

Leicestershire County Council Consultation & Engagement Principles

1. Introduction

Leicestershire County Council makes decisions on a daily basis. Many of its decisions are routine in nature and do not materially affect local people. However, some changes to Council's policies or services have the potential to have significant impacts on people's lives. It will frequently be appropriate for the Council to engage with local people and groups to better understand their circumstances and their views before making decisions. This helps to ensure that Council's decisions are made on an informed basis and that relevant considerations are taken into account.

This document seeks to provide general guidance outlining when and how the Council will engage with residents and businesses, and it also sets out the Council's vision for future engagement.

2. What do we mean by 'Engagement' and 'Consultation'?

Engagement is the umbrella term for how the Council interacts with local people and groups. Engagement arises from the fact that the Council is part of the local community and because of the importance of the Council's relationship with the people the Council serves. 'Engagement' can take place when the council reaches out to talk with local people to exchange information and views on something that affects both parties. Engagement can also be initiated by local people sharing their views or concerns with the Council whereupon the Council would expect to consider those views and respond appropriately.

Engagement can cover any subject, from the council's long-term corporate priorities to specific changes in a particular village. It is a flexible approach that facilitates mutual trust and understanding.

'Consultation' is one form of engagement. However, for the purposes of this guidance, it is sensible to distinguish what we mean by engagement in a broad sense and consultation in particular. Engagement does not start and end when a particular decision is made. Engagement is an ongoing process that helps the Council to learn, share information and ideas, and evolve.

However, consultations are typically focussed on particular decisions or changes which the Council is proposing or considering. Consultations tend to be quite formal. There are rules regarding consultations that the Council must follow to ensure that the dialogue with stakeholders is meaningful and to ensure that the Council is not subject to legal challenge. Consultations are time-limited forms of engagement.

When we engage with local people

The Council recognises that engagement offers a number of benefits: -

- It promotes transparency about the Council's decisions
- It facilitates trust
- It shows respect for the people that the Council serves
- It helps the Council to be responsive and to make fair decisions
- It facilitates the making of informed decisions.

Not least in view of the above benefits the Council does not ordinarily place limits on when and how it will engage with local people and groups.

Does the Council always consult on changes to policies or changes to services?

No. Unfortunately, it is simply not practical for the Council to consult before making every decision. Consulting before making every decision would paralyse the Council's operations and it would be disproportionately expensive. There is no general legal duty on public bodies to consult with potentially affected persons before making every decision.

However, public bodies are legally required to consult with affected persons in limited situations. This includes where consultation is required by legislation (or statutory guidance), where public bodies have a practice of consulting, where the public body promises to consult or where it would be conspicuously unfair not to consult.

Although the Council often undertakes consultation exercises, it does not have a history of consulting in advance of every decision. Nor can the Council promise to consult in advance of all future decisions. The need for consultation is considered on a case-by-case basis. However, the Council's preference is not merely to consult when it is legally obligated to do so. Consistent with the need for efficient government, the Council would expect to consult when its officers are satisfied that it is reasonable, appropriate, and proportionate.

Factors which tend to support the need for a consultation may include: -

- Where the Council is making a significant policy change which adversely affects many local people
- Where the Council is proposing to remove a vital service which is relied upon
- Where the proposed change is likely to affect vulnerable persons or persons with protected characteristics.

3. Methods of Engagement & Consultation

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) has proven to be a robust approach, providing sound insight, and surviving legal challenge.

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 improve the process of engagement in the following ways:

- **Closing the Loop:** increasing the provision of feedback on how 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:** Whilst the time-proven use of surveys indicates 'what' people think, making greater 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 the very elderly, children, and young people, those with protected characteristics, and rural communities. In addition to the equalities processes already in place, officers should make greater use of data on the digital literacy and needs of different groups, seek to offer both printed and digital materials, and seek to advertise through a wider range of media using accessible languages.
- **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 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 practices and get support

- Corporate website pages to promote and host engagement activity
- A wide range of surveying and data tools
- 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

7. Evolution

The communities the council serves and how the council operates will likely 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:

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