

Appendix 1

Document status and confidentiality

Community members are becoming more involved in decision-making as a result of community planning. They (particularly members of area forums) are increasingly gaining access to information and documents that are not fully in the public sphere. Whilst this is, in general, a good thing, some difficulties have become apparent. Perhaps some thought needs to be given to the practicalities of information sharing with community members? How can it best be done? When documents are being drawn up, are the authors conscious that they may be read by 'ordinary people' who may not be aware of the protocols and procedures of that particular organisation?

There are two primary issues that have emerged so far – confidentiality and draft/final version. Improved labelling of documents would go some way to minimising difficulties, but some kind of overall reassessment of document production could lead to better communication.

Confidentiality

'Confidentiality' is a vague term that means different things at different times. People's understanding of the term varies widely. When community members are given a document and told that it is confidential, there is considerable scope for confusion. It could mean:

- Do not discuss with anyone at all: for your own personal information only
- Discuss only with immediate colleagues (who are these?) and/or family members
- Discuss with those who may be affected (but not the general public)
- Discuss (quietly) with anyone but do not contact the press

How do we know which type of confidentiality should apply in which instance?

There are a variety of reasons for confidentiality, too, and these are not always apparent to community members. It may also be true that more documents are marked as confidential as really need to be. If everything is 'confidential', this adds to the confusion and diminishes the importance of confidentiality as a concept.

Draft/final version

Sometimes community members receive documents and are not sure whether this is a draft to comment on, or a final copy to respond to. Community members are dealing with these documents in their spare time (perhaps some while after they have been received) and often in the midst of their own domestic documents. Covering letters (with all the relevant details) may be separated from the main document.

Suggestions

- Draft documents should be clearly differentiated from final ones. Perhaps by using a footer/header for each page on all drafts, or a different format/font?
- All documents should be dated
- The use of the term 'confidentiality' should be re-assessed and clarified. Document makers should be encouraged to assess whether or not confidentiality is appropriate. Could documents be marked with more information about the extent of the confidentiality and the reasons for it?
- What the recipient needs to do with the document should be clear

For example:

Date	1 June 2009
Status	CONFIDENTIAL – low level
Reason	Early draft
Who has access	Cllrs X, Y and Z Chief Exec's staff
Can be discussed with	Area forums Community councils
Cannot be discussed with	Do not yet release to the press
Becomes public	Once document has been finalised and approved at the next Policy and Resources committee meeting (planned for Nov 10 th)
Response required by forums/c. councils	Read , discuss and report initial thoughts to Joan Smith to inform final document No formal reply required at this stage

We think that if something along these lines was to be written on all discussion papers, it would ensure that barriers to communication are minimised whilst maintaining the level of confidentiality that is sometimes required.