

Consultation and Engagement Policy

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Council is committed to making evidence based decisions that take into account the views and experiences of those affected. It seeks to engage with all sectors of the community to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to have their say. This Policy has been developed to ensure that consultation and engagement undertaken by the Council is effective, efficient and consistent, providing the framework for all consultation and engagement that takes place throughout the Council.
- 1.2 This policy covers almost all areas of the Council's activity except for planning and development related matters, where the process of Consultation and Engagement is covered more specifically by the Statement of Community Involvement.

2. Aims, objectives and expected benefits to the Council of consultation and engagement

- 2.1 This Policy aims to support the process of informed and transparent decision making and planning, by ensuring the quality and effectiveness of consultation and engagement undertaken by or on behalf of the Council.
- 2.2 The objectives of this Consultation and Engagement Policy are to:
- Ensure there is a clear understanding of, and commitment to, community consultation and engagement throughout the staff and members of the Council in order to support service delivery, community planning and improved performance.
 - Maintain an open dialogue with stakeholders, whilst giving due consideration to all sections of the community, including hard to reach groups and ensuring consultation gives regard to the Equalities Duty.
 - Ensure the results of community consultation and engagement are fed into the decision making processes of the Council and used to inform decisions, policy development and service delivery, particularly with the increasing importance of understanding and addressing the different needs of our diverse communities.
 - Openly and accurately provide results and, where applicable, actions of all community consultation and engagement ensuring that they are accessible and reported to consultees, members, the public and other stakeholders.
- 2.3 The Council recognises that there are clear and significant benefits to engaging with and consulting service users and non-service users. Consultation and engagement helps to ensure that services are user-focused. Effective

consultation and engagement can deliver a range of benefits, including helping to:

- Plan, prioritise and deliver improved services, to meet user requirements and make the best use of increasingly limited resources;
- Set performance standards relevant to users' needs (and monitor them);
- Develop and enhance working partnerships with users and groups within the community, so they can support and challenge for improved services;
- Ensure where possible negative impacts are highlighted effectively and appropriate actions to mitigate the impact can be taken at an early stage;
- Identify issues at an early stage to enable the appropriate actions to be taken;
- Highlights commitment to transparent and accountable decision-making, and putting services and communities first.

3. Principles for Effective Consultation and Engagement

3.1 To ensure that our consultation and engagement reflects best practice and supports a process of informed and transparent decision-making and planning, the following principles will form a framework for the development of consultation projects and exercises. Approving officers must be satisfied that each of these principles has been properly considered before approval to proceed with a consultation exercise is granted. Consultation and engagement should be:

Necessary

We will not waste resources, time or goodwill by consulting our local communities too much, on something that has already been covered before or by someone else or, importantly, when the decision has already been taken. Before any new consultation begins, a thorough search will be made to find out whether relevant information has already been gathered from the public and if this is relevant. We will avoid unnecessary repetition and duplication. In particular, we will use the Consultation Forward Plan, described below, to identify previous research and opportunities to join-up or merge consultation exercises, where possible.

Robust and purposeful

Consultation and engagement should be carried out to the highest possible standard and according to best practice guidelines. We will be clear about the purpose and scope of each consultation exercise that we undertake.

Any consultation will contain a clear statement describing why it is being carried out and how the results will be used. It will be clear to consultees what may be influenced by responding to the consultation – and what cannot.

We will undertake specific and focused consultation to an appropriate agreed timescale in line with best practice which allows the results to be used for their intended purpose.

Inclusive

We will consult using a variety of methods to ensure that all groups can participate fully. We will further encourage participation by paying attention to timings and locations of events, the provision of information in different formats, access requirements etc.

Methods chosen should be appropriate to the purpose, reflecting the strengths and weaknesses of each method, and be managed with a clear understanding of the particular skills, knowledge and resources that consultation requires. Democratic Services will help plan and assist with methodology selection.

We will seek informed public opinion rather than instant reaction or decision confirmations. Whenever possible, the Council's communication mechanisms will be used alongside consultation to inform and stimulate public interest, and provide clear background information on the issue being discussed. This information will be presented in plain language and in formats that meet the needs of the consultees.

Some hard to reach groups are less likely to respond to certain methods of consultation, so additional efforts are needed to help these people to participate. Sometimes we may require a completely different method of consultation and engagement that runs alongside the main methodology. This can include face-to-face engagement in small groups, or through an existing group, to enable people with particular needs to express their views.

Influential and used

Consultation and engagement cannot be a stand-alone piece of work – the findings must be put to use. Every consultation or engagement exercise needs an action plan or timetable and those actions should be incorporated into service delivery or project plans. We will plan and prepare the consultation activity allowing for adequate publicity and make the consultation available giving consultees adequate time to prepare and submit their response. It is recognised that the length of time will vary depending on the time of year and the level of response that is being sought, however, sufficient time will be allowed for submission of responses. Sufficient time will also be allowed for the results of consultation to be collated, analysed and considered following the closure of the consultation, to ensure that the results of consultation feed directly into the decision making process.

Shared

Our communities are not specific to us and we need to share the information with our stakeholders – that includes service users, possibly non-users, other services and partners. Every consultation and engagement exercise needs to include a communications plan to publicise the consultation, as well as the results and outcomes.

Accessible feedback should be provided to consultees, both on the results of consultation and on how they have been used, in order to encourage greater public participation in the future.

In some cases the results of consultation will be outweighed by other evidence or considerations; in such cases a clear and honest explanation of the decisive factors should be included in the feedback.

Joined-up, co-ordinated (where possible) and efficient

There are many Council services and local organisations that may want to get local communities involved in decision-making but there is a danger of 'consultation fatigue' developing. It makes sense for local organisations to pool resources, share ideas and information, and avoid duplication by undertaking consultation and engagement jointly where possible. Existing links with our communities and stakeholders should be used.

Build better relationships with local communities and stakeholders

All contact with us should be a positive experience for our customers. Building trust with local communities is important. We want our services to be accessible and of the highest quality. Communities and stakeholders involved in consultation and engagement should feel it is a positive experience and that they are contributing towards improvements to services in their local area. Consultation and engagement should be an enjoyable experience.

Empower local communities to have a say about their lives

Local communities are better placed to have their say about aspects that affect their lives if they have the skills and knowledge about how decisions are made and how to influence service delivery. The Council works closely with the community and voluntary sector to increase civic participation and connect people to local services.. More generally, involvement in consultation and engagement gives local people a better understanding of how decisions are made and to get involved in making a difference to their local community.

4. The Process: There are six steps in the Council's process.

1. Identify whether to consult
Consultation/engagement should be considered: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When there are new plans, services or policies• When there are changes to current plans, services or policies.• When there are no changes planned but other external changes (public policy, economy, demographics) are impacting on the public.• Where there is an indication that the public or sections of the community are requesting changes to be made.• Where there is a statutory duty to consult.
2. Establish the objective of the consultation and its scope
Clarify: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What type of feedback we need from the community in order to inform the Council's decisions.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether there are specific groups or geographic communities that should be consulted. • What degree of influence will the consultation/engagement results have in the decision – (for example: Are we offering any choices, is the result binding on us?) • What would be a good public response or involvement rate?
3. Design the consultation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance the available resource, the timescales and best practice advice. • Consider the different methods available for consultation and engagement and ensure these take into account the needs of hard to reach groups • Consider opportunities to align consultation exercises with other services and to work with external partners. • Complete the consultation plan template. • Get approval for the consultation.
4. Deliver the activity & record the inputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake the planned activity • Monitor the implementation and adapt the plan if necessary • Ensure a record is kept of responses, views etc
5. Report the results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation results should be summarised in reports and a full analysis available. • Conclusions drawn from consultation results and consequential proposals will be clear and documented. • Results will be reported on the website and otherwise (as planned/template) be fed back to participants
6. Review/Evaluate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake a review of the consultation and engagement activity, identifying lessons for the future.

4.1 Consultation and engagement activity should take into account holiday periods and must avoid local or national pre-election periods.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

Heads of Service

- Ensuring that their teams are aware of, and apply, the process outlined in this Policy.
- Identifying when there is a need or requirement to consult with respect to their service delivery, plans, policies or processes.
- Informing Democratic Services at the earliest opportunity about the potential need to consult/engage.
- Ensuring that stakeholders are consulted, and have specific regard to the protected characteristics highlighted in the Equality Duty, completing a relevant Equality Impact Assessment.
- Ensuring that consultation evidence is clearly documented and available.

Democratic Services

- Providing support and advice to managers to apply the Policy, and for advising on the most appropriate consultation methodologies.

- Providing quality assurance in relation to planned consultation and engagement activity.
- Providing community profiling information/data to help managers determine who to target for consultation and/or engagement.
- Organising consultation on corporate policy/plans and corporate performance and satisfaction with the Council.
- Maintaining a forward plan (Appendix 3) for consultation and engagement and assisting with the coordination of consultation activity across service areas and with partner agencies.

Councillors

- Councillors have their own regular contact with the communities they represent and will form views about community priorities, needs and views as a result of this contact. It is important that councillors also take into account the evidence from formal consultation and engagement activity and that the Council can evidence that due consideration has been given to consultation results in the Council's decisions.
- Elected members play an important role in encouraging community participation and in helping to ensure that community consultation is well targeted and consultation methods are appropriate.
- Councillors will be informed about the consultation and engagement plans for the Council as a whole and for their ward, in particular, prior to the start of the activities.

6. Planning & Approval

6.1 All consultation and engagement exercises including supporting evidence will be quality reviewed and approved in advance of implementation prior to any publicity.

6.2 Heads of Service will consider the following general rules when identifying the appropriate level of approval following support and input from Democratic Services:

- Consultation on service specific issues will usually be approved by the Executive Director.
- Consultation regarding more than one service will require approval from the Alliance Leadership Team.
- Consultation relating to, or affecting, corporate policy should be approved by the Alliance Leadership Team.
- The Alliance Leadership Team/Executive may refer to committee any proposed consultation that is considered to be of a potentially important nature.

6.3 All consultation exercises should have an officer identified and designated as the key contact. It is the responsibility of the key contact to ensure that the consultation is included on the Consultation Forward Plan (Appendix 3) and developed in line with the Policy. The relevant officers should also be contacted to ensure inclusion as appropriate in communications planning.

7. Consultation and Engagement Forward Plan

7.1 The Consultation and Engagement Forward Plan is a resource to coordinate and share information within the Council. In addition, the system allows information on planned, current and completed consultation to be shared with partners where appropriate.

7.2 All consultation and engagement exercises, regardless of scope or methodology, should be included by passing the required information to Democratic Services to ensure there is a record of the activities held centrally. The information required is set out below. This requirement for information is intended to ensure that the principles outlined above are considered in the planning and implementation of all consultation and engagement activities.

7.3 Ongoing consultation and engagement exercises, for example regular consultation with service user or community groups or forums, must also be included so that officers and elected members can be alerted to the activity. In some cases this will mean including each meeting of a group or forum as a unique consultation event, while in other cases it will be sufficient to make one entry for an ongoing series of meetings.

7.4 The inclusion of statutory consultations, where appropriate, must also be included on the Forward Plan.

7.5 The following information will be required:

- Key officer contact.
- Need and Purpose: What you intend to consult about and describe how the results you obtain will inform decision-making and service delivery.
- Target Group: Identify the people you are seeking to consult with (ensure you have considered those groups considered hard to reach).
- Method(s): Describe the consultation methods you intend to use.
- Timescale: Give an outline of the timetable you expect to follow.
- Resources: What financial, staff and other resources are required.
- Analysis and Reporting: How the responses will be analysed and where will it be reported.
- Feedback: How consultees will receive feedback, if appropriate, including a summary of responses and actions or outcomes arising.

8. Further Guidance

- **New Conversations 2.0: LGA Guide to Engagement**
The Local Government Association (LGA) has produced a useful and comprehensive guide to engagement which will help to give further ideas and can be found here: [New Conversations Guide 2](#). The guide was updated in 2019 and is useful for people throughout the local government sector – whether looking to improve statutory consultation practices to avoid legal challenges or wanting to engage in more creative ways.
- **Government Guidance**
The government published a revised set of government consultation principles in 2018. These principles give clear guidance to government departments on conducting consultations: [Consultation Principles](#).