

Putting the community first

Consultation and Engagement Strategy

Purpose

Huntingdonshire District Council is committed to consultation and engagement to ensure that the views and needs of local residents and businesses are taken into account when planning and delivering services.

This strategy provides a framework which both directs and supports the Council's consultation and engagement activities.

Contribution to the Council's Corporate and Strategic Framework

"Growing Success", the Council's Corporate Plan, includes the following objectives –

- **to provide high quality customer services** – by making it as easy as possible for customers to access our services and get appropriate information;
- **to be good at communicating with and listening to people and organisations** – this will entail regular and effective communication with local residents about Council services, seeking their views on new proposals, and regularly asking them their opinions and considering what they say;
- **to strengthen our commitment and capacity to achieve equality, diversity and inclusion** – by maintaining or establishing statutory equality schemes which consider gender, race and disability equality issues and the needs of disadvantaged groups at all levels of services, policies and practices;
- **to enable Councillors to carry out their leadership role effectively** – determining Council priorities and allocating resources, scrutinising and examining relevant issues as advocates and promoting the interests of the Council and communities.

The achievement of these objectives means that the Council must be excellent at understanding the needs of the users of our services and those we represent and in organising services around those needs. This requires excellent customer service standards and practices, communications, marketing, consultation and engagement activities.

In addition, a series of strategic policies, including the Corporate Equality Policy, Communications and Marketing Strategy and Customer Service Strategy, all contain objectives and activities which require effective consultation and engagement and/or contribute towards the approach adopted within this strategy.

The strategies are mutually supportive and are inherently connected in terms of the objectives they are seeking to promote.

Background

Our residents, communities and businesses have high expectations and expect their views to be listened to and taken into account. The purpose of this strategy is to promote continuous improvement to the way the Council consults and engages with local residents and other stakeholders to ensure that their views are identified and used to improve and shape our decision making, policies and services. The council often has to balance differing views and has to take a balanced and proportionate judgement in the interests of all our communities. A consistent and coordinated approach is needed so that effort and resources are used effectively and not duplicated.

This reflects a detailed and increasingly prescriptive regulatory framework which has seen consultation as a key component of improving service delivery. More recently, through the Local Government and Improvement in Health Act 2007, there is a national drive towards further engagement between service providers and the communities or neighbourhoods which they serve. In response to this the Council, with partners, has instigated a neighbourhood management approach in three locations in the district – Ramsey, Oxmoor and Eynesbury – a key element of which will be to involve local communities in deciding priorities for their areas and helping them to develop and implement, in conjunction with service providers, responses to those priorities.

The Council operates an environment of democratic representation. The role of elected Members as leaders and representatives of our communities is vital to this process. Elected Members therefore have an important role to bring to the Council the needs, views and aspirations of the communities they represent and to use the information that comes from consultation and engagement exercises in order to make decisions and to plan services in a way that meets local needs. Our system of political management demands clear and effective information and processes as to how that information is used to support the principles of transparency and accountability.

This strategy is based on the principle that responsibility for consultation and engagement must remain with individual services but there should be a corporate approach and services should be supported in these activities. The purpose of this strategy is to provide a framework and a consistent approach to our consultation and engagement activities. It will be supported by guidance, protocols and an action plan, which will be based on the principles set out in this strategy and good practice generally. In addition organisational changes already in place will ensure that the Policy and Research Service will carry out corporate activities and support services in their consultation and engagement activities.

Consultation and engagement are intensive and costly activities; however, high spending does not always produce good results. This strategy, associated guidance, protocols and action plan will ensure that our activities are effective and provide good value for the investment we make in them.

Where are we now?

A broad approach to consultation and engagement recognises that a number of different activities will be relevant to different situations and circumstances:

Activities	Examples
Communicating information	Good quality communications, such as District Wide, website and service based information
Market research and obtain opinions	Annual surveys and service specific user satisfaction surveys
Consultation – seeking views on or support for a choice between options	Seeking views on formal policies and strategies
Deciding together – sharing views, developing options, agreeing a course of action	The development of the Sustainable Community Strategy and Local Development Framework Planning for Real exercises Participation exercises with children and young people
Acting together – working with others to make decisions and carry through the action agreed	Neighbourhood management in Oxmoor, Ramsey and (emerging) Eynesbury
Supporting communities – supporting groups and communities to develop and implement their own solutions	Parish planning Neighbourhood management approach

While the Council can demonstrate activity and success across this spectrum, the majority of the consultation and engagement activities have been concentrated on communication information, market research/obtaining opinions and consultation.

As a Council we have placed a special emphasis on consultation with individuals or communities who do not traditionally engage with us, such as young people, those with disabilities or minority ethnic groups. Effective involvement cannot happen without a good understanding of the make up, needs and interests of all those different groups and their capacity to engage. An inclusive approach will be used by the Council to ensure that different groups have the opportunity to participate and are not disadvantaged by our processes. Equality Impact Assessments are being carried out on all our services and policies and they will highlight issues that need to be addressed through consultation and engagement activities. It is important that we have a coordinated approach to the use of information from these assessments.

Objectives

The Council has identified the following objectives:

Objective	Measure
To ensure that consultation and engagement is appropriate, effective and meaningful	% of local people who feel that the council listens to and considers the views of local residents
To ensure that there are the same opportunities for all local residents and business to be involved in consultation and engagement	% of local people who feel that the council listens to and considers the views of local residents
That elected Members are supported in their role to consult, engage and represent local communities	% of Members who feel they are supported in their role to consult, engage and represent their community

	% of Members who attend consultation and engagement training
That the results of communication and engagement activities are used in the planning and design of services	% of local people and businesses who believe that council services meet their needs

Action Plan

The action plan appended to this strategy details how we intend to deliver against the objectives over the next three years.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are critical to ensuring that we achieve the objectives.

To ensure we are making progress we will:

- monitor our performance against local (and national, if any) measures
- report performance on consultation and engagement activities
- collect and publish evidence of good practice throughout the Council.

This strategy, associated guidance and action plan will be reviewed annually so that we can set specific targets for the future. A comprehensive review of the strategy will be undertaken every three years.

Risks

The council's corporate risk register identifies a large number of risks that may have negative effects on the council.

An effective consultation and engagement strategy is imperative to ensure the risks and the possibilities of them becoming a reality are kept to a minimum or prevented altogether.

The following factors would adversely affect the delivery of this strategy:

- Failing to communicate effectively and taking action on the key issues from consultation will lead to falling levels of customer satisfaction.
- Without a corporate lead there will be consultation overload and potentially a waste of resources.
- Low levels of customer satisfaction will affect our reputation.
- Any revenue squeeze may result in financial constraints to implementing consultation and engagement development.
- Lack of engagement with selected/targeted groups.
- HDC employees fail to use the guidance.

Action Plan 2008 – 2011

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
To ensure that consultation and engagement is appropriate, effective and meaningful	Ensure employees use the Consultation and Engagement Strategy as good practice guidance		On-going	PSSD (Policy & Strategic Services Division)	
	Establish and promote a database to record information about current and planned consultation and engagement exercises		July 2008	PSSD	
	Establish consultation calendar		July 2008	PSSD	
	Better use made of consultation and research section of website (database and calendar)		Post July 2008	PSSD to update and promote All to use	
	Ensure a strategic planned approach to make best use of resources, avoid duplication and review existing information and data before carrying out any new consultation or engagement exercises				

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
	Ensure that the results of Equality Impact Assessments are coordinated at a corporate level			PSSD	
	Use the results of Equality Impact Assessments in the planning of consultation and engagement activities			HoS	
	Effective use is made of the Joint Consultation Framework (a joint contract between Cambridgeshire Councils, PCT, Police and Fire and Rescue Service with MRUK – a consultation consultancy		On-going	PSSD	
	Training and development course for relevant employees in consultation and engagement techniques		July 2008	PSSD/HR	
	Establish and publicise consultation guidance (methods and accessibility)		April 2008	PPSD	

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
	Investigate the setting up of e-panels and the use of ICT for consultation and engagement		April 2009	IMD & PSSD	
	Work with Parish Plan groups to engage partners in the preparation of community questionnaires to incorporate more strategic issues and avoid duplication of work		On-going	Planning Services	
To ensure that there are the same opportunities for all local residents and business to get involved	Training in specific areas relating to equality e.g. awareness training for disability, gender, race, age, religious belief, sexual orientation and children and young people			HR & PSSD	
	Establish and publicise consultation guidance (methods and accessibility)		April 2008	PSSD	
	Establish a contact list of community/voluntary groups within the district that represent the needs of hard to reach groups		September 2008	PSSD	

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
That elected members are supported in their role to consult, engage and represent local communities	Training course for Members to support them in their role to consult engage and represent local communities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Through training and guidance ○ Support for Members to undertake specified consultation and engagement activities e.g. focus groups, workshops or conducting face to face or telephone surveys 	% of Members who feel that they are supported in their role to consult engage and represent their community % of Members who attend consultation and engagement training	July 2008	Democratic Services & PSSD	
	Consider a pilot initiative relating to the 'state of district' debate		Consideration by Cabinet	Democratic Services and Overview & Scrutiny working party	
That the results of consultation and engagement are used in planning and design of services	Develop an annual process for reviewing the outcomes from key consultation and engagement activities		June 2009	PSSD	
	Consider incorporation of consultation and engagement within report checklist		December 2007	PSSD	
	Establish process to ensure that local research		September 2008	Planning Services	

Objectives	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
	undertaken through the Parish Plan process is disseminated across services and to partners				
	Ensure the results of consultation, engagement and research are communicated and used to inform the development of policies, decision making and provision of services	<p>% of local people who feel that the council listens to and considers the views of local residents</p> <p>% of local people and business who believe that council services meet their needs</p>			