

Engagement and Consultation Strategy Refresh

To: Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee

Meeting Date: 31 October 2024

From: Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan ref: Not Applicable

Executive Summary: The current Cambridgeshire County Council Engagement and Consultation Strategy was last updated in 2017. This refreshed strategy aims to clarify the approach the County Council will take to engagement and consultation, both at a community level as well as aligning organisational processes to ensure effective, transparent, and legally compliant engagement and consultation activities. This updated strategy will be reviewed in 2025 when more work will be undertaken to develop tools and guidance to support the delivery of engagement activity.

Recommendation: The Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee is asked to:

- a) Approve this Engagement and Consultation Strategy; and
- b) Delegate any further amendments to the strategy, agreed by the committee, to the Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee

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1. Creating a greener, fairer and more caring Cambridgeshire

- 1.1 The Engagement and Consultation Strategy ensures that the council engages with residents, partners, and stakeholders in a transparent and inclusive way, making their voices integral to shaping services and informing decision-making. By ensuring people's voices are heard, particularly those from underrepresented groups, the strategy directly supports Ambition 5 – 'Helping people out of poverty and reducing income inequality' and Ambition 6 – 'Fostering resilient, inclusive communities with access to quality services'. More broadly, through a range of engagement activities, the strategy plays a key role in delivering on all seven of the council's ambitions, ensuring policies reflect the diverse needs of Cambridgeshire's communities.

2. Background

- 2.1 Cambridgeshire County Council is committed to effective engagement and consultation, ensuring that residents and other stakeholders, such as partners and the voluntary sector, have their voices heard and their views considered in decision-making processes. This approach underpins the council's commitment to be closer to our communities as set out in our Strategic Framework.
- 2.2 The Engagement and Consultation Strategy was last updated in 2017. Since then, the council has experienced significant organisational and strategic change, alongside significant external changes, including updates to relevant legal frameworks such as the statutory guidance for best value authorities. These changes mean it is essential to refresh the strategy. In May 2024, the Policy and Insight Team initiated the process of updating the strategy. The key objectives of this review were to:
- (a) Improve the clarity of the strategy
 - (b) Ensure our legal obligations were clear and well defined
 - (c) Reflect the council's updated practices and recent organisational changes
- 2.3 The refreshed strategy is designed to help council officers plan, conduct, and report on engagement and consultation activities in a consistent, transparent, and legally compliant way. It ensures that officers have the information and tools they need to carry out these activities effectively and successfully.
- 2.4 To ensure the strategy update is comprehensive, the team consulted extensively with key officers and members of the Corporate Leadership Team.
- 2.5 A further review of the strategy is planned for 2025. This will ensure the strategy aligns with evolving council needs and the commitment to effective engagement and consultation activities.

3. Main Issues

- 3.1 The main driver for the refresh of the Engagement and Consultation Strategy was that it had not been revised since 2017. This meant it did not reflect the council's current practices and our current legal obligations. In response, the following updates have been made:

- (a) The title has been updated to 'Closer to Communities: Working Together – Cambridgeshire County Council's Engagement and Consultation Strategy 2024', aligning the strategy with the broader 'Closer to Communities' commitment, which is set out in our Strategic Framework, a cross-organisation approach that aims to bring services closer to Cambridgeshire communities.
- (b) Clear definitions of engagement and consultation have been added to the beginning of the document to prevent conflation of these terms. To further aid understanding, quick reference cards covering the definitions of engagement, consultation, research, and evaluation have been created.
- (c) A new section on tools for effective engagement has been developed. This encourages consistency in the tools used by council officers when conducting engagement activities. It also promotes the use of the 'Acorn' data segmentation tool, helping officers better target their engagement activities, getting our messages through to the right people in the right way.
- (d) The legal context has been updated with a focus on consultation. This update outlines statutory obligations for public authority consultations, detailing relevant legislative provisions. Pathfinder Legal Services has reviewed this section for accuracy.
- (e) The role of elected members in engagement and consultation has been clarified, noting that councillors may scrutinise consultation practices to ensure all input is considered, while limiting their involvement to ensure it is appropriate, particularly when impartiality or key responsibilities could be compromised. Reference has been made to committees' authority to respond to consultations (outlined in the [Council's Constitution](#)), with cross-cutting consultations falling within the authority of the Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee.

3.2 Additionally, the Delivering the Strategy chapter has been significantly refreshed to reflect a revised set of next steps:

- (a) A commitment to have ongoing monitoring of consultation activities within the council.
- (b) A commitment to creating a centralised database for logging consultation activities, ensuring greater coordination and oversight.
- (c) The review process has been updated, noting the review in 2024, with a further update scheduled for 2025.
- (d) A commitment to establish an advisory panel to oversee consultations and engagement, ensuring compliance with legal standards and council policies.

3.3 Alongside the strategy update, the wider pool of resources for engagement and consultation has been updated:

- (a) The Consultation Guidance document has been refreshed.

(b) A review of consultation tools is underway, involving engagement with those who currently use these tools to ensure the most suitable options are available. This will inform the further work we do on this strategy in 2025.

4. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

4.1 It is essential for the council to have an up-to-date Engagement and Consultation Strategy that aligns with current organisational practices and reaffirms the council's commitment to transparent and inclusive engagement and consultation.

4.2 The refreshed strategy has been developed to update practices, ensure compliance with evolving legal obligations, and incorporate feedback from key stakeholders. It provides clear guidance on engagement tools, legal standards, and the role of elected members, resulting in a more consistent and effective approach to engagement and consultation across the council. Additionally, the strategy outlines next steps and a plan for a further review in 2025 to ensure its ongoing relevance and alignment with the council's long-term ambitions.

5. Significant Implications

5.1 Finance Implications

As well as the statutory provisions for consultation, the law of legitimate expectation means that where people have come to legitimately expect a process of consultation, for example where there has been a policy or other change which has an impact on residents, there are grounds for a judicial review should a public consultation not take place. Not adhering to legislation and best practice opens the council to the risk of legal challenge and judicial review, with potentially significant associated costs and resource implications.

5.2 Legal Implications

The legal background to consultations and engagement activities is set out in the refreshed strategy, with legal advice sought from Pathfinder Legal Services, who reviewed this section to ensure it accurately reflects current legislation.

5.3 Risk Implications

Conducting a consultation incorporates a legal basis. Not adhering to legislation and best practice opens the council to the risk of legal challenge and judicial review, with potentially significant associated costs, resource implications, loss of public confidence in the council and reputational damage.

5.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

Our engagement and consultation practices will reflect our obligations under the [Equality Act 2010](#) and our commitment to the public sector and socio-economic equality duty by ensuring that all activities are inclusive, accessible, and consider the needs of disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. Equality Impact Assessments will be completed for specific engagement and consultation activities when applicable.

6. Source Documents

6.1 Appendix 1 – Engagement and Consultation Strategy