



Closer to Communities: Working Together

Cambridgeshire County Council's Engagement
and Consultation Strategy 2024





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Introduction

This strategy outlines Cambridgeshire County Council's commitment to meaningful engagement and consultation with residents when making decisions, and details when and how these processes will be implemented. Focused solely on external engagement, this strategy does not cover internal engagement within the council.

Firstly, it is important to clarify the difference between engagement and consultation.

Engagement is an ongoing process aimed at building relationships and gathering information, helping the council to learn, share ideas, and evolve. It involves various forms of information gathering such as surveys, focus groups, and citizens' juries.

Consultation is a formal process, over a defined period (typically 6 to 12 weeks), to seek and take into consideration people's views on specific proposals, to inform decision-making. Residents and stakeholders can inform decisions, but do not have the final say.

While the processes are similar, all consultations are bound by legal requirements and are subject to legal challenges, engagement is not. More information on the legal requirements linked to consultation can be found in the section 'Understanding the Legal Requirements' on [page 9](#).

This strategy explains how the council will ensure that the public:

- have a say in decisions that affect them
- know how to get involved
- understand how their feedback has been used
- understand how the council will provide feedback after a consultation has occurred.

Furthermore, the strategy outlines the processes for effective engagement and consultation, clarifies the role elected members may play in facilitating these processes, and addresses the necessary legal requirements. As a conclusion, we set out the next steps for monitoring and updating our practices to ensure they remain effective and relevant.

The Role of Engagement and Consultation

Engagement and consultation are crucial for ensuring that the council's decisions and actions are well-informed, transparent, and reflective of the community's needs and perspectives. These processes can be used by the council at different times to inform decision-making, change, policy and service delivery. Specifically, engagement and consultation can be used for gathering both qualitative and quantitative information, for the purposes of:



- Strategic planning – to understand the needs of our communities, define policies to address those needs, and ensure that the design and delivery of services meet those needs.
- Strategic performance – to measure performance against our priorities and understand our reputation with key stakeholders, residents, and service users, helping to identify what is working well and the areas of improvement.
- Supporting service change – proposing changes to the community and gauging reaction to various ideas or options.
- Operational planning – for specific services to evaluate the impact they have had on residents; to review the way a service is delivered and inform improvement and to understand expectations and satisfaction.

Whilst engagement and consultation can be helpful in informing decision making and planning, communicating messages about its impact clearly and carefully is important. There are some situations where, despite our best intentions, we cannot always fulfil the requests presented to us through engagement or consultation activities. Therefore, we must manage expectations carefully, ensuring the public understands that engagement alone may not resolve all issues and that we may not always deliver the outcomes they expect.

Although linked to engagement and consultation, the council's approach to Community Resilience and Accessible Information and Communication fall outside the scope of this strategy.

Our 'Working Together Commitment'

The council makes the following commitments on how it will listen to you, engage with you, and consult with you. Developed in collaboration with local people and representatives from local voluntary organisations in 2017, these commitments have been updated by the council in 2024 to reflect internal changes. An extensive update of the strategy, incorporating a broader engagement process, is planned for 2025 to ensure it continues to meet the evolving needs of our community.

How the council will listen to you

We believe that:

- People who live in Cambridgeshire should be able to give feedback on the council services they use.
- People who live in Cambridgeshire should be asked about services at all stages, from deciding what is needed to looking at how well it is working.



- It should be made as easy as possible for everybody to give feedback. The council should utilise a diverse range of feedback channels, ensuring inclusivity and ease of access. These may include:
 - Feedback from people using its services on a regular basis, including reviews, case studies, complaints, and compliments.
 - Surveys (online, postal and telephone).
 - Social media (e.g. Facebook, X, LinkedIn), which should be actively used to support engagement activities.
 - Meetings, workshops and focus groups.
 - Talks.
 - Information events.
 - Newsletters.
 - Direct, targeted outreach to communities or groups underrepresented in traditional feedback channels.
- The Communications Team will support colleagues in collecting feedback and promoting participation through the council's official communications channels, particularly through social media platforms. Whilst the responsibility sits with the individuals leading engagement and consultation activities, the Communications Team will advise departments on good practice to ensure a coordinated and effective approach.
- Everybody's thoughts, opinions and feedback should be respected and valued equally.

This is why the council is committed to regular engagement, ensuring we listen to residents and continually improve our services based on the insights and feedback we gather.

How the council will engage with you

Engagement is an ongoing process aimed at building relationships and gathering valuable insights. It helps the council to learn, share ideas, and evolve. By actively involving the community, the council can better understand the needs and perspectives of residents, leading to more informed decisions and improved services.

To achieve these goals, the council commits to:

- Clear and honest communication about the process of making decisions and what differences can be made by any engagement.
- Engaging residents early in planning and design processes where it is appropriate and proportionate to do so.



- Allowing enough time and resources for any engagement to happen, to make sure that everyone is able to take part meaningfully. This means that:
 - The council should allow sufficient time for any engagement activity to take place, ideally following best practice guidelines. This ensures there is ample time to discuss different ideas and options for new services or potential changes and helps identify potential impacts of proposals early on for better decision-making.
 - Engagement materials should be available in different formats as appropriate so that as many people as possible can join in. Guidance should also be provided on digital tools and relevant accessibility features, such as the ability to change colours, use screen readers, and access large print or alternative formats, as stated in our [accessibility statement](#).
 - Any information provided should be relevant, up to date, in clear English and with no jargon.
 - Training should be given to council staff to support them to do this type of work.
- Identifying those residents who are most likely to be affected and prioritise those individuals/groups for discussion.
- Providing additional support (if needed) to minority, disadvantaged, and seldom heard groups to help them respond. This may involve undertaking targeted work focused on a particular client group.
- Recognising that people who work for the council and other partner organisations can act as informal advocates for the people they work with and tell us about issues important to their clients and their own services.
- Ensuring that there is ongoing engagement with people who use services (not just as part of a formal consultation process).
- Learn from best practice developed by other organisations.

We commit to ensure that people understand:

- What they are being asked for their opinion on and why.
- How long everybody has to take part.
- What the council is asking them to do and what commitment they will need to make.
- What difference their help will make.
- How they will receive feedback after a consultation has happened.

By following these commitments, the council aims to build stronger relationships with residents, leading to better services and a more engaged community.



How the council will consult with you

Consultation is a specific form of engagement where the council seeks the views and opinions of residents on particular proposals or plans. While engagement encompasses a broader range of activities, consultation focuses on obtaining feedback during specific stages of the decision-making process. As a form of engagement, consultations must follow the same guidelines outlined above for engagement. However, a key difference is that consultations must also adhere to legal requirements and thus, can be legally challenged.

Therefore, besides the engagement guidelines, consultations must also follow the Gunning Principles to ensure they are conducted legitimately and effectively:

1. **Consult early:** Consultations must happen when proposals are still being developed, so residents' input can influence the final decision.
2. **Provide enough information:** The council must give enough details to residents to understand the proposals and provide informed feedback.
3. **Allow enough time:** There must be adequate time for people to respond to the consultation, appropriate to the importance of the decision.
4. **Consider feedback seriously:** Decision-makers must genuinely consider the consultation feedback before making the final decision.

By following these principles, the council ensures that consultations are meaningful, transparent, and effective, reinforcing the commitment to active and inclusive public engagement.

Our approach to engagement and consultation

Cambridgeshire County Council views engagement and consultation as essential components of effective decision-making and service delivery. In the following sections we detail the council's structured approach to these processes, outlining the steps involved, and the best use of elected members.

A Defined Process

The key to carrying out effective engagement and consultation is to understand the role that they play in decision-making. Whilst there is a legal duty for local authorities to act fairly (with consultation being a way to discharge this duty – see the following section), rather than seeing engagement and consultation as an 'add on', Cambridgeshire County Council fully embraces the value that well-structured engagement and consultation exercises can bring to the decision-making process.

This involves the council planning engagement and consultation activities effectively, sharing ideas with colleagues or partners on what these activities will cover and considering how to target the right people, at the right time, using appropriate methods and techniques.



The first step is to commit to **ongoing engagement** with residents as part of the council's regular operations. Continuous engagement is vital for understanding the evolving needs and concerns of the community, fostering trust, and improving the quality of decisions and services. By maintaining an open and ongoing dialogue with residents, the council can proactively address issues, enhance service delivery, and contribute to the overall well-being of the community.

When fulfilling the council's statutory duties to conduct **consultations**, it is important to adhere to a structured process to ensure thorough and effective engagement. The following key stages outline the key steps that should be followed:

Pre-consultation engagement: This stage is about giving residents an opportunity to voice their opinion at an early stage about what they value most about services followed by a more detailed consultation on options at a later stage.

In planning a consultation, council staff will need to take into account the impacts of a decision on residents and the level of public interest in the decision.

Also, we will need to allow sufficient time to engage and consult within the decision-making process. In particular, we will need to identify relevant elected member committee dates and ensure that members have access to the results of consultations whilst making decisions.

Consultation dialogue: This stage is about actually carrying out and publicising the consultation. Elected members can play a pivotal role in encouraging open dialogue and promoting discussion with stakeholders (see pages 9-10).

Post-consultation: This stage is about using the information gathered during the consultation to inform decision-making, feeding back to stakeholders and evaluating the process and outcomes of the consultation.

Whilst the above process aims to ensure consistency in our approach to consultation across the council, there are some instances where this will not apply. When carrying out some statutory, regulatory or technical consultations, you may need to follow alternative specific processes. If you are unsure if this applies to a consultation you are undertaking, please get in touch with your line manager.

Tools for Effective Engagement and Consultation

To ensure we engage effectively with everyone in our community, the council uses a variety of tools for engagement activities. These tools help us collect information, encourage participation, and make informed decisions.

The council has approved survey platforms that should be used across all departments to ensure our data collection is consistent, reliable, and secure. We review these platforms every year to make sure they continue to meet our needs and maintain high standards. For more information on which platforms we use, please get in touch with the Policy and Insight Team (contact: policyandinsight@cambridgeshire.gov.uk).



In addition to survey platforms, the council utilises Acorn, a tool that helps us understand and reach different community groups. Acorn segments the UK population by postcode, providing insights into demographic data, social factors, and consumer behaviour. This allows us to tailor our engagement strategies to specific communities and helps us ensure that everyone's voice can be heard.

Acorn can underpin our engagement activities by helping to:

- Identify and communicate with specific cohorts of people.
- Analyse spatial areas to understand the demographics of residents.
- Determine where specific target groups live and how to reach them effectively.

While not every engagement activity and consultation may align with Acorn's methodology, it remains a recommended tool for exploring community insights. By using Acorn, we can better understand our communities and communicate more effectively. You can learn more about Acorn and explore its capabilities [here](#).

By using different tools to support engagement and consultation, the council is committed to creating an environment where all community members can participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

Elected Members' Role in Engagement and Consultations

This chapter outlines key considerations regarding the role of elected members (councillors) in the council's external engagement and consultation processes. As democratically elected representatives, councillors have a mandate to represent their constituents and make decisions on their behalf. Engagement and consultation activities can play an important role in supporting councillors to do this, as these processes can ensure that the voices of local residents are heard and reflected in the decision-making process. Furthermore, they help improve communities' understanding of how their council operates and how decision-making processes work.

Elected members are not only decision-makers but also provide democratic leadership, helping explain proposed service changes in a simple and direct way to the public. They also have an important role to play in scrutinising consultation practices and ensuring that decisions take into consideration any information, data and opinions gathered during a consultation process.

It is important to highlight that in some instances, it may not be appropriate for councillors to be directly involved in certain aspects of the consultation process, particularly where their involvement could compromise impartiality or other key responsibilities. In such cases, councillors should focus on ensuring that the consultation process remains fair and inclusive, with all voices being appropriately considered in the final decision-making.

When it comes to responding to consultations, committees are empowered to respond to consultations within their remit, as set out in the council's [Constitution](#). The Strategy,



Resources and Performance Committee handles cross-cutting consultations, while other committees, such as Adults and Health Committee, Environment and Green Investment Committee, and Highways and Transport Committee, address consultations relevant to their specific areas. For more information on which committees have authority to respond to specific consultations, please contact the Policy and Insight Team (contact: policyandinsight@cambridgeshire.gov.uk).

While the outcomes of consultations and engagement offer valuable insights that must be carefully considered, they are just one of many inputs that inform decision-making. Councillors must also take into account other critical factors and broader strategic considerations, such as budgetary constraints, legal obligations, and various other forms of evidence. In other words, the results of consultation are a valuable source of information but do not replace the democratic decision-making process. Therefore, elected members may end up taking a decision that goes against the views or wishes expressed by some parts of the community throughout the engagement process to ensure decisions are balanced, practical, and sustainable.

Understanding the Legal Requirements

To establish the legal requirements of this strategy, it is important to highlight again the definition of consultation:

Consultation is a formal process, over a defined period (typically six to twelve weeks), to seek and take into consideration people's views on specific proposals, to inform decision-making. Residents and stakeholders can inform decisions, but do not have the final say.

All consultations are bound by legal requirements and are subject to legal challenges. Engagement activities are not bound by legal requirements, therefore, our focus on the legal background pertains specifically to consultations.

A local authority has broad discretion regarding when and how to conduct engagement and consultation unless the specific procedures outlined below mandate otherwise.

Managing the Data Collected

Where a service is considering collecting personal information through a consultation or engagement activity, it must undertake a data protection impact assessment [checklist](#). This will help assess the level of risks associated with the processing and ensure that the council has considered how this complies with data protection legislation. The service should ensure that the reason for collecting personal information, how it will be used and who it will be shared with are clearly explained to those consulted in a privacy notice. If the service is relying on consent, then they should ensure that this meets the standard under data protection legislation.



The service commissioning a consultation or engagement activity is fully responsible for the data collected, even if a third party or another part of the council conducts the activity for them. As the information owner, the service is responsible for decisions relating to the collection, use, storage, and deletion of the data. This responsibility includes ensuring that all data is handled in accordance with council policies and data protection legislation, irrespective of who delivers the activity. Additionally, the service must ensure that it has a formal agreement with an internal partner or a contract with any external providers to ensure the data's quality, security, and compliance. It is essential to review these responsibilities carefully before undertaking any consultation or engagement activity. In case of uncertainty, advice can be sought from the council's Data Protection Officer.

Freedom of Information/Environmental Information Regulations

The council and any data it holds for its business purposes are subject to the Freedom of Information Act and Environmental Information Regulations. A service commissioning consultation or engagement should be aware that the raw data, output or analysis can be requested under these information rights legislations. Whilst in some case an exemption or exception may apply, the data can be requested, and the council may need to provide it in response to a request. If the service intends to publish the data, then it should clearly specify when this will take place and how interested parties can access the information. Advice can be sought from the council's FOI team.

The Consultation Guidance provides further reference to data protection and ownership.

Legal Background: The Gunning Principles

The Gunning Principles provide a framework to ensure that consultations are carried out legitimately and effectively. A supreme court case in 2014 endorsed the legal standing of the principles. Since then, they form a strong legal foundation from which the legitimacy of public consultations is assessed.

- Principle 1: Consultations must occur when proposals are still at a formative stage.
- Principle 2: Sufficient information must be provided to allow for intelligent consideration.
- Principle 3: Adequate time must be given for responses, proportionate to the decision's significance.
- Principle 4: Decision-makers must conscientiously consider the consultation feedback before making a final decision.

While it is only consultations that are legally required to follow these principles, it is considered good practice to follow them when conducting all engagement activities.



Legal Obligations for Public Authority Consultations

The Consultation Institute identifies two areas to focus on when deciding if an authority needs to consult: Doctrine of Legitimate Expectation (common law) and statutory requirements.

The **Doctrine of Legitimate Expectation** ensures that local authorities act fairly, particularly when there has been a clear promise of consultation, official guidance or policies imply a promise to act in a particular way, or where the withdrawal of a benefit would have significant impacts. If a public consultation is expected but not conducted, or not done properly, it may lead to judicial review.

Statutory provisions are legal requirements which state that a consultation must occur. They exist in several key areas, including the following:

- Best Value Duty requires local authorities to ensure continuous improvement in their functions as mandated by the Local Government Act 1999. The [2024 revision to the statutory guidance](#) emphasises the need for consultation in fulfilling this duty, particularly when setting budgets and corporate plans. To comply with this duty, local authorities must engage meaningfully with diverse community groups, and ensure that consultations are inclusive, open, and fair. The [best value statutory guidance](#) on working with voluntary and community groups, and small businesses (revised in 2015) explicitly refers to compulsory consultations. Local authorities must conduct consultations at all stages of the commissioning cycle, including when reviewing service provision, setting budgets, and considering the decommissioning of services, to ensure that the views and needs of the community are taken into account in decision-making.
- The Public Sector Equality Duty ([Equality Act 2010](#)) requires local authorities to have due regard to equality considerations when exercising their functions, including making decisions. This duty necessitates consultations to assess the impact of decisions on people with protected characteristics. The [2023 revised guidance](#) mandates that public authorities explicitly consider equality impacts during the decision-making process.
- The [Health and Social Care Act 2022](#) requires local authorities to engage and consult with local people in developing and reviewing care strategies.
- The [Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations 2017](#) ensure public consultations for projects likely to have significant environmental effects.
- The [guidance on consultation and pre-decision matters](#) outlines the process for planning application consultations, emphasizing a 21-day consultation period by local planning authorities. This guidance primarily applies to lower-tier authorities, so it is unlikely to impact the County Council's consultation processes.



Cambridgeshire County Council's compliance with its Duty to Consult

To ensure compliance with its duty to act fairly in respect of engagement and consultations, Cambridgeshire County Council will:

- Adhere to the Gunning Principles, ensuring consultations occur at a formative stage, provide adequate information, allow sufficient time for responses, and conscientiously consider the feedback received.
- Uphold the Doctrine of Legitimate Expectation, ensuring fair action, particularly when a clear promise of consultation has been made, or where withdrawing a benefit would have significant impacts.
- Fulfil its statutory duties, complying with all relevant laws and regulations that require public consultations.
- Ensure GDPR compliance, maintain transparency about data usage, storage, and obtaining necessary consents in accordance with the [Data Protection Act 2018](#), ensuring the protection of personal data throughout the consultation process.
- Conduct post-consultation reviews by implementing a process to evaluate the effectiveness of consultations and identify lessons learned for future improvements.

By adhering to these principles and guidelines, Cambridgeshire County Council aims to ensure that its consultations are inclusive, fair, and effective, ultimately leading to better-informed and more equitable decision-making processes.

Next steps in delivering the strategy

In order to achieve the commitments outlined within this strategy, Cambridgeshire County Council plans to:

- Monitor consultation work within the council on an ongoing basis.
- Regularly update the council's Consultation Guidance, providing advice for all council staff on how to carry out consultations.
- Develop a centralised consultation database to log and regularly update consultation activities.
- Share best practices amongst members and staff within the council.
- Establish an advisory panel to oversee consultations and engagement, ensuring they comply with legal standards and council policies, to be introduced with the 2025 strategy update.

This strategy underwent a preliminary review in 2024, with a comprehensive update planned for 2025 to ensure it meets the council's needs and accurately reflects our commitment to effective engagement and consultation.



Glossary

The **Consultation Institute** (tCI) is a membership body, and global leader in consultation best practice and training. More information can be found on their [website](#).

Qualitative data is interpretation-based, descriptive, and relating to language.

Quantitative data is numbers-based, countable, or measurable.

Useful Links and Contacts

You can find more resources at the [Engagement and Consultation CamWeb page](#), including:

- [Consultation Guidance August 2024](#)
- Quick Cards on Engagement, Research, Consultation and Evaluation [\[add link when ready and uploaded to camweb\]](#).

For all other enquiries, including support with any engagement activities or consultations, please contact the Policy and Insight Team at policyandinsight@cambridgeshire.gov.uk.