



SCRUTINY COMMISSION – 12th JULY 2021

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Scrutiny Commission on recent activity regarding Leicestershire County Council's approach to public engagement and formal consultation.
2. Accompanying this report for information is the Leicestershire County Council Consultation and Engagement Principles document which has recently been developed in response to changes in the Council's approach to public engagement in light of the pandemic and feedback received from officers, the public and Members during the last 12 months.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

3. The recent activity and ongoing work on engagement reflects progress against objectives in the Council's current Communities Strategy and the Great Communities Strategic Objective Framework. Both officers' ongoing work and the Engagement Principles appended are aligned with the forthcoming refresh of the Communities Strategy.

Background

4. The Council has a strong record of engaging with communities on changes to its services and strategies. The approach adopted reflects the Council's values of openness and transparency, it facilitates trust and shows respect and enables the Council to build strong relationships with its residents, service users and local businesses. For many of the Council's services and strategies there is a statutory duty to consult, or there may be other legal grounds for consultation. The Council has always sought to ensure it proactively engages with those affected by or in receipt of its services to ensure it can take informed decisions about the provision of those services and more efficient implementation of change.
5. The Council's high standards, and the level of investment in engagement and consultation activity have been recognised by the Consultation Institute, the UK's national body for public engagement. Historically, the County Council has particularly excelled at formal consultations on specific changes. This is the result of strong governance, good preparation and smooth delivery. It is also because officers value feedback from local communities.

6. The range of tools that officers draw on when engaging, and the standards of excellence the Council expects of staff, have been tried and tested across hundreds of consultations. The frequent use of quantitative methods (such as surveys) alongside more qualitative methods (such as focus groups) have proven to be a robust approach, providing sound insight, and surviving legal challenge.
7. The Consultation and Engagement Principles have been developed to improve on the Council's existing good practice. In particular, the document was developed in response to the Council's experience of consultation during the pandemic, where many activities were moved online and to recognise the national shift toward greater community involvement and the practices and culture this requires. Officers recognise that whilst an innovative digital approach has many strengths, it will exclude some people, and the Council must be aware of who these communities are and how best to involve them in other ways.
8. The Council is also now looking to sign up to the Consultation Charter as detailed below.

Proposed new Consultation and Engagement Principles

9. The County Council's Consultation and Engagement Principles have been developed to reflect a wide variety of influences over the last 12 months, from the changes to how the Council engages with the public necessitated by the pandemic, to cross-Council discussions with officers in the Engagement Hub, and feedback from the public and dialogue with elected Members.
10. The Principles document summarises the Council's vision for engagement with external stakeholders, from those who are dependent on support from the Council to individuals who want to have a say on issues such as climate change. The document states the values that should underpin engagement work across all service departments. It will be made available for members of the public to read, in addition to Council officers and elected Members.
11. The key points in the document are:
 - Moving towards more of a continuous engagement approach, rather than one-off consultation.
 - Closing the loop: creating feedback mechanisms that evidence how seriously the Council takes what people tell it.
 - Our methods: drawing on our tools to maximise the effectiveness of the engagement work that we do – to understand both 'what' people think and 'why' they hold a particular view.
 - Involving communities who may not typically have their voice heard – understanding who these groups are, their needs and targeting our approach effectively.

- Best practice: making sure that our corporate messages, training and support create consistent good practice and create a culture of excellence.
 - Elected Members have an important role to play in promotion and in representation.
12. The key principles that should underpin all our engagement activity are being *Inclusive, Transparent* and *Meaningful*. Articulating these values is intended to set a corporate benchmark for all engagement activity, reinforced within individual initiatives and through Council-wide channels. Officers will continue to reflect on and adapt this approach to best reflect the feedback and comments of those who use it.
 13. The role of elected Members is one of the key themes for future work referenced in the document. Members may wish to play a role in the County Council's consultation and engagement activity. This will often involve promoting consultation and engagement to the communities they represent. The new Elected Member Portal has a link to all current consultations and, where consultations are considered to have a significant impact on residents across Leicestershire, Members will receive notification via the Cabinet report that a consultation is due to start. Members will also be involved in responding to consultations through the scrutiny process. Where a consultation has a significant impact on a particular electoral division, the local member will be notified by the service area in the usual way. A local member may receive representations from the communities they represent and choose to advocate for these communities on a matter which is the subject of consultation.
 14. The Principles document will be presented to the Cabinet at its meeting on 8th September 2021 and the comments of the Commission will be included in that report.

Engagement undertaken with Members, Officers and the public

15. The Consultation and Engagement Principles document has been created following feedback received from officers, Members and the public during 2020 and 2021.

Resident feedback

16. The 'Conversations about Covid' project was the main vehicle for getting information from local people that could inform the approach to engagement and the Consultation and Engagement Principles in particular. This project ran from January to May 2021 and sought to understand the impact of the pandemic on a wide range of different groups across the County using informal facilitated online conversations. Officers spoke with older Asian women, foodbank coordinators and users, adult and youth volunteers, children in care, and parent-carers of young people with SEND, amongst other groups. The conversations touched on the experience of the pandemic, but also what participants wanted to see from the Council going forwards. The issues varied between the groups but a need for more frequent channels of communication, easier ways to find material on the website,

differing levels of digital exclusion, and the need to feel listened to were common themes. The resulting Principles document will be shared with those who participated in the project for them to comment on and to shape our approach in the future.

Officer Feedback

17. The primary forum for getting feedback from officers across the Council was the Engagement Hub, which meets every other month. This is an informal group of officers from all departments who are involved in public engagement activity. The function of the Hub is to ensure that Council engagement initiatives are joined-up and efficient, for officers to get advice and support, and to reinforce the Council's standards of best practice. Drafts of the Principles document were shared with the group for comment, and detailed suggestions were received that served to refine the Principles, and to ensure that the document reflected our existing high standards of activity across different areas of work.

Member Feedback

18. An All Member Briefing was held in November 2020, chaired by Mrs L. Richardson CC, the then Lead Member for Communities. The briefing provided Members with an overview of the Council's existing approach to engagement and consultation, the rationale for our approach and the proposed shift in emphasis toward more continuous engagement rather than one-off consultations, the resources available to service staff, and areas for development resulting from Covid-19 and other pressures.
19. Members also received a presentation by Paul Parsons, Associate at the Consultation Institute, the UK's national body for setting guidelines around consultation, based on emerging trends and case law. This provided Members with a wider view of what is expected from a good consultation and provided assurance that the Council's current processes met with best practice.
20. Key areas raised by Members for future development included:
 - Greater use of qualitative approaches, video and more accessible language: the Principles document states our commitment to using a narrative and qualitative approach.
 - Improved assurances around the inclusion of marginalised communities and hard to reach groups including rural, older and young people: the Principles document references these particular target groups.
 - Improved communication, the identification of options and any preferred option prior to a formal consultation taking place: Officers are now encouraged to state the principles and decisions that have informed any options.

- The provision of improved feedback to residents: ‘Closing the loop’ is a key area of change identified in the document.
 - Improved communication on how strategies affect services: Officers are changing their approach to engaging on strategies, focussing on the practical implications for, or personal experiences of the people we consult with.
 - Greater clarity on why a consultation is being undertaken and the process that will follow: Scrutiny of any supporting information is provided by officers working at the corporate centre to ensure the rationale and process is made very clear.
21. As part of the forthcoming refresh of the Communities Strategy and to further inform the approach to future community engagement, a Scrutiny Workshop was held in February 2021. This provided an opportunity for discussion with Members around current community engagement activity taking place across departments and how this has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Members were invited to take part in small group discussions and share their experiences of the last year, focusing on the way in which communities had organised themselves prior to and during the pandemic, and, looking to the future, what the Council and Members could do to support this activity.

The Consultation Institute’s Charter

22. Following Members’ suggestion at the All Member Briefing in 2020, the Council is now in a position to sign up to the Consultation Institute’s Charter and officers are currently exploring the process and appropriate communications for this. A copy of the Charter is attached as Appendix B.
23. The Charter is a set of standards created by the Consultation Institute, the UK’s national body for consultation and engagement, to guide public bodies in the way that they use public consultation within decision-making processes. As the approach to consultation is typically shaped by English Common Law, there is no one widely recognised set of standards covering consultations. The value of the Charter is in its clear and succinct articulation of best practice, which reflects both emerging case law and historic rulings.
24. The Charter comprises seven ‘best practice principles’, which are: Integrity, Visibility, Accessibility, Transparency, Disclosure, Fair Interpretation and Publication. Each principle is underpinned by direction on the policy, processes and behaviours that should govern the authority that is consulting and the individuals who are being consulted.
25. There are many benefits to becoming a signatory to the Charter. The Charter provides external validation of the Council’s existing commitment to excellence in public consultation. Relatedly, local communities can be assured of the Council’s investment in this area and understand the standards to which they can hold the Council. The Charter also provides a clear source of authority on how officers should approach and deliver public engagement activity, which can be used to

support training across the organisation. The process of signing up to the Charter has already enabled a programme of staff training with an officer workshop and online training module made available. The Charter will form a core part of building knowledge and skills in this area going forwards.

26. Officers propose to use a programme of further training and communications to launch the Charter at the council. This will also be an opportunity to ensure a broader understanding of our own corporate principles through the new Principles document. The Principles document and detail of the Charter will be hosted on the engagement pages of the County Council's website.

Equalities and Human Rights Implications

27. The Engagement Principles explicitly emphasise the importance of an inclusive, tailored and proactive approach to engaging with individuals with protected characteristics. It facilitates broadening and deepening this work to ensure that we are reaching all those who have a stake in an issue, using external channels and internal forums such as the Leicestershire Equalities Challenge Group.

Background Papers

28. None.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

29. Once the Consultation Charter is signed up to, we will launch this internally and externally with a programme of communications. This work will also signpost people to the Consultation & Engagement Principles. Circulation via the Members' and Managers' Digest emails will form part of the programme of communications.

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List of Appendices

Appendix A: Leicestershire County Council Consultation & Engagement Principles
Appendix B: The Consultation Charter

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