a priority within that to '**engage with and empower our communities**'.

By 2024 we have committed that there will be:

'A menu of opportunities for residents and communities to engage at a level which suits them best. Wide-ranging informative and accessible communications with residents. Consistent, timely and good quality engagement in decisions, service design and financial planning. Best practice has become common practice.'

To help contribute towards that commitment we have developed this Consultation and Research Strategy. This strategy sets out how we will improve the quality, consistency and actionability of consultations and how we will ensure that research into people's opinions and behaviour is of a consistently high standard.

The Corporate Plan

OUR VISION An open, fairer, greener North Somerset



Open

We will provide strong community leadership and work transparently with our residents, businesses and partners to deliver our ambition for North Somerset.

Fair

We aim to reduce inequalities and promote fairness and opportunity for everyone.

Green

We will lead our communities to protect and enhance our environment, tackle the climate emergency and drive sustainable development.

Our priorities

A thriving and sustainable place

- A great place for people to live, work and visit
- Welcoming, safe and clean neighbourhoods
- To be a carbon neutral council and area by 2030
- A transport network which promotes active, accessible and low carbon travel
- An attractive and vibrant place for business investment and sustainable growth
- A broad range of new homes to meet our growing need, with an emphasis on quality and affordability

A council which empowers and cares about people

- A commitment to protect the most vulnerable people in our communities
- An approach which enables young people and adults to lead independent and fulfilling lives
- A focus on tackling inequalities and improving outcomes
- Partnerships which enhance skills, learning and employment opportunities
- A collaborative way of working with partners and families to support children achieve their full potential

An open and enabling organisation

- Engage with and empower our communities
- Empower our staff and encourage continuous improvement and innovation
- Manage our resources and invest wisely
- Embrace new and emerging technology
- Make the best use of our data and information
- Provide professional, efficient and effective services
- Collaborate with partners to deliver the best outcomes

Our values

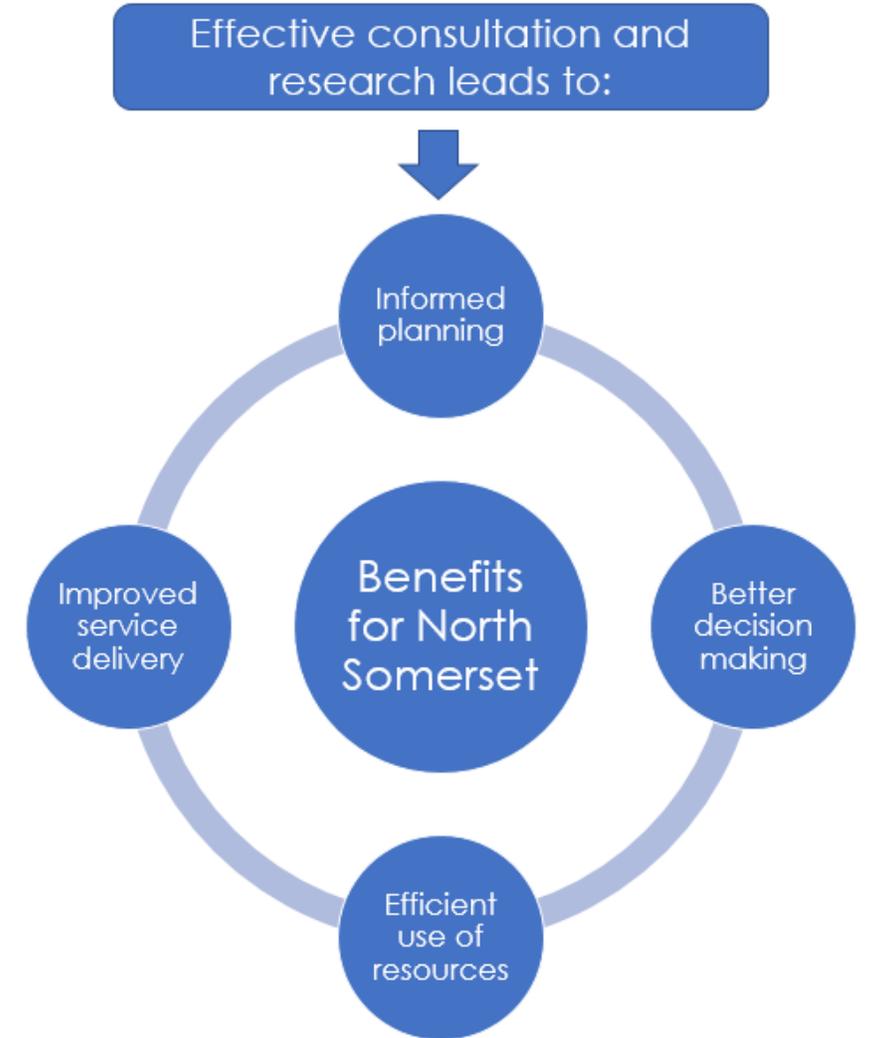


[Link to the Action Plan, Performance Management Framework and Strategic Risk Register](#)

Key principles

Our key principles for consultation and research activity across North Somerset Council are that:

- Consultation and research activity is essential to ensure we are an open and enabling council.
- Consultation and research activity is fundamental to ensuring that we make informed decisions which ensure efficient use of resources and ultimately improved service delivery.
- Consultation and research activity will always be carried out to a high standard and well-coordinated.
- Consultation and research activity will be inclusive, ensuring we meet our equality objectives.



Consultation

This strategy sets out how we will improve the quality, consistency and actionability of consultations by:

- Meeting the legal requirements
- Meeting our other commitments to our stakeholders including Town and Parish councils
- Organising our internal process to ensure that we deliver a planned and high-quality consultation service.

Consultation scope

Key points:

- Consultation is part of a spectrum of activity for how we work with our stakeholders including residents, communities, partners and business. From educating and informing to co-designing and co-production, this is often referred to as the 'ladder of participation'.



- We define consultation as more two-way and long-lasting than 'informing' but more top-down and shorter-term than 'co-production' activity.
- Although it might share some tools with market research or communications or even community development projects, the defining features of consultation in local government are:
 1. a structured, transparent process, and
 2. to seek views about a plan or proposal, and
 3. an extension of the democratic process i.e. with legally prescribed aspects to ensure fairness.

This strategy provides a framework for how we will consult to a high standard, ensuring we make use of best practice.

This strategy commits us to:

- **Meeting the legal requirements** on councils to consult including, for non-statutory consultations, adhering to the [Gunning Principles](#), namely...
 - Provide enough information to enable people to consider the proposals intelligently.
 - Consult when proposals are still at a formative stage.
 - Allow enough time, usually at least 6 weeks.
 - Decision-makers must be able to provide evidence that they took consultation responses into account.
- Additionally, to ensure consultations are conducted in line with data protection, communications and equalities policies.
- **Meet our other commitments to our stakeholders** to ensure that we deliver the basic democratic aspects of consultation including:
 - Making consultations easily available by flagging up all our consultations in one place online, with an alert/subscription option.
 - Publicising this platform to all residents at least annually.
 - Proactively providing an alternative to the online platform (posting the monthly list of live consultations monthly in libraries/gateways).
 - Designing online content to *promote* accessibility. For example, no unnecessary jargon, provision of phone contact.

This strategy commits us to:

Organise our internal process to ensure that we deliver a planned and high-quality consultation service. This includes:

- Applying these commitments to statutory consultations, to the extent it does not break the legal rules they work to.
- Ensuring that these commitments apply to all consultations on the consultation portal even if the consultation is designed by other partner agencies or consultants working on behalf of the council.
- Setting up a 'Consultation and Research Co-ordination Group' with representatives from key council service areas to:
 - Implement and oversee this strategy
 - Refresh our consultation tools, toolkits and guides
 - Calendarise and co-ordinate the many individual consultations where possible
 - Provide a highly visible one-stop shop for advice and support to staff doing a consultation
 - Sign-off or veto consultation plans and projects on quality grounds before they go live
 - Require people consulting to provide information on the results and impacts of consultation within six months of consultations closing.
- Strengthen the consultation element of Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) and use those as the means of analysing and reporting patterns in consultation activity.
- Report to council leadership annually on the incidence, quality and impact of the past year's consultations and plans for the coming year.

Research

This strategy sets out how we will ensure that research into people's opinions and behaviour is of a consistently high standard by:

- Meeting any legal requirements
- Using methods that suit the aims
- Meeting research-industry-standard quality thresholds
- Organising our internal process to ensure that we deliver planned and high-quality projects.

Research scope

Key points:

- Research involves trying to reliably measure or assess people's views or behaviour by asking them things and to extrapolate or generalise the findings beyond those who provided information. For example...
 - A questionnaire/survey which aims to generalise from a sample to e.g. all service users.
 - Focus groups among service users claims which claim general lessons beyond the people spoken to on the day.
- This strategy does not cover very small-scale quantitative research, where the population of interest is less than 50 people.
- It does cover all other research projects as defined above, carried out in the name of North Somerset Council be that among staff, the public, service users, organisations, councillors or any source of information where we need to measure or assess something about a large group by asking a subset of that group something.
- Unlike consultation, research is not directly linked to our democratic or legal obligations. Research is operationally important, we need good quality information to make good decisions, but a democratically flawless council might do no research and vice versa. The standards are taken from bodies like the Market Research Society rather than bodies like the Local Government Association (LGA).

This strategy also commits us to:

Meeting legal requirements, using methods that suit the aims and meeting research-industry-standard quality thresholds by ensuring that we...

- Provide written guidelines and self-help tools
 - Guides and toolkits for how to plan a research project in the context of NSC based on industry standards in methods, ethics and data protection, equalities and other relevant law (aligned with our overall data strategy).
- Conduct any research project in line with these tools
 - Get signoff to that effect before committing any resources from the council's research lead/group.

Organise our internal process to ensure that we deliver a planned and high-quality consultation service. This includes:

- Co-ordinating research projects and promote best-practice...
 - Among staff or councillors this is via the People Strategy Board where approval is needed before doing research.
 - Among others: via the Research and Consultation Co-ordination group (see consultation element of this strategy).

Actions

Across both consultation and research this strategy commits us to a number of actions.

Our action plan:

- **Consultation and Research actions**

- Form a group of suitably qualified people to
 - co-ordinate, advise on, assess and ultimately sign off projects
 - share skills and reduce silos
 - act as a centre of excellence
 - refresh guides and toolkits.

- **Consultation-specific actions**

- Expand the consultation element of Equality Impact Assessments
- Refresh consultation guides and toolkits
- Report annually to Corporate Leadership Team as part of business planning framework
- Review the consultation website/portal to ensure best value and best practice
- Publicise standards internally and externally
- Explore training modules to staff and councillors.

- **Research-specific actions**

- Publicise standards internally
- Explore demand for training modules for staff
- Maintain and develop the Citizens' Panel.

Our action plan

Area	Action	By when	What is the outcome we want?
Consultation and Research	Form a Consultation and Research Group	Q1 2022	A group that co-ordinates, advises on, assesses and ultimately signs off consultation and research projects.
Consultation	Refresh consultation guide and toolkit	Q1 2022	An easy to use toolkit which explain how we should consult and gives best practice examples
	Publicise standards internally and externally	Q1 2022	This strategy and refreshed guide and toolkit are shared with DLTs, LDT and during The Hour.
	Explore training modules to staff and councillors	Q1 2022	Staff feel empowered to consult and engage in the best way.
	Explore expanding the consultation element of Equality Impact Assessments	Q1 2022	To ensure we are meeting our equalities duties.
	Review consultation website/portal	Q2 2022	To ensure we have the best tools which are user friendly and encourage good consultation and engagement.
	Report annually to CLT as part of business planning framework	Throughout the year	CLT are kept up to date with consultation and research activity across the organisation.
Research	Publicise standards internally	Q1 2022	This strategy and refreshed guide and toolkit are shared with DLTs, LDT and during The Hour.
	Explore demand for training modules for staff	Q1 2022	Staff feel empowered to undertake research in the best way.
	Maintain and develop the Citizens' Panel.	Throughout the year	We have a standing sample of residents who will engage with us on research.

Monitoring progress

The actions within this strategy will be monitored on a quarterly basis as part of the council-wide Performance Management Framework.

All actions follow the SMART matrix:



Updates are [published quarterly](#) as part of our open data commitment.



Queries?

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