

Leicestershire County Council
Consultation & Engagement Principles

1. Introduction

When the council is considering how best to improve policies, services, or assets, or decide what the future direction of the organisation might be, ideas are typically invited from members of the public within a process known as ‘engagement’. In some cases, there is a statutory obligation to get feedback from service users and interested parties; in other cases, talking to people is just the best way to get good information on how the council can improve. But as well providing valuable insight and data, engagement enables strong relationships to arise between the council and local communities.

This document describes the current way that the council engages with residents and businesses, and the vision for future engagement. It also sets out the key principles, tools and methods that will enable the council to realise this vision.

2. What do we mean by ‘Engagement’ and ‘Consultation’?

‘Engagement’ is when the council reaches out to talk with local people to exchange information and views on something that affects both parties. Engagement can cover any subject, from the council’s long-term corporate priorities to specific changes in a particular village. The activity involved can range from informing residents of a change to delegating decisions to a community. It is a flexible approach that facilitates mutual trust and understanding.

‘Consultation’ is just one form of engagement. The council has a statutory obligation to run consultations on some kinds of changes. Consultations have [specific standards](#) and timescales that the council must follow to ensure that the consultation is meaningful and that the council is not subject to legal challenge. Consultations are more formal and time-specified forms of engagement.

3. Context

The council has a strong record of engaging with communities on services and strategies. The council engages because it is the right thing to do in the spirit of openness and transparency; it facilitates trust and shows respect, as well as enabling the council to build strong relationships with local communities. Proactive engagement also facilitates informed decisions on council services and more efficient implementation of changes.

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.

Historically, the council has particularly excelled at formal consultations on specific changes. This is the result of strong governance, good preparation, and delivery, and because the feedback received is valued by staff and Members.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought engagement into focus for councils as both local authorities and citizens have had to face new challenges. Councils are adapting to lower levels of trust amongst some

communities, to citizens feeling less enfranchised and less able to exert influence over local government decisions, coupled with fear of cuts and service changes.

Recognising these challenges, the council aims to change the process of engagement in the following ways:

- ***Closing the Loop***: Ensuring that the council communicates how feedback and ideas have influenced final decisions (and if the feedback has not influenced the final decision, that this is stated and justified). This builds democratic goodwill amongst local communities and mitigates against any belief that engagement is not sincere.
- ***Using a wider range of methods***: Engagement can be approached in many different ways and the council's methods should facilitate each engagement exercise being maximally insightful, inclusive, and robust. Whilst the time-proven use of surveys indicates 'what' people think, making use of narrative or qualitative approaches, videos, and user forums can show more about 'why' local people hold the views they do.
- ***Engaging marginalised communities***: Some members of local communities may struggle to engage with the council so the approach must facilitate full participation from groups such as older people, children, and young people, those with protected characteristics, and rural communities. In addition to the equalities processes already in place, officers should make best use of data on the digital literacy and needs of different groups, offer both printed and digital materials, and advertise through a range of media using accessible language.
- ***Reinforcing best practice***: In addition to the existing council standards and tools, joining the Consultation Institute's Charter will enable officers to better understand the national standards governing this policy area. [The Consultation Institute](#) is a national body that sets and promotes standards of excellence for engagement activity, reflecting current case law, regulation, and emerging trends.

4. Adapting to a changing landscape

How people access information and what they expect from local government have shifted over the last few years. Many citizens are now be able to instantly access information and communicate with the council via their smart phones. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in dramatic changes to services and citizens' lives, and there are many changes still to come. The council therefore needs to ensure communities' voices are heard as services evolve. Ensuring that engagement is future-proofed will better enable the council to understand what quality, cost-effective services look like to those who need them.

Looking ahead, some of the key themes are:

- ***Thinking in terms of engagement, not just consultation***: putting in place a variety of mechanisms to talk to people on an ongoing basis about a wide range of issues, both raised by the council and by citizens. This includes early informal engagement with the relevant communities and elected Members on emerging areas of change.

- ***Widening and deepening our engagement:*** ensuring that the council understands the needs and interests of service users and other interested parties; and that engagement methods are tailored to maximise involvement from all those who have a stake in an issue.
- ***Investing in relationships with end users:*** prioritising staff capacity and tools to ensure that the council can build and sustain relationships with our communities over time; engagement will offer large dividends to service design and delivery where the appropriate resources are put in place.
- ***Drawing on the role of elected Members:*** ensuring that officers use the insight into communities that Members have to shape planned activity; and using Members' networks to increase engagement. To continue with the governance provided by Cabinet and Scrutiny Commission.

5. The council's engagement principles

These three principles state the most fundamental characteristics of the council's engagement activity and provide the foundation for any planned engagement work.

Inclusive

Involve all those who have a stake in an issue by understanding local communities, actively reaching out to different groups, and tailoring the approach.

Transparent

Build trust with citizens by being open and clear about reasons and decision-making.

Meaningful

Engagement activity is sufficiently well defined and well executed such that local people are able to participate fully and effectively influence decisions.

6. Engagement Methods and Tools

The council has a range of support and tools that officers can draw on to design and implement effective engagement. As well as being held to national standards of best practice, officers are expected to be able to define the success criteria for their engagement activity at the outset, with reference to the target groups to engage and the outcomes to be achieved.

The council's engagement methods and tools include:

- Dedicated support staff at the corporate centre across the Policy Team, Business Intelligence Service, Communications, Democratic Services and Legal
- Engagement Hub meetings for staff to connect activity, troubleshoot and access training
- Access to diverse service users and community groups, including Leicestershire Equalities Challenge Group and the Leicestershire & Rutland Association of Local Councils
- Intranet site for staff to self-serve on best practice and get support
- Corporate website pages to promote and host engagement activity
- A wide range of surveying and data tools: Snap Survey, Confers, Mentimeter, MS Forms

- Expertise in qualitative methods including interviewing and focus groups
- Expertise in quantitative methods including data analysis and statistical techniques
- Access to data to track engagement and review previous consultations
- Targeted publicity across a range of media
- Links to the [Consultation Institute](#) for external advice and national trends

6. Evolution

It is likely that the communities the council serves and how the council operates will continue to change at pace over the coming years. This document is therefore a work in progress that will be reviewed and adapted as officers engage with staff, elected Members and local people.

For further information about the council's engagement approach, please contact:

Elizabeth Watkins
Engagement & Consultation Manager,
Chief Executive's Policy Team,
Leicestershire County Council
Elizabeth.Watkins@leics.gov.uk
0116 3051152